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Donald H. Timmer oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 30, 2008

Donald H. Timmer (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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[Transcriber's note: The Interviewee's personal information has been removed, at the request of the Interviewer. This omission is indicated with ellipses.]

Michael Hirsh: Just so I have it, your name is Donald H. Timmer?

Donald H. Timmer: Mm-hm.

MH: And you're at.... And your phone number is

DT: Yeah.

MH: What's your date of birth, sir?

DT: October 16, 1925.

MH: Sixteenth, 1925. And what unit were you in?

DT: 89th Infantry Division.

MH: And what part of that?

DT: The ordnance.

MH: Ordnance? Okay. How did you happen to be at Ohrdruf?

DT: Okay, I was in Patton's army, and he wanted to go to Berlin. So, he took off when we crossed the Rhine River. I think the adjacent armies were probably forty miles behind him. We went to Gotha, and Eisenhower told us to stop and wait. We were fighting with the Germans on three sides of us.

MH: Right.

DT: But, anyway, we were there for several days and then we started back down the autobahn; we fought on the autobahn. We were the last company: we and a tank company from the 4th Armored Division were the last to leave. And just as we were getting ready to go, we were told to go down to Ohrdruf. They had some strange experiences with some of the prisoners, I think, that escaped from there. So, it was a beautiful morning; I'd say about eight-thirty. It was the first nice day of spring. And as we drove into Ohrdruf, when we got to the little town, German planes came down, swooped us, and they didn't shoot at us. They shot ahead of us, and we didn't know what happened. They shot at the camp, for some reason.

Anyway, we went through Ohrdruf then. The windows had white—not white—yeah, white sheets hanging out the windows. We didn't stop; we went right through.

MH: In the town of Ohrdruf?

DT: Yeah.

MH: Okay.

DT: Okay, we drove through the town of Ohrdruf. And just on, I guess, the west side, we ran into this chain-link fence, and we drove along and followed it. I had about three vehicles. We drove up and followed it, and we got in the entrance of the camp, and there were about twenty bodies laying out on the ground. You've probably seen pictures of this.

MH: Yes, and I've talked to a lot of the 4th Infantry Division guys—4th Armored Division guys.

DT: Yeah. Okay, well, I was the company interpreter. All I had was German in high school; I wasn't a German kid. I had to get down and see if there were any still alive, and all of them had gotten shot in the head, besides being machine gunned. As the Germans left the camp, they pulled the men out of this last barracks and machine gunned them. That was about maybe a half hour before we got there. I didn't see what damage the German planes did, but they had fired into the camp. In the camp, there had been five thousand prisoners there. Two days before, they took all the able-bodied men that could go; they left about five hundred prisoners back in the camp in the barracks. In other words, after we found the bodies, we were gonna then bury them, and we were told no, they had notified our division commander and the army commander, and Eisenhower's coming. And he came, four or five hours after that. In the meantime, we had the people come out from the town, and we were gonna try to get them to bury about two thousand bodies that laid there, that were stacked up in places. The mayor and his wife were there. They were all weeping; they thought we were gonna kill 'em. We told them, "You come back tomorrow, and you're gonna dig graves for [each] individual and bury them." So, they went home, and I think the mayor and his wife—no, I don't think. The mayor and his wife committed suicide that night.

MH: Right.

DT: And they left a note, and the note said something like, "We didn't know—but we knew."

MH: And you saw the note to translate it?

DT: Uh-huh. Yeah.

MH: Were you there when Eisenhower came?

DT: Yeah, I was there.

MH: Tell me what that was like.

DT: Okay. When he came—and, again, I was the company interpreter. The 4th Armored Division were there, too, but I was the one that was interpreting at the time. When he came, his interpreter was on the plane behind him, and so I think for five minutes, I was the interpreter for Eisenhower. The thing was that he—I said to him, “General,” and he was a general and I was a private, but it was no big deal (inaudible). “General, I’m not that good at German.” He said to me, “Don’t worry. I’m a German; I know it. But I need time to formulate my answers.” So, we proceeded, and his interpreter came. That guy just dropped to the background and followed him around.

I think the most pathetic thing that happened [was] we came into a barracks, and as I said, there were maybe five hundred men in the different barracks. There was one who was unconscious, and a fellow shook him and said, “Eisenhower’s here, Eisenhower’s here!” That guy sat up, smiled, and fell over dead.

MH: That’s for real?

DT: Mm-hm.

MH: Okay. Was Patton and Bradley there at the same time?

DT: Yeah. You can get the pictures, I think, out of our 89th Division (inaudible).

MH: Right, I’ve seen the photos. I just wondered if they were on the same little tour that you were on.

DT: Yeah. Yeah. The one thing that I noticed, Eisenhower, after we were there maybe an hour or two—that he was there an hour or two. His staff said to him, “Ike, we got a war to fight. We have to get back.” And he said, “Don’t bother me, don’t bother me. I’ve got to get this.” And I read in his memoirs later on that he knew that they [the Germans] were gonna deny this happened. So, what he did, he called the president, who I think was Truman, because Roosevelt died about that same time.

MH: Roosevelt died that day.

DT: Mm-hm. Okay, anyhow, I wasn’t there when he did these calls—

MH: Of course.

DT: But he called him and said he wanted the media, and not just the reporters, but the owners of the media, to come. So, they did come, and they used a lot of film. Back in the States, I think they tried to get almost everybody they could to see it. But, again, going back to his thing, he knew that this was gonna be denied sometime. And other things he said, like he was ashamed of the German army for letting this happen. He said, "I used to respect those guys. I don't anymore."

MH: He said that when you were around?

DT: Mm-hm.

MH: Okay. Okay.

DT: He didn't say it to [me]—you know, he said it—I was just tagging along with the group.

MH: Right.

DT: Yeah. Yeah.

MH: Did you end up in any of the pictures they took?

DT: No.

MH: No? Okay. What else do you remember about Eisenhower there?

DT: Well, again, I didn't know the impact. When he got to be president, then I realized, holy mackerel, I had been part of history. But I guess the biggest thing I remember was his reluctance to leave. You know, he almost was prophetic that he knew this was gonna be denied.

One funny thing happened: Most of the guys, like myself, did not talk about this when we came home. Two years ago, in Ashland, a town close to us, the senior class was gonna go to Washington. They had a meeting with the school board. One of the school board members said, “Well, what are you guys gonna see? Where are you gonna go?” They talked about the different monuments, and also they’re gonna go to the Holocaust Museum. And this school board member says, “I’m tired of kissing Jews’ asses.”

MH: Really?

DT: Yeah, he did. Anyhow, I wasn’t at the meeting, but I read it in the Ashland paper. I called Phil Marcus, who was a fellow engineer and the head of the local synagogue. I said, “Phil, what are you gonna do about that?” He said, “Don, I can’t do anything about it. It’ll just go back and forth. I heard about it.” I said, “You gotta do something.” He said, “Well, what do you care?” I said, “Phil, I was there. I saw that thing.” He said to me, “You know, Don, I can’t do anything, but you can. You’re an eyewitness.” So, then I was scheduled to give a talk to the synagogue; this was in the spring. They have an annual meeting on the Holocaust. So, I talked about it. The Cleveland Jewish newspaper got a hold of it and asked me to go to an interview. Pretty soon, I was like the Christian savior.

MH: (laughs) Okay.

DT: It was really something. And I kept thinking, “Why me?” Again, I think I was talking to Phil about it. He said, “You saw the thing, didn’t you?” I said, “Yeah, but about one hundred thousand other Americans saw it, I’m sure.” He said, “Well, how many are still alive?” There’s maybe a thousand, because I’m eighty-three. I’m still a young guy.

MH: You’re a young guy. I’ve talked to guys—you’re about the youngest, and the oldest I’ve talked to is ninety-six. I’ve interviewed about 150 guys now—from all the camps, not just Ohrdruf.

DT: Yeah.

MH: Do you remember the name of the local synagogue?

DT: The local synagogue here?

MH: Yeah, where Phil Marcus was.

DT: Oh, gosh, I can't think.

MH: What city is it in?

DT: Mansfield.

MH: The synagogue's in Mansfield?

DT: Yeah.

MH: Okay.

DT: And then—

MH: Is Phil Marcus still there?

DT: No, he passed away.

MH: He passed away, okay.

DT: But the rabbi comes down from Cleveland, and he got the story up to the Cleveland thing.

MH: Okay.

DT: So, I was giving talks; every year I'd give a talk or two at a different synagogue. I was giving one up in Cleveland about two years ago. Usually when I give the talk, when it's over everybody goes home. But up there, they all came and they wanted to—for about twenty-minutes, they were asking questions about it. And in the audience, I noticed that there were two guys crying. I looked at the one and said, "What's the matter

with him?” He said, “He saw the same thing you did, but he didn’t do anything about it.” So, I looked at the two guys, and I said, “Fellas, two years ago, I didn’t do anything about it, either.” But then I told them, “We’re the last of the eyewitnesses. We’re important. So, my feeling would be you guys should get in touch with your synagogue.” I think the meeting we went to was Church of Christ. But anyhow, there are so few guys that have been involved.

MH: Do you have a picture of yourself from around World War II time?

DT: Do you what?

MH: Do you have a photo of yourself from back in World War II days?

DT: Yeah.

MH: Would it be possible for you to send me that picture, and a current picture of yourself, and then I’ll copy them and send them back to you?

DT: Okay. Hold on a second. Now, it’ll get there in the next couple of days.

MH: There’s no rush. Don’t break a leg doing it.

DT: Well, it was interesting. I’m sure you got something from some of the guys at the other camps, and maybe even from our camp.

MH: I have a number of people from Ohrdruf. I talked to the—I visited with the battalion commander of the A Tank Battalion for the 4th Armored. I’ve talked to a number of the guys, a couple of guys from the 89th, and of course a number of the guys from the 4th Armored. And it’s just—I found something on the Internet that mentioned your name and talked about you translating the suicide note, and I figured I would try and find you. And it turned out to be relatively easy, once I knew where you were from.

DT: Okay. Yeah. Well, I’ll be glad to. A current picture and a picture from—

MH: Yeah, a current picture and a picture from World War II. You have a pencil?

DT: Yeah.

MH: My name is Michael—

DT: Hirsh.

MH: Hirsh. H-i-r-s-h. And my address is ... [DT reads MH's address to him] What are you reading that from?

DT: It's a—Ohrdruf from Michael Hirsh, and it says, "I'm in the process of writing a book about the liberation." I was gonna call you tonight.

MH: Oh! Okay, okay. That's me. Yeah, I forgot I had sent you a letter. Yeah, I would really appreciate it. And the unit you were in, you said you were in—

DT: Ordnance.

MH: Ordnance, but what company or what battalion?

DT: It was 714th Ordnance Company.

MH: 714th Ordnance Company.

DT: And we did two things. One, we repaired vehicles. And two, we took care of the ammunition, too, deliver it to the rest. So, we were a big company for that, with a colonel.

MH: Yeah. How did—I'm curious, how did—you were a private or a PFC [private first class] at the time?

DT: Private. I got discharged a private.

MH: So, did your having been in the army—I was in the army in Vietnam, and I can just imagine your commanding officer realizing that one of his privates is gonna be tagging around with Eisenhower. Didn't it make him crazy?

DT: Well, no, because—see, basically, Eisenhower's merely a general. Now, it may have bothered him or not bothered him, but it affected him when Eisenhower became president. It did me, too. But—

MH: But the fact that he was the general, the boss of the whole thing?

DT: (laughs) Well, they were a little bit in awe, but then, I was the company interpreter. And not a good one, either.

MH: (laughs) I see.

DT: But I had a lot of funny experiences doing that. And the thing was, when I went in the army, I had gone to high school in New York City and had taken engineering as my main course in high school. So, when the war happened, I wanted to go in the Corps of Engineers, and I got, "Oh, no, no, no! We got a more important job for you," and it was sheet metal mechanic, because I had had sheet metal mechanics as one of my classes during that four-year period. I wound up being a fender-bender, and I got to thinking. My gosh, you get a dent in a car, and it takes about a day to get it out. You got to work the metal back to its original shape. And I got to thinking, "Why am I gonna be denting fenders in Europe?" So, I went over, and any fender that was dented, I cut it off with a torch and sent the vehicle back. I didn't work on the fenders.

MH: I'm sure.

DT: So, I had a lot of free time.

MH: Yeah. Now, it was just high school German that got you through that?

DT: Yeah.

MH: If I can go back to the suicide of the people, did you—how did you get the suicide note?

DT: The people that came back the next day. We told them to come back; they were gonna bury the—

MH: Okay.

DT: And I left shortly after they had come back. In other words, our outfit went out. But they brought the message.

MH: And you got that letter the same day that Eisenhower got there?

DT: Yeah.

MH: Okay. Sometimes, it's just hard to put the timeline together.

DT: Yeah, I know. I had trouble with it, until one of my neighbors now, who was in the 4th Armored Division, told me about his experiences in a concentration camp. I said, "Well, you must have been where I was." "Oh, no, I wasn't." So, we got his map out, and it showed that he was there—

MH: He had—

DT: —and the date that he was there. So, that was the first time I ever really tied the date down.

MH: Yeah. Well, they liberated it on the afternoon of the fourth of April, and then more people came in on the morning of the fifth. And Eisenhower didn't get there until the twelfth, which was the day that they were actually liberating Buchenwald. But Eisenhower was in Ohrdruf on the twelfth, and that was the day Roosevelt—

DT: Yeah, I didn't think I was there that long.

MH: Yeah. Which makes me wonder if you were there on the first day or if you came in later, 'cause they were waiting for the 89th to get there to relieve the 4th Armored. I think that the 89th got there about four days after the 4th Armored got there, and then you guys stayed for a long time.

DT: Yeah, but when we got there, you know that German plane that came before we got to Ohrdruf? As I say, I didn't see any evidence of bombing, but they could have machine gunned. When we got [to] the prisoners, my knees were bloody from kneeling down and checking each of the twenty or so bodies.

MH: Those are the bodies that were sort of in a circle near the gate.

DT: Yeah.

MH: And each one had a bullet hole in him.

DT: No, each one got machine gunned.

MH: Machine gunned.

DT: And then they also got one in the head.

MH: In the head. Okay. Huh. All right. You know, I don't know that sixty-five years later or sixty-three years later, anybody's ever gonna be able to put it together exactly the way it happened minute by minute.

DT: Yeah.

MH: But what you told me about your experiences there, and especially what happened in Ohio—what ever happened with the guy from the school board who said, "I'm tired of kissing Jews' asses"?

DT: (laughs) Okay, he ran for office: he ran for state senate. I called over to Loudonville, the Republican Party, and said, "Hey, you've got to get that guy stopped." They said,

“Don’t worry, he’s not gonna make it.” He got beat in the election. I never followed up to see what happened after that.

MH: Oh. Where is Mansfield?

DT: Halfway between Cleveland and Columbus.

MH: Oh, okay. All right.

DT: On Route 30.

MH: All right. My daughter went to school at Miami University. I’m originally from Chicago.

DT: I’m from New York.

MH: New York City?

DT: Yeah. I was there till I was eighteen, till I went in the army.

MH: What’d you do after you came back from the service?

DT: Okay, while I was in the service—well, first of all, in high school, none of the kids, none of the boys, talked about a career or talked about college. Every one of us was going in the army. Okay, I checked with guys that had gone in the Marines and Navy and Army, and found out that I had a bad eye. So, I found out that I couldn’t get in the Navy—their exam was too tough—and the Marines, same thing. The Army was a little easier. They gave you a piece of paper, cardboard, to put over your eye. So, I took a thumbtack and punched a hole in it, so I could read with my right eye where I couldn’t read with my left eye. That’s how I got in the service. But that was a typical attitude.

MH: So, what’d you do after?

DT: Well, while I was in the Army and while I was in Germany, I was driving a ten-ton wrecker, pulling a lowboy with damaged tanks. I was bringing damaged tanks that could either be stripped or could be repaired. Every time I came to a bridge, I had to call the Corps of Engineers to check out the bridge: could it carry the heavy load I had? The first time I called, they got there within an hour. Then it was an hour and a half, two hours, three hours, and then they called and said, “We can’t get through till tomorrow morning.” I said, “Well, I’m gonna cross the bridge anyhow. I’m not waiting till tomorrow morning.” They said, “Oh, no, there’s no reason for that. We’ll get there.” He had been the fellow that came and checked the bridges out. He said, “Do you want me checking the bridges out?” I said yeah, I did. He said, “Do you remember the book I was using?” I said, “Yeah, I looked at it from over your shoulder.” He said, “Well, here’s the book. You rate the bridges.”

MH: Okay. (laughs) You’ve now been promoted.

DT: Huh?

MH: You’ve now been promoted.

DT: No.

MH: Yeah.

DT: Anyhow, the thing I did then—in other words, I checked it. But at that moment, I knew I wanted to be a bridge engineer. So, before I got out of the Army, I signed up for college, and I got a master’s degree. I had enough time, G.I. time.

MH: Yeah. Where’d you get your master’s degree?

DT: Rolla. The University of Missouri at Rolla.

MH: Okay. Can I put you on hold for—whoops, never mind; the call went away. So, you got your master’s degree in what, civil engineering?

DT: In civil engineering.

MH: And you worked where?

DT: Well, I worked—I started out working in Omaha, Nebraska, with the Union-Pacific Railroad, did bridges. I liked that, except the chief engineer was a non-engineer, and he didn't want me there designing anything. He wanted me to go looking the books. "We've done ten of those bridges already." So, I looked and found out, and I chased down. The doggone thing had been designed in about 1920, and all the rest of those guys had just been okay on it. It just was terrible engineering, and I said, "I quit."

So, then I moved to—I stayed there in Omaha for about four years, went to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for four. Went down to Florida, and while I was down there, I got hired to be a bridge engineer with a company here in Mansfield. So, I came up in 1958, I think it was. Usually, I changed jobs every two years and moved every four years, but at the end of two years, I was appointed deputy director for the highway department, covering eight counties. So, I did that for six years; I broke my moving. When I left the highway department—again, because I didn't want to be an administrator, I wanted to be an engineer. I helped form an engineering company; I was the founding partner. And the reason I became involved, I said, "Now I can retire when I want to." (laughs)

MH: I see.

DT: And so, I still work. Eighty-three, I work on bridges. I do covered bridges.

MH: You did covered bridges?

DT: Mm-hm. I think I've done about twenty of them. I've done others. The main venue was the interstate system, building the bridges for that. We built several big bridges. The company—oh, we've got about sixty guys. I retired, and I work every day, part-time.

MH: You have family?

DT: Yeah. I have three kids, two of which became engineers, my oldest daughter and son. My youngest daughter became a teacher. And I got seven grandchildren, of which five are engineers.

MH: Oh. There's something hereditary working there.

DT: (laughs) I guess we're good at it.

MH: Can I ask you—this is a strange question. Are you listening to the big band channel on cable TV?

DT: Yeah, they have the big bands.

MH: That's exactly what I have on here.

DT: (laughs)

MH: I'm hearing it through my one ear, and I'm hearing it through the phone, and I'm going, "Wait a minute!" (laughs) Yeah, we both have the same thing on.

DT: Yeah, I like this. And then turn—about seven o'clock, I go and watch some other show.

MH: Oh, okay. Well, I thank you very, very much for your time. I really appreciate it.

DT: I'll get your pictures.

MH: Okay, and I gotta tell you, I'm Jewish. I really appreciate your speaking up. It's really important.

DT: Well, I feel that, too. I almost feel like it's a calling. But they've treated me so well. I participate every year, and occasionally I'll give a talk at another synagogue or church.

MH: Yeah. Well, I really appreciate what you did. Thank you very, very much.

DT: Well—

MH: Okay?

DT: I feel that—yes, I've always felt this way.

MH: Good. All right, I look forward to seeing the pictures.

DT: All right, then.

MH: Thank you very much, Don.

DT: Take care.

MH: Bye-bye.

DT: Bye-bye.

End of interview