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# Owen Tripp oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, September 5, 2008

Owen Tripp (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 your name properly, it's Owen, O-w-e-n, Tripp, T-r-i-p-p?

OT: That is true.

MH: And you're at....

OT: That's true.

MH: ...

OT: That's correct.

MH: And you were with—so far, I'm doing good. And you were with Company C, 27<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division that got to Falkenau, which was a subcamp of Flossenbürg. What's your date of birth, sir?

OT: It's August 21, 1924.

MH: And when did you enter the Army?

OT: When did I enter the Army?

MH: Yes.

OT: I think it was March of forty-three [1943].

MH: And before I forget, happy birthday.

OT: (laughs) I don't need any more birthdays. And the way I'm feeling, I probably won't see many more. Go ahead.

MH: Well, I have to talk fast then, I suppose.

OT: No. (laughs)

MH: So, where were you before you went in the service? What were you doing?

OT: I was a machinist at the Seattle-Tacoma Shipbuilding Corporation in Tacoma, Washington.

MH: All right. You were drafted, or you enlisted?

OT: Well, it was a combination: I knew I was going to get drafted, so I volunteered, I guess you might say.

MH: Where'd they send you?

OT: Where did they send me?

MH: Yes.

OT: Well, originally I went to Fort Lewis, which is nearby, and then, let's see. I don't know where I went after that. I moved around, bunked in a lot of different places. I think it was Pittsburg, California, was my next stop.

MH: How long before they sent you overseas?

OT: About two years.

MH: Oh. So, when did you—

OT: Just a moment, please.

(to someone else) What is it, Ronnie? (murmurs in background) Yeah, I think so.

**Ronnie:** You're giving an awful lot of personal information.

OT: Well, it's all right. It's not something—he's concerned that I'm talking to somebody, that I'm giving out a lot of personal information.

MH: If you'd like me to talk to him and tell him what I'm doing, I'll be more than happy to.

OT: Oh, that's all right. You go ahead.

MH: Okay. Um—the, uh—now I got rattled for a second. You went overseas when?

OT: It must have been in January of forty-five [1945]. That's the best I can recall.

MH: So, you went over as a replacement?

OT: Yes, that's true.

MH: And do you know, where did you join the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored?

OT: Well, it was really—it's a little vague to me, because we were all—you know, a private never knew anything about anything. But my real first recollection of joining a fighting outfit was at the Remagen Bridge in Germany, which is the one—

MH: I'm familiar with it.

OT: It's become kind of famous, because it was the first opportunity to get across the Rhine [River].

MH: Right. And you were in that battle?

OT: Yeah.

MH: Once you got across, then you moved on into Germany.

OT: Well, we was in reserve at a place called Unkel, Onkel or Unkel. And we kind of recouped things, because there were some losses subsequent to the Remagen Bridge—and later, 'cause I wasn't in the Bulge, but a lot of the company was, and they lost fellows there. So, they sat in reserve there at Unkel and we still had a lot of hazards of artillery and overhead aircraft and whatnot, but there was very little man-to-man fighting for a few days there. Then we moved out, and I don't know where we went from there. We went along the Rhine for a little ways and then started, I would say, north or northeast, moving up into central Germany.

MH: At what point did you know anything about the concentration camps?

OT: Oh, I was aware of 'em before I went across.

MH: Okay. That makes you fairly unusual; most of the guys I've talked to didn't know anything about them at all.

OT: I wasn't too surprised, but I knew about it. I didn't know I was going to run into one or two of 'em. I think probably one I can specifically remember, and that was the one that's along the railroad siding. And why does it stick in me? I might have seen others, it just doesn't come back. This sticks with me because there were three what they call 40s and 8s, boxcars, and they each were about a third full of bodies, nude bodies. Some, I suspect, maybe were not completely dead, but very close to it.

MH: And—go ahead.

OT: Well, I don't think they'd been there any great length of time, as there was no odor or anything of that nature. We didn't spend any more time 'cause we were pushing through on a spearhead, which is the business of the armored outfit. So, I was only there maybe thirty minutes, but I did look these three cars over just to see if I saw anybody alive, which I did not. But it was suspicious, that's all I can say. And, let's see—

MH: How do you react when you see something like that?

OT: I didn't have any particular reaction to it. It was a tragedy, of course; it was evidence of a terrible period. But I was deeply affected by it. I guess I'd been prepared for it or something, I don't know. But I did not have any—it was a revolting scene, but it didn't get into me deep, I guess, is the best way I can describe it.

MH: I understand. Were those cars, boxcars, outside a camp?

OT: Yes, they were. They were just outside the—what I would call the main entrance.

MH: And what did you see inside the camp?

OT: Not much. There was hardly anything left in there that I could see. We did go in and clear the barracks, which I hated with a passion because every time I did, I went into a camp and went through the barracks, I got loaded with fleas, which I did this time, too, as much as I tried to avoid getting contact. And I ran through the middle of some of these barracks, but it wasn't good enough. I still got loaded with fleas.

MH: How do you get rid of them?

OT: Mostly just brush 'em off, I guess, and I used DDT powder and rubbed that on my legs where they were the biggest problem.

MH: Right. They had, what, squads from your unit going in through the barracks?

OT: Well, I guess some of the fellows in the squad, about five of us, seemed to work together all the time. And that's all I can recall of being there. And then, later, we formed up again, and in this case we got into the half-tracks and took off someplace. It sounds kind of vague, and I agree. I didn't have a map; it wasn't if anybody could tell me where we were, and none of the leadership ever volunteered it. In fact, I saw very little rank all the time I was over there.

MH: What else can you describe to me about this camp? What did it look like? How many buildings did you see?

OT: Well, I would say, just trying to reach out, probably a dozen buildings. They were one-story, flat, simple constructed barracks. The whole place was surrounded in barbed wire and a few guard towers. But there was nobody—I saw only a few people there, and they were local civilians.

MH: So, the prisoners were already gone from the camp.

OT: Whatever was there was gone.

MH: The only thing they left behind were the fleas.

OT: Yeah, well, and the dead people that were in the boxcars.

MH: Were there dead people in the camp as well?

OT: I didn't see any, and when we went through the barracks—'course I didn't go through all the barracks; others went through 'em. But I saw nothing; there was nothing in the barracks in the form of human matter whatsoever.

MH: Once you left the camp and you continued on down the road, did you ever run into any of the marchers of the prisoners?

OT: Well, let me think. I'm sure I did, but I can't specifically recall because—well, I think we did, but in the armored outfit, we were moving so much all the time. Yes, I can recall we were wavin' 'em back. That's right. I don't know who captured them; I wasn't in on that. But they were along the road as we went by in our half-track.

MH: Were these, like, inmates who had been in those labor camps, or were these German prisoners?

OT: They were German prisoners, soldiers.

MH: Soldiers going back.

OT: Yeah.

MH: So, this is getting pretty close to the end of the war, then.

OT: Oh, yeah. See, the bridge, the Remagen Bridge, was captured on March 7, and it fell in on March 17, I believe.

MH: Okay.

OT: It was up about ten days. So, the war in Europe ended on about May 7.

MH: Right. And according to the list that I got from the Army Center for Military History, the camp that your division would have seen, they went through around May 7, right just before the end of the war. Does that make sense?

OT: Lay that on me again, please.

MH: According to the list that I have from the Army, the camp that your division would have seen, the one I think you just described—

OT: Oh, the concentration camp.

MH: The concentration camp, you passed it on May 7.

OT: Well, we may have, because it was right toward the end of the war. Now, let me think—no, I was up in the Sudetenland at the end of the war on May 7. That's over in part of Czechoslovakia.

MH: Yeah, that's where this camp is. Falkenau, Falknov, is in Czechoslovakia.<sup>1</sup> It's a sub-camp of Flossenbürg.

OT: Oh, I never knew that. 'Cause we was up in the mountains there, and what we did is since things were slowing down and we were in a holding position, we had to take off one day to settle a kind of an uprising in one of the places where the German soldiers were. I can't remember the name; it was inland a ways. I can't recall the name of it. It was a prominent city in Czechoslovakia, Sudetenland. Anyway, we were only there about a day and then we came back. We stayed at a farm and used the upper half of the farmhouse for quarters—the lower half of the farmhouse for our sleeping quarters, and we cooked our meals there and so forth.

By the way, (laughs) they had five late teenager and early twenties daughters there.

MH: Uh-oh.

OT: And that old man, I'm telling you, he locked 'em up tight every night. (MH laughs) We never molested them, we never attempted to; we just spoke pleasantly to 'em and that was it. We were pretty good gentlemen.

MH: But he still locked up his daughters.

OT: Yes, he did.

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<sup>1</sup> The camp was located in Falknov nad Ohří, a.k.a. Falkenau an der Eger, which was renamed Sokolov in 1948. There is also a German town called Falkenau, which is in the state of Saxony.

MH: [I] don't blame the man.

OT: Well, I don't either. (MH laughs) Some of those women were pretty aggressive, too. But anyway, now I've carried you away, and I'm sorry.

MH: That's okay. So, when the war ended, how long before you got back to the U.S.?

OT: Well, I started, I got—oh, I think—before I got back to the U.S.—I got back to the U.S., on August 14, 1945.

MH: Okay. And came home to Washington?

OT: No, my home was in North Dakota at the time. Now, the reason I remember that is that we were on our way to join not the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored, but the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the Pacific, and it turned out we were scheduled to do a landing at Tokyo Bay. However, somewhere in that process, August 14 became the unofficial end of the war in the Pacific, kind of a V-J Day. So, we were unloaded on that day in New York Harbor. I actually went back in the United States August 14, 1945, rather than going on to the Pacific.

MH: Right. What did you do after you came home? What was the rest of your life like?

OT: Well, it was pretty good. Unfortunately, we were sent to Camp McCoy, a good number of us, to Camp McCoy, Wisconsin. And—excuse me a minute.

MH: Sure.

OT: I'm trying to beat a very deep chest cold.

MH: Oh, I'm sorry.

OT: Now, let's see, what was your question again?

MH: I was asking what—you went to Camp McCoy. When did you finally get out of the Army?

OT: Oh, that's right. I went to Camp McCoy and they held us there for about a month to see how things were settling out in the Pacific, and then they sent us home for a month. So, I went home for a month and then we had to come back, expecting to be discharged. But for some reason, those camp administrators, they look for their own problems and not anybody else. So, I was stuck in permanent party there until January of forty-six [1946]. And the only reason we got out, I and a couple hundred other guys got out, was that we got together and learned that the Inspector General was going to be there on a certain day. So, we went to see him on that day, about fifty of us. And that was a Friday afternoon, colder than blazes; that's the only reason I remember, I guess. Anyway, Monday morning at ten o'clock, we were all discharged.

MH: And then you went home.

OT: Yeah.

MH: What did you—you eventually got married?

OT: Oh, yeah, but that was 1950.

MH: Okay, and had children?

OT: Oh, yeah, five of 'em.

MH: Okay. And what business did you go into?

OT: I went to school on the G.I. Bill to become a—and I did—an engineer, and I designed various things from heating and air conditioning systems to machinery until I retired from the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in eighty-five [1985]. Then, I worked part time with a local consulting organization for about seven years.

MH: Did you ever have occasion to tell people what you saw in those boxcars?

OT: Well, I've been asked it before, because other book writers have got a hold of me somehow, and asked me. But I don't have any real filling stories to say: it's just we had

some battles; I had bullet holes in my pant legs and all that. But that's not—it's exciting to me, but not many other people.

MH: Were you wounded?

OT: No. Well, that's—not officially.

MH: Okay. I understand.

OT: I got some shrapnel in my back, but it was never part of an official finding.

MH: And so, you've never spoken about your experiences in there, especially at that camp.

OT: Not particularly. There's a young lady from someplace in California got a hold of me and asked me some questions about it. But I couldn't tell her much more than what I've told you. I didn't know where I was or anything else. And I had no map, so I'm kind of a dead end. Sorry, wish I—

MH: No, that's okay.

OT: It'd be better if I—all the fellows I fought with are all dead. They can't help either, see.

MH: Right, I keep going through this list hoping to find people. But I thank you very much for your time.

OT: You're welcome. I'm glad people are interested in these things, because they're a pretty good part of the United States history. But I fell flat: I should have kept a diary, but I didn't do that. Really, for an infantryman in an armored outfit, that doesn't make much sense, because he's living on his own; there isn't any formal organization as far as sitting down and having a place to write.

MH: Right. Okay, well, thank you very much, sir. I appreciate it. Do you have an e-mail address?

OT: An e-mail?

MH: Yes.

OT: I do, but I would rather not give it out.

MH: Okay. I was just going to send you some information about the book, but I can drop you a letter.

OT: Well, if you would, please, I'd be interested.

MH: I'll be happy to do that.

OT: All right.

MH: Thank you very much, sir.

OT: You're welcome.

MH: I appreciate it. Okay, bye-bye.

*End of interview*