

July 2008

Melvin Waters oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008

Melvin Waters (Interviewee)

Michael Hirsh (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Waters, Melvin (Interviewee) and Hirsh, Michael (Interviewer), "Melvin Waters oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, July 18, 2008" (2008). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 147.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/147

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Concentration Camp Liberators Oral History Project
Oral History Program
Florida Studies Center
University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: C65-00142
Interviewee: Melvin Waters (MW)
Interviewer: Michael Hirsh (MH)
Interview date: July 18, 2008
Interview location: Conducted by telephone
Transcribed by: Kathy Kirkland
Transcription date: November 29, 2008
Audit Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Audit Edit date: April 13, 2010
Final Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Final Edit date: April 14, 2010

[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: Can you, first of all, give me your name and address?

Melvin Waters: It's Melvin Waters ... Dallas, Texas....

MH: Okay, and your phone number is.... What's your date of birth?

MW: March 22, 1925.

MH: Which makes you how old today?

MW: Eighty-three.

MH: Eighty-three. Tell me a little bit about where you grew up before World War II.

MW: Well, I went to grade school in the southern part of Dallas, and then I started high school in Lancaster, Texas, which was about fifteen miles south of Dallas. It was kind of a bedroom community for Dallas.

MH: Tell me about your family a bit.

MW: My father had a good job during the Depression. He was a salesman for Standard Brands, and at one time both my grandparents from both sides lived in this little town of Lancaster. During the Depression, my mother's mother and father moved about fifteen miles south of there. But my Grandfather Waters had a stable, and he was a horse trader and a cattleman.

MH: Brothers and sisters?

MW: I had one brother that died in 1934, and then I have one sister that's eleven years younger than me.

MH: When World War II broke out, what were you doing?

MW: I was a sixteen-year-old senior in high school.

MH: Was the assumption that you'd go into the Army?

MW: Yeah, it was just a matter of when. My first inkling was to try to get as much education as I could before I went in. I guess the first day after World War II started—after we got in World War II, December 7 [1941], I know I made a remark to my mother. I was so mad, I was gonna go join the Navy, and she said, "You're not gonna join anything. I'm not gonna sign anything for you until you're drafted when you're eighteen." But I did go the next fall to a junior college—it was a military school—and I talked my mother into signing my papers to the Marine Corps.

In the first part of 1943, I was called up. Being seventeen, I could only get in the reserve, and when I got called up for active duty, I flunked my physical. I didn't think much of it; everybody thinks they're healthy as a horse. I went—a few months later, when the Air Force started a program of taking seventeen-year-olds and calling them up when they became eighteen, I thought, "Well, I want to get in the Air Force all the time, anyway," and that's when I found out that I had high blood pressure. That was my problem.

MH: The Marines hadn't told you what the problem was?

MW: No. But the doctor that the Air Force sent me to had me go get my Marine Corps papers, and it showed that I had high blood pressure.

MH: High enough that they wouldn't take you.

MW: Yes. Well, you know, by today's standards—what makes me so mad about the whole thing is I had two friends in the Naval Air Corps and one in the Army Air Corps that had just as high a blood pressure as I did, and they went all the way through. (laughs)

MH: So, what happens when you go home and tell your mother that they won't take you?

MW: Oh, there was no problem with my mother. But when I had the chance to go to the Field Service in the early part of—I first heard about them in the spring of 1945. The funny thing about the whole situation is my mother supported me when I wanted to go, and my grandmother—both of my grandmothers did, too, and my two grandfathers and my father thought I was crazy.

MH: Had they served in the military?

MW: No, none of them had.

MH: Oh, okay. Tell me how you first heard of the American Field Service.

MW: I was promised by the head of our draft board there in Lancaster. I was promised two or three times that he would call me up for the draft. He did one time, and I didn't make it through. I think it more had to do with the Marine Corps than it did the physical that I had then. And because the doctor that I had then—there was no medicine for high blood pressure, but there were a lot of things you could do about it, such as staying away from caffeine and beer and a lot of other things, and get plenty of sleep.

But anyway, I just had a problem with my father, especially. He said, "You're out of it. You don't have to go, and you're crazy to go." And, like I said, my two grandfathers backed him up. But my mother was always the one that I would carry my problems to. And she—you know, she said she understood. So, when I saw the ad in the paper—I think what the ad said was, "Wanted: ambulance drivers for immediate deployment

overseas.” Of course, this was before D-Day, so everybody thought, you know, they’re wanting them for D-Day. This was a couple months before D-Day.

There was a fellow I was working with at the time. I had started—to get back to my other story, when I was waiting for the draft and all, I had started a temporary job with Dallas Power and Light. And the fellow that was working there with me, I didn’t know him very well, but I knew him. He had been in the Marine Corps and had been discharged out of boot camp. I showed the ad to him, so he and I decided to call the number. That afternoon, when we got off work, we called the number and made an appointment for the next day, and we went over. And then at that time, we were told by a fellow in Dallas in the insurance business, that had been in the American Field Service during World War I—then he told us what it was all about at that time when we met with him.

MH: What did he tell you it was about?

MW: Well, he said there were volunteer ambulance drivers. In World War I, he had been a student in Paris. Along with some other students in 1914, when Paris was just about to be captured by the Germans, they had helped out by—they were using taxis to go to take men to the front. The reserves were coming up from southern France and going through the only opening into Paris, from the south, and they were being carried to the front in these taxicabs. So, these students started taking the cabs and going out and picking up the wounded and bringing them back into a certain hospital there in Paris. After the siege was over with, these students decided they wanted to continue what they did, and they got their parents to back them financially, and they bought some ambulances that were being made by Ford Motor Company in southern France. And that was the beginning of the American Field Service, in 1914.

Then, in 1940, they again went overseas. They formed their ranks again. The number two man, General [Stephen] Galatti—I don’t know if I said his name right or not—but anyway, he was second in command of the Field Service in World War I. He was in command in World War II with headquarters in New York. They had ambulances and their drivers in France in 1940 when France fell to the Germans. One of the fellows there had been—he was a movie star, Robert Montgomery. I don’t know if you ever heard of him or not.

MH: Yes.

MW: He was English. And he later—he escaped through France, went to Lisbon, rode the Pan American seaplane back to New York, and later became an officer in the Naval Reserve.

MH: So—

MW: Then in World War I, temporarily the Field Service was disbanded. In 1941, the British asked if they would reorganize and come to the desert. That was in North Africa; that's when [Erwin] Rommel was in Egypt. And they did, and then they went all the way with the British 1st Army—I mean, the British 8th Army. They went all the way with them into Italy, and then ended up, of course—and that's where I went. They shipped me to Italy.

MH: Did they give you any training before they sent you?

MW: Well, I'll tell you the training we had: We stayed for two months in New York City. They had a brownstone that was lent to them and made into a dormitory on 51st Street. We had some veterans coming in and out of there that had been in the desert, and they held seminars for us where they would tell us what it was like and tell us what to do, what not to do. The most training we had was on what not to do.

MH: Such as?

MW: Such as don't touch dead bodies, don't pick up any souvenirs, and don't walk anywhere that hasn't been cleared. The Germans were very good at demolition; they were very good at mines. They were expert on explosives. In Italy, for instance, they blew up every railroad in Italy. Italy, prior to the war, had the best railroads in Europe. The Germans blew up every rail. The rails were just bent in awkward positions where they could never be used again. And then they blew up all the power lines that [Benito] Mussolini put in these villages to the mountains, and every bridge in Italy was blown up by them. And they mined everything.

So, it was something to really think about, and it really made me feel uneasy. I was dumb enough not to worry about being injured or crippled for the rest of my life, but I was very concerned and uneasy all the time about where I was stepping and just being anywhere where the Germans had been.

When we got overseas, we were in Naples one week, and what training we got there was mostly getting acquainted with the ambulance. And we certainly had troubles when we got to the front. I was with a group of five of us in New York City. They were all older than me. One was a schoolteacher, one was an engineer. Of course, there was Rollins, a

boy from Dallas who was about a year older than me, who went with me. Then we had a fellow that joined us, a Jewish fellow from Louisville that was—I didn't realize it at the time, but he was almost the same age as my father. And he was a professional student. He came from a wealthy family, and I don't think he ever did anything but go to school and travel. But when we got overseas, three of the five didn't make it through the first assignment.

MH: When you say they “didn't make it through”—

MW: Well, they just psychologically couldn't make it.

MH: What was your first assignment?

MW: Well, the first—I broke up from the guys, because I met some other people going overseas that did more what I did—that was play bridge and play poker and stuff like that—and I broke off and went with these fellows; there was two of them. The first post that we were sent out to, they sent me on the third day that I was forward. What they did, they sent us from Naples, they drove us in a truck all the way up through Rome, through Florence, and north of Florence: about sixty miles, I guess, north of Florence. At that point, we all were in the same truck, along with about thirty other guys, and we stopped at—

There were two companies of AFS ambulance drivers. Each company heading off to Italy was made up of four platoons of about thirty to thirty-five ambulances apiece. So, you had eight platoons, and about thirty-five ambulances. And they had headquarters for the company we were in. When we got there about noon—it was probably about thirty, forty miles north of Florence. It was a house inside a—it was surrounded by a tall brick fence, and it was a square and the little house—which was just a regular five-bedroom house; it didn't look like an Italian villa—set right in the middle. And there was four entrances: one north, east, south, west. Going into the house, besides the four paths, everything else was a rose garden. It was a beautiful thing.

The only thing was, it never had been demined. And there were wires and little flags all around there about mines. That was the most uneasy—we had a real good lunch, but that was the most uneasy time I can remember in my life, sitting there eating lunch in the middle of that minefield. But I don't know, that thought of—I guess it got me thinking the wrong way.

But we were not prepared to do what we went into. Psychologically, we were not prepared. And what happened is these four fellows went one direction in one platoon, and I went with these other two in another platoon. Three days later, we were sent up to a place called Monte Grande, and I'll be darned if they weren't already there. So, we were all thrown back together again, except the older Jewish fellow; he had been sent in the hospital from the platoon headquarters before they ever went up. And the day I got there, the fellow that was a schoolteacher, he was leaving. After we'd been there about a week, Rollins came up to me one afternoon and said, "I'm going back." I said, "What do you mean, you're going back?" and he said, "I can't take it anymore. I'm going back to company headquarters."

The fellow that I was friends with was named—he was from Alabama, so his name, of course, was 'Bama, just like mine was Tex. And so he swapped ambulances with me, and he was up next, and Rollins had said, "I'm gonna take the next ambulance back to Casa de Rio." Casa de Rio was the foot of the mountain, about nine miles away. The trip down was within view of the Germans, the Germans were on the next mountain, and they were always shelling this road. We went down it a couple times a day and one time at night, as a rule.

So, anyway, I took Rollins back with me. And when we got down to Casa de Rio, a little town at the foot of the mountains there, he told me, "Yesterday, when I was here—you see that little sign over there?" It was a little metal sign, something about MDS, which was the place that we delivered our wounded. And he said, "A shell fell here in this parking lot, and a piece of shrapnel went right by me and hit that sign there. I'm not just prepared for this. I'm going home." So, that is how we were prepared.

MH: Let me ask you a couple of logistical kinds of questions. Were you in uniform?

MW: Yes.

MH: What kind of uniform did you wear?

MW: We wore battle dress, mostly.

MH: Did they look like Army uniforms?

MW: Yes, they were British. What happened, when we were called to New York, they told us what to bring—sleeping bag, blankets, a couple Army blankets—and to go and get

two pair of Army khakis, officer Army khakis, and three Army poplin officer shirts. We went in the summertime, so that was our uniform. They were the same as American officers' uniforms. When we got to New York, they issued us a Canadian battle dress, a battle dress—I don't know; have you done any research on World War II, the American part of World War II?

MH: For the past several months I have, yes.

MW: Did you run across a jacket that the Americans wore called the Eisenhower jacket?

MH: Actually, I have one in my closet here from my father.

MW: Okay, what that was—it was a knockoff on the English battle dress jacket. The only difference is it is long and formfitting. The English battle dress jacket was short-waisted and bloused over, and it was not near as dressy. The Eisenhower jacket was a dressy jacket. The officers made it out of—had it made out of material they were using for the American officers coats. They also made it out of pink, too, which meant, I guess, they used the same material as they had in their slacks. We were allowed to buy clothing in the American officers' shop, and we were also able to buy uniforms and items in the British officers' shops.

MH: What insignia was on them?

MW: The insignia of the American Field Service was an eagle with his wings dipped. You've seen the insignia of the American colonel with the eagles?

MH: Yes.

MW: Well, those eagles' wings were just drooped. In fact, I've got one of the insignias for a hat. It wasn't mine; it was just one that I ended up with.

MH: The ambulances that you drove were military ambulances?

MW: They were American Dodges, and I think the British wanted them worse than they wanted the drivers. They were the best. They were the best vehicle in World War II.

MH: It was like a panel truck?

MW: No. You know, the ambulances you see on the road today are kind of boxy. That's the way the British ambulances were, only they did not have four-wheel drive. These ambulances we drove were American ambulance. They were the same ones used by the American Army, only we had them brand new. They were bought especially for us and then shipped overseas. They had four-wheel drive. They would take two stretchers on the floor, and two hung. They had little pull-down seats that ran the length of each side of the ambulance that could be pulled down for what we call "sitters." We could sit about eight or ten men back there, or we could carry four stretchers.

MH: How come the American Field Service wasn't concerned about your high blood pressure?

MW: Well, I guess you might say—Galatti wrote a prefix on a book called *The History of the American Field Service*, which if you're interested at all, you should get that from our archives. But he said in World War I, the American students in Paris organized the American Field Service and were drivers for the American Field Service. In World War II, the men who could not serve in the armed forces—in the American armed forces—were our ambulance drivers. And I don't know—well, are you careful what you put in print? (laughs)

MH: Usually. (laughs)

MW: We had a lot of homosexuals in the American Field Service. Not real dominating numbers, but they were allowed in American Field Service.

MH: And they weren't allowed in the Army.

MW: That's right. At that time, they were not allowed in the Army.

MH: So, they wanted to serve, and this is the way they could do it.

MW: Yeah. We had—

MH: I take it that's not a state secret.

MW: No, it's not.

MH: Okay.

MW: They also—we had several people like myself with blood pressure. Rollins had a curvature of the spine. One boy that I was close to had an arm that was sort of withered; he had been a copilot in the Air Force, in a bomber, and had been injured in a crash. Some of the guys looked perfectly healthy; I never did know what some of them was. One of my friends, I know, had blood pressure. 'Bama had a punctured eardrum. In the Korean War, he would've been drafted. A lot of them were minor things that you couldn't tell, and then some of them were apparent what was wrong with the guy.

MH: When they sent you over there, did you know that you'd be serving with the British, as opposed to the Americans?

MW: Oh, yes, yes. Now, when I went over there, the French unit had been started up again, so the American Field Service was in three locations at the time I went overseas in 1944. The French unit was training in North Africa for the invasion of southern France, which happened in September 1944. They were mostly veterans who'd transferred over to the French unit. The other two companies in Europe were, of course, in Italy, and then we also had a company in India-Burma. And I was given—of the three, I was told to put down two choices. I put down the French first. When I got my orders, I was to go to Italy with the British 8th Army, which didn't bother me a bit. After thinking about it, I thought, well, that's better than going to North Africa.

And then, when the war in Europe was over with, the fellows who came overseas in my unit and after my unit were obligated to go to India, which we did, most of us. Some of the guys that were in [Bergen] Belsen did not go. I think they all had a little head problem after that deal in Belsen.

MH: Before you went over there, or even in the early months that you were there, did you know about concentration camps? Did you know what the Germans had been doing?

MW: Well, you know, there was some publicity about it in the movies and everything else, but not to the extent that it was. I don't know, to tell you the truth. I don't remember

when I first found out about them. I wasn't surprised, because when we drove up in front of that concentration camp that was the first time I knew where we were going.

MH: So, the British military didn't tell you in advance about this, either?

MW: They didn't tell the individual. Now, I'm sure our officers knew where we were going.

MH: Just tell me the story of the early stage, before you got to Bergen-Belsen and how you ended up there, and then we'll talk about what happened there after that.

MW: Okay. Well, I was in Italy in March, and I was scheduled to—most of the fellows, most of the drivers, had left headquarters that day. We knew of what ended up being the final push. We knew that we had an offensive plan, and that the big battle was going to start any day. I was scheduled to leave the next morning, early, to join an English unit. I'd already packed everything in my ambulance and got it all spic-and-span and everything. I was in the house where our headquarters was—the villa. We didn't even have enough to play poker that night.

It was after supper, and I was just about ready to retire and go to bed in my ambulance when somebody broke in the front door. They came—I saw that they were from headquarters, one of the officers, and he got our lieutenant and told him he wanted to talk to him in private. So, they left the room. There was eleven of us there at the time, and we were sitting around reading, just killing time.

Our lieutenant came back and said, "I got an announcement to make to you. [Ambulance Car] Company 567"—which was not our company—"is leaving Italy for an assignment. It's secret. We can't tell you where they're going. We can only tell you that they're leaving Italy, and they want ten volunteers to go with them. They're taking ten men from each platoon, because where they're going, they cannot get any new recruits." So, he said, "I need ten volunteers."

Eleven of us volunteered, so he said, "All right, I'm gonna take you by seniority." We came down to one of the guys, who was a friend of mine, John. It came down between John and myself. And there was a deck of cards on the table, so our lieutenant said, "Y'all draw cards to see who goes." I drew a trey; John drew a deuce.

MH: (laughs) Okay.

MW: So, I got to go to Paris and London. (laughs) Anyway, we left there that night. We had to get our gear and we had one hour to get our gear together.

MH: Where in Italy were you?

MW: We were north of Forli. Are you familiar with Italy?

MH: Well, my wife and I were just there last year, but I don't know where—

MW: What part of Italy were you in last year?

MH: We went on a ship, so we were in Milan and then Venice, and then all the way down and around, and up to Livorno, and back to Rome. So, Florence—

MW: We were about 100 miles from Venice. We were inland, about forty miles from the Adriatic side.

MH: That's northern Italy.

MW: Yeah. We're just in the beginning of the Po Valley, southern part of the Po Valley.

MH: And you had an hour to get your stuff.

MW: We got our stuff, went over the high pass, which was the mountain range just north of Florence.

MH: So, you're driving your ambulances.

MW: No, we're in a truck.

MH: You were in a truck, okay.

MW: We had to leave our ambulances. And it just so happens that 567 Company had 250 new ambulances delivered to them on Christmas. So, here it was, three months later, those ambulances were just brand new. That's the reason why their company was picked to go to northern Europe.

So, we went down and spent the night on the Arno River, and the next morning we got up and drove in convoy. That's where the 567 Company were staged when we got there. They put all ten of us with other drivers. It just so happens the driver that they put me with was a fellow I had gone overseas with, so I knew him. And we went over to what they call the King's Forest, which we went through Florence going east—I mean, going west—and then went through Pisa. Then, just beyond Pisa, we got into the edge of what they call the King's Forest, and we stayed there a couple weeks. And from there, we shipped over by LST [Landing Ship, Tank]. One group went one night, and my group went the second night. We hooked up again in Marseilles.

MH: And you're taking these new ambulances with you?

MW: Yeah, we're taking these new ambulances with us. Yes.

MH: How many ambulances were being convoyed over?

MW: I would say about 150.

MH: Did you wonder what event is coming up that they need 150 ambulances?

MW: Well, we had had rumors, ever since I got to Italy, and they turned out to be true. There was [Winston] Churchill—Churchill was wanting to get into the southern European countries, before Russia did, like Yugoslavia, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia. He was wanting to get over there and beat the Russians to that. So, there'd been some talk ever since we were in Italy of an invasion of Yugoslavia, and that American Field Service was going to be part of it. And because we were the best—

See, our ambulances were so much better than what the British had. The British had one gear—not one gear, but they did not have four-wheel; they had two-wheel drive. And I'm telling you, you get into mud up to your hubcaps, you can't move. Or over ice, you just spin and everything else. You put the four-wheel drive on, you got pretty good control.

I remember one night we were going over the mountain. We were with the Polish, and we were going back, supposedly, to a rest place, which really probably was a ski resort in peacetime. We went over this mountain. I'm telling you, we had bright lights on. We were all at the top of the mountain. It was an artillery outfit, and they had these carriers that about eight men would fit inside, and then they had a cannon hooked onto the back of that, pulling that. And these two-wheel vehicles just weren't making it. And I remember we ended up—the vehicle in front of us was pulling a cannon. We ended up pushing that one and pulling another one, and he was pulling a cannon over the top of that hill. And believe it or not, an ambulance did that. They were powerful engines.

MH: Okay. So, in any event, they took you on LSTs?

MW: We went to Marseilles.

MH: From Italy to Marseilles? Okay.

MW: We got in Marseilles just in time to hear [Harry S.] Truman speak to the joint House and Senate. Then, that afternoon and the next morning, we started off in convoy going up through France over near northern Switzerland. And we went all the way up. We dodged Paris. We were about thirty miles from Paris one night when we stopped, and I guess that was probably our last night in France.

MH: In this convoy, is it just ambulances, or are there military equipment as well?

MW: Well, we just—whatever equipment we needed. We had some Jeeps. We had several vehicles that the British Army, like water carriers and some trucks, but not many. It was mostly just a column of 150 ambulances.

We finally end up in the southwestern part of Belgium at a place called Waregem. We stayed there about three, four days, and then we drove through Brussels and on up north of there and into southern Holland to a place called Eindhoven. Then we turned east at Eindhoven and drove. There was a little town about twenty miles from Eindhoven, and then on the other side—about twenty miles on the other side of it is where our destination was, temporarily, which was really just—it was a seminary, a Catholic seminary for priests. Down the road from it was the Catholic school, which was active; the seminary was vacant. We occupied the seminary for about three or four days, I guess.

All our other three platoons left, so we had about thirty-five ambulances there. We had a unit called Reserve that had about three, four ambulances in it and a driver and a half for each one of them. So, I guess that made pretty close to forty ambulances. And then we got word we were the only ones there, and we were skittish because we thought we were gonna be left out of the war. We knew it was gonna be over with soon. And we got this call to go down to—I can't even think of the name of it now. It's part of Holland that dips down in a little strip between Belgium and Germany.

MH: Okay.

MW: I've got all this down. I'll stop and tell you this right now: I have written a book about this, and I've got all my names and everything else in that book. I haven't finished it yet, but I've finished the part about Belsen.

Anyway, we got down there late in the afternoon. The next morning, we were told to go to mess, and right from mess, we were leaving. We were stationed that night at the British 9th—outside of the British 9th General Hospital—and we were told that we were going to carry a hospital into Germany. So, next morning, the personnel came out—and their equipment—and we loaded them up and we started out to the Rhine. We got into Germany before we got to the Rhine River.

I remember we went through a German town there that was just—you could see from one end to the other. It wasn't anything but rubble, and bricks were just stacked up. A bulldozer, I guess, had gone and cleared the road. And that's the first time that we had seen that much destruction. Then we went on over to the Rhine River, and we crossed it at what they called the Roosevelt Bridge; it was a pontoon bridge. We went into Germany a little further, and then we went through the northern part of the Siegfried Line.

MH: Aside from the hospital unit, were there military troops with you?

MW: No.

MH: No? Okay.

MW: None. And we were zigzagging, evidently to miss pockets of Germans; it took us two days to get to Bergen-Belsen. And then the afternoon that we arrived there—I guess the ambulance I was in was probably five or six from the front, something like that. As

we came out of this forest around a little bend, all of a sudden the ambulances in front of us just slowed down to a crawl. As we got into the opening, we could see the prison, or the concentration camp, over to our left. The front gates were open, and people were just milling around. And, of course, we were just looking at it with our mouths open.

MH: What was it that caused you to look at it with your mouths open? What were you seeing that shocked you?

MW: Well, just the barbed wire and the people that—we didn't know it at the time, but the section we were looking at was the women's section. They had a women's section, and they had a men's section. Probably had a children's section, but I never saw any of the children. And then it had a prisoner of war section that I didn't even know about for years later. But, I mean, just the appearance of the thing and the people, and the condition of the people. They were just skeletons.

MH: How close were you to the people at that point? Is the road right next to the barbed wire fence?

MW: The road was right next to the barbed wire fence. There was just kind of a little dip, ditch in between. Anyway, we kept going, and there was an SS barracks that looked like what you'd seen in movies, what a German cavalry barracks would look like. And we went up into this south part, which was about a mile and a half away, over to the west of the German encampment, and ended up going off the road and circling our ambulances into the edge of a forest. And we took that over and made that into our camp.

MH: How many days after the camp was taken over by the Allies was this, would you guess?

MW: The camp was liberated on April 15. I'm not sure what day it was, but it was the end of April. We didn't get there for at least ten days. I did not have a diary, and what I'm going by—there is someone—the lieutenant in my outfit had a diary. He wrote very, very badly. I have parts of that diary, and I don't—I got it, and then I lost my sight just right after that. I don't know. Did they tell you that I was blind?

MH: No.

MW: Yeah, well, I'm legally blind. And I didn't get all my writings done, but after I had to quit, I think I have found a way to finish them now with a magnifying machine, but

anyway—a more powerful one than I have. But anyway, I might be able to dig up some dates for you from that diary.

MH: That's okay. You've now got—essentially, the wagons are circled, and you're near the forest.

MW: We're in the forest. It's a light forest; it wasn't a heavy forest.

MH: And you're going to spend the night there?

MW: No, we stayed there for seven weeks.

MH: So, they set up tents?

MW: Yeah. We set up tents because—we didn't immediately set up tents, but we finally set up tents because the ambulances were not fit to sleep in because of all the diseases and everything that the people had that we were transporting.

MH: I see. Once you get camp set up, then what happens? Did you go into the camp?

MW: What happened is the first afternoon there, we were told we were leaving and going back to Holland to get the other half of the hospital—that we didn't know existed. (laughs) So, we go back in one day and then bring it back in one day.

MH: That's what's what you did?

MW: Yeah.

MH: I'm a little confused as to why they were using ambulances when big trucks would've seemed to—

MW: I don't know. I don't know. Of course, they wanted the ambulances up there to work—

MH: Right.

MW: —to do the work, but why they didn't transport some of this stuff—not only that, but we left two ambulances there, which did no work that I know of. We went back; we lost two days getting back and bringing back the rest of it. The minute we get there—the day that they come back, they put the ambulances in service carrying Germans. There was a German hospital there, and they carried loads of SS troops that were in the hospital. I heard 200. Carried them to some sort of a hospital prison.

MH: They were in a hospital at Bergen-Belsen?

MW: Yes, the Germans had their own hospital there.

MH: It sounds like—what were they trying to do, empty that hospital so they could put other people in it?

MW: Well, I was only in that hospital—it was back in the woods, away from the camp. The German camp really had a large area around there. They had a little train track all the way through it. And I was in that hospital. A friend of mine and myself found out about it, because we were not with them—we didn't go with them because there wasn't room for a second driver, because they had to have an armed guard to sit in the second seat. So, the hospital was not well known. A friend of mine and myself, we stumbled onto it one Saturday morning about a month after we'd been there, and there wasn't any activity there at all. It wasn't being used at all.

MH: This is the hospital in the camp?

MW: Yeah. Well, it was—

MH: Near the camp.

MW: —it was in the vicinity of the camp. And also in the woods, in the vicinity there, were some houses—cottages—that the commandant lived in, and some of the hierarchy of the SS had lived there rather than in the barracks.

MH: When did you first go inside the barbed wire?

MW: I went in the first day. It must've been—well, it had to be—let's see, one, two, three. It was about the fourth day we were there. I can never understand. They took over the barracks and made a hospital out of the barracks of the SS; that was about a mile and a half north toward Belsen, toward the town of Belsen. And these barracks were—the setting for the barracks was they were lined in twos, and they were about four or five stories tall, brick buildings. And in the center were smaller buildings that had been the stables at one time for a cavalry outfit. But now it was being used by the SS as a training for the SS Panzer divisions. And at the time we got there, we were told there was a division of Hungarians there, but I don't—thinking back over it now, I don't think [so]. There might've been a regiment there. It wasn't any 15,000 there.

MH: When you went in the camp, were the former prisoners still there, the inmates?

MW: Oh, yeah.

MH: Tell me about what you saw.

MW: We went in the women's section. These women were laying in bunks, they were so weak, and they couldn't walk; they couldn't get out of the bunks. Some of them were delirious. And the way they handled that is they went through, a medical unit—supposedly a medical doctor—went in front and said, “Take this one, leave this one; take this one, leave this one.” Then there were some—a unit of English medics. They had their masks on and everything, all their special gloves and everything, and they were stripping these women of their clothes, [the women] that were chosen to be carried off. They'd wrap them in a blanket and then put them on a stretcher.

That's where I went in the first day. Being a spare driver, I went in the first day or two as a stretcher bearer. We got so that we would help them put the women over—they would strip them off, and we'd put the blanket around them and put them onto the stretcher. And we had one woman, I remember, that fought us like a cat, because she thought we were taking her to the crematory.

MH: Were you able to communicate with her?

MW: No. She was completely out of her head. They did. The medics were telling her, “We're here to help you. Don't be afraid. We're going to help you,” you know. But they

looked like men from Mars (laughs) to start with, with all these masks on and everything. We didn't have that equipment on. They dusted us and that was about it. Some of us had on gloves, some of us didn't.

MH: They dusted you with DDT?

MW: Yeah. I looked like I had gray hair there for about four weeks.

MH: Was the DDT supposed to prevent typhus?

MW: Well, it was everything. I mean, it wasn't just typhus, it was everything. We all had shots. But the day that we were gone, a British soldier had died of typhus. Of course, they had already been there for a couple weeks ahead of us. And then when we got back, man, there was a flood going to the dispensary to get shots. We all had had typhus shots, but we all got boosters, even though we weren't due them. They were good for a year, I think.

Part 1 ends; part 2 begins

MH: When you were in the camp, were you able to talk with any of the inmates?

MW: No, I never did talk to any of them. A lot of our drivers did get to talk to some. I never—I got to talk to some outside, a lot of them. I talked to a lot of the inmates outside. But that couple of days I was working inside that camp there, no, we did not. We didn't find anybody to talk to.

MH: When you say you talked to them outside the camp, when did that take place?

MW: Oh, when things started being cleared up, cleaned up. I ran into a lot of people that were in pretty fair condition; either they hadn't been there very long or they got special treatment. And they turned around and took a lot of them—

Well, after we'd been there about a week, they decided they needed more nurses, so they took all the ambulances for a day go to pick up a German hospital. They went to the wrong town. It so happens that there were two towns with the same name. Our lieutenant was not very good with the map. Then they had to make a second trip a couple days later, so that was two days right there that were lost, another two days lost. We were strictly under orders from—I mean, we had nothing to do with it. We were under strict orders

from the medical officer of the hospital as to what we did and when we did it. But then, it really didn't take very long to—I don't know, I don't imagine we were in the camp over ten days.

MH: Where were they—were they actually taking some people someplace in your ambulances?

MW: Yeah. What they did is—I told you the configuration?

MH: Right.

MW: We'd take those people up to one of these little huts that were in the center. They had been turned into—I forget what they called them, but that's where we took them, and turned them over to the English orderlies and nurses. They would scrub these people, give them baths, they would cut their hair, they would take all the lice and stuff, de-lice them, and get them in condition that they could take them over into one of the brick buildings. They'd all been turned into dormitories for people working there, dormitories for people who were able to take care of themselves, and the rest of it was hospital. And a lot of the people that could take care of themselves—I met several of them, the girls that they turned into nurses' aides. So, everybody had a job there; everybody was doing something all the time.

MH: Tell me about the conversations you did have with people who were outside.

MW: Well, I met—first, let me say that the trouble that they had, and this ties into the people that I met that were German. The camp had been built as a Russian prisoner of war camp. Whenever the guards left, which was a couple days before or a day or so before the British got there; the SS guards just took off, left the people there on their own. And these Russians broke out and had gone through the countryside tearing up everything, raping all the women they could find, stealing and taking everything they could. And some of the people told us—some of the Germans showed us the doors, how they broke them down and everything.

So, we met some German—I mean, some Russian nurses. They were about our age, and they said they'd been taken prisoner at Stalingrad, and of course they had them working as nurses in the infirmary in the hospital there. I noticed that they were in pretty good shape, and I wondered why in the world would the Germans take up their transportation bringing people all the way across Europe to put them in the concentration camp. I couldn't understand that. And there was a lot of women there that was in good shape, and

they were nice looking women, so you wonder if the Germans didn't bring them for other reasons.

So, anyway, these nurses, there were about five of them, and we kind of paired off and talked, and one of the girls that—for some reason, she and I got together. She could speak real good English and was telling me all about their stories. When we left after they had fixed some—had some wine from somewhere and had some crackers and things; I guess probably we brought some of it. We just had a little cocktail party.

And as we left, I said, “Those young girls look in pretty good shape, but you know, they must've been suffering from malnutrition, some of them,” because I know when I was in Italy, I said to one of my friends, “I never have seen so many pregnant women in my life as I've seen here in northern Italy.” He said, “They're not pregnant; that's their stomach swollen from malnutrition. It affects a woman that way.” So, I said, “They must've been suffering pretty bad from malnutrition, and these other guys said, “Yeah? But they're pregnant.” (laughs) So, three out of five were pregnant. That made you wonder again what the Germans had been doing.

MH: I think the question's answered.

MW: Yes. And also, I ran into a couple Polish girls there; one of them spoke very good English. And I made friends with an English soldier, and we ran around together there. And we picked up these two girls on Sunday. On Sunday, they'd all get, toward the end of our stay there, Sundays was a promenade day, everyone called it. All the girls would get out in the area there, in the center of the compound, and walk around. So, anyway, we met a couple girls there. I found out the girl I met—a very pretty Polish girl, had blonde hair—couldn't speak English. Not one word. So, the other girl would translate.

She said she'd been married. She was twenty-one years old; she had been married and was with an underground group in Poland, in Warsaw, and been captured. And her husband, young husband, had been killed along with the other males, and she had been transported. And how many camps she'd been in, I don't know. But one thing, Belsen was a—well, Belsen had about four times as many inmates in there at the end as it was built for.

And when I went back over there in 2005 for the sixtieth anniversary, German and Hamburg, who was tied in with the American Field Service. In fact, they started a—I guess you know that they have a scholarship thing going between exchange students. In other words, the Field Service, five years after the war was over, started an exchange of students all over the world. Did Norman tell you anything about that?

MH: No.

MW: Well, anyway, that's the thing; that is the reason why the American Field Service is still in existence today. It's because of that. And he told me—we went down to the camp on the day of the ceremony, and he said, "I just can't understand this, why so many people died here. We Germans are better organized than that." And I thought to myself, "He thinks that the problem is they weren't well organized, not the fact that they were doing something they should not be doing."

MH: Right. I'm just looking online as you were talking. It says that on April 8, 1945, there were over 60,000 prisoners in the camp.

MW: That's probably true. I have read where there were 70,000 died there in the first part of 1945. See, what happened is all these camps were being overrun, all over southern Germany and Poland and all. They were moving those prisoners over to Belsen, sometimes by rail, sometimes by just walking. And that's the reason they got so many.

My understanding is, Belsen started off being a prisoner of war [camp] in 1941, for the Russians. Then there was a program that they were going to get, an exchange program. So, they started bringing the Jews into Belsen that they thought they could exchange, and they did do some of that exchange, and then it got just to be a concentration camp. They said that there was not a gas chamber there, even though some of the guys that I was with said there were. I don't think there was. Officially, I have read where there was not a gas chamber there. But they worked them to death and starved them to death.

MH: What else did you see, walking through the inside of the camp?

MW: Well, what they did there for sanitary reasons is they built toilets, and the toilet was nothing but a slit trench with a board over it with holes in it periodically. And these women would just go by, and there was filth all over where someone went to the bathroom. And these people, women, would come up and get on one of these planks and pull up their dress. They wouldn't have any underwear on. I saw so many naked women that I thought I never (laughs) cared to see a naked woman again. And they had no modesty whatsoever. There weren't very many men, because this was the women's section, but the first day there, the people I saw out in front of the gate were men. But then there were women around, too.

The first day we worked in the camp, we had to drive to the north end of the camp, and then down and out the front gate. We would drive right by a big hole that had been dug, and what was taking place was that flatbed trucks were being used, and they were going through the camp picking up corpses, and they were bringing them up to this big common grave. And they were putting 1,000 to 2,000 people in these graves. They had Germans—they were either prisoners of war or people they conscripted from some of these towns nearby—down there stacking these bodies. Some of the bodies, you'd look at them, and the eyes were open and they were looking, just staring. And most of them, the flesh was just over bone. They were so thin.

MH: How does this affect you?

MW: Well, I'll tell you, of course I guess I was shell-shocked at the time, but that didn't really bother me as much as it did some. Well, for one reason, I wasn't in the camp as much as what some of the guys were. And I guess I just had— when I had saw all my buddies folding up in Italy, I guess I made myself to the point that I just had hardened myself against it. And I know I got criticized when I was in Italy for being sort of hardhearted.

And I know they once told me, "You've been criticized for not—by some of the patients. You're not friendly to them, you don't do this or that," and I said, "I get them down the damned mountain, don't I? What else can I do? I'm getting the job done." And they said, "Well, you can talk to them and offer them cigarettes and do this and that." I guess I just had hardened myself, because I was weak and that's the way I got by. And I still felt that way. I mean, I don't mean it didn't bother me; it did bother me. But I guess it's like a doctor; you got to the point that you felt for them, but you couldn't feel for them so much that you couldn't do your job.

MH: The shell didn't break at Bergen-Belsen?

MW: No. A lot of people, especially the guys that worked in the camp every day, a lot of them came out in pretty bad shape. The guy I was driving with, he went home; he didn't go to India with us. And there were several of the guys who were supposed to go to India that didn't go to India, and that's the only reason I can think that they didn't go.

MH: Were you getting paid for this?

MW: \$20 a month.

MH: There you go. How did that compare to being in the Army? I don't know what—

MW: A private got \$60 a month plus overseas pay, which was—an Air Force pilot got about \$200 to \$500 a month.

MH: When you came back, were you able to take advantage of the GI Bill?

MW: We thought we had the GI Bill. A senator from the State of Washington had amended the GI Bill to allow us. The GI Bill was amended before that to include anybody that was in a foreign army. Well, when it came to us, they said, "Wait a minute. These guys never did take their allegiance to be in the army," and we hadn't. We hadn't because Congress had passed a law that if you took an oath in any other country to be in their Army, you took the oath, you could lose your citizenship. So, I went to college, I was there two weeks, and I got notice that I was not in the GI Bill. So, we did not get any benefits until 1995. (laughs)

MH: In 1995? Then what happened?

MW: In 1995, somebody in our organization got a bill passed in Congress recognizing us and giving us the GI Bill.

MH: What about medical care at the VA?

MW: Yeah. And the way they did it was people who served the British army in Italy at one time came under the supreme command of an American general, and for that period of time, that six months—I guess it's further than that, about eight months. Anybody serving in Italy at that time was eligible to apply for a discharge from the American Army. I have never been in the American Army, but I have got a discharge from the American Army. And right now, I'm looking at my medals up here, and one is a Good Conduct ribbon from the American Army. (laughs)

MH: I don't even have one of those, and I was in the American Army in Vietnam! They forgot to give me one.

MW: They forgot to give you the Good Conduct?

MH: Yes, they did.

MW: You can have mine. (laughs)

MH: Thanks. Did you get health coverage under the VA system?

MW: Yes, I do. Could you hold just a second?

MH: Sure, no problem.

MW: I need to use the restroom.

MH: No problem.

Pause in recording

MH: Just in general, how do you react to having spent time at a place like Belsen?

MW: Well, I came home and completely forgot about it. I never had a nightmare. I never even thought about it. I did talk about a lot of things that happened while I was in Belsen, but not about the camp part. And then, about thirty years after the war, I went to a movie with my wife one Sunday afternoon, and it was *Sophie's Choice*. Do you remember that?

MH: Yes.

MW: And when we went out and got in the car and I started the car up, and then I just completely broke down. I guess what got me was the scene where she had to make a choice between her two children; do you remember that one?

MH: Yes.

MW: And I had thought that the surroundings reminded me, and I told Jo, I said, “I think that that was Belsen, the way it looked.” Probably all of them looked alike in some form or fashion. But the daughter immediately went to the gas chamber, and of course, there wasn’t one in Belsen.

But my feeling was really and truly a feeling of not feeling like I was compassionate, as much as I should’ve been. In other words, I just treated it like a day at the office instead of what it really was.

MH: But that was your way of getting through it, too.

MW: Yes, that’s true. And then, I know I went back to New York and went to the archives and went through it again, and I just completely broke down. I was to the point that I really, you know, felt like I couldn’t talk about it in public. I never did try to talk about it.

MH: What is it you saw in the archives that unsettled you so much?

MW: Well, I guess we just started talking about it and seeing the whole thing again, seeing the atmosphere, seeing the pictures of everybody and all. And I took some pictures there. One of the freebies that we had was developing film. We could send those in through headquarters. I don’t remember if they gave us the film or not, but I think they must’ve furnished the film. And whenever you got your film back, if you had a shot that didn’t take, you had the negative there.

I sent two rolls in, and I mean they were pictures that really showed the camp. And when I got them back, none of the pictures showing what the real camp was like. It showed—I had some that came back where we were loading people in the ambulance. But when I took pictures of the open graves and people laying dead in the open, and the pictures of one of the buildings with corpses laying on the outside of it, I didn’t get those back, and I did not get negatives back. I talked to a friend of mine a couple years ago, and he told me the same thing. And I said, “Well, you sent me some pictures that you got from headquarters, and when you sent copies to me, I saw one or two in there that looked like pictures that I thought I took.” He said, “I did the same thing.”

After that, they told us that there was a professional photographer taking pictures of the camp, and there was gonna be 500 pictures processed and that we could get some of them. They had us put up money for them, which we did. And when we got ready to leave for Europe, we asked them, “Where are—?” It so happens that, right at the end there, we were just a few miles from Brussels, and Brussels is where our headquarters

was, and we asked them in the headquarters, “Where are our pictures that we paid for?” And finally they said, “Well, that deal fell through; there’s not gonna be any pictures. And, also, we can’t refund your money.”

MH: Oh, okay.

MW: But what I couldn’t understand is—it looked like they were thinking about a cover-up, or what? I don’t understand what they—it looked like we had censorship.

MH: Well, it certainly sounds like censorship, but I can’t believe anybody was covering up what was there. I mean, so much has come out. So, are there any pictures of you at the camp or with your ambulance?

MW: Yeah.

MH: Do you have them, or does—?

MW: I have them. I have some.

MH: What I’d like to do, if possible, is to get a picture of you at the camp, or any of the pictures that you took, that I can scan and then return them to you with an eye towards using them in the book.

MW: I’ll go through and see what I got. I also have some pictures of the camp that were official pictures taken. I don’t know who took them. We had a fellow that was a part-time photographer for the company; whether he took them or not, I don’t know, but I do have some pictures. Did Eleonora [Golobic] not tell you about those?

MH: Yeah, she said that they have an archive there that has pictures, but what I’m interested in is getting a picture of you at the camp. At some point, I know, I’ll go to the archive that she has and see what they have. But if you could find a picture of yourself at the camp—and a current-day picture would be nice, too, something taken recently.

MW: Big difference.

MH: For all of us.

MW: (laughs)

MH: We have a Vietnam reunion coming up in August. This is twenty guys who were with the 25th Infantry Division Public Information Office, who were all combat correspondents or photographers in 1966. We've had a couple of reunions, and I remember going to the first one—it was probably twenty-five years after the war—and I walk into this room and mostly the only thing I recognized were the voices. Otherwise, we were all a lot older. So, it'll only be worse now for us.

MW: Everybody looks so much older than you do.

MH: Yes, absolutely. (both laugh) You were at the same reunion, see?

MW: Yeah. (laughs)

MH: After seeing *Sophie's Choice*, how did you—how long did that feeling last?

MW: Well, it's not as bad now as it was then, but I still feel that I was not compassionate enough, that I didn't do enough when I was there.

MH: Did you ever talk to anybody about that?

MW: No, not really.

MH: Sometimes people do what they need to do to get the job done.

MW: Yeah. Well, I don't know, it's just—I was young, and I was a guy that liked—that was missing the Saturday night dance and stuff like that, you know. When I got back from the war, well, everything was—everybody was getting married and getting homes, and everybody was having families and going to school. And, you know, we were all busy, and we could kind of put that life behind us, even though—you know, I've always told stories. I've got a lot of stories. It's not that I—

And the time I was in the Field Service, I was overseas fourteen months, and I traveled 40,000 miles. I traveled on the *Queen Elizabeth* coming home, and they flew us from India back to England in four-engine bombers, and sent us to India in a cruise ship. But it wasn't—in July, going through the Suez Canal wasn't exactly a cruise.

MH: Which ship was this on?

MW: This was the *Empress of India*.

MH: *Empress of India*.

MW: Mm-hm. And we went through the Suez Canal in July. (laughs)

MH: Nice. You talk about being—feeling you weren't as compassionate as you should be. Yet, you were there and didn't have to be.

MW: Well, that's true. It's funny, but I don't know whether it was—the ten of us—I did not know this until very recently. The ten of us were all still together and part of that seventy-six that was—I mean, the ten that transferred out of my platoon. We were all sent to the same place, and I never realized it, because I wasn't friends with any of those guys; they were all old-timers. When I say “old-timers,” they were there ahead of me. There was kind of a distinction in the Field Service at the time; the old veterans called the young guys “Johnny come lately,” and then when we got to be the old-timers, (laughs) we called them “Johnny come lately.” But I was a little bit more social with them than they were with us. But I didn't realize. I didn't know the guys well enough.

One guy that I did know well enough went back while we was in Pisa. I know he was an Italian boy. He told me, “I don't know why I signed up to do this. And just miles up the road is my family, my grandparents that I've never seen. What would you do?” And I said, “I'd stay here.” And that's what he did, but that left nine of us. And just before we left Belsen, the guy came up to me and said, “Tex, I want to apologize to you.” And I said, “Apologize to me for what?” and I didn't even—I mean, I'd seen him around, but I didn't recognize him being one of the nine guys in my old platoon. And he said, “Well, I thought you were a hotshot when we were on Monte Grande, zipping up and down that mountain like a racetrack, but I want to apologize. I think you're a pretty good guy.” And to this day, I don't know what he was apologizing for.

But something I didn't tell you, what I did when we was on top of that mountain. One Saturday morning, I was given the job of transporting a British Army captain, who was a dentist; he'd been up there fixing everybody's teeth. I was given the job of driving him back to his next position. In the British Army, when you're an ambulance, you have the right of way. And we were lined up to go to a one-way strip that was being monitored by the American MPs [Military Police], and we was up to our hubcaps, and it was hard getting around.

We were there waiting in line, and this darned Jeep comes by us, throwing mud and everything, slipping back and forth and throwing mud all over us, and went up to the head of the line. In the British Army, the big men are all put in the guard units, 6'0" and over, in the guards. The guard units finally went down to 5'10" during the war, with all the casualties they had. But they always say they put the smart big men in the guard units; the dumb big men they made MPs out of.

Well, this truck that went up, this Jeep that went by me throwing this mud all over us, these guys had red on their caps. These MPs would take these covers, red covers, and put it on top of their hats. So, I stuck out my head and told him what a son of a bitch I thought he was, and so on and so forth. And the captain behind me just turned white. He said, "You know what you've just done?" And I said, "What's that?" and he said, "You've just cussed out our colonel." Well, the British officers have a red band—from the lieutenant colonel up have a red band on their caps. He wasn't an MP.

MH: I see.

MW: So, that was one of the things I did.

MH: And the consequences of that?

MW: I got a write-up in *Union Jack*. *Union Jack* was the same as—

MH: The *Stars and Stripes*?

MW: The *Stars and Stripes* of the British Army.

MH: Who told the story?

MW: Well, I don't know how the story got told. I don't know who told the story, because I sure didn't, unless the captain did. And it went to the British, too, and he got out and went up and apologized and told him who I was, told the colonel who I was. He said, "Oh, he's one of these Yanks, he's new here."

MH: Back to Belsen for a moment. Were there times when you could be by yourself and walk through the camp and just think about what you were seeing and what you were in the middle of?

MW: I did not go to that camp unless I had to go to work in it. The only other time I went to the camp was—that was on the twenty-first day of May. I was in camp, and there wasn't very many people there; a lot of the guys had gone on leave to Paris and all. And I saw smoke, and the blackest, biggest column of smoke going up in the air with flames. We were about a mile and a half from the camp. And somebody said, "They're burning the camp."

MH: This is at Belsen?

MW: Yeah.

MH: And you were still there on the twenty-first of May?

MW: Yes. So, I climbed in my ambulance and drove down there, and what remained of Belsen was being burned at that time. I don't know when we finished in Belsen, because it only took about ten days of actual work inside the camp. Maybe a little bit longer.

MH: Where did they take all the inmates?

MW: All the inmates had been evacuated by that time, all the ones that were alive. The ones that were dead had been buried, and the ones that were alive had gone through the process of being put into the hospitals. We'd gotten down at that time to about fifty deaths a year—I mean, fifty deaths a day.

MH: What did it start at?

MW: It started at about 500, I think. I don't remember for sure, but it was way on up there. I got all this written down in my book.

MH: What did you do—what was your job when you came home? What was your career like?

MW: Oh, I ended up being a CPA [certified public accountant].

MH: In Dallas?

MW: Yeah. I had my own—after I worked for a company for—I worked in private industry for twenty-five years, and then the last twenty-five years of my career, I had my own company.

MH: When did you get married?

MW: I got married five months after I got back.

MH: To a woman you knew before you went in?

MW: I knew her but never had dated her. I dated her sister. (laughs)

MH: Oh, okay. You had children?

MW: Yes, I have four. I've got three daughters and a son.

MH: And you have grandkids now?

MW: Yes. No great-grandchildren, though.

MH: How many?

MW: I have eight grandchildren and two step-grandchildren.

MH: Except for that incident with *Sophie's Choice*, does the experience at Belsen ever come back to you?

MW: It only comes back at times like when I'm talking to you or I'm talking to somebody about it. It doesn't bother me. There was a time I couldn't have talked to you about it. I could talk to you about it, but I couldn't talk to you about the camp.

MH: How long ago was that?

MW: Well, I guess the time that I really—it started tapering off after I had that episode in New York. You know, it kind of surprises me, but I don't think I feel as guilty as I used to. I think it was more guilt than anything. Because my job—most of my job while we were there was—I think I drove in the camp one day. Of course, we were only there ten, eleven days, twelve.

MH: But you must have come—

MW: I was a stretcher bearer, and the other times I worked as security.

MH: You must've been there more than ten days if you were there on May 21 when they were burning it.

MW: Oh, we were—no, I meant working, working ten days in the camp. In other words, we only had about ten days—ten or twelve days, two weeks at the most—of actually working and clearing out the camp. The camp must've been cleared out, I think, by May 12, somewhere along in there. The camp was cleared.

MH: So, you were there for V-E Day.

MW: Oh, yes. Yes. The camp still wasn't cleared out on V-E Day. And we did a lot of things after that. One day, I had to transport some of the Russians that were in the hospital, some of the men. I had to transport them, the Russians. Finally, after V-E Day, after the two armies hooked up, the American and British with the Russians, they sent a Russian contingency over there to corral those Russians, because what happened over

there was, whenever the Scotch guards—that's what I heard, the Scotch guards were the ones that liberated it, or went through there, anyway, and they mopped up by capturing everything that was left there. Everyone that was—all the Germans that were left there, they captured them.

Then they left, and they left about 250 Royal Engineers. Left a company of engineers there, and that's all they had, and handling those Russians was more than they could handle. They had disarmed all the Hungarians, so they turned around and armed some of the Hungarians who were prisoners of war. They armed them in helping control the Russians. And then, when the Russian Army came in, they took control of them, and they took them to a town nearby and evacuated it, hauled the Germans out of it and took it over, and put the Russians in it.

I was part of the group that transported the Russians from the hospital over to that camp. They had barbed wire all around it, and armed guards with bayonets on their rifles. I didn't know whether it was to keep the other people out or keep the Russians in. I found out later it was to keep the Russians in.

MH: Did you write letters home about the camp?

MW: The only person I would've written to would've been my mother, and—you know, I never thought of that. I had all her letters at one time, but I don't have them anymore. I've lost them somewhere along the line.

MH: Eleonora had mentioned that in the archive they had some letters home that were written; I just wondered if any of them were yours.

MW: No, none of what she's got is mine.

MH: Okay. Anything else you want to tell me about this?

MW: Well, no. One episode I had that was strange was—like I say, I was (inaudible). We had, because of the Russians and because of the Hungarians, because of the Germans that were passing through, especially at night—the Germans that were ex-soldiers—we had some people wake up in their tents at night with somebody in the tent with them. We had them even in the daytime. We had people stealing stuff out of the camp. So, we set up a five-man armed guard. We weren't supposed to carry arms until we went into Germany,

and when we went into Germany, they just more or less tore up our Geneva cards and said we couldn't go in, as we were armed, on Eisenhower's orders.

Well, I was walking down the road one night, and of course we didn't have any streetlights or anything; it was very dark. I ran into three men that were walking down the road, and I stopped them. They said that they were Jewish and from—they named the federation that they were from. One of them spoke English and the other two didn't, and the one that did speak English was the leader of the group. And he told me, "We're here representing this federation, and seeing how the Jewish people are being treated."

So, we're talking, and I guess my jacket was coming open. He pointed to the shoulder holster I had with a revolver in it with pearl handles on it, and he said, "Patton?" and I said, "No, cowboy." And he said, "May I see it?" I pulled it out of my shoulder holster and handed it to him. He looked it over, and he said, "Bullets?" and I said, "One." And he pulled out a—he handed it back to me, he pulled a pistol out of his waistband, and took two cartridges out of his gun. The .38 I'd been issued was the most impossible to get. The .38 was used by the British, but they would issue an officer a pistol with six shells. That's all we ever had during the war. Anyway, he handed me two shells and said, "You now have three."

But when I told that story, a lot of people said, "You mean you gave him a gun and you didn't even know who he was?" and I said, "I had a .45 cocked in my coat pocket."
(laughs)

MH: (laughs) I see. Okay. Your mama didn't raise no fools.

MW: That's right.

MH: I see. If you could look for those photos—I mean, what's the easiest way to do this? Do you want to call me when you get them, or I can mail you an envelope? What would work best?

MW: Is there a way of sending them on the computer?

MH: There is, but they have to be scanned at a high enough resolution so we can use them, to be able to publish them. I have a scanner at home, and what I've been doing is getting photos from the guys, and then I scan them and I send the prints back. And I also

send you back a DVD that has your pictures on it—or a CD, rather, that has your pictures on it.

MW: Let me tell you this: When I went back to the sixtieth anniversary, the Field Service was asked to have a representative there by the Jewish Federation of Lower Saxony. During the whole proceedings, which only were partly in English, American Field Service—and we also had a printout of all the speeches—American Field Service was never mentioned in that whole celebration, and the English Army was only mentioned one time. So, I hope your book will give some credit to the American Field Service.

MH: Well, that's why I've been talking to you for the past two hours. The subtitle of the book is *America's Final Witnesses to the Holocaust*. I was very happy to see there were Americans at Bergen-Belsen, because without the Americans there, I wouldn't be dealing with the subject, because it was liberated by the British and Canadians. I actually found a man who's now an American citizen—Jewish, Polish, fled with his family to Russia, the Russians sent him to Siberia. He ended up coming back in the Polish Army to some of the horrible camps in Poland, and then ended up with the Russian Army at the Battle for Berlin and at the camp called Sachsenhausen. And he became a U.S. citizen and ultimately became commander of the Jewish War Veterans of the State of New York. So, I've interviewed him as well, because it gives me the chance to talk about camps that weren't liberated by the Americans.¹

MW: I have a fellow here, a Jewish fellow here that was in the Palestine brigade, or the Jewish brigade that fought in Italy. He was Austrian, and he and his wife both left Austria when they were sixteen and went to Jerusalem; that was when Hitler first took over Austria. I got the book about the Jewish brigade and put it on my talking books—I use books, you know, with tapes. They said that the Jewish brigade left Italy and went in convoy up through Germany and stopped at Belsen. Of course, this was after we left Belsen. I figure we were in Belsen seven weeks. So, this fellow I know here was not in that group. Whenever I talk to him about it—he's one of these that doesn't like to talk about it.

MH: You get talking books from the Library of Congress?

MW: Yes.

MH: If you're interested, there's a book that I wrote—I was embedded with U.S. Air Force pararescue guys in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Uzbekistan in 2002, and I wrote a book called *None Braver*.

¹ This man's name is Bernard Storch. The DOI for his interview is C65-00132.

MW: *None Braver.*

MH: Right. Which was recorded for the Library of Congress.

MW: Good, good. I'll get it.

MH: In any event, if you can call me when you've found the pictures, then we can figure out the best way to deal with it. All right?

MW: Yeah.

MH: Well, I thank you very, very much for taking all this time to talk with me.

MW: Well, I hope I didn't take too much of your time.

MH: No, you didn't. It's fine. I really appreciate the time, and I also understand the emotional impact of having to go through and tell some of this stuff. I know it's not easy for a lot of the guys I'm talking to.

MW: Well, I'll get to this and let you know about it.

MH: Okay. Thank you very much. I appreciate it, Melvin. Bye-bye.

End of interview