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Paul Wannemacher oral history interview by Michael Hirsh, November 1, 2008

Paul Wannemacher (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 correctly, could you spell your name and give me your name and address?

Paul Wannemacher: W-a-n-n-e-m-a-c-h-e-r....

MH: And your phone number?

PW: Phone number is ...

MH: And when were you born?

PW: July twenty-five [1925].

MH: July of 1925.

PW: Right.

MH: So, you were with the 712th Tank Battalion.

PW: That's correct.

MH: And it was attached to the 90th Infantry Division?

PW: At that time, yeah.

MH: At that time. When you were getting near Flossenbürg, did you know that there was this camp up there?

PW: Not that we knew, no.

MH: What was your first clue?

PW: Well, our company immediately went in and took it over when we found it, you know. But we were in recon; we came up a little bit later just to see what was going on. And we just came to, you know, the fence-enclosed barricades. Huge place; I mean, it wasn't small by any means. And we just went in.

My first direct indication of what the hell was going on there was kind of from a C Company guy by the name of Gifford, Frank Gifford, but he's dead now. Frank was standing outside of a little building, and he was sort of pointing inside. I noticed there was a guy standing there with a hose, and I couldn't figure out what the hell he was doing with a hose. And I went up and looked in the door, and there must've been twenty-five or thirty dead bodies there. He was just sprinkling them with the hose, I guess to keep the stench down.

MH: This was an inmate who was doing this?

PW: No, no. Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was an inmate that was doing it. And then we walked around areas of the camp, saw the ovens and all that stuff, and of course the gas chambers and piles of glasses and shoes and things that had been piled outside these gas chambers, sort of a circular-type building. They would invite them in to take showers, and of course they'd make them strip and they'd gas them in there. It was not exactly a pretty place to be.

MH: How do you—you were twenty years old at that time.

PW: Actually, I was nineteen.

MH: Nineteen. How do you cope with something like that?

PW: Well, I don't know, you just do it. I mean, I was in there—I got in there with the 712th. Let's see, it was about the 13th of June I actually joined them. I went over in France in the latter part of June, but it was the 13th of July that I joined the 712th. We had gone all the way across through the hedgerows and Avranches, Le Mans and Mayenne and the Gap, Falaise Gap; and all the way across to Metz and the Saar [River]; and up to the Battle of the Bulge and all over through central Germany; and wound up over in Czechoslovakia. So, you saw a lot of different things as you were going.

MH: But surely, seeing a place that was made to kill thousands of people—

PW: Well, that was just one of many.

MH: Right. Had you seen others?

PW: No. Well, I went to Dachau; that was after the war, though. Of course, you walk into Dachau, into the administrative building, as they called it, and the first thing you see is this huge map on the wall in front of you with different towns marked on them: of course, they were the locations of the different camps. What we didn't know at the time, and I found this out when I got there, was that camps like Flossenbürg, for example, were like the headquarters camp, and then they would have satellite camps surrounding it, like maybe—hell, fifteen, twenty different towns that'd be like little satellite operations of it. And each of these camps were identified on this map.

In front of the town—in other words, it was like a rectangular box on the wall, and it would have in big letters the name of a town. And then directly in front of the big letters, there would be another little box with a three-letter symbol on it: all those that were connected with Flossenbürg, for example, had FLO on the front of the camp. So, you could look at the map and see exactly which towns were reporting to which camp. They had them for Dachau and Bergen-Belsen and all the different camps around, and so forth. But it was quite a network.

MH: Yeah. What else did you see inside the camp at Flossenbürg?

PW: Oh, well, there was mass confusion, of course. Poor devils, they didn't know what the hell was going on. They were completely ecstatic, but they hadn't eaten, they were starving and very—it was terrible, I mean, from that standpoint. But there wasn't anything you could do about it right then and there. They were stuffed in barracks that looked like chicken coops today and so forth. But no, it was just—I mean, it was there, and you had to try to get it organized and coped with and so forth. We weren't there that long, because we took off and we were still chasing them, you know.

MH: Right, which almost seems strange, if you don't consider the circumstances that a war was actually going on. You found this horrible place and really can't stay there to help.

PW: Well, there were people there to help. They brought in—they would bring in different types of troops to come in and take of the administration and set up the camp: medical people and all kinds of quartermaster people to try to get some clothing on them or something of that nature. You know, just to get them back to humanity, I guess you might say. But it was not just something you just turned a switch and did it overnight.

We were more or less on the hunt. We wound up over in Czechoslovakia, and we were over there within about two weeks after we hit Flossenbürg. So, you know, there was a lot that went on after we got out of there that we don't have any idea about. But I'm sure there's plenty in the history books that you can find out about it.

MH: Did you also see the place at Flossenbürg where they were dumping, apparently, the ashes of the people they'd cremated?

PW: If I did, I didn't—the thing that got me was those damned shoes and glasses and stuff outside the gas chambers. In fact, I have pictures of the damn thing. I don't know why that stuck, but maybe it's because I was wearing glasses as a kid, you know. But here's this huge pile of shoes and glasses and things of that nature that were just parked out. And of course, if you didn't know what was going on—I mean, these things were just round buildings, and they looked like a community shower-type thing. And they would put them in there, gas them, and haul them out.

MH: Did you take a lot of pictures there?

PW: Not a lot, no.

MH: Do you still have the pictures you took of the—?

PW: I got a couple of them around here, but nothing worthy of Nobel Prize consideration, let's put it that way. (laughs)

MH: Oh, well. But, I mean, are they pretty good pictures of what you just described?

PW: I guess. They're small, you know; we didn't have the big Leicas or the digital cameras at that time.

MH: Of course.

PW: Some of them are pretty small. But yeah, I got some around here.

MH: If you're able to find them, what I'd like is to borrow them and be able to scan them into the computer, and then I could possibly—

PW: Well, let me see what I can find.

MH: Okay.

PW: I think I got your address downstairs. Where are you located?

MH: I'm in Punta Gorda.

PW: Where?

MH: Punta Gorda, Florida.

PW: Punta Gorda. Just a minute, I'm putting the phone down.

MH: Okay.

PW: (to wife) Annie? Where's Punta Gorda, Florida?

Annie Wannemacher: It's on the Gulf, isn't it?

PW: Is that on the Gulf?

MH: Yeah, it's on the Gulf. We're about forty-five minutes south of Sarasota.

PW: Forty-five south of Sarasota?

MH: Right.

PW: Oh, okay.

MH: You have a place in Silver Springs?

PW: Yeah. Well, not Silver Springs, a little bit east of there, the forest we go to. But our mailing address is Silver Springs.

MH: Silver Springs.

PW: What's your address there?

MH: My address is....

End of interview