

**Thomas B. Gardiner**

**Tape 1 Side A**

**August 24, 1997**

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### **Abstract**

Thomas Brown Gardiner was born on March 26, 1920 in St. Louis County, Missouri and was brought up during the depression. His father died two months after he was born and his mother had to raise the four children herself. He quit school at 15 to earn a living. He worked for a manufacturing company for 16 years working himself up to be a certified tool and die maker. Then he attended trade and night schools to study engineering, product design and electronics and worked himself up to a semi-executive position. In 1940 he married Rachel and they had a child upon his discharge from the Army. He was drafted in 1944 and was sent overseas to serve in France and Germany. His company happened on the Dachau Concentration Camp which they liberated. It was an emotional experience for him to see the dead and dying bodies and hear the stories of the prisoners. He got discharged early to return to his job. It took awhile for him to get over his nightmares and he still gets emotional when thinking about his Wartime experiences. The main result for him is to not permit himself or his family to be racist.

### **Summary**

00:00 Thomas Brown Gardiner was born on March 26, 1920 in St. Louis County, Missouri, just two months before his father's death. He was raised by his mother, two sisters and a brother. He grew up during the depression and unemployment era. He had a happy family led by a devoted Christian mother. They were the typical depression family. Thomas attended first year of high school and dropped out due to economics. They moved to a small farm in the Ozarks near Salem, Missouri for two years. Then they returned to St. Louis to find employment in 1935. He was 15 years old and worked as a painter's helper and then delivered newspapers by a Model T4 truck. He earned 10 cents an hour at both jobs. In mid-1936 he worked for a manufacturing company at age 16 in the suburbs of St. Louis for 16 years and after an apprenticeship he became a certified tool and die maker. He worked for another company in the same position while attending Trade School and night school at Washington University and other trade schools. He got a job as an engineering assistant and product designer and attended a night school course in electronics and operated a repair business in the 50s. Thomas married in 1940 to Rachel and they are now married for 57 years.

05:00 He changed jobs after 14 or 15 years. He held 4 or 5 jobs in his lifetime and worked himself up to a semi-executive position. He had a happy, interesting career. Thomas had a happy but sometimes turbulent life. In 1944 when he was 21 and the US was getting ready for D-Day in Europe, he was drafted after receiving a couple of deferments. At



that time they drafted anyone who was healthy and under 26 as they had no deferments. Thomas had been a tool and die maker and engineer assistant when he got deferments as his company did precise war work and he was the nighttime supervisor. His company manufactured small parts for the M1 rifle and he designed tools for it. He made many ply and ring gauges for rifle pistol cartridge cases. They produced small arms in St. Louis by making gauges. He was sent to Jefferson Barracks for a couple of weeks hoping his request to be an Army engineer was accepted but they only needed infantry replacements. He was shipped to IRTC Camp Robins in Little Rock, Arkansas for 17 weeks and then to a replacement camp in England and in August or September was sent across the channel to Epinal a front army replacement camp in France. He was assigned to the 44<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division a day or two before Thanksgiving where they had an early Thanksgiving dinner.

10:00 They went up into the action in the Meuse Mountains in Alsace-Lorraine. It was fortunate that despite seeing action in the winter and the spring, he was never seriously wounded in combat. Only one time he was taken off line when a bazooka blew up in his face and knocked him down but he did not receive a purple heart. It just stunned him and gave him powder wounds with no permanent injury though he still has some scars. He was pulled off the line for a few days to get replacements. The 45th Division had lots of casualties. The First Division in South Africa went up Sicily and Italy to Southern France and he joined them in Northern France in Alsace-Lorraine. He went up the mountains on the 7<sup>th</sup> Army front when the Battle of the Bulge took place and his unit had to pull back from its position as they were surrounded. He spent Christmas Day and evening in foxholes, crossed over to Germany and a day or two later was sent back to Headquarters suffering from battle fatigue and arthritis from being in sewer water and after several days returned to battle.

15:00 His unit was cut off and captured by the Germans. He was spared and as a result his unit and the whole battalion were declared inoperable and attached to other units. It was reorganized and still is 157 Infantry with Col. Sparks as battalion manager. They started moving rapidly into Germany during the latter days of the War. They traveled on tanks and other vehicles heading across the Saar Valley or plains of farm land. He participated in the capture of Aschaffenburg (?), an industrial town, and Nuremberg and the next objective was Munich. Col. Sparks narrated this mission in his book. The unit came across Dachau Concentration Camp on their way to Munich. They were diverted to liberate Dachau. Their sister company, I Company, were at the entrance first. Two companies occupied the town of Dachau. They saw the seriousness of the camp so the Munich objective was delayed and the Colonel told them to liberate the camp and guard it until the military police could come in. A few hours later or the next morning, they crashed the gate. Thomas' company pulled into the billeted area outside of the camp where the Nazi officers had lived. The men were put on guard shifts both outside and



inside the camp for several hours at a time. They had orders not to permit anyone in or out due to typhus and other diseases.

- 20:00 There were about 17,000 prisoners in the camp with about 300 dying each day. They did not want the ill people in the countryside. During guard duty, Thomas spoke to the prisoners who came up to him to tell him their stories. They spoke English, German and Polish. By then, Thomas knew a little German from picking it up since he was stationed there. There were one or two prisoners who wanted to take him and his buddy to see the barracks. They were shown the prisoners in the barracks and emaciated men taking showers. Then they returned to their guard posts. They remained in Dachau for four days. They heard interesting and sad stories. One prisoner was an American with the Dorsey band who had gone to Germany to settle an estate and was captured. He might have been Jewish. This prisoner was overwhelmed to see him as he had family in the US. One Polish boy, who spoke broken German and English, saw his parents butchered in front of his eyes. Another saw Nazis throw babies up in the air and shoot them.
- 25:00 The first day Thomas went into the camp and saw bodies laying at the fence awaiting the crematorium. They were lying at the barbed wire waiting to be burned and looked like sticks of wood. Thomas got a camera from a German prisoner and took photos of these bodies that looked like skeletons. There was a box car full of bodies piled up that the Nazis had brought from camps without crematoriums. Thomas took a photo of that boxcar with the side door open. The prisoners gave Thomas a tour of the gas chambers where the prisoners had lined up, undressed, went through the fake delousing shower and were gassed and in the next room the bodies were thrown helter-skelter like cordwood awaiting to be burned in the adjoining furnace. The fire was still going as it was important to dispose of the bodies as some died of disease so were a danger. His company marched into the camp and soon after he went inside to a guard post. Other soldiers guarded outside. He was at his post to assure that no one went in or out and that there were no fights as there was a lot of turmoil and many different ethnic groups of prisoners.
- 30:00 He never had to break up a fight. There were cases where some prisoners called attention to the Nazi guards who had put on the prisoners' uniforms to try to get out. There was a lot of confusion with crowds pushing. The prisoners were joyful to be liberated and eager to tell their stories. Thomas shows the interviewer a photo of prisoners expressing their feelings upon being liberated. Most of them are smiling, one is making a face and an old man has his head down, perhaps not emotionally normal. A large percentage had been in Dachau a long time and had to keep their mental stability. It was also hard for the liberators to keep their mental stability. When the sister company went into Dachau first, they were so upset at what they saw that they lined up 40 or 50 German guards and mowed them down with a machine gun. An American officer from that unit almost got



court martialled for shooting them. **Tape 1, Side B.** Within the few hours it took Thomas' unit to enter, all the German guards were liberated, killed or imprisoned.

- 35:00 Thomas' quarters were deluxe apartments, well furnished with wall decorations. The quarters were probably nicer than those of the American officers. After four days, they left for Munich. He saw little action as Germany was falling apart. Other units may have had some combat to enter Munich but his entrance was peaceful. They took over a section of family apartments. Thomas was billeted in Munich for a month guarding important installations including utilities such as water and supplies until the military government could move in and take over. He was shipped to the town of Augsburg and billeted nearby in a farm house for a month to have his orders signed. He took exercise and routine training, nothing exciting. He and his buddy had wood working as a hobby and were able to do this work at a local cabinet shop with military materials and exercise equipment.
- 40:00 They had free use of the cabinet shop. It was a pleasant break from the military. They packed up and placed 40 men and 8 horses in a train and moved to a tent camp. They traveled seven days to La Grande (?), France to await shipment to the US. Upon arrival they were scheduled for a short leave, amphibian training and then shipment to Japan. The A-bombs were dropped while they were at the tent camp eliminating the need to invade Japan. They were shipped to the US on a victory freighter which held 2,000 troops. Then they were given a leave of 45 days. Those without enough points for discharge had to report to another camp and Thomas was in that group. He was sent to a camp in Texas but wound up being able to negotiate his discharge. His company was doing critical work so interceded for his release and he returned to his job. His wife became pregnant with their first child. They had been married for six years. It was easier for him to adjust to civilian life as he had a job to go to and a loving family so he was not hanging loose like the others. It took months to overcome the emotional part as he was always an emotional person. He had nightmares. He would stay awake until 2 or 3 AM, working on his hobby until he got sleepy. Gradually the trauma went away. Now, 50 years later, he still gets emotional, especially if he sees a war movie.
- 45:00 He was never racist before and through the Army, Europe and Dachau, he saw what racism can do so he came out of the War with the obsession of not permitting himself or his family to be racist toward ethnic or racial groups, even today. In Europe the Nazis had to blame someone for the world's troubles and it was the Jews and non-Jews. Thomas does not believe in doing that but you should judge people as individuals. The experience helped him to become a stronger Christian. He had a battlefield conversion to be a Christian. Being an active Christian works against discrimination. He was never an activist toward a group as that is a form of hate such as the Ku Klux Klan or the militia. If it gets out of control, it can be just as heartless as the German Nazis. He viewed the exhibit at the Holocaust Museum just prior the interview because he wanted to refresh his



memory. He also did this because his eldest son had been there before and was shocked and he spoke to him about what he had seen. He showed his son the photos he took at Dachau and he realized that it was real, not propaganda. His son wanted to go to the Museum together with him so he did so. His son bought a book about the Holocaust and read it. Thomas read the Schindler list book and saw the movie which refreshed his memory. His son developed business relations with Jews in Houston. One was a survivor and they discussed collaborating in writing a book together. Thomas tried to support his son in this worthy endeavor. He did not learn anything new at the Museum, just realized the immensity of what occurred.

50:00 Thomas hopes his story helps prevent a reoccurrence.