

Interview with Dr. William McConahey
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
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HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

Q: This is an interview with Dr. William McConahey for the JCRC-ADL Holocaust History Project by David Zarkin at Dr. McConahey's home in Rochester on June 30, 1983. Dr. McConahey, could you please give me your name and tell me when and where you were born.

A: I'm William M. McConahey. I was born in Pittsburgh, on May 7, 1916, and at age nine moved to Sharon, Pennsylvania, where I grew up, as a young boy.

Q: Tell me about your military career, or your military involvement.

A: I went to Harvard Medical School and graduated in 1942. At that time, the war was on, and most of my classmates, I think, had military commissions. I took one in the Army. I then had an internship in Philadelphia General Hospital where I interned until the end of June, 1943. I then was called to active service by the Army on July 17, 1943. I was assigned to the Medical Field Service School at Carlyle Barracks in Pennsylvania. This was a place where all medical officers began and got a quick, six-weeks indoctrination into the Army as far as how to act, what the military medical corps was like, map reading, field exercises, and many things such as this. At the conclusion of this, I was then assigned to my first station at Camp Carson, Colorado, with the 71st Light Division. This was a new concept at that time. The Germans had had a light division, which was pretty good in European action, and so the U.S. Army was going to try some light divisions. Our division in Colorado Springs, Camp Carson, Colorado, had only carts. We had no jeeps. We had pack mules for our equipment. And so, for the next some months, we maneuvered and practiced up in the Rocky Mountains with our mules and our mobile units to carry into combat. Then in about January of 1944, this would be, they got some orders to send some of us medical officers elsewhere, because the division, the 71st Division, was going to be shipped to California for further maneuvers, and they were, in a way, being re-formed. As a matter of fact, the 71st Division later became a regular standard division, and it

was no longer a light division. So it was sort of done over and re-formed at that time.

I was ordered to report to Fort Dix, New Jersey, in, I think, late January or early February of 1944, with the 90th Division. The 9th Infantry had been training in the desert, mostly around Texas, and they were now fully trained for combat, were going overseas to England, and they needed to bring up to strength their membership, and they were short some medical officers, so I was sent to Fort Dix to join the 90th Division. We were there a short time. I got to know my fellow officers and the men in my medical section, and I was assigned to be an assistant battalion surgeon with the 337th Infantry, with the 3rd Battalion. Then on, I think, about March 23rd, we sailed out of New York harbor on troop ships for England. I was on the "Dominion Monarch." This was a British boat which had been built for the run from England to New Zealand to bring back meat to England, built just before the war started. Down in the hold were bunks and hammocks for the enlisted men. The officers were in bunks, given cabins, with about three officers to a tiny cabin, and we crossed the Atlantic in this way. It was a rough crossing. It was March. There were a lot of storms around. Of course they were worrying about U-boats and attacks, and we had a convoy of around 60 ships. We were convoyed by destroyers and I think American ships convoyed us.

Q: And this was when?

A: This was in March of 1944. It took about ten days, you know, to cross the Atlantic, zig-zag back-and-forth. And we finally got safely to, I think Liverpool. We landed and disembarked, and then we were marched to trains and taken to our billets in England, where we were stationed in the Midland, not too far from Birmingham, England. Here we were then, from, if I remember, the first week in April. During April and May we did a lot of getting things ready, and taking hikes and getting in condition. And we learned about the end of May that we were, quote, "on the first team," which didn't please me too much. It meant we were going in pretty close to D-Day. We had no idea where, or what. We just were told that we were going to be on some of the assault troops somewhere.

Q: Let's go back to what D-Day was.

A: D-Day was the day on which we were to land on the coast of Europe. We didn't know where it would be, France, the Balkans, Greece, Norway, we had no idea where. We were going to land somewhere to engage the German army, to attempt to fight through to join the Russians and end the war in Europe. So we were trained, we got ready, and finally one day we were told that camp is sealed. First we went from there to the coast, from the camp down near Bristol and Cardiff in Wales, which we knew was near the embarkation point. And there we were for about a week. And then one night the camp was told we were going to get on the ships the next day, and we did.

B: We marched down to the shore and loaded onto an American army troop ship -- troop transport. We were there about a day -- because we later learned D-Day had been delayed one day, we were an extra day in port -- and then sailed. I think, on about June 5th. We put out to sea, and were out to sea when D-Day happened on June 6th.

There were two American beachheads on Normandy. One was Omaha beach made by the 1st Division, and the 29th Division, and Utah beach, which was made by the 4th Division and the 90th Division, which is the one I was with. Now we had no idea where we were going to be going in until we got to sea, and then they told us we'd land in Normandy. We got the maps, we were told exactly what we were going to do, where we're going to be, what we're supposed to do. Our group was to go in on D+2, that is on June 8th, two days after the beachheads had been made. Part of our division came in with the 4th Infantry, the 339th Infantry with the 4th Division on D-Day on Utah beach, and the rest of us came in on D+2, that's two days later.

Utah beach was the easier of the two. Omaha was a terrible beach. They lost a lot of men. They almost got tossed back into the sea. They barely made it in, with great casualties. Utah beach was easier. The Germans weren't as strong at that point and they didn't have too many casualties.

The paratroopers jumped ahead of us -- the 82nd Airborne had jumped inland to obtain the causeway. You see the Germans had flooded the land behind the beaches. If we landed on the beaches, on the sand, we couldn't have gone inland, because we were trapped by all that water.

Q: This was in what country now?

A: This was in Normandy, on the eastern shore of Normandy. But there were four causeways, four roads that went through the water from the beach to the main land. And the airborne troops jumped to hold those causeways so we could get in. And they did. They jumped inland ahead of us, and held the causeways so when our boys got in, they could go from the beach, across the causeways, into the land and engage the enemy.

So then we landed on June 8th. At that time the front had moved inland a bit, several miles, so there wasn't any fighting on the shore, but there were still shells landing around the ships and there still was the sound of battle in the distance. We then went inland. I marched my aide station of 32 men inland to the place where we were to rendezvous and found a place where we stopped, dug foxholes for the night, and got ready to spend the first night ashore. We then got our jeeps in, which had our medical equipment, and by the next day we were ready to go. And so at midnight -- well about dark, eleven o'clock at night perhaps -- on June 9th we formed into files and started towards the front.

Now Ste. Mere Eglise was the first little town taken in Normandy by the American troops. The paratroopers took this in their jumps. And we were right outside Ste. Mere Eglise. The 82nd Airborne was holding a line a couple of miles outside of Ste. Mere Eglise -- the other side of it -- and we were ordered to relieve them and start the attack on the Germans going through.

So we marched up and stopped just before dawn on June 10th at the Meteret River, which had been flooded by the Germans, and you could hardly get across, except on one bridge. It was really a small stream, but they dammed it up, so it was very wide -- just flooded -- and all sort of swampy. And about dawn, we started our attack across the bridge. That's when we began our fight.

The division then fought through France. We were part of the First Army, during our initial Normandy fighting. Once we were out of Normandy, we became part of General Patton's Third Army, and the rest of the war we were with Patton's Third Army.

His famous attack around the Germans at Falaise, the Falaise Gap attack, where he trapped the German Seventh Army, we were in this. We then turned east, went south of Paris across the Seine River and through World War I battlefronts, the Argonne, and St. Mayenne, up to Verdun. And we were going as fast as we could without much opposition at that time. We broke out of Normandy and we got to Reims, France. Ran out of gas. We simply outstripped our supplies. Had to stop there to re-group, and during this time, the Germans came back and held some of the forts that they held on the front, so when we got going again, we were slowed down and never got the momentum again, because they had come back and held the line. Metz was as far as we could go, and they were then holding the Metz forts, and we had to stop there for several months.

Q: What were your duties all the time?

A: I was as far forward as medical officers got. I was in charge of an aid station taking care of the wounded. My work was entirely first aid. I did nothing else. We would be about a mile perhaps behind the front line. I had an aid station where I would get under cover, in a barn or an orchard if I had to, but usually a house somewhere. I needed to work inside. At night I'd have to use the lights and black it out so you couldn't be seen, and if it was raining we had to be inside because of the wounded, so we tried to get some kind of cover. I would be remaining close to the battalion headquarters for communications, and I'd be within a mile or so, or less sometimes, of the front lines. And each battalion, you see, had three rifle companies and a heavy weapons company -- four companies -- and that would be a battalion. And the battalion aid station would take care of their casualties. And with each company we had three aid men. So in my medical group, I had, then, about ten or fifteen aid men who were technicians, medical technicians, to help with the wounded, and a couple of jeep drivers.

We had put litters -- sort of litter frames -- on our jeeps so we could pile two litters on a jeep. If we got a call that there was some wounded at a certain company, I would send the litter jeep out. They would go up, four litter bearers and the driver. They would see where the wounded were, put them on the litters, load them on the jeep, and bring them back to the aid station, where I would take care of them. Next, behind us, was a collection company, and they were the next echelon, for taking care of the wounded. They had places for rough, quick surgery -- suturing, maybe doing some minor surgical repair. All I did was to stop bleeding, put on splints, give morphine. We gave a lot of plasma. We had this blood plasma with us -- cases of it. We gave a lot of this in the lifesaving of the wounded. We gave them the plasma right away, which was a substitute for blood. Because we had no blood. This was plasma, without you see, without the red cells in it, but it would stop shock. They'd do well until they got back to the next station, the collecting company.

And so my job was to get the wounded out of the front lines, take care of them at my station, splint bones, fractures, stop bleeding, dress wounds, stop shock, stop pain, and get them back farther where they could get better care in a more stable installation.

Q: You were kind of on the march.

A: Yes, we moved a great deal. We would be in position maybe two or three hours, maybe two or three days. But we would move quickly. We had our materials, our equipment, all in big boxes, cases. We would close them up and hop in a jeep and be gone in ten minutes. We kept in close touch with the battalion command post to know where they're going to go. And we would try to keep close to the front line troops at all times.

We, of course, weren't armed. The medics in the European war, they had all decided to use the Geneva convention. Not so Japan, of course. But the Germans respected the Red Cross usually, and so we were safer to carry no arms and have the Red Cross markings. We really displayed them. We had them on our helmets, we had four Red Crosses, front and back and both sides painted. We wore Red Cross armbands on both arms, and on our jeeps we had a Red Cross flag. And they didn't fire on us, usually. As a matter of fact, my life was saved, no doubt, several times, by being on that Red Cross jeep and having a Red Cross band. And I think that in general there was very little attacking of unarmed medics by the German Army. I won't say the same for the SS troops. That was different. The ordinary troops, Wehrmacht, no; they were very decent soldiers.

Q: So what kind of path did you take, then?

A: We went from Normandy, then broke out of Normandy, up to west of Paris, then swung south of Paris, across the river over to Reims in the northern part of France, then east to Verdun, and then to Metz. Metz is in the Alsace-Lorraine

area, right near the German border. And this was on the Moselle River, which was about 60 miles, I guess, from there to the Rhine River. And that was the big barrier, the Moselle River and the Metz forts, that stopped us. Once we broke the Metz forts and started east, we then fought our way to the Rhine River, and our division then turned south. At Coblenz, the Moselle River comes into the Rhine, and makes a kind of triangle there. We crossed the Moselle River going south, went on south, down along the west bank of the Rhine for maybe 30 miles, and suddenly turned east and crossed the Rhine -- this is now about in March, I guess, of '45 -- and turned north to Frankfurt, Germany, and east again right straight across and finally ending up in Czechoslovakia the end of April or early May of '45. The war ended then on May 8th. We were in Czechoslovakia, near Pilzen, when the war ended. As we moved into the central part of Germany, we started hearing reports about the concentration camps. There had been a couple of them liberated and captured.

Q: Who were you hearing reports from?

A: From the Army, from our buddies, from the Army headquarters. Every day we'd get a briefing on enemy possibilities, and reports about what's going on here and there. We would hear that these camps had been liberated, that there'd been some very terrible things seen. I think on April 23rd or thereabouts, our division liberated the Flossenburg concentration camp. I heard right away about this, and the next day I went to be there as a medical officer. We were a few miles from there in my aid station, so we took the jeep and some of my other officer friends and drove over to witness it.

Now Flossenburg was not the most famous camp in Germany, but it was one of the real, honest-to-gosh concentration camps. This held 15,000 prisoners, and altogether 60,000 to 100,000 people had been through there, because of course they died by the thousands. The camp was next to an airplane factory where the prisoners worked on some airplane parts, and they stayed in the camp. When we got there, there were only 1,500 inmates left. There'd been about 15,000 shortly before, but as the army got close, the German guards marched out about 13,000 toward Dachau, to get away from our advancing army. When I arrived, the gates were open.

Q: Was this during the day?

A: This was during the day, in the morning. And there were great gaps in the barbed wire, I think by the prisoners. They were so delirious to get out, that they ripped the thing open, and some of them got hurt by doing it. The guards had left. They'd run. And there were no Germans around at all at that time. Only the inmates. So I had a good look at the camp. Now as I went in, there were a few, very emaciated prisoners wandering around in their prison garb, with their blue and white striped uniforms on. And we just sort of walked around and talked to some and looked at the camp.

The camp was laid out in a very neat barracks-style with two big barbed wire enclosures around it, one about a ten-foot fence on the inside. On the outside was about a 14 foot electrified barbed wire fence. And outside that, of course, they patrolled with police dogs and SS troops, when the prison was there. The camp had, running through it, like a little railroad, a push cart type, with rails and a cart. Like you see in some of the mines in Kentucky, you know, a little hand cart you can shove around -- they're there to cart the coal in -- which they would take through the camp every day to pick up the dead! And haul out the dead bodies, to burn! I followed this cart up to the crematory. And here was the crematory, on one end of the camp, and it was still going strong, because they were still dying like flies.

Q: Who was operating the crematory?

A: Well at that time, three inmates. What the SS did would be to get inmates to run the crematory. And that was their job -- to burn the corpses! And they were still there. They were prisoners, they were still there, and for sanitation, you had to do something! Because they were dying right and left. There were about 15 or 16 corpses lined up to be burned as I walked in this building -- each one about 40 pounds, I guess. You could pick them up with one hand, I think. They were just skin and bone. Nothing there. And one of them opened the furnace door, and there were a couple of bodies in there, sizzling away. And they would take the ashes out and dump them outside when they were through and put in some more! And this had been going on for years! And this was still going on, because they were still dying.

The prisoners had been fed almost nothing. They would get some very thin soup once a day. That's all they got. Maybe a potato or two, mostly water. They worked six days a week in the plant, and the seventh day they got beaten most of the day, and tortured and kicked around so it wasn't a rest day. It was certainly a most horrible place for existence.

I think we should remember as Americans that this was a place -- that came out during the Nuremburg Trial -- that on Christmas Eve, 1944, the Germans had a big party for the inmates -- had a Christmas tree decorated -- and they hanged 15 American paratroopers. Just hung them up, on the tree, as decorations. The inmates had to watch it. This was their Christmas for their inmates! The SS's celebration! That all came out in the Nuremburg Trials, so I think it's no rumor. This is where Edvell Kanaris died. He was the -- I think -- intelligence chief of Germany, who really was an anti-Hitler man and finally got caught and was sentenced and put in Flossenburg concentration camp and killed there. Also, the famous German Protestant theologian (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) was imprisoned there, and died.

So I saw the crematory, and as I say, they were still picking up the dead and burning them. They had to, I guess. And then I walked back and walked into the barracks where the prisoners had been kept, and some were still there. These were very drab, cold barracks, with three tiers of bunks on each side. Each bunk had nothing but boards. No straw, no mattress, no nothing. And on this, three people slept. It was big enough for one, but three slept on that every night in these tiers. And then I visited the "hospital" -- which I'll put in quotation marks. This was a building where they brought them to die. If they could no longer stand, they'd put them in there on the floor. It had straw on the floor, but nothing else -- bare wooden floor with straw on it. They'd put the prisoners there, and they'd lie in their excrement and vomitus, and they'd die. Then they'd haul them out to the crematory and burn them. And no medical care of any sort! They put an SS doctor there, they told me. This is what I heard from the prisoners. I didn't see him, he was dead. They said he was a very sadistic guy who would do experimentation on prisoners, did a lot of "surgery." He'd hack off an arm or anything he wanted to do. He finally caught typhus and died. I think there was bloody justice.

Q: Did they tell you the name of that doctor?

A: They did not, no. I don't know what it was. By the way, my jeep driver was a boy from North Saint Paul, Peter Weedel. He's now dead. Peter grew up in a German family and spoke fluent German, so he could converse with all these people, and he had quite a conversation with many, many prisoners.

Q: Do you remember any of these conversations?

A: Oh, yes. They were from all over Europe. They were Poles, Russians, Czechs, French, Belgian, Spanish -- and they weren't all Jewish people. They had a lot of the Jewish there, of course, but many were political prisoners. And one of the doctors, who wouldn't give the names of some of the underground people. And a boy of fourteen had been there for two years -- a fourteen year old boy, now sixteen. We talked to them about what had been going on. They told us about the terror of the SS. That they'd get them out in line every morning for their inspection. If they didn't pull their hats off quick enough and bow to the SS, they'd beat them unconscious. And every time an SS man walked by, they'd stop and bow and take their hats off. If they didn't do it fast enough, they'd knock them down. They used to have a special sport on Sunday, which wasn't a work day. They'd have "fun." They'd make them clean out latrines with their hands. They'd make them haul latrine buckets with their teeth in races. They would beat them unmercifully. They all bore the scars of beatings and being knocked around. And some of their spirits were broken. They were just shells. They'd had it, and they were never any good, I'm sure. Some still had the zip and sparkle of life, but a lot of them were gone. They were walking around, but they'd lost the will to live.

In the crematory where these guards were burning the corpses, those fellows were really pretty much zombies, too. And I think what happened there is that after those guys knew too much, they'd kill them and toss them in the furnace too. They were a crew that had been brought in to do the job for a while, and later they'd have been tossed in there too. They were pretty much beaten and cowed and lost the sparkle of life entirely, I think.

As we walked out of the camp, I saw the road where the 13,000 had started down towards Dachau -- a very poignant, sad looking road, because you knew they were marched out carrying some blankets and maybe a jacket. And along the road, they would get tired, and they couldn't carry it, and they'd drop it off the side. They were too weak to carry even a coat or a blanket! And if they dropped in the road, they were beaten unconscious and left to die, or shot by an SS trooper. So they tried to make it and not fall, but they would drop everything they had, leave it there, because they couldn't carry it.

In the camp the sick were still dying. We couldn't save them. We tried to feed some of those people, and really, we couldn't. They hadn't eaten for so long that for some, if they got food in, they vomited and bloated and obstructed. We had to put them in a hospital and get them back on small feedings very slowly over a period of weeks to get them back to normal life! They couldn't start eating food like I was doing at that time. They had to go very slowly. And so you couldn't save them! We felt terrible! They were dying under our eyes! Nothing we could do, because they were so close to death, and you couldn't feed them. Some, of course, made it. They did take a little food and got better. Some of them hadn't been in there as long as others, and they were stronger and hadn't lost as much weight. They got out. But a lot of them didn't, even once we got there. Very sad.

Q: What were some of the other conversations that you had with the prisoners that you can recall?

A: Well, it's a long time ago. I can't remember exactly everything that was said. I remember talking to some people. Why they were there. And the story of one was, he'd been with the French underground and caught. He was a "criminal." So they threw him in a concentration camp. I think that these were political prisoners, they were anti-Hitler, several of them. Many of the Jewish people, of course, they were there because they were Jewish. But actually, many of those had died before this. This was 1945. And so many of the ones that were left -- there were more of the political prisoners that had been put in recently. And their stories were simply that they'd been picked up by the Gestapo at night, because they either had been subversive, or they thought they were anti-Hitler and anti-government, and were tossed in without trial.

We also saw an underground torture room. This was a bare cement basement vault with hooks in the ceiling where they would take prisoners there, and hang

'em by their thumbs, and beat them senseless, kick them in the testicles, burn them, and then maybe shoot them in the end, perhaps. And the prisoners told me that they would hear at night these screams of the tortured prisoners in the cells below, and the shots of pistols, and they knew what was going in, and it might be their turn next.

I couldn't comprehend it, really. I felt, here I am. I can see this. But unless I lived here and were one of these people, I couldn't know what it was like. And I thank my Good Lord I never did have to do this, but I don't think that I could understand what it was like to be there without having really been there. The hopelessness of it. No way out. Only torture, only misery, only starvation and finally death. It's just a terrible, terrible thing to look at. You need to be there, to really understand it.

Q: How long were you at Flossenburg?

A: Probably about four or five hours, I think. I did what I could for the sick and the injured, and then they were moving in an ambulance to take out some to hospitals. So we simply talked to people, got their stories, gave what first aid we could to the sick and injured and then went back to our unit, because we were moving on. The war wasn't over yet. Our division was advancing after the Germans and we were heading towards Czechoslovakia, and so we had to keep up with our own troops and take care of the wounded and be with them. We couldn't stay for a long time. But they did bring in more base army hospital units to help clean up the mess in these camps after we left.

Q: Did you ever hear after you left, what became then of the people in the camp?

A: No, I don't know what happened. I just know that they did have trouble, as I said, in saving them, even later, because of their atrophic stomachs -- no food for a long time. They did put them in hospitals before they could send them back home, to get them built up a bit. I got to Dachau. I saw that after it was liberated, if you'd like to talk about that.

Q: Yes. What month and year was that?

A: After the war ended, in Czechoslovakia, our division moved back into Germany, and I came home, then, in October. But during that period from about May to October, we were on occupation duty in eastern Germany, in a county, and ran the civil government, and took care of the medical affairs there. So I did have some time to travel, and one day, with some of my comrades, I got a command car and drove down to Munich, where Dachau concentration camp was. This was now probably two months, three months after the war, so it was all over, and all the prisoners were gone, and just the camp was there. But I did tour it with a guy who had been an inmate there himself, a young Pole who was still there. And we saw Dachau from top to bottom. We went into the main door. Dachau was a

much bigger camp, of course, than Flossenburg. We again toured the barracks where they had the prisoners. We saw the crematories -- they had about six big ovens there, where they burned the corpses -- and outside there were stacked up by the thousands, jars of bones! Burned bones, ashes, of people who had been burned there. And I was told they used these for fertilizing the gardens. And I'm told also, that sometimes, if some Germans were shipped there for political prisoners and died, they would later send the family a pile of bones, "Here's your loved one's bones." They might be anybody's bones! They'd just pick up a pot and send it! We saw the whipping posts outside where they used to beat the prisoners for various minor offenses. We saw the torture chambers there -- they had big ones -- where they used to hang them by their thumbs, and beat them. And we were told that this is where many of the conspirators -- German conspirators for the anti-Hitler plot -- had been killed, and tortured. When Hitler had missed the bomb in that bunker, you remember there was a big to-do when they arrested anybody that might have been implicated in this business, and put 'em in Dachau, and they were all killed there. And I was told that those political prisoners, they simply hung them up by their necks and let them strangle and suffocate. Didn't hang them like a drop through a trap door, break their neck. They'd hang them and they'd suffocate, and they would kick and wiggle on the piano wire and they too pictures of this and Hitler looked at them. He wanted to see the whole thing, watch these enemies of his being slowly strangled. He was sitting in his bunker and watched this when they took it back to him. He thought it was great! There were thousands and thousands in Dachau at one time! It was simply another incredible camp of degradation and terror and horror and torture and suffering and the whole business. It was another story just like Flossenburg, only on a bigger scale.

Q: Were you able to talk to any people who had been inmates at Dachau?

A: Just this one young Pole that showed us through the camp. He spoke a little English, and he did speak some German which my interpreter could talk to him. He told us about the beatings. And what they would be for? For nothing. They'd haul 'em out of line and beat them on these whipping posts. That they worked them hard every day, That they were often kicked around. And that they had no rights of any sort. Nothing more than I had already heard at Flossenburg. The same sort of sad story about the human torture and degradation.

I might add, going back to Flossenburg, we also walked out of the camp and saw the SS houses. There were six or eight or ten beautiful houses near the camp where the SS troops lived. You see, there were two types of SS, the Waffen SS. The fighting SS, and the Lagen SS, the concentration camp SS. They were the Death's Head SS and they were terrible! They were really sadistic, and butchers. They had these beautiful houses they lived in with their mistresses, their SS women. And we were told by the prisoners that the women were even more brutal than the men! They would do more torturing and kicking around than the men would, sometimes. The little factory where they built the parts for the planes

was close, and they didn't have to walk too far for that. And the SS troops had their houses close. It was a community, but very great comfort for the SS and terrible, terrible for the inmates.

Q: How old were you?

A: I was twenty-eight, I guess. I'd gone into the army after my internship.

Q: Had you read any books or had any other experience that would prepare you for this?

A: No, nothing! I had heard, as we all had, rumors there were concentration camps of some sort. We had heard that really they were for the political prisoners. We really had no idea this was going on – the fighting troops didn't. We were completely unprepared for it. And then there were a couple liberated, as I said, I think it was Mauthausen, and what were some others up north that they got first? We heard about it. It was hard to believe it! And this was completely unexpected. Now we did see, once we got in and got going, the slave laborers all over Germany. They had brought people from France and Belgium and Holland and Czechoslovakia and Hungary and all over, to work in their farms and factories! And so every place we went, we would find the slave laborers running around the countryside. And they hadn't been treated like the concentration camp people. They were very poorly fed, and they had to wear a special mark on their clothes to mark them as sub-German, and they weren't well treated. They were strictly an inferior race.

Q: Were you ever able to get any explanation as to why they were in this category?

A: It simply was that the Germans needed people. They had all their troops in the field -- all their men were in the army. They needed people to run the farms, cultivate the fields, to harvest, to work in the steel mills, in the mines. And they'd just go into a French town and say, "We're going to pick up fifty men." With a rifle, they'd round them up, put them on a box car and ship them to Germany to work. They weren't political prisoners, they were just Frenchmen, and they lost the war, so they were going to work for Germany now. They weren't paid anything. They were just fed something, and they didn't starve, and they weren't whipped and beaten, but they were just, "Get to work now. You work hard and do work for us," period. And that was because they were out of manpower. And in Holland and Belgium, they'd grab people, say, "Come on, you're going to build the Reich and work." And off they'd go. And so we knew that they had this "sub-group" around. And then we saw some of the Polish and Russian people who were really badly treated, because the Germans thought they were sub-human. And those slave laborers were really very much worse treated than the French and the Belgians and the Dutch would be.

Q: In what ways?

A: Well, they weren't as well fed, weren't as well clothed, and would be kicked around, maybe beaten up once in a while. And then we also picked up a few prisoners of our own that had escaped from German camps and got back to our lines, and gee, they were emaciated and sick. They hadn't been tortured, but they hadn't been fed worth a darn. They were really run down and sickly and starved. So we knew that things weren't very good in any camp they had in Germany. But the deliberate attempt at murder, to torture, to kill, to wipe out -- of this we didn't have any idea about the concentration camps -- at all -- until we got into them.

Q: This coming at this point in your life, do you think it had an effect, or is it difficult to evaluate this?

A: Well the whole war had a tremendous effect. It marked me for life. What did the war do for me? I think, one thing, I realized then that what counted was coming back home to a family, a wife, a home, a job, and doing something. And little things like being president of this, or to make a lot of money, or being a big-shot, that wasn't as important as being alive! Enough to eat, a warm place to stay at night, and really be a person was what counted. And so I realized that all that stuff we used to strive for and fight form for position, for power, and all this stuff, was a lot of nonsense. It really didn't count.

And then as far as the concentration camps went, it had a tremendous impact, and all of us, I think, realized then, really more than ever, what we were fighting for. I think we before thought, well, we had to fight this war, that we'd been attacked and Germany's going to enslave the earth, but once you got in there, we really felt this was a crusade. We had to do something to stamp this out! This was a really diabolical regime which was set upon the world, and this was really a holy crusade to wipe this out. We really felt that way, once we got in there and saw this.

Q: Did this alter your views about humanity?

A: Not really. I think today I still feel that, how can the human race be this way. Today we see all the atrocities throughout the world -- El Salvador, and in Guatemala, and in the Near East, and in Russia -- and so it hasn't changed. People are this way, I guess. And it's sad they are. The difference I think was this. That we have the same sadistic bums in this country who could do what the SS did in Germany, but there Hitler gave them a rank, a uniform and a purpose and a mission, and encouraged them to go. Most countries don't do this. Their misfits, their psychopaths are not given this sort of mission. He did! So there he got around him this bunch of guys who did these things because they were this type of people. So I think the difference is, our government does not foster this sort of thing. It fights it if it can. There, the Hitler government fostered it.

Q: Are there any other points we should make here?

A: I don't think so. I just will say this, that in our division, we had 13,000 men. We lost 30,000 in our division. We replaced about two-and-a-half times over. It didn't tell the story there, because most of the casualties came in the entering companies, and within two months of when we got into combat, we lost almost most of our men! I lost 21 of my 32 men. We used to say that a company commander, a captain, would last two months in combat. The second in command of a platoon would last two weeks in combat. That was about true. They were either killed or wounded by that time. So within two months, we were a whole new division. With World War II, once a division got shot up, they didn't pull 'em out to rest, like in World War I. They sent in replacements right along, to keep you going, so we would build up, so after about two or three months, we had a whole new division, all new men in the front lines. Now the engineers, the artillery, the headquarters, they were not pretty well shot up. They would go with the same people. But the rifle companies were almost all brand new after about two or three months. All I can say, I guess, is that we all got rather fatalistic, and I don't know why we made it through it, but we hoped we would, and that's about the way it was.

Q: Do you think that coming back to a hero's welcome -- well, somewhat of a hero's welcome -- was difficult for you? I've heard this from other people, because the people were idolizing you, and they didn't have any comprehension of what you had seen, or where you had been. Or maybe I'm off-track on this.

A: I don't think you are. In a way, yes. I had no trouble. When I came back home, I was going to go into a medical career. I had been side-tracked for three years in the Army. I was now going to go on and do what I wanted to do -- train in internal medicine. So I was set to go and move ahead and put this behind me. I didn't have any trouble getting back into the track, I don't think, and yet it is true that you simply can't tell people what you did, what you saw, because they can't understand it! Exactly like the concentration camp. Unless you're there and go through it, you don't know. Unless you're in combat and fight the battle and crawl on your belly under machine gun bullets and dig a foxhole in the rain and get shelled, you can't understand it. So I think this is true.

I had trouble in not being able to tell people. I didn't really want to, I simply had a different life. For instance, my medical colleagues, we had little in common as far as the service goes, because most of my colleagues were in hospitals -- base hospitals someplace. They had no concept of what I went through. Not that it makes any difference, but I was in the infantry, and that was my life. And it was not the medical corps as you know it, like in M.A.S.H., or in the movies. Nothing to do with that. We were out with the infantry, and having the same life as they were having, and the same death they were having too.

Q: That brings up another question. When it comes to literature and popular films about the Army and the medical corps in World War II, do you think that these accurately depict what went on?

A: I think they do in general, yeah, but most of them of course are with base hospitals or with M.A.S.H. units, things like this. Very few were with the front line troops, which is a different thing entirely. It's interesting that I was up to my own devices, never had a higher ranking officer come out and look to see what I was doing. I looked to myself, because I ran the show myself. All the high-ranking medical officers were back in the hospital. They didn't go up front. That was fine with me. That was exactly what I wanted. I had no high brass looking over my shoulders because of this.

Q: Had you possibly been in a base hospital, you wouldn't have had the freedom or the access, necessarily, to the camps then, would you have?

A: I think not. That's correct. I could do pretty much what I wanted to do.

Q: Right. This completes the interview with Dr. William McConahey by David Zarkin on June 30, 1983 in Rochester, Minnesota.