

**A Veterans Oral History**  
Heritage Education Commission  
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Moorhead, MN

**Ray Stordahl**  
Narrator

**Linda Jenson**  
Interviewer

**January 2007**

- RS: My name is Ray Stordahl. I live at 3632 5<sup>th</sup> Street South in Moorhead.**
- LJ: Ray, where were you born?
- RS: I was born in McIntosh, Minnesota.**
- LJ: How big a town is that?
- RS: McIntosh is a town of about 600 people, situated north and east of Detroit Lakes.**
- LJ: Who were your parents and what did they do?
- RS: My parents were farmers. I lived on a farm two miles out of McIntosh; and I was a farm boy going to high school in McIntosh High School.**
- LJ: What were your parents' names?
- RS: Henry and Clara.**
- LJ: And you went to school in McIntosh?
- RS: Yes.**
- LJ: And you graduated there?
- RS: Graduated in 1944. My first seven years were in a one-room schoolhouse; the classic one-room schoolhouse as we read about it.**
- LJ: Did you go on to college?
- RS: Yes, After returning from the service I attended Concordia College, graduating in 1950.**
- LJ: So you went into the military first?
- RS: I went into the military in 1944 through 1946.**

LJ: Were you drafted?

**RS: I was about to be drafted immediately after graduating from high school so I volunteered and went off to World War II.**

LJ: What branch of the service?

**RS: I was in the Army.**

LJ: What was your military training like?

**RS: About all the military training I really had was my basic training. I went in in July and in December the Battle of the Bulge occurred; and all of a sudden, from people that were being trained, they needed men in front lines in Europe, so towards the end of 1944 and before I was 19 years old, I found myself outside of the United States heading for Germany, or actually Belgium at first.**

LJ: Any special memories that come to mind from that time, the short training and going overseas for the first time?

**RS: We, of course, thought we were pretty well trained. When we got there we found that we really weren't. I went over as a replacement. I went to the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division as an armored infantry person; and they had only been in combat for less than a month when I arrived. They had come over from England during the Bulge. They had been in combat for less than a month and sustained substantial losses; and I went over as a replacement, became a BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle) person in an infantry squad in an armored division.**

LJ: So you were right in the war zone?

**RS: Yes, I was. Within the first few weeks that I was there, we penetrated the Siegfried Line; and one of our first –**

LJ: Where is that?

**RS: That's right at the edge of Germany, between Belgium and Germany. A line that was built just after World War I, as everybody thought an impenetrable defense for Germany. We began to penetrate that right towards the end of the bulge. We found ourselves – the first time we found ourselves pinned down for a week sitting in the – and if you can imagine snow on the ground, sitting in the same foxhole for a week, with shells landing all around us and small arms fire on a regular basis.**

LJ: What did you do to keep up the morale at that time and place?

**RS: Well, you got to remember I was just barely 19 years old and we thought that was the right thing to do, and it was. Our morale was fine, but we learned a lot more about combat during the first two weeks of being in combat than we had learned in the few months of training that we'd had prior to coming**

over. My theory is that if you can last the first two weeks in combat, you've got a pretty good chance because many, many of friends and others that were wounded or killed in the first two weeks. It's because you have to learn pretty fast when to duck and when to dive for cover and whether the artillery shells are coming in or going out and all of those things that are associated with the kind of combat that we were engaged in during World War II.

LJ: Any special stories come to mind during that time?

RS: Oh, I think the most significant event that I think really needs to be remembered occurred later in the war. Our division marched – we went across Germany quite rapidly capturing town after town, heading east. And when the war ended, we were the farthest east of any divisions in the U. S. Army and we met the Russians about a day before the war ended.

But one of the significant things is that we were the people that opened the gates of Mauthausen and Gusen concentration camps and that's an experience that even when I say the words I can barely say them yet, and it's almost 60 years.

LJ: What was it like?

RS: It was a terrible experience. People who say that never happened just are not realistic. Recently, within the last year, there was a book written by Dr. David Pike from the American University in Paris [Spaniards in the Holocaust]; and he talks about Mauthausen; and it's a history book that's used in Canada and in the United Kingdom. He took 10 years researching the things that happened in that particular concentration camp and that's down in history for people to read over the years to realize that what we talk about happening in the concentration camps really happened. And an interesting sidelight, I'll show you, is that my name is in the history book.

LJ: Fantastic.

RS: As there's the squad that we came there on the 5<sup>th</sup> of April and they were just opening the gates. The SS people that were the guards had fled because they knew we were coming. We were not really assigned to go there. We were out on a patrol to try to meet the Russians and happened to come up to Mauthausen and Gusen concentration camps and were there and participated in opening up the camps for the prisoners.

If anybody has been to the Holocaust Museum, the pictures that you see are not by no way fake pictures. They're exactly how it happened. You see the hundreds of thousands of people that were killed. This particular book follows the experience of the Spanish people that had originally participated in the civil war prior to World War II and had been on the losing side, were communists from Spain that had lost and they were moved into France prior to World War II; and after the Germans took over France, they were most of

**them removed to Mauthausen, where thousands of them perished and about 6,500 of them lived through the experience.**

LJ: What were the prisoners' reactions when you got there, when they saw you?

**RS: Many of them were too weak to do anything. Of course, there were piles of dead all over. Many of them were so half starved they tried eating, and they would eat, and their system couldn't handle it. They actually died because they ate. We didn't really know enough about not giving them high-fat food and those kinds of things. And many of them actually died as a result of being able eat.**

LJ: How sad.

**RS: But the recollections of seeing these people that were virtual skeletons with their uniforms that you see in the pictures with the stripes on and seeing one day, and seeing the day after, seeing four of them sitting around in the ditch roasting a horse's leg to eat, it was – as you can see, I even have difficulty talking about it this many years in the past.**

LJ: I'm sure it's a vision that never goes away.

**RS: It's a vision that will never leave us. And it is so infuriating when I hear people say that's all propaganda; that didn't really happen. It happened to hundreds of thousands and literally millions in the many different camps; but in that particular camp it was hundreds of thousands of people from about eight or nine different countries. There were several people that were Russian prisoners there, as well as Jewish people from many other parts of Europe.**

LJ: Can you tell us about some of the people that you met during your time in the service, any special buddies?

**RS: Yes, after the war I went back to school, began my working career. Tried my best to forget about everything and pretty much did. It wasn't until probably about 40 years after the war that I started becoming a little more interested in trying to find some of the people that I knew. And subsequently, located my old squad leader who was now living in Alexandria, Minnesota. And now I stop and visit with him almost every month and have coffee or have lunch and talk about the old days. I've become more involved in our 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. We have an association and I've become more involved in that and go to their reunion almost every year.**

LJ: So it took 40 years though to...

**RS: It took about 40 years. On the 50<sup>th</sup> year a group of us went back to Europe; started in Belgium and visited all of the towns that we had captured during the war and that was a healing experience to see these towns back the way they had been when we were there and the way they look now. And, in fact, I took some pictures in Belgium of actual buildings that the local stores had**

**pictures of what it looked like during World War II and I took pictures of the same buildings; the church, for example, that was nearly all knocked down after we left and what it looks like today. So we were able to see those things. Went to a village in Belgium where we found the barn that we had slept in, in January of 1945; and two other friends of mine and I had all slept in this barn loft. We had our pictures taken in the same hayloft 50 years later.**

LJ: That's awesome.

**RS: Very interesting and the lady of the house, who had been a 16-year-old girl at the time we were there in 1945, remembered us being there. And she threw a big party for us and had several – oh, more than a dozen people there from the village; and she served wine and cheese and sausages and all sorts of things. And when we left, she was following behind us and crying.**

LJ: What a memorable experience. Now what year was that?

**RS: That would have been in – oh, it's about six or seven years ago – I don't remember very exactly what year it was – but it's been 50 years, and there was about – I think there was probably about 60 of us, something like that. And we visited almost all of the major cities. The way an armored division operates is that we would capture a city, put up a perimeter defense. And then, the main front line would move in and occupy our spots. And we would spearhead to the next major roadblock or the next major road center and set up perimeter defense and then leap frog along towards the east.**

LJ: Any other special stories you'd like to share?

**RS: Well, I think it's interesting that you're doing these kinds of interviews because as I go to these annual reunions of the 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, we're getting to be fewer. You have to remember I was barely 19 years old, so I'm one of the younger ones. But many of those that were in their 20s or early 30s at that time, these people are all – most of them gone – and the number of World War II vets that are still around and active, like I am, are few and far between these days.**

LJ: How did you feel about leaving the military – in 1946? Was it '46?

**RS: Yes, 1946. Oh that was – the job was done – time to go home, go back to school.**

LJ: And you went back into college after you got home?

**RS: Yes, I had just graduated from high school when I entered the military and I got out in July of 1946 and went to school in September.**

LJ: What college?

**RS: At Concordia and I graduated from Concordia then four years later in 1950.**

LJ: What was your field of study?

**RS: I had majored in business administration and physics.**

LJ: And what did you do after graduation?

**RS: I spent 11 years in the construction business, a business that a college friend of mine and I had started while we were still in college. And I was with that for 11 years. After selling that business, I went in the manufacturing business for 20 years; and then ended up spending the last eight years before retirement working for the University of Minnesota where I managed a field office for a research project.**

LJ: Any final thoughts you'd like to share, and leave us with?

**RS: Yes, only that I think we have to make sure that the history of World War II is accurately recorded so that, particularly young people who can't – war today is different than it was in World War II. And the only way for history to be accurately perceived in future years will be if it's written now and written accurately and trying to do it in such a way that – history, you know, is really the author's perception of what happened. And I think that if you interview enough people, people like myself, and the thousands of others that are still around from World War II, that society can really get a picture of what that circumstance really was like.**

LJ: Ray, how would you like to be remembered?

**RS: Well, I guess I've been – over the more than 50 years that I've been here in Moorhead, I've been active in community affairs and I think that some of my small town upbringing and my military service, and education I received at Concordia are all of the elements that really caused me to feel a responsibility to be doing some things in community service and I'm still involved in. Although now retired, I'm not as actively involved as I was a few years ago but I've tried to maintain a record of being involved in community affairs all the time. And I've lived here in Moorhead ever since 1946.**

LJ: Thank you, Ray.