

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ANTHONY J. RICHTSMEIER  
Medic, Army, World War II.

1994

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**Richtsmeier, Anthony J.**, (1919-2004). Oral History Interview, 1994.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Anthony J. Richtsmeier, an Iowa Falls, Iowa native, discusses his service with the 482<sup>nd</sup> Medical Collecting Company and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Auxiliary Surgical Group in Europe during World War II. Richtsmeier talks about his upbringing, his awareness of politics before the war, and, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, enlisting in the Reserves while attending medical school at the University of Iowa. He details his experiences in college, including being heckled by pre-flight Navy men for not being in uniform and transferring to Madison. Inducted into the Army in 1944, Richtsmeier speaks of basic training at Camp Barkley (Texas), living in tents, and the health problems encountered there. Assigned to Macaw General Hospital (Washington) for six weeks, he touches on bringing his wife and son out to Washington and having easy duty until he was assigned to the 482<sup>nd</sup> Medical Collecting Company at Camp Maxey (Texas). Richtsmeier describes the military discipline at Camp Maxey and uneasy relations with the other medics after being made company commander of his unit. He comments on the non-medical training he received, feeling inexperienced, and shipping overseas. Richtsmeier talks about disembarking in Liverpool, being immediately sent across the English Channel to Utah Beach, spending two months waiting in a Normandy orchard, and eventually arriving in Spa (Belgium) shortly after the Battle of the Argonne began. Richtsmeier discusses avoiding capture and the eventual breaking up of his unit. Assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Auxiliary Division, he talks about duty assisting surgeons at MASH-like hospitals, taking care of non-transportable combat wounds with top-bracket doctors. Richtsmeier talks about his interactions with soldiers from the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, who filled all their rinsed-out gas cans with cognac from a liberated distillery. He recalls scrounging for souvenirs, crossing the Rhine, his unit's distance from the front lines, and constantly moving the hospital. Richtsmeier comments on the types of injuries he saw, sending crystal dishes home, and recreational activities. Near the end of the war, he details touring Bavaria in a stolen car and later catching rides in military aircraft to alleviate boredom. He touches on relations between the medical staff and female nurses, contact with European civilians, and availability of alcohol. Richtsmeier discusses visiting Buchenwald Concentration Camp and seeing the poor state of the facilities and freed prisoners.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Richtsmeier (1919-2004) completed his residency in internal medicine at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and had a private practice in Madison.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1994

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**Interview Transcript:**

Richtsmeier: Dr. A.J. Richtsmeier on the 15th of August, '94, dictating war experiences. In December of 1941 I was a sophomore in medical school at the University of Iowa, and I'm not sure whether it was the next Monday or shortly thereafter all of us went down and enlisted in the Reserves.

Mark: This was in 1941. Was it Pearl Harbor that prompted you to do that?

Richtsmeier: Yeah, yeah. We were all deferred for medical reasons. And one of your questions were, "Do you remember when Hitler invaded Eastern Europe?" And yes, I do very much, because it's interesting, in my looking back over the history of the United States in wars, I could see that every twenty years there was a new batch of recruits that they could get to start another war, and I knew that I was, after 1918 and 1920, I was coming up in 1940, so I was going to be the new batch of cannon fodder. So I can remember hearing the invasion into Eastern Germany and all of the screaming that the Nazis did with all the stuff all the time, realizing the fact that I was probably going to be in the military someplace, sometime.

Mark: And you were how old at that time?

Richtsmeier: Well that was in '39, that was two years before—I was still in college. I was probably nineteen years old.

Mark: Let's backtrack even a little bit farther. You went to medical school at the University of Iowa?

Richtsmeier: Right.

Mark: What prompted you to take that career field?

Richtsmeier: Well, it was—at first it was rather deceptive. I came from a farm family and had three brothers, all who stayed on the farm. I did not like farming, I didn't like the lifestyle. I was much more interested in world events and I wanted to go into college, but at that time, like a lot of farm families, my father had died when I was six years old so I was brought up by my older brothers and sisters, of which there were nine, so I was sort of beat up. And by beat up, I was raised by my older brothers and sisters, so the youngest brother was not really the most beloved and taken care of person. So I could see that I wanted to get out, and my mother, being a very religious person, I sort of talked priesthood to her a little bit and she thought that would be just fine. So she hoodwinked my older brother into letting me go to Columbia College, it was called at that time, in Dubuque; it was really a seminary.

Mark: What is it now?

Richtsmeier: Well it's still a seminary, but it's a very good pre-med and pre-professional college.

Mark: Is it still called Columbia?

Richtsmeier: No it's called Loras now, L-o-r-a-s. And after a year or so there, I found out that I liked science. I met a girl who was later my wife who sort of encouraged my taking up science and medicine and I got into medical school after two years.

Mark: This was still in the Depression because—

Richtsmeier: Still in the Depression, right.

Mark: Did you have trouble financing your college?

Richtsmeier: No, strangely enough, my family weathered the Depression not well, but they were old Germans and I can remember—as I said, I'd like to read newspapers and world events. We could not afford the ten cents for the morning Sunday Register because it was too much money and they were very frugal. Of course I can remember my room, board and tuition and total expenses, which I had down to even shoelaces and shoe polish, and cigarettes were fifteen cents a package. My total expenses, every penny I spent my first year in college, I think was six hundred and some dollars. Which at that time was a lot of money, but even so, as long as I was able to pass the courses—I had a sister that was a nurse and I sort of had an introductory to medicine through her and I also had an aunt who had her Ph.D. in biology, so I had an inside into—plus the fact I found out that this was a way to really get from farm life into a professional life with a certain amount of dignity. And I think at that time doctors were looked at probably as real heroes in a lot of respects, and I enjoyed the pre-med and the possibility of—so I came from average grades the first year to a 3.8 score in my junior year taking all sciences, and that got me into both Marquette and into the University of Iowa. I didn't apply to any other schools. I took Iowa's offer and accepted it because I think tuition there was nearer fifty or seventy-five dollars.

Mark: At a public school?

Richtsmeier: A public school. And it was a very good medical school. So I went there to medical school and it was interesting because the pre-flight schools there, they had all these young Navy bucks and those guys were merciless as far

as seeing anybody who was draft age who wasn't in uniform. And of course at that time you didn't wear white coats; you didn't have any external insignia like they do now. Now they all walk around with stethoscopes and white coats and stuff. And we were yelled at because the pre-flight school and their workout areas, we all had to walk through on the way to medical school. That was not very pleasant. But it was very pleasant, I enjoyed going to school. Then the other interesting aspect then was Dr. Bill Ginney[?], who was number one in his class at medical school, came up to Wisconsin—this was at the time when deans traded off students; you didn't apply like you did now and had all of your accreditations numericalized and you went in a computer. Then it was "I'll trade you this one for this one." And Bill Ginney came up here and then we were, we went through an accelerated course. Our senior year was only nine months. And for some reason, nobody picked Wisconsin and I was planning on dating this girl from Milwaukee, so that looked like an ideal setup for me to come to Madison. Besides, Madison is a great town; I had come up twice and I liked it, so I came up. For some reason or other, everybody here at the University of Wisconsin felt that I was of the same caliber as the previous top man in the class and I didn't have to fight my way in as knowing something, and sometimes it was embarrassing because I was given more work than what I really had the knowledge or the aptitude for. I didn't realize it at the time, but as I look back now, I can see where he did a lot of my groundwork for me and he was a good entrance. So I was up here for nine months in the accelerated program and they worked us to death. Dr. Irv Schmidt used to do surgery all day Saturday so we never got to a football game. And we went in, inducted into active service.

Mark: Do you know what date that was?

Richtsmeier: Yes, that was January 1944. And then we were inducted—you know, given four days' notice; we knew we would be called in sometime. So I was called in with about two to three thousand other doctors and we all headed down to Camp Maxey which was in January—oh it was—

Mark: I've never heard of Camp Maxey.

Richtsmeier: I'm sorry; I don't mean camp Maxey, Camp Barkley. Barkley, which was between Dallas and Fort Worth and El Paso. They made us all live in tents. They put us into the regular GI setup to indoctrinate us into the horrors of the Army and we lost a couple of people with illnesses there. Meningeal coccemia [unintelligible] Really, really tough, because these guys had been inside of hospitals [unintelligible]. Nobody was [unintelligible].

Mark: I'm not familiar with meningeal coccemia. Is it swelling of the brain?

Richtsmeier: Well, it's a meningitis. But it's a meningitis organism that gets into the bloodstream and it destroys the adrenal glands and that's "boom," you know; the time from being completely normal to death is forty-eight hours.

Mark: What causes that?

Richtsmeier: Well, carrying around the bug. There's a lot of people that are carriers. You see, when you push in three- to four-thousand people, make 'em live together, sleep together, there is an *awful* interchange of bugs. And this poor guy just didn't have any—well there were two of them. It was nothing but bivouacs and sleeping out in the cold and trying to put up with being a foot soldier and they really didn't have any [unintelligible], the whole six weeks that we were there.

Mark: I'm interested in how the medical doctors dealt with that sort of thing.

Richtsmeier: Well we didn't deal very well.

Mark: The image you see, of course, is Hawkeye Pierce on MASH.

Richtsmeier: Sure.

Mark: And they all run around in their robes and stuff, and I'm wondering—

Richtsmeier: Well we didn't have any of that. There wasn't the surgery and the medical care of World War II had not become well known as it did as time went on. And when the statistics came out as to if you were wounded and got back to either a clearing station or a field hospital, your chances of survival were ninety percent. And excellent. I ran into later in my military career excellent, very—well, they were just good doctors and they took care of the military like they did their own patients. There wasn't any of this brusque, harsh treatment. And we stayed in Texas and froze to death and it rained on us and we slept in pup tents and—

Mark: Did they march them around?

Richtsmeier: Oh, all the time. Oh yes. You know, you were called out every morning from your barracks and then you had a—I forgot what's that called, where everyone gets—

Mark: Roll call?

Richtsmeier: Roll call, yes. And you were just like one of the regular GIs. You're all first lieutenants. And we ate together and we had to go to school, you

know. It was chemical warfare school and motor maintenance school and how to put on this broken femur ring. It had everything to do with what the Army taught us; they didn't teach us any traumatic surgery or preventative medicine or anything like that; it was all military.

Mark: Yeah. Was there discipline?

Richtsmeier: A lot of discipline. Although the discipline wasn't that tough. You know, your weekends were off and I can't remember anybody or anyone being chewed out unless they just said, "Oh, the hell with it. I'm not going to get up this morning for that silly stupid roll call." Then there was—but if you just played along with them—then after six weeks of that we were all shot out to various different places.

Mark: And where did you go?

Richtsmeier: I went to Macaw General Hospital in Walla Walla, Washington. And I was married at the time and I had a little boy. I remember finagling my wife, who went from Milwaukee all the way to Walla Walla, Washington with detromaltose and diapers, cloth diapers then, in four to five days. [laughs] She still made it. The kid not having frank diarrhea but—Walla Walla was—it was supposedly to learn hospital, but as I look back now, they were shifting us into various holding areas until they decided what they were going to do with us. And I was there for six weeks which was just wonderful because that was in the early spring and Easter in Washington is a pleasure. Spring was fresh fruits, flowers and it was a wonderful experience there. Hardly anything in the way of teaching you ward work; still no patient care. They said, "Yeah, you have this ward," or something, but there was always a senior officer there. And I was assigned then to the 482<sup>nd</sup> Medical Collective Company. A collective company is a mixture of three doctors, two non-medical officers: one who ran the motor pool, the other who ran the litter bearers. And we had about fifty to seventy-five litter bearers and we had about twenty, thirty ambulances. We had eight[?] aid stations for three of us and I was training there at Camp Maxey during either the summer—

Mark: Now where is Camp Maxey?

Richtsmeier: Camp Maxey is up in the panhandle of Texas. It's near the Oklahoma-Arkansas borders up in [unintelligible]. And this was all rigorous Army life. In other words, we all had to get up for the morning report and stand in front of the troops. It was learning how to march and taking long parade marches and go on bivouac and give us a compass and lose us out in the middle of no place and then had to find by compass and azimuths a number of yards where [unintelligible] was, and that was a complete fiasco



because the company commander—I was just one of the junior officers—the company commander, the last war game bivouac we went on lost the whole company and he was removed from his command and they appointed me, and here I was only in six months and I was one day senior over both other medical officers, so you can imagine how much quibbling there was going on as to [laughs]—I’d sort of give them a little something to do that was a halfway order and I’d get the answer, “Do it yourself.” There was very little discipline. Not with the enlisted men or the non-coms, just with the medical men. The non-commissioned officers were excellent, the motor officer, the infantry, the litter bearers. And the motor pool officer luckily had some more experience in the Pacific[?] before he came back [unintelligible] because we were put into action the day before the Bulge and we were marching, driving right smack into it. [A telephone rings in the background] [Pauses] In other words, he said when the infantry and the tanks and the trucks and everybody else was going this way, we don’t have any business going that way. We’d have been slaughtered and captured. So he was extremely beneficial. So that was it. The training—I went to auto maintenance school and learned how to service a two by twos truck for two weeks.

Mark: That’s something you never had to use.

Richtsmeier: No. And you know, I spent half my time inspecting trucks, inspecting ambulances, nothing in the way of anything medical or traumatic-type instructions. Which see, we had our medical school shortened to just nine months, we had our internships shortened to just nine months, so I’m six months short of training that other people had, so we were quite inexperienced. We had a lot of knowledge in our heads and very little practical knowledge. So all that this did was just add to the non-medical knowledge stuff that was not medicine. Because everything was administrative; it was the morning report, it was making out leaves for everybody, you know, and this guy didn’t like this guy, and, you know, making inspections. Everything was non-medical. And that’s where we were when we went overseas.

Mark: Yes. I was going to say, when did you get orders to go overseas?

Richtsmeier: We got orders to go overseas in August.

Mark: Of ’44?

Richtsmeier: August of ’44 yeah, and that was right after they fired the company commander so I was the company commander of this two hundred man unit as a first lieutenant and I’m going to meetings with unit commanders and they’re all majors and lieutenant colonels, colonels, and I’m a first

lieutenant and trying to get stuff, to find out or to get heard, or you know, stand in line. [laughs] I didn't have much luck; it was about ranking. But we had a very interesting—this was where I first saw the military function correctly. It was on a troop train and then at the port of embarkation which was in Boston, in Camp Myles Standish. This was slick. Everything worked. You were given your orders and told what to do and whereabouts, what was going to happen and it was just like that [clicks fingers]. And we were in Camp Myles Standish only about three or four days and then we boarded ship. And I wish I could remember the name of that ship; I can't think of it. The USS United States or something—it was the biggest troop carrier, and there were five to six thousand troops on that ship. And we left Boston at about three o'clock in the afternoon and we zigzagged across the ocean to Liverpool, between four or five days. No escort, no nothing, just zigzag as a way to keep submarines from finding you. This was a very interesting experience because when we getting close to Liverpool, all company commanders, all unit commanders had to report to a big assembly area which was full of majors, colonels, lieutenant colonels, and even a few generals, all to get our orders, and for some reason or the other I'll never, never understand, they gave us the orders of debarkation. For five or six thousand troops, interestingly enough, it was "482 Medical Collective Company on the slip," was right there, the first unit off. And I don't think we were the last ones on; it wasn't like cream on top of coffee or things of that nature. And so the ride over was absolutely gorgeous: smooth, nobody got sea sick. It was in the early fall and the weather was nice, the moonlight. Then we got orders to get off and we marched through Liverpool. There was a train waiting; it took us down to Southampton. When we got to Southampton there was a boat waiting, flipped us across the Channel. We had to go over the side of the ship on a rope ladder into LSTs, dumped us off on Utah Beach in the water, told us where an orchard was, and sat for two months. [laughs]

Mark: Two months?

Richtsmeier: Two months! Two months! Just sat there looking for somebody. See, we were replacement; we were a replacement unit, and this was in Normandy and we could get our rations. It reminded me of Woodstock, it was practically that bad, because all it did was rain. We had this orchard which was about the size of most farm orchards and two hundred men and their tents. You know, we had stoves. Cripes, we weren't in combat so nobody delegated anything.

Mark: So what did you do for two months?

Richtsmeier: Nothing. Nothing. You know, I would order that we would have drills and we would, you know, simulate casualties and stuff like that, but there

wasn't any place to do it. We had to wait for a nice day because they didn't give us any area where you could dry or where—you know. But it was funny; through all of this thing we never lost anything. We had cases of warm [unintelligible]. Have you ever had warm [unintelligible] and watched it being locked up. Then we got all of our equipment, got our ambulances, got our trucks, and for some reason or the other again I was picked as the commander and led about, it must have been four or five hundred vehicles up to the front. You cannot tell, you know, if the next town you are going was north, you probably go out of town from the south entrance and then circle around. I had those poor guys zigzagging all over Normandy, France. Then they took us up to Belgium, and there we were able to stay at home because buzz bombs were coming and they didn't want to sleep because it “putz, putz, putz, putz” all night. And we stayed there for a short period of time. And then we got orders to join the First Army and report to Spa, and that was in early December, and due to waiting and everything else and getting the orders, we were ordered to report to the Medical Corps general at Spa.

Mark: Spa is in Belgium?

Richtsmeier: Spa, Belgium. This is right north of Malmedy and this is two days after the Argonne started and of course communications in a war zone are very poor, no radio, no nothing. We didn't know what was going on, but this was where my lieutenant told me everybody else is coming towards us, especially all fighting [unintelligible] so I don't remember how all of that became rectified. At least we stayed away from being captured. We could tell when we were close to the front because you could hear the sounds of shells exploding. We were in this area, nothing going on but a lot of military folderol, and suddenly you're in where everyone looks haggard and tired and everybody is carrying big weapons and you know that you're in close to [unintelligible]. And then they took all of our litter bearers and divided 'em up between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> Division; I don't know [unintelligible]. These were two infantry units came into North Africa and then I think from North Africa—I don't know if they were in Italy or not, but they were brought back to England and the 9<sup>th</sup> Division landed on Utah, ah, on Omaha beach. It was a very crack outfit. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division had a reputation of excellence. So all our litter bearers went with them. The doctors were taken and placed in several areas, and so I stayed at home with the first sergeant and I had a very interesting experience, because in that period of time it was almost like being a war correspondent. I'd go into the First Army where our troops were and then run on back and go laterally, find the others and sort of discreetly talk to them, and we did that for about two months. Luckily, we didn't lose anybody. We didn't lose anybody because we weren't committed to real bad action. The Bulge had stopped—I don't mean stopped, not falling back further. So they were all

quite—got letters of commendation from the 9<sup>th</sup> Division, from our company [unintelligible] and then they broke up the unit because really, collective companies are a holdover from the first World War where the litter bearers pulled them out of the trenches, back to the aid station, and the aid station was where the collective company was supposed to pick ‘em up from there and take them back to the clearing company, which took them back to the hospital. Now everything went from the front in an ambulance back to whatever unit was back there, a field hospital or division headquarters. And I was very fortunate in that I was assigned to the 3rd Auxiliary Division. This was a unit that got a presidential unit citation because they came on, on D-Day, and this was a group of surgeons, anesthetists, surgical nurses, surgical corpsmen, and this was the start of the MASH units, because all we did was take care of the non-transportable belly and chest wounds. These were guys that they didn’t feel could be moved; that is, if they moved them back twenty or thirty miles, they’d be dead by the time they get there. So we hopscotched right behind the truck repeatedly and worked in schoolhouses or churches or buildings, wherever we could find a place to set up a hospital. And of course, one of the surgeons in our group was Al Hurwitz, who was a professor and head of the Department of Surgery at Yale, and the anesthesiologist was Bob Smith, and he ended up as Chief of Anesthesiology at Harvard. These were top bracket people, and of course I was a flunky, but I was happy to do it. I was holding retractors and did pre- and post-op. They took me in as one of their own, very, very enjoyable. I learned a lot because I didn’t do any operating by myself. Once in a while somebody was waiting around with a laceration or something and I was their retractor holder, and pre- and post-op started [inaudible].

Mark: And you were finally able to practice medicine?

Richtsmeier: I was finally practicing medicine. And these guys, they were hard-working docs—[**End of Tape 1, Side A**—]somewhere between five and fifteen characters. They were really bad off. We had, you know, fresh blood brought in every day, and they’d work for thirty-six, seventy-two hours and then all they had to do was take care of the people that they operated on until they could clear everything out and move back to the hospitals, and then you’d rest for a couple of days, and then you’d hop-skip above. And this is when we got behind the 9<sup>th</sup> Division. The 9<sup>th</sup> Division was a real crack outfit, it was very good. They had a lot of fun guys who liked to come back, you know, and visit in the evenings and come in. And they liberated this whole cognac distillery and every one of them washed out their gas cans [laughs], and every person had gallons and gallons of cognac.

Mark: This was in Belgium?

Richtsmeier: This was in Belgium, yeah. No, it was just when we crossed into Germany. See, we went to Belgium near Liège into Aachen, Germany and then went—we were on the north flank, we were between the Third Army, I'm pretty sure, so at this time you see all of the stuff of the Bulge was pretty well quieted down, and we were hoppin', you know, twenty, thirty miles a day[?], taking a lot of prisoners, and it was always fun to go down to the prison and collect [unintelligible] because, you know, they had to throw everything out. You had your pick of cameras and knives and Luger pistols and all that sort of stuff. I picked up a Leica camera, Roloflex, and of course the officers would have to [inaudible] all that stuff. If would all be thrown in with the rifles and [unintelligible] digging equipment, dirty shoes, whatever. And we were with them when we got orders to follow behind when they were on the way to Remagen and we didn't know it, so they found the bridge intact and scurried across, so we went across with our tanks and all of the combat troops and set up the first hospital across the Rhine. That was rather interesting because it was the first time when you were really right out in front and you could see the combat [unintelligible].

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask you to clarify a little bit. How far were you when you were operating? How far back from the front?

Richtsmeier: When we started out we were probably no more than a couple miles.

Mark: So you could hear shells in the distance?

Richtsmeier: Oh yes, shells, but we never had a whole bunch like they depict in the present MASH, where everyone had to hit the dirt and so forth, because you maybe had it for an hour or two, but then it was moving forward so you could tell after six, twelve hours that you were pretty much out of range. [unintelligible]

Mark: So you had to pack up an entire hospital and keep moving?

Richtsmeier: Well no—well that's right, yeah.

Mark: I assume that was a difficult task.

Richtsmeier: Yeah, but it wasn't a real hospital because we didn't do anything with surgery. It was a very compact—surgical nurses took care of all the administrative and equipment and the corpsmen, and then you'd start operating as soon as you got the place cleaned out. You'd operate on the stretchers; you never had an operating room. You had very minimum [unintelligible] You had your lights. You had to sterilize so you're always

ahead with gloves and gowns [unintelligible]. You used the old cupboards for fractured femurs, for hands, as surgical splints.[?] And they did a—I can't tell you how excellent these surgeons were. They really care, you know. When they were through they weren't out running around, they were looking at patients. They did postmortems on patients; that was the surgical person's job, to find out what went wrong.

Mark: It's a busy, busy place.

Richtsmeier: Very busy. Very, busy, busy for, you know, one to two days and then it would slow down. See we never—I never witnessed it before, like we would be in the Hürtgen Forest or in areas where it would be stalemated you had a lot of casualties, so I did there until—I got in on all the gravy and not too much of the meat.

Mark: So the casualties would come in in bunches of ten, fifteen or so?

Richtsmeier: Yeah, yeah. Well, an ambulance brought them. This was all by radio communication. I never did figure out—you were a lot of time assigned to a field hospital. The field hospital would go in and set up and have the equipment and then you'd go in, see, with the personnel. This was one of the first things that was done right, and that is people with surgical, anesthesia knowledge, they used their doctor's training in the right way rather than being administrators. That's what they did with a lot of people before then. The only way you could get rank would be not [unintelligible] medicine, be a good administrator and do that kind of stuff.

Mark: So before a patient got to your facility, they had already been triaged?

Richtsmeier: They had been triaged, right. Up on the front somewhere.

Mark: And the casualties that came to you, you said before were the serious wounds?

Richtsmeier: Combat wounds, real serious wounds.

Mark: Could you maybe describe the types of casualties? Head injuries?

Richtsmeier: Well, they were, you know, landmines which are just horrible, you see; everything was mangled and, you know, you'd bring out in the belly clinkers the size of your fist.

Mark: A clinker, what's a clinker?

Richtsmeier: Well, a clinker is a bunch of shrapnel, you know; it's all steel. And especially in landmines. Very little in the way of like a single bullet. Eighty-eight shell type things; you had head wounds, chest wounds, belly wounds, extremities mangled. But usually the mangled extremities were not life threatening so they could be packed and transferred; we didn't really treat them.

Mark: So I'm trying to imagine the scene. You were radioed ahead of time you were going to get a load. I assume you were prepared?

Richtsmeier: See, I was a flunky, so I was doing all the work. I don't know how or who set up the place that we were to go. In other words, we didn't have a—we had a CO and he was the chief surgeon; that was finally done right. He was in charge of all the other doctors and in charge of the nurses, and in charge of the medical corp. And so he would come in and tell us where we were going to go next, but he never told us—I never knew where he got his information. I'm sure somebody in the rear told him what to do because 3<sup>rd</sup> Aux Surgical Group was a large group that had been present since D-Day. They got a unit citation for their work on D-Day, exceptional work, and they were also a unit with a lot of esprit de corps. They had reunions all the time. I never went to one and I wish I would've, but I never went to one because I wasn't with them a very long time, and I've been to a couple reunions where unless you know people it's rather embarrassing [unintelligible]. But they sent out bulletins and sent out everybody's address. A couple times of a year they would have reunions long before the present one, the fifth year, the tenth year.

Mark: Kind of like high school?

Richtsmeier: Yeah, yeah. And the guy that did all of this, I can remember his name was Graves, Colonel Graves from La Jolla, California, and I kept getting these letters from him. [unintelligible] Writing letters to his old buddies [unintelligible]. He wrote a book. There is a book on it, but—you know, I thought I was gonna get one but I guess I didn't. I probably had to go to one of these reunions to get it. But that was the [unintelligible]. Oh, the other interesting aspect—see, this is how we got into Buchenwald, because ICO was Jewish and he found out about it. He was very well-educated because when we were in Liège he said, "You get your wives some Val Saint-Lambert crystal." That was the hometown of the crystal that was made, and I can remember after I got home being in a big hotel in Chicago and that crystal, even then, each piece was twenty to forty dollars. It was a lot of money; you could buy a used car for that. But he knew that, so I sent home while we were waiting to get into action, a nice decanter, wine set, which other than a few broken ones we still have. So it was things like that. Then at the tail end of the war, we went, followed the 9th Armored all

the way up the Alps, met the Russians. And there was utter chaos. By chaos—see we had—unless we were assigned to something, we had no duties. We didn't have any enlisted men, we didn't have to look after any of the wounded or anything else, and one of the 9th Armored had captured a Mercedes-Benz from one of the SS troopers and so they painted it green and put stars on it, so we took off [laughs] to tour Bavaria, five officers. You could stop in any place and get any sort of rations, you could get gasoline, everything was in turmoil, other than, you know, each division and each unit along the front were very well organized and were holding that, but as you came through nobody asked you, "What are you doing here? Where are you going?" you know, "We want gas." The only thing when we come back and we found out under these [unintelligible] we was hauling dynamite[?] which nobody—that was interesting. Seeing Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Munich, those places just after they were liberated was interesting. So I was very lucky. I had almost a war correspondent's view of what went on. [unintelligible] It was tough during the Bulge, because we didn't have places inside. It was cold; God, it was cold. [unintelligible]

Mark: Now I'm interested in some of the slack times you had between batches of casualties. What did you do to occupy yourself?

Richtsmeier: Oh, it was playin' cards and sittin' around at night drinking cognac, and I was never very much interested in playing cards because there was always interesting stuff going on, something to read, and there was a lot of boredom. After the war, after our tour, we all came back to Gießen and we sat in pup tents in a big field. See, this was after [unintelligible] and I had to stay around 'til February the following year, but all of that, months in the summertime, it was just a lot of boredom. You could—you know, I can remember 'em going down to the airstrip and jumping on one of these C47s, you'd tell them, "Where are you going?" "I'm going to Brussels." "Well, can I ride along?" "Sure." You know, and then you get up and find that the pilot's some little pimply eighteen-, nineteen-year-old [laughs]. And air travel in Northern Europe was just, oh my God, bumpy; you'd just get tossed all around. I never once thought of that. But then I remember that was where I saw my first jet. German jet. That was on one of the moves when we moved forward. [unintelligible] At the time I didn't know what it was, but it was the first time I ever saw that plane [unintelligible]. When they come on the strip "rrrrrrrrrrrrrr," you know, and made a hell of a noise as he [unintelligible].

Mark: Now in your particular case you were in a unit that had women stationed there, is that right?



Richtsmeier: Yeah, yeah. There was problems. There were problems. Because you see I was—I was very young; I was only twenty-two[?] or something and I never—I wasn't smart enough to know what was going on at the time, but there was never anything that got to be where it was a matter of discipline or morale. The majority of the nurses were not assigned to [unintelligible]; you didn't have the nurses like they had in MASH. They didn't find us attractive [laughs]. Several of them were very attractive, but, uh—I was later made CO of the field hospital at a place in Bremerhaven and that was sort of a BD center, there for about a month or six weeks, and then we were moved down to central Germany, and this was an interesting episode because we were set up as a field hospital. We didn't have a lot of expert people around, just a sort of first aid station. It's called a field hospital, and I got a call that Patton was coming and [unintelligible]. That would have been a real chaotic experience.

Mark: Did you have much contact with the German people?

Richtsmeier: A lot of contact with the German people, and they were very subdued and cooperative at that time because they knew, you know, that was the end. The Belgians were extremely nice to us and we could sleep in their second floor bedrooms while they slept in the basement with the buzz bombs. The French never showed me any affection. They were selling Calvados and selling all kinds of other things.

Mark: Selling what?

Richtsmeier: Calvados, which was that apple booze. Calvados is a cheap sort of a strong wine and I don't think there is any of it here.

Mark: I'm not familiar with it.

Richtsmeier: Very popular drink in Normandy. Well, that was the only thing you could get. [unintelligible]

Mark: Now with a name like Richtsmeier—

Richtsmeier: Yeah?

Mark: That's not Irish?

Richtsmeier: No, no. I had a lot of Germans that when they found out my name—I had a lot of relatives named Richtsmeier, but I never found any of them. I kept saying it but—

Mark: I suppose they weren't from [unintelligible]?

- Richtsmeier: See, I took French in college and I didn't know a word of German. I learned a lot, but we didn't have that much contact with the Germans, although we did take care of critical Germans the same way as we did American troops, the non-transportable. Old Al Hurwitz could talk German.
- Mark: Now I know right away in the occupation there were non-fraternization orders. You weren't supposed to have contact with the Germans.
- Richtsmeier: Yeah, yeah.
- Mark: Did that hold up very well in your experience?
- Richtsmeier: I couldn't tell because I wasn't a company commander any more.
- Mark: I mean, of the people you knew? Did you go into town?
- Richtsmeier: People that I knew, I don't think that it held up one single bit. GIs are GIs and they don't care who and what, they sit around long enough they're out fraternizing. But in that area, you see, it's different because there is always plenty of booze. I don't know where they got it, but somebody always found something in somebody's basement that was drinkable. We never got into any what I would call [unintelligible], experiences other than [unintelligible].
- Mark: Why don't tell me more about Buchenwald and your experiences there?
- Richtsmeier: Well you know, we didn't—I didn't know what to expect when he said to go and look, so I went with one of the other medical officers; he knew where it was.
- Mark: But what did you first hear? I mean did you think concentration—
- Richtsmeier: Well he told us—see, we were this unit of about six or eight medical officers and nurses and corpsmen and when we weren't working we could do what we wanted to. Bob Smith and I had a great time out scrounging, looking for loot. We were the prized looters in our free time, and loot doesn't mean that you go and capture somebody to get something, you are just messing. It's lucky that we never got anything that was booby trapped. We got into the Leica factory and you'd give one of these slave laborers two packages of cigarettes and he'd assemble a Leica for ya. That's how those things were obtained.
- Mark: A souvenir collection?

Richtsmeier: A souvenir collection, yeah. Word of—when it isn't combat, the word of mouth behind the lines goes like wildfire, but during combat, you know, nobody knows anything other than the guy that's just come back from the front and tells you how bad it is. You follow the front line guy [unintelligible]. See, I have a friend who got the Silver Star and he was like seventeen or eighteen at the time and he, in a trench, fought off a whole German unit with a single machine gun. Everybody around him was killed; all of his buddies were killed. You know, that's a far cry from some guy like me who the ones that we see killed, the soldiers who are dead or are dying, they're not our buddies that we worked with in the last six months or two years. That's worse. So yeah, that's about it.

Mark: Buchenwald?

Richtsmeier: Oh, Buchenwald. Buchenwald—um, I didn't know there was such a thing. We heard that there were concentration camps and then our senior officer told us later what we were seeing, but this was an area that I would say was probably the size of the square, probably a little bit bigger, with fences like they show in the movies and barbed wire, and in it a bunch of buildings. The biggest building that I could remember was the crematorium. Out in the courtyard were the stacks of bodies. I just happened to get one; there were probably twenty or thirty [unintelligible] bodies. And this was typical of the ones that were still standing and moving around. They were cachectic, they didn't have any food or any nourishment on 'em at all and they had very little clothing. The clothing was all striped like this. And what they lived in, it was boarded up bunks with straw and it would be probably the size of these filing cabinets.

Mark: I'm not sure we're catching this.

Richtsmeier: Oh sorry; that would be—what is that; that's about ten feet. And there would be at least four bunks. You know, you couldn't get your head up or move hardly at all, just [unintelligible] and it was all straw and the flooring was dirty and muddy and feces all over everything. You didn't really have split trenches. They were supposedly split trenches, but it was always so muddy and dirty they would fall in, so they were doing their bowel movements all over the place, and urine all over the place. I don't know if you've ever been on a farm or in a pig pen, but pigs wallow around in the mud; this is pretty much what it reminded me of. And although some of them had an expression of, of a smile or "I'm liberated," the majority of them were so far gone it was just this sad, desperate, hawkish, sullen face and [unintelligible]—starved.

Mark: So what's going through your head at this time?

Richtsmeier: Well you know, again, you're looking—it's funny; after a while in wartime you can steel yourself to these horrible atrocities. Not to the fact that it's commonplace, but you can look at it objectively, almost like you're looking at a picture rather than seeing a human being. Especially, I think I would look at it a lot differently if I had a responsibility, but I was merely there as an observer, and I can remember—see, I don't have any picture of these people standing around. I felt that it was insulting them to take their pictures; I didn't think that that was the right thing to do. I can remember being embarrassed pointing a camera at them. [unintelligible] And the others, there were a lot of people that looked a little bit malnourished but were walking around and they had makeshift crutches, you know, and some sort of a wooden stick. I never got into any of their mess hall or anything like that. See, all of the Germans had been taken back by that time. We didn't get there until probably somewhere between eighteen and twenty-four hours—

**[End of Interview]**