

INTERVIEW

Thomas Ward

YEAR

2005

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: Thomas Ward

DATE: November 30, 2005

PLACE: Copeland, Kansas

INTERVIEWER: Joyce Suellentrop

PROJECT SERIES: Veterans Oral History Project for Gray County

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

Thomas Ward was drafted into the army when he was twenty-four years old and married. He had worked as a supervisor in a Lockheed plant in California and had not been allowed to join the service before that time. He served in Europe during the last days of the war where his troop cleared the enemy out of small towns and forests as they moved toward the Elbe River. There they awaited the Russians capture of Berlin and then were sent home. He settled back in Copeland to work on the farm with his father and he lives there still. He feels fortunate to have survived the war without injury, having lost a brother soon after the war.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Life as a young man in California and his training and shipment to Europe to serve with the infantry. His return to civilian life and his thoughts about how World War Two affected his life were discussed.

COMMENTS ON INTERVIEW:

SOUND RECORDINGS: 60 minute tape

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: ¾ hour

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: none

TRANSCRIPT: 16 pages

ORAL HISTORY
Ward, Thomas
Interview Date: November 30, /2005

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)
Interviewee: Thomas Ward (TW)
Tape 1 of 1
Side A

JS - When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in '41 you were working?

TW - Fort Lockheed in California.

JS - How did you get to California?

TW - Well, Whitaker and I went out there looking for work in the fall of '39 and I kept pestering Lockheed for a job because I got tired of washing dishes in restaurants, and they offered me a job sweeping floors. I swept floors about three months and they put me in a new factory as a supervisor in charge of a department, a farm boy. I had quite a few people working under me. I never could join and I wasn't drafted on account of the job I had.

JS - What did Lockheed make?

TW - P38s, B17s, and a lot of smaller planes.

JS - What qualities do you think you had that made them put you in charge?

TW - I don't know. I guess just being a farm boy and I was a good worker. I haven't ever figured that out.

JS - And you were in charge of several people?

TW - I had about thirty-five people and a whole bunch of machines. We were in the shear department which cut the metal for the planes. I never could join. I tried to join, but I had that supervision job and they thought that was more important, I guess, building airplanes. They finally passed a law, about the time of the Battle of the Bulge and they said they were going to take everybody under twenty-five years old, regardless of what they were doing. That's when they got me. I lacked three months being old enough, I wouldn't have had to go.

JS - When you were at Lockheed, you stayed there until they drafted you?

TW - Yes.

JS - Do you remember how much money you were making?

TW - I can't believe this. I had worked there four years and they finally took me off a weekly rate and put me on a monthly rate and I was making \$300 a month.

JS - That was big money.

TW - It was back in them days.

JS - Now it wouldn't be.

TW - It wouldn't be enough to do nothing now. I met my wife out there in California.

JS - Were you married before you were drafted?

TW - Yeah, we got married in '41. She was a Nebraska girl out there. She was working in a restaurant across the street from Lockheed, and I'd go over there to get a milkshake and she was the only one that made a decent milkshake.

JS - So you married her?

TW - I married her.

JS - Where were you when you heard the news about Pearl Harbor?

TW - I think we were at a friend's house playing cards one night when we heard that. It kind of spooked everybody. Then after that we had to watch our lights and drove with hardly any lights on our cars.

JS - Because of the security issue?

TW - Yeah, we had a nice time in California. That was back in the big band era and we were going to all the dances. Cowboy bands were starting up and we would go to their dances. It was a good time back there.

JS - Lot of things to do there. You said you couldn't have your lights on in the house?

TW - Yeah, we could have them on, but when you drove you just had a thing that had a little slit for lights. They were afraid we might get bombed and that they could have reached our factories from the ocean.

JS - I know I talked to someone who was on patrol on the West Coast. He was a member of the army and was on patrol.

TW - My brother was killed in the war. He was about two years younger than I am.

JS - When did he go in?

TW - He went in before I did by several years. He was in, I guess, the armory. He took flight training and became a pilot and was flying an airplane in Europe. After the war he found out where I was stationed and he flew down there to see me in a little airplane.

Of course, he wanted to take me up for a ride. We got to the end of this little grass strip and we wasn't airborne and ran into a bunch of trees. We spent eight days together in the hospital and had a nice visit.

JS - I'll bet you did. Were you seriously injured?

TW - I wasn't, but my brother was hurt worse than I was. It broke the engine off and broke his legs. It cut me up. I didn't know anything until I came to on the way to the hospital. He was killed after that.

JS - In the war?

TW - No, it was after the war and he was ferrying troops. They got into a storm and he flew right into a mountain. It was after the war. He got married over there. We have lived a good life.

JS - You were working at Lockheed and you were drafted?

TW - I went to Little Rock, Arkansas, to take basic right in the middle of the summer.

After I got through basic, I thought I'd go to Fort Benning and take paratroop training. I thought I might like that better than the army. Then they were taking everybody in the army. They needed bodies over there in Europe so I went over there in an infantry division.

JS - Did you have to have special training for the infantry?

TW - We had plenty of that down in Little Rock.

JS - The basic training?

TW - Yeah, under fire and you had to do everything with hand grenades and rifles and they shipped us to New York and that's where we shipped out of.

JS - What did you think on that ship ready to go across the sea?

TW - I went over on the Queen Mary. I think they said there were 15 thousand on that ship other than the crew. That Queen Mary hauled lots of troops during the war all over the world, not just to Europe. We landed in Scotland. I got off that ship and got on a train and went down through Scotland. I got off the train, got on another ship, went across the channel to France. I got off that ship and got on another train, and I was on the front lines in 10 days.

JS - My, that was almost too fast for you to think about it.

TW - Yeah, we picked up our equipment and stuff in Belgium and I didn't see a lot of action, but we had to clean out the forests and the towns and that was kind of spooky.

JS - So that equipment you picked up in Belgium, you mean trucks and things like that?

TW - Yes, rifles and stuff like that.

JS - And you just started marching?

TW - They took us to the front which was, at that time, on the Rhine River. We did some more training there.

JS - What kind of training was that?

TW - I don't know. Maybe to get our minds set to go into action and thinking about it. There were no bridges across that river. We had to go across on a pontoon bridge. We were just cleaning out the forests and towns behind the armors. See, the Germans were on the run then.

JS - So when you cleaned them up, what did that mean?

TW - We had to go in all houses, pick up all weapons and take them out in the street and destroy them and things like that. We ran into some trouble one day in one little town after we cleaned it out. A plane had flown over and said there was an outfit in front of us ambushed. We'd just get in the trucks and would drive right out there. We didn't get very far out of town until the bullets started flying around us so we had to get out of the trucks and get back in town. Then we were just cleaning up towns and forests and getting the Germans corralled up.

JS - The German soldiers had moved on. You were pushing them back. Did they leave things?

TW - Oh yeah, they left a lot of stuff. We picked up souvenirs in these towns and stuff.

JS - What kind of souvenirs?

TW - Guns and caps and stuff like that.

JS - Were you permitted to bring or send them home?

TW - They let us bring one pistol home. We could send a rifle or something like that home after the war. When we were getting ready to come home, we got to Le Harve, France, and they called me out of the ranks and said I was going to Paris, and going to fly. My mother had gotten an emergency furlough for me. I guess she had been trying. I went to Paris and spent three or four days waiting for this plane trip. We flew to Scotland, landed at Iceland and Labrador on the way home.

JS - It was another quick trip.

TW - I had to ride in an old paratroop plane. We landed in the Northeast and then in Topeka and that's where I got signed out of the army.

JS - Is that the first time you had flown?

TW - No, I flew in the paratroops. I had flown before. My friend, Whitaker, was a spray pilot. I had flown with him a lot.

JS - Was he drafted also? He was in California with you.

TW - He went into the Merchant Marines. He never went overseas.

JS - When you joined, did you run into people from Kansas that you knew?

TW - No, not really.

JS - You were married when you were drafted. Did your wife stay in California or did she come back to Nebraska?

TW - She went to Nebraska and was staying with my aunt up there in North Platte. She did make a trip down to Fort Benning to see me before I shipped out.

JS - Let's go back to Europe. You were cleaning out towns and forests, and there were skirmishes along the way with German soldiers. So everyday, you would just sort of move further?

TW - When we got to the Elbe River, which is just this side of Berlin. That's as far as they were going to let us go because Eisenhower and some of them had gotten together with Stalin, and they had got their heads together and said we

were going to stop there and let the Russians come and take Berlin. I'm glad we did because the Russians lost a lot of people taking Berlin.

JS - Once you reached that river you just sort of stayed there?

TW - Yeah, we were in a little town. We run all the people out of that town and moved into their houses.

JS - The civilians?

TW - Yes, the civilians.

JS - So, you would just go in and say you have to get out?

TW - Yeah, they had a bunch of displaced people in that town, slave labor. We gave them lots of beer and stuff that night and we found the mayor of the town hanging up the next morning. They got rid of him. \

JS - Where were they from, Eastern Europe?

TW - Oh, different countries, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and I don't know what all different countries they were from.

JS - Were they working in factories there?

TW - No, it was a farming country. I don't know what all they had to do, but while we were in this little town by the Elbe River, the Germans were coming across that river from the east; (Any way to get across to get away from the Russians because the Russians were really giving them a bad time). After the war we went to a little town not too far from where they had the Nuremberg trials for the German people. We just moved around to different towns.

JS - When you said the Germans were coming across the Elbe, were those soldiers or civilians?

TW - They were soldiers and civilians too. Then we had outposts. The Russians would have an outpost and we would have an outpost about a quarter of a mile apart checking everybody. The Russians were shooting at people trying to get back to their homes. It didn't make any difference to them, they just shot them. Those Russians were mean or mad or something.

JS - Of course, they had been invaded by Hitler too.

TW - Oh yeah, they killed lots of Russians.

JS - When you went to the town where the people were slave labor, how did you know?

Were they dressed a certain way?

TW - You could tell that they weren't Germans.

JS - You couldn't communicate with them? They didn't know English?

TW - No. It went on for a couple of weeks waiting for the Russians to take Berlin. We just moved around to different towns.

JS - Did you do guard duty?

TW - In Munich they made railway MPs out of us. I was a railway MP for a while. We went over into Czechoslovakia to get coal and things like that. We just didn't do a lot until it was time for us to come home.

JS - When you were marching in and clearing out, did you have support troops? What kind of food did you have? Did you have K or C Rations?

TW - Yes. We had K Rations and we ate them for so long, your mouth would get sore. You know, those old dry crackers and stuff they had in them.

JS - What would you drink?

TW - We had water.

JS - Where did you get the water, from a well?

TW - Yes, we'd get water from the German wells.

JS - Where would you sleep?

TW - About anyplace you could find. We were trying to take a big pill box that was setting on a hill, one time. The SS Troopers would shoot medics and they would shoot anybody and we had a terrible time taking that pill box. Finally they gave them notice we were going to get planes in there and bomb it and then we went right up there. They left.

JS - The pill box is out of cement and then just has the narrow slit so they could shoot at you, but you had a hard time getting to them?

TW - Yes.

JS - What did you think when you were doing that kind of fighting?

TW - Well, you didn't know, you might be next. I was going up this hill and one guy had been hit and was laying there on the road and I didn't know what to do, help him or what. I didn't. If I had of, they would probably have shot me. We lost medics and gun guys and everything that day. Seemed like, after that, we didn't run into a lot of trouble, but when we got to that Elbe River they stopped us.

JS - Could you form an opinion of Germany or the German people as you marched through?

TW - I felt like I liked the German people a lot better than I did the French.

JS - Why was that?

TW - The French people, you just don't like their attitude or something. They are different. The Belgian and Holland people were nice. The civilians and the Germans, we liked them better than we did the French. I got to take a furlough one time after the war was over and we went to Switzerland, some of us did, and that was a nice trip.

JS - Where were you when you heard that victory in Europe had been declared? How did you find about it?

TW - I suppose our commander told us. We sat there on that Elbe River waiting for the Russians to take Berlin. When they did that, why, then the war was over.

JS - Do you remember how you felt?

TW - Oh man, you were just glad it was all over. One thing that bothered us was the Japanese were still fighting and we felt like some of us may get sent over there. We probably would have if we hadn't dropped the atomic bomb. We were still nervous about the whole thing.

JS - That would have been in May and we dropped the bomb in August.

TW - That when it was? The German war was over in May, wasn't it?

JS - May 5th, wasn't it? V-E day or maybe May 7th or May 8th. Somewhere right in there, I know. When you were over there, were you able to write home?

TW - Oh yeah.

JS - Did you do it on a regular basis?

TW - Yeah, and we got our mail from home. It would catch up with us with letters from our families and we tried to write home on a regular basis.

JS - Could you let them know where you were and what you were doing?

TW - After we got to the Elbe River the war was pretty much over with, we did, yeah. You couldn't disclose too much stuff. I'm lucky I didn't get hurt, other than that plane wreck with my brother.

JS - When you talk about World War Two, is there a particular person or maybe a friend or an officer or a particular incident you seem to remember very strongly and talk about?

TW - Yeah, I had a buddy that got hit with some shrapnel from an artillery shell that just about cut him in two and we had several fellers get wounded pretty bad. I don't know, I guess I was just in the right place or something.

JS - How did you deal with that when you saw your buddies die?

TW - You get pretty hard, in a way. Going through all that, you just take it as part of the job.

JS - When you went in, do they ever prepare for things like that?

TW - No, not really, I don't remember anything like that.

JS - When you went in, was that the first time you had been away from home?

TW - I went to California and I was away from home when I went to college. I went to Business College in Hutchinson one winter. I went to CC Camp and we built that lake down at Ashland.

JS - That would have been in the '30s?

TW - Yes, after I got out of high school.

JS - Talk a little bit about those CC Camps. It's the civilian corps?

TW - Yeah, that was something that Roosevelt did. They built windbreaks and put up trees. They were putting this dam on that lake down there and they had barracks about like you did in the army. It was a civilian job. We drove Caterpillars and trucks and stuff to work on that dam. I did that after I got out of high school. I don't remember how long I was down there. It wasn't too bad.

JS - Were the young men of a certain age?

TW - About all of them were about my age, I suppose.

JS - Did you get paid to do it?

TW - Yeah, but not very much.

JS - But you got your food?

TW - We got food and a place to stay and they would take us to town on Saturday nights. It wasn't all that bad.

JS - When you were in basic training and went overseas, you met young men from all over the United States. Was it difficult to follow orders and obey and to live with men who had been raised differently?

TW - Oh, it seemed like you always made buddies with certain guys. I still have buddies I write to.

JS - Really, where are they now?

TW - One of them is in Wyoming and another one is down in Texas. That's about the only two I ever keep corresponding with.

JS - Do you see them?

TW - The one from Texas did come up one time, but that's been several years ago. The one in Wyoming, I haven't seen him. I did too, one time on a trip we drove up through Wyoming and we looked him up. You make friends with certain guys in there and you don't forget it.

JS - When you write to them, do you talk about your war experience?

TW - No, not really. Forget that. How you are getting along and how he is getting along and things like that. That's been a long time ago. I got out in '46, so how many years has that been?

JS - It will soon be 60 years. Next year will be 2006.

TW - I would have been twenty-four years old when I went in.

JS - Some of the young men were eighteen or twenty?

TW - Yeah, a lot younger. I just had that job with Lockheed and they wouldn't let me join as long as I had that supervision job, I was supervisor over people and machines. I had a lot of good experience and could have gone back to that job, they said, but I didn't.

JS - You wanted to come back to Kansas?

TW - My dad was needing help on the farm. I just came back and helped him on the farm and finally took it over. My granddad on my dad's side, W.W. Ward was the first mayor of Copeland. He built this two-story house right across over here. I think he had something to do with the government in Kansas at one time too, representative or something.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Thomas Ward (TW)

Tape 1 of 1

Side B

JS - Had your family fought in other wars?

TW - I think mainly on my mother's side. Some of her kin was in the Civil War. I knew a lot of friends here in Copeland who served in World War Two. I feel fortunate to have gotten home.

JS - When you were in the army, were there religious services available? Could you go to church, for example, or was there a chaplain?

TW - We had a chaplain, you could talk to. We didn't have services, no.

JS - When you were moving in France and into Germany did you know what was going on in the war or did you just know that you were being told to be there?

TW - We just knew what we were doing, really. Oh, we would hear stories about things somewhere else.

JS - You would hear it by word of mouth? You didn't have radios, did you, or newspapers wouldn't reach you?

TW - No.

JS - In letters from home, maybe?

TW - When we were on the move we weren't getting mail. Only time I got mail was after we had stopped and the war was over.

JS - Did it seem like a long time when you were fighting?

TW - I got over there around the first of the year, about the time of the Battle of the Bulge. I didn't get involved in it, which was a fortunate thing. We set there on the Rhine River for probably a week waiting for all the rest of the army to get up there before we crossed over.

JS - While you were just waiting, did you just sit around?

TW - Yeah, mainly.

JS - It was in the winter so it was cold?

TW - Oh yeah, it gets cold over there and snows. We just played cards, etc.

JS - Did most of the people smoke?

TW - The army gave you cigarettes. I guess they wanted you to smoke.

JS - Maybe they thought that would relieve stress or something.

TW - We got our cigarettes free and they were worth money after the war was over. The German people wanted them cigarettes.

JS - So you could sell them on the street?

TW - Oh yes, or trade them, and same thing with gasoline and anything that had some value. I don't know that I traded my cigarettes off.

JS - Were they non-filtered cigarettes? Filtered were not available yet?

TW - Yes. They gave us cigarettes, all the time. You could trade cigarettes for about anything.

JS - Would you trade for food?

TW - No.

JS - You had sufficient food?

TW - Yes.

JS - When you would go into towns and move the civilians out so you could stay in the homes, was there food available that way or did they not have much food?

TW - When we got to the Elbe River, we found cured meat up in the attic of this one house. They wanted to take that with them, but we didn't let them.

JS - Because you wanted it?

TW - They had some cattle out there in the barn and we proceeded to butcher one of them.

JS - So you knew how to butcher?

TW - Yeah. We had one sergeant that liked pigeons. There happened to be a lot of pigeons so he had all the squab he wanted.

JS - This was after having C or K Rations for a while. When you moved in and said to the German people that they had to get out, did they resist in any way?

TW - No, they couldn't really.

JS - Did you have to take German soldiers prisoner as you moved?

TW - Yes, one time we built what you call a PW cage and put them in it.

JS - You built it out of wood?

TW - Oh yeah, posts and bars. Somebody behind us took care of it. I think they took them to a bigger camp. I drove a Jeep for an officer that was in charge of a PW cage and I noticed that one of the prisoners in there had a great big dent in his forehead. Come to find out, a Russian officer had put a pistol against his forehead and pulled the trigger. It didn't kill him, it was too close and it didn't penetrate.

JS - Looking back, what do you think of all those experiences?

TW - I don't think we were near as bad as what's going on over there now. I don't like that a bit. We've been after it for five years and that country has so many religions in it that have always fought amongst themselves. It's hard to say, but we did what we were told to do. There were times we didn't want to do it, but we had to.

JS - When you look back at that experience do you think it changed you? Was it significant in you life?

TW - We had lots of discipline even in basic training. A lot of kids when they grow up don't have a lot of discipline in their life. You learn to do what you're told and you are in a lot of different countries. It is amazing that the Germans thought they could whip the whole world. We have helped France and those countries out of two wars, World War One and Two, and now we are over there with our nose in others people's business. We are going to pay for it if we keep messing around. People are getting tired of us telling them what to do.

JS - Is there any other particular story or thing that happened that you would like to have on the tape because students might be reading this in years to come or historians might be using this information. If you could capture something that you think is necessary to let people know or think about, can you think of anything.

TW - No, it was amazing that when I got to Le Harve they had a streamlined train that I rode into Paris. I don't know where they had it hid, but it was a streamlined train. It was amazing the highway that Germany had, the autobahn. It was a four-lane concrete highway all over that country. They blew up a lot of their nice bridges trying to stop us. They had a lot of rockwork in their bridges. It is a beautiful country.

JS - I think they said if you have to give Hitler credit for anything it is that he did build that Autobahn. That was, I believe, in '33 and the trains going on time.

TW - The kids believing in him, too, I mean young kids. We ran into some of that and you wouldn't believe the young kids that he had brainwashed. We went through the Buchenwald Concentration Camp and they had six furnaces there. I took pictures of them. They had meat hooks on the wall where they hung these people before they got them cremated. Their beds were made of wood and there was hardly enough room between the beds to even crawl in there. They slept on wood and those people were just skin and bones, those that were left there. How many people did Germany put to death?

JS - They said six million.

TW - Now, they think more than that.

JS - I think six million Jews.

TW - They'd run them in a big building or something and gas them.

JS - Did you go through that right after the war?

TW - No, that was during the war that I went through the Buchenwald Concentration Camp.

JS - But it had already been liberated?

TW - Yeah.

JS - What did you think when you saw that?

TW - You just can't imagine what one person can do to another person. The Japs were about as bad.

JS - I went through Auschwitz about ten years ago, and it made me cry with so many, but you were there and it was an immediate thing. I can't imagine how that felt.

TW - I took pictures of the furnaces. You can't imagine. They stripped these people down and put them in a building and then killed them all. Somebody had to take all those dead people out of there and bury them. What of the people that did all that?

JS - You said you were close to where the Nuremberg trials were?

TW - I didn't get to see much of that. We got on guard duty there for awhile.

JS - You knew they were going on?

TW - Yes, that was after the war. I don't know how many people they even tried, now. There were a lot of them they should.

JS - Is there anything else that you want to talk about? What did your wife think when you were drafted?

TW - Of course, she didn't like it. We had a good life out there and had a good job and my aunt lived in North Platt and we just felt like she would be better off living there with my aunt. Her folks lived in Eastern Colorado so it wasn't very far. She came down there to see me once when I was in training. Then she was at Holyoke when I got out, over there living with her folks on the farm. I stayed there for about a year thinking I could possibly help her dad farm and maybe get into farming, but it didn't work out so I came back down here and helped my dad.

JS - When you were in the army, do you remember how much pay you received?

TW - No, I think it was \$60 and my wife got about thirty of that. She got a portion of it. I don't remember the exact figure.

JS - How did that compare to what you had been making when you were at Lockheed?

TW - That \$30 was for a month and I had been making \$300 when I went in the service.

JS - When you came home and decided what you were going to do, it took some time. Did you talk about your war experience?

TW - To the family?

JS - Yes.

TW - Not really, I don't think. I don't think any of the guys done that.

JS - Did your family even ask you?

TW - I suppose they did, but I'd just kind of skip over it. A lot of fellows had it a lot tougher than I did. I was pretty lucky. I feel real fortunate that I didn't get hurt. The plane wreck that my brother and I were in was the only injury I had and that was our fault. We saw a lot of bad things over there.

JS - Do those memories stick with you and pop up every now and then?

TW - No, not really. If somebody brings them up or something and they are always doing something for the veterans and you get to thinking about it.

JS - Can you think of anything else you want recorded?

TW - About myself, huh?

JS - Anything.

TW - I saw a lot of country and I got to ride the Queen Mary across the ocean. It took us five days and I saw a lot of country in Europe and even went to Switzerland.

JS - Did you ever go back to Europe?

TW - No.

JS - Didn't want to?

TW - No, and I flew back. Otherwise, I would have been three weeks on another old boat. I was really lucky in a lot of ways.

Interviewer: Joyce Sullentrop (JS)

Interviewee: Thomas Ward (TW)

Tape 1 of 1

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