

**Charles William Hurlbut
Veteran**

**Michael Russert
Wayne Clark
Interviewers**

**Interviewed on September 23, 2003 3:00 PM
Ithaca, New York**

Interviewers: Q
Charles William CWH

Q: Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

CWH: Charles William Hurlbut. November 25, 1924. New York City.

Q: What was your education prior to entering military service?

CWH: High School Graduate

Q: Do you remember where you were, and your reaction when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

CWH: Yeah, it was a Sunday afternoon. I was getting all jazzed up to meet some guys. We were going to go to a movie. We never made the movie. We met, but we forgot about the movie.

Q: How did you hear about this?

CWH: On the radio.

Q: What was your reaction at the time? Do you recall?

CWH: Oh God, this is awful. Now we're really in it. I had great feelings we'd have to get in the war in Europe.

Q: Why was that?

CWH: I was convinced we'd have to go into the war just for humanitarian reasons. Then when Pearl Harbor hit, there was no question we were in a war.

Q: Were you drafted or did you enlist?

CWH: I was drafted

Q: How old were you when you were drafted?

CWH: 18

Q: Where was your induction center?

CWH: Auburn, New York

Q: Where did you go from there for training?

CWH: Ok, first Fort Niagara where we got our uniforms and were processed and all that. Then they sent us out to Camp White, Oregon.

Q: Can I stop a second? In 1943 when you went to Fort Niagara were there any POWs there yet? They had German POWs for a while. Were they there at that time or not?

CWH: Gee, I don't remember seeing any.

Q: Where did you go from there?

CWH: From there we were sent west to Camp White, Oregon, which is near Medford which is about 20 miles from the California border. That's where we took our basics, and fundamental engineering. We were engineers, combat engineers.

Q: Now did you take any tests, or did they just put you in the engineers?

CWH: They just put us there. They needed that group, so we were it. What was unique about it, there were about seventy of us drafted out of Auburn all at one time, and we thought when we hit Niagara we were all gonna be split up. I'll go here, you'll go there but then they kept us all together. Eighty-five percent of us stayed together all through basic, all through the states, overseas, the whole war so that made it unique in a way. You had some old buddies with you there all the time.

Q: What kind of specialized training did you get as an engineer?

CWH: Well, engineering makes you think of bridges. All types of bridges, foot bridges, bigger bridges, tank bridges, (unclear @3:26) bridges and a lot of mine detonations. Planting mines and deactivating them. And a lot of infantry tactics because combat engineers work with the infantry. They are very close. So we got a pretty well-rounded basic training.

Q: How long were you in training?

CWH: Probably four or five months. Four months, yeah. Then we went on maneuvers in the Oregon desert for a couple of months. Then they sent us to Fort Louis. We were there only a short time. Then we all thought, okay here we go to Japan because we were on the west coast.

But son-of-a-gun they sent us to Florida. Fort Pierce, Florida and we took on a whole new aspect of training. We were now demolition engineers, underwater demolition. We knew that it had to be at a beachhead somewhere. So that's

what we were trained at. We trained as what today would be the Seals? They were the originators. We worked right with them under Navy supervision.

Q: So you wore the scuba gear and so on?

CWH: At times yeah. But we'd come into the beach in big rubber rafts full of explosives and put them on the obstacles and blow them up. We were to make beach assault landings.

Q: What kind of explosives did you use?

CWH: I think it was called C2. It was a putty-like material.

Q: How long were you given this special training?

CWH: Possibly three months, at least a good 2 months. Then we were sent to Camp Picket for a while where I saw my first German prisoners. They were doing all the KP work. Happiest guys I ever saw in my life [Smiling]. Then I went to Camp Kilmer and we were pretty sure this time, everything got very secret and restrictive. They were gonna be shipping us out. We went into New York harbor, overseas.

Q: Did you go in convoy or single ship?

CWH: Convoy

Q: Where did you go?

CWH: Well, we crossed the Atlantic, of course. Our destination was Cardiff, Wales. Then they took us to (unclear @6:39) Wales and we continued our demolition training in the water.

Q: Do you have any little stories about your training, or anything like that? Did anything unusual happen?

CWH: No, pretty much run of the mill.

Q: Did you ever have contact with the people of Wales or were you pretty much on your base by yourself?

CWH: Wales? No very, very little. We marched from the ship to a train, a little parade and they all waved at us. That's about it. In Fort Pierce we had passes. Very close to the public in Medford, Oregon.

Q: Where did you go from Wales?

CWH: A couple of camps in England. We were gradually moving closer to the Channel Coast, the southern coast. Because by this time there was big talk about the invasion. And it looked pretty much like we were going to be part of it. So every move is a little closer to the Channel.

Q: What kind of weapons did you carry?

CWH: An M1, yeah.

Q: The rifle or the carbine?

CWH: It's a rifle. A 30 millimeter rifle. It took eight clips. The only ones that had carbines were the (unclear @8:33).

Q: It must have been pretty close to D-Day then by the time you got into England.

CWH: Oh yeah, this was May. We went over in April. All of May. Then we finally got to Weymouth which is a port on the English Channel and they put us in an old boat. I mean old. An old converted Channel steamer I guess. We rocked, and rocked, and rocked for a few days. Someone announced D-Day was June 5th so you get your mind all set, all of that. Then they would come out and say postponed a day so you had to go through all that agony again you know.

But we were assigned to assault teams. We were a battalion. Three companies. We made up eight assault teams. That's about 30-35 men in a boat. Our job was to go in with the first wave and get rid of the obstacles all along the beach. And there were hundreds of them.

Q: Now those were the triangular type of (unclear @10:10)?

CWH: [Intertwines his fingers to make an image] Tetra hydras, Belgian Gate things, big poles.

Q: What were they made out of wood?

CWH: Metal, cast iron metal. There was one like a big telephone pole, that was wood, of course, but the rest were cast iron. And they were all scattered along the beach. Well, they had to be removed in order to open channels for the rest of the troops to come in. That was our assignment.

Q: Do you remember looking out and seeing how large the fleet was?

CWH: On the way over? Oh my God, yeah. [Shaking his head] I wondered what the hell am I, a little farm boy from New York State, doing in the middle of this thing? [Smiles] Oh, every ship you could image was there.

Q: How about the aircraft that went over?

CWH: A lot of aircraft, yeah. A lot of aircraft.

Q: Do you mind describing your landings?

CWH: It took about two hours from (unclear @11:20). We were about twelve miles off shore. So I guess we must have left about four o'clock to head for shore. That was a rough ride. The guys were already seasick from waiting on the harbor back at Weymouth. Waiting to go, you know, rocking and rocking and the ride in didn't help any.

Q: Now what kind of craft did you go in on?

CWH: LCPV. So there are a lot of sick men. Geez, I thought here they are gonna meet the biggest physical challenge of their life, and they are just not physically prepared you know? They were sick. Well our coxswain was very good. He took us in as far as he could. We were only in the water just below our knees so we got off.

Q: Were you under heavy fire?

CWH: Not all the way in, but as soon as we approached it started.. As far as I know, we all got off the boat okay. And the, it was just awful, God. Guys were dropping all around you and screaming and yelling. I took the rubber raft floating next to me. I took the tow rope and put it over my shoulder and starting pulling it and using it. Then all of a sudden there was a big terrific explosion, the raft had been hit.

I was cart wheeled, knocked senseless and when I came in I was flat on my back spitting blood. I felt like I was hit by a freight train. I untangled the cord and pulled it in. It was a big, ragged piece of rubber. Meanwhile somebody had laid three bodies on the raft. Two were face down, I couldn't tell who they were. But one was face up, I knew him. After the explosion they were all gone. Our demolition raft, bodies, everything gone. All gone.

So I got together with a couple of other guys. One of them was an officer and he says-well we can't do anything. We have lost all our demolitions. It is every man for himself now. So you just tried to make it to the shore the best you could. We soon got parted and I stumbled along.

I see this guy laying in the water moaning. I look down and it is one of my buddies. I knew who he was. He has this terrific gash in his leg. You can see the bone come through. I knew if I left him there he was gonna drown. He was a lot bigger than I was. I don't know how the hell I was gonna get him in to the shore. So I tried a lot of things. I finally got down behind him and put his body between my legs and grab him under his armpits. I could pull like this, you know. It was very slow and very exhausting but we were making progress. Then all of a sudden a tank comes up next to me. The guy looks down and says-boy, you are in trouble. He hops down and together the two of us could get the guy up to the sand dunes where it's a little safer. Then he ran back to his tank. I don't know his name, where he was from, but boy he helped. I finally got a medic to look after Joe, his name was Joe, and he said it would be best to leave him there.

I wanted to be with some of my guys. I was trying to find some of my old buddies. But everybody who came up and flopped along beside me, they weren't them. I finally noticed a bunch of guys way down, about a quarter of a

mile away. They seemed to be behind a pretty good cliff. Whereas I was just in the sand dunes for protection. So I said, I'm gonna try to make that.

There was a tank and a jeep between us. I said I'll make the tank, take a rest, then I'll make the jeep, then I'll get with the guys and that's the way it worked out. It happened to be an aid station where they were collecting the wounded. I wandered among them and so many were my old buddies that's why I hadn't seen so many of them. Some of them recognized me, some of them didn't. At least it was good to know they were still alive. Yeah, that was quite a morning, quite a morning. [Pauses]

It looked pretty bad. I remember envisioning hundreds of tanks coming over the hill. Tiger tanks, and behind them screaming SS troops. We were just gonna be driven into the sea. They were gonna annihilate us. We had nothing to stop them from doing that because we couldn't get the stuff in. The tide was coming in. That was prohibiting their landing. Every time they would land they took up so much space there wasn't room to move. The tanks were having a hell of a time with what we call the shingle which is a lot of gravel. They couldn't get the traction. And there was some big (unclear @17:55) tank ditches which were giving them trouble.

A destroyer came in awfully, awfully close. I couldn't imagine how close he came. He pinpointed a couple of gun positions and he got those. That made a hell of a big difference. Finally some guys grouped together and they made it up the hill and took care of a lot of the German gun divisions. And we were finally able to get off the beach and into the bluffs.

Q: How long did you say that took?

CWH: All morning. It wasn't till mid-afternoon that we had any type of advance whatsoever. And Bradley, Omar Bradley, was way other there watching it all. He was pretty close to calling it off because over at Utah Beach (unclear @18:50) and he was seriously thinking of calling off Omaha and just leave us I guess. But thankfully, that didn't have to happen.

Well, all I can say is that it was one awful, awful morning. (unclear @19:21) death, so quick, so final. Nobody is ready for it. As tough as they think they are, it gets them. And when they are your own friends boy, it hurts. [Pause].

Q: Did you eventually wind up with a lot of the men from your own unit?

CWH: Yeah, we finally managed to congregate with what there was left of us. They took roll call so I realized we lost a lot of guys.

Q: Do you know approximately how many were lost?

CWH: I think they said forty-five percent.

Q: You were wounded there, you said with the explosion?

CWH: Well, they considered that a wound, a concussion (unclear @20:34) my back.

Q: Did you get treatment for that, or was it left untreated for a while?

CWH: Left untreated, yeah. It didn't slow me down. I still had my senses and, you know, I could maneuver okay. But they did give me the Purple Heart for it. Yeah, that was quite a day.

Q: What was the evening like?

CWH: Well we were cold, miserable, hungry [Chuckles], and very, very sad. We were up in the bluff which were the hills that come off the beach. You couldn't have any fires, of course. One guy, somebody, hollered GAS, and that is the worst word you can hear in war. It was either a joke or a false alarm, but boy it caused a lot of trouble for a while.

Q: Did you have a gas mask with you at this point?

CWH: Yeah. A lot of guys didn't. They got lost or something. They were crying like babies, but thankfully we didn't need them. I think the Germans sent over a couple of planes. Every ship in the Channel, everything on the shore opened up on them. It was a Fourth of July you wouldn't believe. The trace of (unclear @22:20) going up there. I don't know if he made it out or not. That was a big break for us that the Lufthansa was so weak. They didn't have the planes. If they had, it would have been a whole different story, their airpower. Then we spent a couple of days cleaning up the beach, the debris, opening up the channels allowing the troops to come in. Taking care of mine fields and we got the Presidential Unit Citation.

Q: What division were you with?

CWH: At that time we would come in with the First Division. We were what you would call a Bastard Battalion. 299th Combat Engineers. It's three companies plus and H&S company. It's only about six hundred to six hundred and fifty men total. You're really not with anybody, it's under a (unclear @23:30) jurisdiction. You really go where you are needed. So we served many, many masters. The morning of the invasion, the first wave, we were under the First Division.

Q: After you spent several days cleaning the beach up, did you have explosives at that time? Were you blowing up obstacles?

CWH: Yes, and then some bulldozers came in and they did most of the work. They could push it aside, clear it a lot better.

Q: After those several days, where were you assigned, what did you do?

CWH: They took us a few miles inland to an orchard. They gave us sort of a rest

period. One day of rest, to sleep. Geez, we needed sleep, got some hot food, recuperated you know?

Q: So they set up kitchens? What sort of hot food did you receive?

CWH: I think we got it from another outfit. They cut a deal with another outfit. Until then it was K-rations.

Q: Did you get replacements to fill your ranks again?

CWH: In a week or so we got replacements, right.

Q: How were they accepted into the unit?

CWH: Well, I made a promise to myself I will never make friendships like I had before cause it hurts so much when you lose them. But that didn't last long. I just couldn't do it, it wasn't in my nature. I reasoned that hell, these guys are soldiers, they were told what to do, they're only following orders, you know. So I became friendly with a lot of them. A lot of good buddies. But it was weird. They told us that they knew they were replacements for us about three weeks before D-Day. That's how much faith the Army had in us. They knew it was a suicide mission. They already had our replacements ready to take over. So that made you feel kind of funny.

Q: Did they have engineering training also?

CWH: No, they were just basic infantry I guess.

Q: Did they have to learn on the job then?

CWH: Yeah, but they were good guys. They fit in well.

Q: After your little rest, where did you go from there?

CWH: I think we had to build some bridges. This was in Normandy around (unclear @26:37), that area. We got the stuff coming in from the sea, but its got to get inland. The Germans were blowing a lot of the bridges and scooting up the road, so we had to get that taken care of pretty much.

Q: (unclear at 26:55)

CWH: Some, some wooden bridges.

Q: When you had to build a wooden bridge from scratch, where did the materials come from? They came in from the beachhead or did you have to use something that was there? **CWH:** Well, you had to tear down an old barn, or an old building and get the big rafters out of it, you know. You had to salvage a lot of the stuff. Once we broke the hedgerows, that was crazy in Normandy. That slowed us down so much, but once we broke out of there it was clear sailing through Northern France, right up through Belgium. We were going crazy. The biggest problem was logistics. Keeping up with the troops, the gasoline, and the materials they needed, you know. That was our big problem.

Q: Did you have to march, or have trucks?

CWH: We had trucks. Every squad had their own truck, some jeeps. We had our own bulldozer, a compressor so we could jackhammer and all that stuff. Yeah, we were pretty well equipped. We were pretty independent, self sufficient. We could exist on our own, we didn't need to rely on other outfits so much.

Q: How long were you in continuous combat or following the front?

CWH: Okay, from D-Day morning till, I guess a week before VE-Day. We hit all five campaigns and took active part in every one of them.

Q: Where were you when the Bulge took place?

CWH: Down in Southeastern Belgium, right next to Luxembourg. They sent us down there because it was a quiet area. A lot of troops were being sent there for rest and relaxation, you know. It was very calm, nothing going on. (unclear @29:37)

Q: Did you have winter equipment by then?

CWH: No. It wasn't till Spring that we got the snow packs and the heavy stuff. We had our overcoats, that was the heaviest thing that we had.

Q: Did you have boots?

CWH: We had what they called Arctics, remember Arctics with the buckles on them? That's what we had. But the guys coming (unclear @30:10) they all had nice boots [chuckles] nice new snow packs, fur covered collars, oh God!

Q: How involved were you with the Ardennes?

CWH: Well, we were right in the middle of his drive. Caught right smack in the middle of it. We had to put up a lot of road blocks, man a lot of little defensive lines, protect the bridges, wire some bridges, blow some bridges. Anything to slow them down. And it was the little outfits like us that were giving him the most trouble-the Germans. He would need that bridge and somehow we got there before him and blow it up. He would have to find another route to go. What did they call us? The damn engineers. But it finally petered out. He ran out of gas and equipment.

Q: Where did you go from Ardennes? Did you stay in that area for the winter?

CWH: No, the Bulge, as they called it ended around the middle of January. We were in that area for a while, then we moved North. We got involved with the old railroad bridge Remagen. We were at Remagen, that was our next big step. And the Rohr River, we got involved in that.

Q: Can you tell us about that?

CWH: The old Remagen bridge, they captured that. They used it for about a week, we got a lot of troops and equipment over it. But it finally gave in, couldn't take it anymore. But by that time we had built some pontoon bridges and were

running a ferry. So we were in pretty good shape. But that was a hot spot for a while. It was the first time Hitler used his jets at REMAGAN. And these things, we were mesmerized -the speed and maneuverability they had. So that was quite a bit of (unclear @33:10).

By now, pretty much all the forces were over the Rhine River. We were into Germany proper. That's where you saw the damage, the worst damage in the war German cities. They had taken an awful beating. We built some prisoner of war stockades. We were in charge of those for a while. But most of it was clearing roads, keeping the roads open for traffic. I guess we were around Nuremberg when the war finally ended.

Q: Were you aware of the concentration camps?

CWH: Not at that time. That all came out about a month or so after the war they discovered them. But we never saw them. I guess we were quite close to one of them but didn't realize it, Dachau, very close but we didn't realize what it was. We never got to Berlin. We got to Munich and Frankfurt.

Q: Did you ever come into contact with the Russian forces at all?

CWH: We didn't, no.

Q: How were you received by the German people, the civilians?

CWH: Well, stiffly I guess. They just wouldn't want to admit they lost the war. The kids were okay they took the candy and the chewing gum, but the older crowd, they were pretty aloof.

Q: Do you recall where you were and your reaction when you heard about the death of President Roosevelt?

CWH: Yeah, that was in April, I think, just a few weeks before V-E Day. We were in Germany we just finished Remagen. It hit us hard because everybody loved Roosevelt. He was the only president we had ever known, and he was my idol. I thought, gee, he was my commander-in-chief, boy I felt so great. But that one hit everybody very, very hard. And then the war ended.

Q: Where were you when it ended?

CWH: I think down around Nuremberg.

Q: And what was your units' reaction?

CWH: Oh, we went crazy. I don't know where it all came from, but we had anything you wanted to drink, all of a sudden (Laughs) And sadly, we lost a guy on VE-Day. It was an awful hot day. He hit it pretty heavy and went to his tent to sleep it off and he suffocated- or what do you call it when the sun hits you.....

Q: A heat-stroke?

CWH: Yeah.. Then after we cooled down we realized, hey, the war is still going on

in Japan. And there's a big talk about them going to invade Japan. And we knew that's got to be a beachhead and they'll want some experienced people. So we felt pretty sure we were going to be called on to be part of it. So that didn't set too well. And then Truman dropped the bomb. That was it.

Q: What was your reaction when you heard about that?

CWH: The bomb? Oh God, elation.

Q: Where were you, were you still in Europe?

CWH: Central Germany.

Q: Was your unit used at all in the time you were there after the war to do any kind of reconstruction, cleaning up?

CWH: Well, we had a bulldozer, we had trucks so we cleaned a lot of roads and we guarded a lot of prisoners. But eventually, we had done our part, it was time to send us home. Other troops were coming in to take over that occupation duty. And then they had the point system, to send us home what a joke that was.

Q: Why?

CWH: Well guys in Paris, who had never got out of Paris were going home instead of the guys on the front line. We got no points for D-Day, nothing. If you were married, or had a dependent you got points. It took me six months after the war ended to get on a boat to come home.

Q: Did you come back as a unit?

CWH: Oh no, we were all split according to your points. If you're forty and I'm twenty you're going to go before me so you get all split up.

Q: When were you discharged?

CWH: November, 1945, Fort Dix

Q: How long did it take you to get back home to Auburn?

CWH: Let's see, I had to hit New York City, dead of night [Chuckles].

Q: Were you expected when you reached home?

CWH: No, we didn't have a telephone in those days and all this communication stuff. But I did find my Dad. I woke him up. It was just before he went on his night shift. So I was able to do that.

Q: Did you ever make use of the G.I. Bill?

CWH: Yeah, I went to school. That was a God-sent. It helped a lot.

Q: Did you ever stay in contact with anyone from service?

CWH: Yes. Well, I was at school and was away. But some of the guys had already started a reunion association. I didn't get involved with it until it was in about its tenth year. Let's say, it was in the 1960's and then I'd go every year to

the reunion. The other unique thing about the 299th, it was all from New York State. Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Binghamton and all the little towns in between. Very unique. (unclear @40:59) Rochester, Binghamton, Buffalo, and then we'd go around again.

They were very successful because nobody had that far to go. Usually, a reunion is in Los Angeles, and you live in Maine, then it's tough. We've kept it going (unclear @41:23) the old guys kept it going (unclear @41:30) 299th was still activated. And those guys, those veterans, have kept it going, a lot of them from Vietnam.

Q: Out of those approximately seventy men that were drafted together, you said fifty or sixty were in your unit, how many survived the war?

CWH: Probably sixty to seventy percent. We only lost six on D-Day. Did you see the monument in Auburn? We put up a monument for the six guys we lost on D-Day.

Q: Did you ever see a USO show?

CWH: Oh yeah, after the war [laughs]. Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, Jack Benny. This was in Nuremberg, in the stadium. Maybe you've seen it, they show it a lot with Hitler's big picture.

Q: How do you think your military changed or effected your life?

CWH: Very much, very much. It made me realize the value of life I guess. Friendships mean more than you think they do. You can't take too much for granted. Little things that you would brush off now had a definite meaning to them. Values and things of that sort. It made you realize that we're a democracy, but we're very fragile and you've got to keep alert and vigilant. You've got to be willing to go and do that, and play your part if you're going to be part of this democracy.

Q: Well, thank you very much. **CWH:** Yeah, well, was it kind of smooth? [smiles]

Q: Yes, yes it was a wonderful job. Oh, one last thing I want to ask you if you don't mind. Have you seen the *Private Ryan* movie at all?

CWH: Yeah.

Q: What was your reaction to it?

CWH: Well the first half hour is very, very realistic. It was pretty authentic (unclear @44:40). But from then on, the chase for him, it becomes a Hollywood movie I think [Smiling]. I don't think they would have sent a Captain, a second louie maybe. And another thing that bothers me, they get into a gun fight in some little town. One of the guys is shot, he's laying out there and they all pour sulfur then take their canteens and wash it all off. (unclear @45:09) I could not understand. But the first half hour, Oh boy, very realistic. Except at one place, I

caught they had the poles going the wrong way on the beach. [Uses his pen to demonstrate] This is the Channel, this is the land. The poles were like that so the landing craft could come up and swerve off. He had them going like that. That's one thing I caught. Oh, I thought the way they introduced the old guy at the cemetery and then they focused to the young guy. That was beautifully done. It's a great picture.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

CWH: You bet.