

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II P.O.W. Project

Prisoner of War Experiences

O. H. 557

AMIL MENTGES

Interviewed

by

Stephen Evanson

on

February 1, 1981

## AMIL MENTGES

Amil Mentges was born on October 17, 1918 in Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Emil and Lillian Mentges. He attended a variety of schools: St. Columbus, Grant Junior High School, and Chaney High School.

Mentges had quit school in 1937 in order to go to work at Youngstown Welding and Engineering. Mentges had intended to enlist into the service, but since he was working in a defense plant he was granted automatic mandatory deferment. Even so, on January 12, 1944, Mentges was sworn into the Army. He received his basic training at Fort Benjamin Harris. After basic training he received advanced training in heavy weaponry.

Upon completing his training, Mentges was sent to Naples, Italy. In early Spring of 1945 Mentges was captured on the outskirts of Colmar, France. Reluctantly, Mentges was turned over to the German authorities where he was questioned and later transferred to a mobile type of prison. Escape was virtually impossible. Late in 1945 Mentges received his freedom.

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INTERVIEWEE: AMIL MENTGES

INTERVIEWER: Stephen Evanson

SUBJECT: P.O.W. Camps, Germans, military life, liberation

DATE: February 1, 1981

E: This is an interview with Amil Mentges for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on World War II P.O.W.'s, by Stephen Evanson, on February 1, 1981, at 3:00 p.m.

Mr. Mentges, what do you remember about your childhood?

M: I lived on High Street years ago. I had an average childhood. I used to play football at Volney Rogers Playground.

E: Do you remember what high school was like at all?

M: I went to a Catholic grade school, St. Columbus. I played football for St. Columbus in 1931. Then I went to Grant Junior High School for a year. Then I went to Chaney and played football for them in 1935 and 1936. I quit in 1937 and didn't graduate from high school. I quit my senior year.

E: Can you tell us what it was like growing up during the Depression years?

M: My father probably worked one day a week at Youngstown Sheet & Tube. He was a machinist. We had food on the table. We didn't eat elaborate, but we had soup and bread.

E: You didn't get involved in any of the programs like WPA?

M: No. The WPA was in 1934 or 1935. I was still going to school at that time. I started to work in 1937. I worked at Youngstown Welding and Engineering. I learned the machinist trade out there. From 1937 to 1940 I was working fair. I worked a year and was maybe laid off a couple of months and then back to work again. In 1940 things started to pick up.

- E: Right before the war what was the atmosphere like? Was there talk of the U.S. entering the war?
- M: There were rumors of war. The older people were scared for the young people. It was evident that Hitler was going clear across Europe.
- E: Were you drafted or did you enlist?
- M: I was drafted in 1944. I worked in a defense plant. I wanted to go; I tried to volunteer twice to go into the Seabee's. They turned me down because I was on deferment. Every time my deferment came up they would renew it. I didn't want that. Towards the end I tried to get out of getting deferment and they didn't renew it. In December they put me in 1A and I was drafted January 12. I had examination around January 10.
- E: Around that time did you feel it was your patriotic duty?
- M: Yes, I did. I talked to guys that had come back and I felt odd that I hadn't been in it. I figured at least I had to get into the service. I felt I was missing something.
- E: Do you recall how your family felt about it?
- M: My mother was pretty worried. In the meantime I had planned to get married. I didn't think I would be drafted so quick. I had planned to get married in January and the day I planned to get married I had to go up for examination four or five days before. I was supposed to get married January 12. I went to Cleveland January 8 or 9 and they sent me straight through to Fort Benjamin Harris in Indiana. I passed my examination and they weren't giving any furloughs. I told them I was getting married and they sent me back for a week. So I got married on January 15.
- E: Prior to entering the service how did you feel about taking another man's life?
- M: I never thought of it until I went overseas. In basic training they kept giving you combat training and told you if you didn't follow the instructions that someday you'll wish you had.
- E: This was in the Army?
- M: Yes. I was in the infantry. They told me it was--either you kill or you be killed. It was your life or the other fellow's. You had to learn your training and make sure that you knew it well. I learned it, but I never realized how valuable it was until I went overseas and got into actual combat. Any man, I don't care who he is, is going to protect himself.

E: Was it a unit?

M: I was attached to a rifle company. I was a machine gunner. I carried a .32 water-cooled gun. My buddy carried the tripod. When you're on a drive and you are dug in in the back, the rifle company is in front of you, spread out. You might be trying to take down a barn or house that the enemy is in and you are shooting over the heads of your own men. Sometimes when you're dug in, your gun sits in the hole and around you are your riflemen. When you see the enemy coming toward you, you and your riflemen are shooting at them. They always tried to hit the machine gunner because he was fire power. I had my training in what they call heavy weapons; that was machine guns, .30 water-cooled guns, and 81 millimeter mortars. A mortar is a four inch pipe that is four feet long. You set it on a base and you drop cartridges into it. When it hits the bottom there is a firing pin. On the end of the cartridge is a shotgun shell and when you drop it down it hits that and ignites. When that leaves the tube, anything that strikes, it goes off. You get your distance by tearing off fuses on the mortar shell. That is the big mortar. A rifle company also carried a small, portable mortar which was 60 millimeters.

E: What was the distance on those?

M: I forget the yardage on those. You always had to make sure you had tree clearance. If that struck a tree branch or anything above you, it would explode. Some of our men got killed by their own mortars.

E: While over there did the thought of going home ever enter your mind?

M: I used to say to myself that there wasn't a way for me to come out of this alive. The Germans were great with their 80 millimeter guns. They could drop that in your back pocket. They had those on their tagger tanks. They had a pattern they would throw in. If one would land on each side of your foxhole, the third one would be right on you. They were accurate with those. It was the same way with mortars too.

E: While you were overseas what were some of the customs? Can you recall the culture of the people?

M: When I left I landed in Naples, Italy. The Americans had come in to Italy and I joined the third division right outside of Rome. In the town of Naples the people were all hungry and the kids would steal off of you. When we came off the boat we were marching five abreast up the road and one kid would be talking to you and his brother would be

stealing C rations out of the back of your pack. The Americans were up into Florence at this time. This was in October of 1944. Rome was an open city; they wouldn't bomb it. The Germans and allies agreed they wouldn't bomb it. After coming into Rome I went into training for the southern invasion of France. This was the second invasion.

I got wounded crossing the Mosel River and was in the hospital four days. I was wounded in the elbow. I went back to combat at Christmas Eve. On December 28 or 29 the Germans had this big push, the Bulge; they had them pushed all along the front, from Belgium on down. We accompanied the division in reserve and we went in to help the 36th Division and the 1st French Army. This was around the Rhine River. We were relieving a company and the men were coming out when we were crossing an open section and we asked them how things were. They said that everything was fine. Our company started to go through the town and the Germans came into one end of the town and we were in the middle and they sucked us in and started shelling us. That is when they started capturing us. That is why I was captured.

E: There was no way for any type of reinforcements to come in?

M: No, they had us pinned down. It was all open country. Our men were spread across a big, open field. We wanted to get into the town, but we couldn't because of the machine guns and mortar fire. Five of us were strung across and shells started dropping around us. One shell came in close and knocked me out. I laid there. When I came to I couldn't move my legs. I thought my legs were blown off. It was getting daylight and I laid there for a few hours. I could see a barn in the distance, so I started crawling to that barn. I crawled over to my buddies, and they were dead. After I got to the barn I laid back and I could hear shells bouncing off the barn. They must have seen me crawling in there because they were shelling the barn. I crawled in the corner underneath the hay wagon and I laid there. I must have dozed off, and when I came to I heard men talking, Germans. There were six German patrol that came in and searched the barn. They walked all around the barn and then walked out. Then this one, little short guy comes back in again and he starts looking again. He is stooping down and looking on the barn floor. He spotted me. I had this white cape on and he probably saw a part of that white cape. We had white capes to blend in with the snow. I didn't have enough sense to take my cape off after I got into the barn. He hollered to the other Germans and they came running back in and pulled me out. I thought--I'm finished now; they're going to shoot me. One was a squad leader and he could talk English. He told me to get out. I had my gas mask

and in it I had about three cartons of cigarettes. I pulled them out and I threw it to them. They grabbed that. They told me to get out and to stand up and walk. I couldn't walk very good; I was staggering. Two of them grabbed me by the arm and started carrying me. There was a wall around this one village. The gate was boarded up so they threw me over the wall. Then they took me back to their regimental command, and that was in Colmar, France.

The Germans were moving out and I figured they weren't going to take me with them because there was only one man. A colonel told these two Germans, "Take him across the road over to the barn." I knew they were going to shoot me. I was walking out in front of them and cars were coming. A car stopped and an officer got out of the car. He asked the Germans where I was going and he told them, "I'll take care of him." He told me to get in the car. I hesitated and he rushed me. The other two Germans just turned around and walked away. He was a high officer then in the German army. The first thing he asked me was if I had any American cigarettes. I gave them to him and he said, "I only want three. You need them." I said, "I don't smoke." He said, "You'll need them." I put them in my pocket and he told me to get in the back seat. I got in the back seat and he took me into Colmar to their regimental command. They put me in a place where there were all these big maps and everything and he told me to sit there. I sat there for about two hours and he came back and asked me if I had anything to eat. He went out and got me a bucket of barley soup. He told me to eat it because I didn't know when I was going to get anything else. After sitting there they brought in another American GI prisoner; he was a young fellow. I asked him where he got captured and he said near Colmar. I asked him what outfit he was in and he said the Third Division before the 7th Infantry. I told him that was the same outfit I was in. He had only been over two days. He was on the line an hour and he got captured. I don't think he was even eighteen years old.

That night they took us across the Rhine with some more GI's that had been captured. The Americans were trying to shell the last bridge across the Rhine. The Americans wanted to bomb it so the Germans couldn't retreat into their own country. We didn't go across the bridge; they took us across on barges. Horses were pulling the gun carriages because the Germans didn't have any fuel toward the end of the war. I was near the horses and they were getting fidgety. When we finally got across the Rhine we were in Wurttemberg. By this time they brought more GI's in and they had over 50 to 75 American soldiers. All in all, when we started out to march we had over 125 American soldiers that had been captured in that bulge.

From Wurttemberg we marched to Villingen. There was an old military school and they put us there. That was on the outskirts of Stuttgart. We joined some more guys there, but these were English and Australian prisoners of war. This now made 300 men. We were there for about two weeks. All we had to eat was a little bread.

The Germans were on the run now and the Americans had crossed the Rhine River. I was never in a permanent prisoner camp; I was always on the run. Eventually we got a little soup and some bread.

Next we went to Ludwigsburg and there was a camp near a railroad, a main line which went into Berlin. Every time there was a bright day the Americans would come over and the air corps would bomb the railroad. Every time they bombed it we had to go out and repair it. At night the English had bombed pretty hard and had leveled the houses close to the railroad. We were back about a half of a mile and we could feel the concussion and everything from the bomb. That morning the commandant of the camp lined us up; there were Americans, Australians, English, and Russians in this camp. The Germans hated the Russians. The minute the Russians did anything out of line they would shoot them right then and there. They would just leave them lay there. He came out and told us that we had to go down in the town and clean up the mess. They kept Americans and English together in one group. We went down the street and one soldier told three of us to clean up the debris from this house. He said, "There is a young girl buried in the cellar." We thought he was just trying to jive us. We started cleaning up and we found some potatoes stored. We were filling our jackets up with potatoes. I was cleaning debris and wood and I ran across the leg. I got sick and the other kid hit me. He said, "The guard is coming over. Get busy or he'll hit you." I finally got my bearings and was cleaning up and my buddy said, "Here's the other leg. Somebody's under here." We got it all cleaned up and there was a girl about eighteen years old. She was dead and we carried her out. The people that were dead they put on blankets and lined up and they made everyone walk around and pass every one of them. The townspeople were throwing rocks on us and spitting at us. We couldn't help it. We then went back to the camp.

A week later they got us out of there because they were bombing the railroad so bad that we couldn't do anymore repairing to it. The Germans wanted to get us out of there because the Americans were moving in close. We marched over Germany for about three weeks. We ended up at the foothills of the Alps in a big P.O.W. camp. They had Indians, Moslems, Americans, every nationality. They didn't have any food or anything so we kept moving. In the villages



we would go through the people would slip us bread or an egg or something. They didn't have anything themselves. One day four American planes came down. We hit the ditches and started waving anything white. He tilted his wings to mean that he recognized prisoners of war. That was April. Every day those planes would follow us. Towards the end of April we were almost at the foothills of the Alps in Germany and the Americans were in a barn in the field. They told us we were going to rest this day. We were in a big soccer field. Guards were walking around with dogs. They had one German police dog and one guard for ten men. There was a rumor that there were tracer bullets coming toward us and that the Americans were about twenty-five miles away coming toward us. They were trying to get us in the mountains to bottle things up. I woke up at about 5:00 the next morning and woke my buddy up and told him there were no guards or dogs; they were gone. He told me I was dreaming. Pretty soon other guys were talking and I said, "There is gunfire coming towards us." Machine gun shells were going across our heads. We were in a crossfire between the Americans and Germans. I told the guys to crawl in the barn because there were bales of hay in there. The Germans kept retreating down. Finally the 12th Armored American Division came in and liberated us there. When we saw the first American tanks come down the road the first thing we hollered was, "What do you have to eat?" We got C rations. Guys were throwing them off the tanks in cases.

We got into a village and the people were excited. They wanted the Americans. The Germans had taken all the youth in the army so the town was all old people. They treated us really nice. The Americans came through and dropped off all the C rations they had. Then everybody started going crazy. Men were starting to go here and there and were out to get what they could find. These guys went out to find one SS guard who used to smash eggs in our hands if he saw villagers giving us food like eggs. They always said if they got out they would kill him, and they did. He had one eye shot out and the German Army took him out of his combat position to guard prisoners. He didn't like it and he was taking it out on the prisoners.

Two days later we got machine gun fire again. Back in the woods a group of Hitler's Youth movement was coming in and machine gunning us. We picked up rifles that the Germans had left and we started shooting back at them. Finally we captured them. These were kids twelve and thirteen years old. In the meantime the Germans were coming in and they were giving up; the Germans were surrendering to us. Before we even had the guns or ammunition they were coming in and putting their hands up and telling us they wanted to surrender.

A week later they told us they would fly us out of Germany to France. The field was all bombed. The plane on the other side started to take off and hit a gully and flipped. We took off and I was scared because I wanted to get home. We were up in the air and we were circling over Paris. I kept wondering why we didn't land. We had a pilot, copilot, navigator, and radio operator. I could hear the radio operator talking and finally he came back and told us that when we took off we blew a tire out. We had to come in on the belly of the plane then in order to land. He told us that when we came down everybody should rush to the back of the plane. They were squirting the field with foam. We came into Reims, France the day they were signing the Armistice; the Americans were signing the Armistice with the Germans.

That was a big staging area for all prisoners of war all over Europe. We hadn't had baths or anything. I hadn't even shaved for six months. We stood in line for a shower and delousement for twelve hours. A buddy would stand in line for us and we would all alternate turns standing. After this they took us to a hospital for examination. The ones who were weak and everything they would keep. I weighed 170 when I was captured and when I was liberated I weighed about 135. You couldn't eat much because your stomach had shrunk. If you did eat your food would go right through you. I was in the hospital for a week.

Then they put us on a hospital train and sent us down to Le Havre, France at Camp Lucky Strike for a week or so. Then I came home on a boat. The way you got home depended on the transportation they had. They tried to get you home as quick as they could. Whatever came first, planes or ships . . .

E: You're still enlisted in the service though?

M: Yes.

E: Following the war, did it have any effect on you psychologically or emotionally?

M: When I got back I couldn't sleep very good. We went up to Lake Erie and there was a bad storm. I jumped up and crawled under the bed and started hollering, "The shells are coming in close." It sort of shook me up a little bit. I couldn't hold anything in my stomach for about six months after.

E: In your own view, how did your values change as compared with somebody who didn't go?

- M: As far as anybody that didn't go, I figured they were lucky they stayed home. I don't have anything against anybody who didn't go.
- E: What were the benefits that you received after discharge?
- M: I had the GI bill. I had a disability pension for ten years and then in 1960 they cut it out. When President Kennedy got into office he cut off a lot of veteran's pensions, and I happened to be one of them. I was on what they called ten percent disability pension.
- E: Did you have the opportunity of going to school?
- M: Yes. I went to night school and took up drafting for about six months when I got back. That's all I used of the GI bill.
- E: After your arrival home were there any public or private celebrations?
- M: No. A fellow that lived next to my parents belonged to the Rotary and he took me to dinner at the Rotary Club. That is the only celebration.
- E: Being that you were involved in the war yourself, what is your opinion of the wars that followed?
- M: I think the Korean War was fought more to protect the property of the businessmen. We went over there to protect the American interest. We had no business going over there.
- E: Is there anything you think important to add that we didn't cover?
- M: No.
- E: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW