

Robert Persinger

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Robert Persinger

Today is January 31, 1994. My name is Jim Will. I'm a volunteer at the Midway Village and Museum Center, which is cooperating with the statewide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in the events surrounding World War II. We are in the home of Robert Persinger whose address is 3411 Constance Drive, Rockford, Illinois. Mr. Persinger has served in a branch of the United States Armed Forces during World War II. We are going to interview him right now about his experiences in that War.

WILL: Okay. Can I call you Bob?

PERSINGER: Yes.

WILL: Can you give your full name and place and date of birth?

PERSINGER: I am Robert Persinger. I was born in Weaver, Iowa, on September 29th, 1923.

WILL: Can you give us the names of your parents?

PERSINGER: My father's name was Charles and my mother's was Lucille Persinger.

WILL: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

PERSINGER: Yes. I had two brothers and two sisters. One of the brothers has passed away recently.

WILL: What were their names?

PERSINGER: William and Charles. Fern and Darlene.

WILL: Now is there any special thing about your family that you would like to tell us anything that you remember?

PERSINGER: We were born and raised on a farm. My days, as a child and youth, were being with the farm.

WILL: Was this in Iowa?

PERSINGER: In Iowa. And my father died when I was 13 years old, so it left me, being the oldest boy, kind of the head of the family. We moved to Illinois to live on a farm with my uncle. And (I) studied in Marengo prior to World War II. I worked in a factory there.

WILL: When did you graduate from high school?

PERSINGER: In 1941.

WILL: 1941. From where, Marengo?

PERSINGER: No. From Holcomb, Missouri. We moved to Missouri. That is located in the northeastern part of Missouri, just across the line from Iowa and Illinois.

WILL: And your job in '41, after graduation?

PERSINGER: Well, I worked in a small factory in Marengo doing metal products. I worked there until I was drafted. I was offered a deferment because of being the supporter of my mother and the rest of the children but I waited until I was drafted and then I wanted to go at that time even though I knew I should be at home. I thought I should go.

WILL: On December 7, 1941, how did you hear about the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

PERSINGER: I was listening to a football game between the Chicago Bears and, I believe, it was the Cardinals. It was interrupted in announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

WILL: What was your reaction?—Your thoughts?

PERSINGER: I was surprised, but we had been hearing about the War and the things that were happening so we knew. I thought then that we were definitely in War and that was it. I looked

forward, really, to getting a chance to get into the service.

WILL: You mentioned you were drafted. That was after Pearl Harbor?

PERSINGER: Yes. That was after Pearl Harbor. Yes.

WILL: Do you recall anything before Pearl Harbor about what was going on over in Europe? Have you opinions of that?

PERSINGER: Well, like I said, by just the news and following the newspapers that we knew something was going to happen with Hitler doing what he was doing and Japan. We just knew it was going to come. It was going to break into a War sooner or later. The time was up.

WILL: Okay. You say you were drafted. About when was this? Do you remember the date?

PERSINGER: I can't exactly [remember] the date. I guess March of '43. It was in that month.

WILL: You were roughly what age?

PERSINGER: Just coming on to 20 years old.

WILL: What was the response of your family when you got your draft notice or before you got your draft notice? Were they in favor of you going into the service?

PERSINGER: My mother never said. She never did say that I should stay home and help support her or help support the rest of the children, my brothers and sisters, because at that time they had no work. I was the only breadwinner, so to speak.

WILL: What were their thoughts on the War?

PERSINGER: I don't recall. We just had to accept it like you do with everything in life. I guess. I am sure that my mother was concerned.

WILL: And where were you when you got your draft notice. Were you in Marengo?

PERSINGER: I was living in Marengo.

WILL: Do you remember anything about that when you finally got it?

PERSINGER: I was inducted in Woodstock, Illinois, and came right over to Camp Grant here in Rockford, and spent about three days before we were shipped to Camp Gordon, Georgia. That was where our basic training was.

WILL: At Camp Grant you had your physicals?

PERSINGER: Physicals and tests. I think you're classed by the tests; classed by what they thought, maybe, you could do. Were you mechanically inclined, whatever. So I was sent to Camp Gordon, Georgia, and joined the 3rd Cavalry "reconnaissance" squadron mechanized, as a tank company. I learned to drive a tank after my basic training.

WILL: You had basic down there?

PERSINGER: Yes, basic training. Then we started preparing to learn how to operate tanks. My first job was to learn how to drive a tank.

WILL: What did you think of the training? Was it ...

PERSINGER: The training was ...

WILL: Adequate or was it ...

PERSINGER: It was good. It was in the sands and Camp Gordon, Georgia, was very hot. It was a lot of loose sand and under the sand was red clay. It was trying. We were doing close order drill and training out in the sand.

WILL: Do you remember anything special about the training.

PERSINGER: No, I really—Actually I really enjoyed it, the training. Really, I went along with it. I never fought it. I tried to learn everything I could that made it easier for me.

WILL: Did you get out with any passes?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes. We were given a weekend pass to go to Augusta if you wanted to. But I never did go much. I really didn't. I stayed at the base most of the time and attended the theaters, movies there on the base. That's about it.

WILL: How about after your training? Did you get a furlough home?

PERSINGER: Yeah, we did. After basic training that amounted to about 13 weeks, I got a week off, I think. Yes, it was a week. I enjoyed that. I came home by bus. Rode a bus all the way from Augusta, Georgia to Chicago and then on to Marengo on a bus and I returned the same way. That was a big experience. I never ever had to do that in my life or had the opportunity—ride a bus, but I did.

WILL: Now this was the 3rd Cavalry?

PERSINGER: Yes, it was the 3rd Cavalry. The mechanized cavalry consisted of 2 squadrons. It was the 3rd and 43rd squadrons which made up the unit.

WILL: What were your assigned duties?

PERSINGER: I became a tank commander of the tank and when we went overseas ...

WILL: Which squadron?

PERSINGER: 3rd Cavalry Squadron?

WILL: You weren't transferred out to any other unit.

PERSINGER: No. I was in that unit from ...

WILL: After the training, where did they send you?

PERSINGER: After Camp Gordon, they went to Tennessee maneuvers for three months — November and December of '43 and January of '44 — so there were 90 days there living and getting used to living outside, bivouacking, playing the war games, giving us training for what we were eventually going to meet.

WILL: You were immediately sent overseas?

PERSINGER: No. From then [Tennessee] we came back [to Fort Gordon] and were transferred to a camp at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where we were on a firing range for 30 straight days.

WILL: When were you shipped overseas?

PERSINGER: Then I was shipped over in July. I remember we were in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on July 4th, 1944. I can remember that. We came back the following July 4th, 1945. I was on my way back on the high seas again.

WILL: What did you think of the nation's efforts up to this point?

PERSINGER: Tremendous. Our Country—everybody was—knew what we had to do.

WILL: Everybody pitched in?

PERSINGER: Everybody pitched in. It just made you want to get this thing over. Everybody was pretty patriotic, I'd say

WILL: Nobody dragged their feet.

PERSINGER: No.

WILL: Objected?

PERSINGER: No, there were very few conscientious objectors that I remember.

WILL: Upon arriving overseas was it France or—this was after D-Day?

PERSINGER: Yes. I went with a convoy, the last big convoy that went across the Atlantic. We landed in Liverpool, England, and then we went across the English Channel at South Hampton on a landing ship tank. There were 64 tanks in that ship. This is after D-Day, August 7th, 1944, was when I landed in France.

WILL: How about when you landed there? What was the first thing you had to do?

PERSINGER: Well, we went in just getting close to nighttime. We actually had a bivouac. We spent a couple of miles inland and there was no resistance because it was beyond We met our first combat at St. Lo so it was quite a few miles of no resistance. So we just—eventually, we were given assignments and missions to help General Patton’s 3rd Army.

WILL: Let’s see. In chronological order, I guess they want the approximate number and types of casualties and how they occurred?

PERSINGER: Well, the number of casualties—our unit, our squadron, had about 750 men. The other squadron, the 43rd, had about the same. I’ve heard since then when the War was over, the deaths and men wounded was found to be about 82%. So it—Yes quite a few deaths. A lot of men killed in action but more so wounded than killed.

WILL: How were they treated? Did they have adequate treatment at that time?

PERSINGER: Yes, we did have. Tremendous! Our medics and the field hospitals everything was... I’d say they did the very best possible job.

WILL: How did your mental attitude change as the War progressed?

PERSINGER: Mental attitude? It changed I’m sure. I never smoked until I got—I guess probably in the middle of the—going across France took about 39 days, I think it took us, and I started smoking probably about in that time because you know, you wondered about how many days or where you were going to be and what your next... You really never really knew and it was something to relax you a little bit. That’s why I started smoking.

WILL: Do you still smoke?

PERSINGER: I quit smoking in 1968. Smoking through all those years, but I did quit. I was thankful I did.

WILL: Did you write home a lot? Or did you...

WILL: I did as much as I could. I probably got a letter off to home at least every two weeks.

WILL: How about receiving mail?

PERSINGER: Sometimes it was pretty—due to our outfit and what we were doing, we’d get mail in bunches. So it was—some days quite a few days would go by before we got mail. But it had to catch up with us. Being that we were a reconnaissance unit for the 20th Corps, the 3rd Army, we were on the move day in and day out.

WILL: You were out in the front more or less?

PERSINGER: Exactly. We did do a lot. We were in the rears many, many times of the German Army. I think one time the deepest was 70 miles, in behind German lines. We were the eyes and ears of the

WILL: Did you in your experience over there with other fellows did you establish friendships?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes. Those fellows that I was with, in my own platoon, in my own company, we became so close. We used one another’s mess kits, their forks, their spoons whatever. They were like brothers.

WILL: Do you remain in contact?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes, even to this day we have a reunion every year. This next reunion coming up in August of 1944 or 1994 will be in Buffalo this year, and next year we hope to be back in Fort Bliss where our 3rd cavalry is at the present time.

WILL: Did you ever have to retrieve a wounded buddy from the field?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes, I did. I did do that. I saw my buddies get killed.

WILL: Did you ever capture any enemy prisoners?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes. We got many prisoners.

WILL: Can you explain some of this?

PERSINGER: Yes. Whenever we got missions that whatever our mission was, why being a reconnaissance unit we would take Germans by surprise. Many prisoners were taken because you were on them and they had no way of escaping. We had them and we would simply get them back to our headquarters and they'd go on to the rear. I remember one time we were going down a street in a small town and talking about getting prisoners easily. There was artillery coming in. Our lead tank turned around and as he was turning around his muzzle pointed right to the basement door of this one building and here walked about 19 or 20 Germans out because they thought we had them dead right and we did. It was to our surprise too when our tank ...

WILL: The gun pointed ...

PERSINGER: That sort of thing seemed to happen ...

WILL: I can imagine—like the Germans probably didn't want any more of the War than ...

PERSINGER: Oh, no. The Germans knew, I guess a lot of them knew, that when we got in Germany—when we got on to their home ground—why they knew then that the War would soon be over. The end was in sight for them and us.

WILL: Okay. There's a question here... Prior to the end of the War, were you aware of any civilian concentration camps?

PERSINGER: Yes, for sure.

WILL: Before ...

PERSINGER: Oh, before the end of the War and I just heard about concentration camps. I never really knew exactly what they were, what was involved.

WILL: You were talking earlier your unit went up into Germany.

PERSINGER: Yes.

WILL: Then you headed south.

PERSINGER: We went into Germany, probably we have it on record in our history book here we were the first troops into Germany itself, the 20th Corps, the 3rd Army. The first troops of the 3rd Army to enter Perl, Germany. And we did go across the Rhine, proceeding north and east, and we were up in the north part of central Germany and then turned and went south along the Czechoslovakian border and down into Austria.

WILL: Near the end of the War?

PERSINGER: Yes, as we came south we helped take the town of Regensburg. I remember that was a long dash, and we proceeded on to Bavaria and went into Austria at the end of the War.

WILL: Can you tell us about liberating this concentration camp in Austria?

PERSINGER: Yeah.

WILL: What the name of it was?

PERSINGER: The concentration [camp] was in Ebensee, Austria. We entered that town of Ebensee on May 6th. The War ended May 8th. The Germans at that time were surrendering to us as we proceeded to this town. We were two days ahead of that. On the way to this town our mission was to get to this concentration camp which was in Ebensee. Now the Germans were giving up and they didn't want to be in contact with the Russians. We were meeting the Russians, and so, rather than to surrender to the Russians, they were coming to us.

WILL: [Interruption] Meeting or beating?

PERSINGER: Meeting, yes. They were giving up. The War ended like on May the 8th. On May the 6th we entered this town of Ebensee. My tank and another tank in my platoon — I was platoon

sergeant — I was given the job of going up to the gates of this concentration camp. The two of our tanks, mine and the other one, entered this concentration camp. The only resistance was the German Volkstrom. They were the civilian army that they had to control the people. They were at the gate and I remember taking the gun away from this old German Volkstrom ...

WILL: He didn't resist?

PERSINGER: No he gave no resistance. He handed me the gun and broke it over the... I can remember breaking it over the muzzle of my tank. They opened the gates and we drove in.

WILL: What did you find there?

PERSINGER: It was estimated that between 14- and 16,000 prisoners dying — naked, skin and bones. Maybe if they did have something to wear it was just a robe, and rags was all they had on. What a horrible place.

WILL: What was your duty then?

PERSINGER: What we were suppose to do then, and our unit along with all, immediately progressed with the rest of the army. [Headquarters] was notified as to what was there, so our unit started getting food to try to feed these people. They hadn't eaten anything. I do remember in two days — within 24 hours I'd say, we — [it] was our first.... The following evening we did have soup prepared for these people, and it was prepared in these big kettles, heated and made soup. I remember those people were so—they wanted to get to that so bad we had to fire our machine guns over their heads to calm them down because they were just like animals.

WILL: Desperate?

PERSINGER: Yes, desperate for food. Many of them that evening, I remember after that they [gorged] themselves so it didn't take much to make them sick, and many of them died there on the spot. Within hours after they were fed.

WILL: How about medical treatment?

PERSINGER: The Army gave them all the medical treatment right away, what our unit could. Then the Army hospitals moved in right away. Within a week they were all there and then being taken care of very good. But many of them died as soon as we entered the place. I suppose they were so happy to see [us and] that they were liberated. When they did get a chance to eat something [they] just [gorged] themselves and you couldn't control it. I can remember that.

WILL: You couldn't tell them to eat slower?

PERSINGER: Oh, no. There was no way. So many... near the crematorium where they burned them in the furnaces they were piled up like cordwood. The sicker they got the closer they moved them to the furnaces so when they did die they would be near there. They would just burn—their remains were put in a freight car, shoveled in. Their ashes were put into those cars, the freight train.

WILL: Any records of who they were?

PERSINGER: No, we had no records. We did have ...

WILL: The camp kept records?

PERSINGER: Yes, the Germans kept records and I think they probably... a lot of people were identified by their records. After that we left them, within two weeks after we liberated that camp, so that was the last of my experiences with the concentration camp. But I know it was a horrible one. The very first day when we went in the camp I got out and walked around with this prisoner that could speak English. That's Garcia. And the night crew ...

WILL: With a name like that was he a Jew...

PERSINGER: He was a Jew but he was born in Spain and the family way back in '14, I think it was '92, Spain, if you were Jews, you had to adopt a Spanish name. That family did. They took on the name of Garcia. But anyway, we walked around that camp. When I got back in my tank and got back to our edge of this little

town, I discarded my shoes. I put my other pair of shoes on. They were so filthy and the stench was so bad. [Will made a comment.] It brings back many memories. Every once in a while I get to thinking of that, especially when we have reunions.

WILL: Well, let's see here. When and how did you return to the United States at the end of the War?

PERSINGER: We got back on a train back to Camp Lucky Strike at LeHavre, France. We came back on a liberty ship. Our whole unit came back by itself, back to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

WILL: Of course, this was after the War?

PERSINGER: Yes. We were going to, well, the War in Europe was over but ...

WILL: When the War ended in Europe, what did you think?

PERSINGER: Well, General Patton on the 19th of May '45 told us he was glad the War was over in Europe and he did not want to take us to Japan. That was his ...

WILL: [Interruption. Some double talk.]

PERSINGER: We all thought we were going to because we knew ...

WILL: [Interruption.]

PERSINGER: Yes, it had to be done. We did come back to the States, [I] was given a 30-day furlough and went back to — I can't think of the name of the camp for the life of me, I can't think of North Carolina and we went on a — back on preparation for movement overseas for training.

WILL: And VJ Day? Do you remember?

PERSINGER: VJ Day. Yes, I remember it well.

WILL: You were in the States then?

PERSINGER: I was in the States yes; I was home again on furlough. That was our first 30 days home. [We] got home in July. The middle of July [I] was given a furlough just getting ready to go back to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. That was the camp. [I] Was ready to go back to there when VJ Day happened. I did go back and then was discharged from the Army in October of 1945.

WILL: Now, you weren't married at this time?

PERSINGER: No, I wasn't married. I was single.

WILL: What was your rank at the end of the War?

PERSINGER: I was, at the end of the War I was a Staff Sergeant and overseas I was until I was made a Platoon Sergeant. I was what you called a "duck" sergeant. Every tank Commander had that rating.

WILL: Did you receive any decorations at all?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes, we had the European Theater, four battle stars and all the others—Good Conduct, the Victory Medal, Purple Heart. I have that.

WILL: How did you get the Purple Heart, for what?

PERSINGER: That was for shrapnel wounds that happened in Germany on December 15th. I think, of '44. That was the Siegfried Line. We were just kind of ...

The [Battle of the] Bulge was on and the Germans were to our north of us and we stayed there. We were transferred from there and moved towards the Battle of the Bulge. We were spread awful thin. I think our 3rd Cavalry unit at that time covered the front at 40 miles. We were [Interruption]

WILL: How many tanks were there?

PERSINGER: A tank company had 17 tanks, five tanks to a platoon.

WILL: Do you remember how many campaigns you were in?

PERSINGER: Well that's [hard to] say. We had four different campaigns. There's France and Alsace-Lorraine, Germany, and Central Europe.

WILL: Okay. How did you get along—this is before your return to civilian life. I ask this question. How did you get along with the men with whom you had the greatest contact? How did you get along with them?

PERSINGER: Civilians, you mean?

WILL: No, in your unit.

PERSINGER: How did I get along? To me the ones that were kind of "goof offs" or whatever, "sad sacks", we laughed at them. They were part of us, I guess.

WILL: It's obvious the ones you keep in contact with were the ones you got along well with.

PERSINGER: Yes, but we did have a few that—very few. But we did have a few that kind of "goofed off" and that was in the States before we actually had a solid 3rd Calvary unit that went overseas. The ones that did kind of "goof off," they were weeded out—transferred somewhere else. We were a unit that was sent to combat.

WILL: As far as your experiences ...

PERSINGER: No.

WILL: Would you have gone into some other branch?

PERSINGER: If I had to do it over, I guess my other two brothers when I was in service, I suggested to them—the first thing that was—I thought he'd get better food. My elder brother—by that time the third one went in. Both of us were trying to get him to take the Navy. My second brother also took the Navy, so I guess I won out in convincing them that maybe if they get in the Navy that maybe they'd have at least

three meals a day if they were on a ship or something. No, I really have nothing against the service, I thought that... We had very good officers; we had all of that and, of course, General Patton was the greatest.

WILL: What is the most difficult thing you had to do during the service?

PERSINGER: Well, spending ...

WILL: Physically, mentally or emotionally?

PERSINGER: Well, the most difficult was contending with the weather, especially in the winter at the time of the Bulge and living with the very cold weather and all the snow—trying to keep yourself alive. All that, along with a lot of course, times when your life you didn't feel was worth too much, I guess.

WILL: Just never knew about the situation.

PERSINGER: No, you lived for 24 hours a day. Many a day—once in a while we got relief, got pulled off the line. We were in a reconnaissance unit that just never—and the 3rd Army never stopped. If we hadn't run out of gas we probably could have won the War much quicker.

WILL: What was the most successful achievement?

PERSINGER: Well, I guess that—just that we won the War—we whipped the Germans.

WILL: Let's see here. You mentioned VJ Day you were in the States. Was there a lot of celebrating?

PERSINGER: Yes, there was.

WILL: Where, in Chicago?

PERSINGER: No, I was in the small town of Marengo. There was a lot of celebrating over there in that little town. I remember that.

WILL: Do you remember the atom bomb?

PERSINGER: Oh, yes.

WILL: What was your thought on that?

PERSINGER: Well, this was going to save us a trip from going over there. When I heard that, I knew that it was over.

WILL: You didn't know about it before?

PERSINGER: I had ...

WILL: What was your impression of what it was?

PERSINGER: I couldn't believe that they could have that strong a bomb. I knew terrible destruction of civilians. But somebody had to wake up Japan; I guess that was the way to do it.

WILL: Has your opinion changed over the last 50 years?

PERSINGER: The only reason my opinion would change, would be the way the young people look at the world today. If I had known—at times I get so discouraged—if I had known these children were going to turn out like this I don't know if I'd have been so patriotic in those days of 1943. It just—I can't believe we can have this type of thing going on here in this country—all the crime, drugs. Children with the wrong attitudes, no pride, it's hard to believe this is what we got today, 50 years later.

WILL: Yeah. I agree. When were you officially discharged?

PERSINGER: October 29th in 1945.

WILL: And where?

PERSINGER: In Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

WILL: Did you have any disabilities when you had that shrapnel?

PERSINGER: No, it was just my arm and my hand—the back of my hand and my side.

WILL: Did you spend any time in the field hospital?

PERSINGER: It was just over night in the field hospital.

WILL: Do you have any contact with the Veteran's Administration?

PERSINGER: Not the Veteran's Administration. No reason to.

WILL: Have you an opinion of it?

PERSINGER: Veterans' Administration?

WILL: Or any organization?

PERSINGER: The organizations? American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign War are great outfits.

WILL: How about a VA Hospital?

PERSINGER: Had no contacts with them.

WILL: Never gone for medical ...?

PERSINGER: No, never. I'm glad we've got them, what we do have now.

WILL: When you were in the service can you tell us how your family supported you and your brothers?

PERSINGER: Well, at home there was just my mother. There were five of us altogether; five of us children. Three boys went into the service; two sisters that stayed home with my mother. I am sure at that time they were getting along well because my paycheck, which was hardly anything then. I was making, I think, \$115 a month. Being overseas that was called combat pay. We got \$115 a month and all of that money went home to take care of my mother. My other brothers did the same thing. They learned to live with what they had.

WILL: [What], over the years, has this support meant to you? From your family?

PERSINGER: Given to my family? I always thought of my family, my mother, supported us children all the way through until she died in 1975, when she passed away. Whatever I gave to her was never enough.

WILL: Do you have anything else to add?

PERSINGER: No.

WILL: Any comments? We've gone through about everything here.

PERSINGER: Well, just glad I was able to do what I did—saw a lot—I visited the 3rd Cavalry again at Fort Bliss [Texas]. I've been there twice, and was lucky enough to be back there last spring to a seminar we had. They were asking for a few Veterans of World War II. I did get back there. I did see the new modern tanks, all the equipment they've got. It was just tremendous. I hope they never forget that. I hope they always have those units available.

WILL: Okay. I guess that about winds it up. Do you want to say goodbye?

PERSINGER: I'll say goodbye to you.

WILL: Okay.

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Editor's Note: Bob Persinger lived out his life in Rockford, Illinois, where he was plant manager for All Rental Garment. In later years, he frequently talked about his experience in World War II and the Central European Campaign to students and groups interested in history. He also volunteered at the Madison, Wisconsin, Veterans Hospital. He died November 19, 2018, requesting memorials be directed to the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, Skokie.