

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

Norman E. Toft

Conducted by Martin W. Thomas

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Part 1: Introduction

I'm speaking with Norman E. Toft. Mr. Toft was born on May 19, 1920 on a farm near Ruskin, Nebraska. He now lives in Darien, Illinois. Mr. Toft learned of the Veterans History Project through the Indian Prairie Public Library's Newsletter. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here is his story.

Part 2: Entering the Military

Mr. Toft, how would you like to be addressed during this interview?

You can address me as Norm, N-o-r-m.

O.K., Thank you. Norm, when did you enter the Service?

I enlisted on May the 23rd of 1942.

So that was just after your 22nd birthday?

Yes.

Where were you living at the time?

I was living in Lincoln, Nebraska, attending the University of Nebraska.

What year in school were you then?

I was a junior.

What prompted you to stop your college career and enlist?

Well, I was, of course, subject to the draft and I felt that I would like to join the Air Force rather than be drafted and be assigned to some branch of the Service at somebody else's pleasure.

Your friends and classmates, had any of them already gone into the Service?

Some had, yes.

Where were you inducted?

I was inducted in Omaha, Nebraska.

And upon induction did you immediately go into the Service?

No. I was on furlough until sometime in September of 1943.

Part 3: Training

What were your first days like once you actually entered the military?

Well, of course, the first days were in preflight training in San Antonio, Texas, at Randolph Field. There was the typical indoctrination for boot camp type activities.

So, did you actually go through a boot camp, learning to march and military discipline?

Yes, yes, that's the whole thing.

Did that include any ground weapons training, rifles or ... ?

No.

None at all?

Except that we did have to march guard duty, but we were not trained in fire arms prior to that.

The preflight training, how long did that last?

I would say approximately 8 weeks, I'm guessing.

Any interesting experiences during that time, anything that was unusual outside of the regular regimen?

No particularly that I recall. I certainly recall being sent out to pick up cigarette butts on the parade ground and going through the challenges of inspection of your quarters with the quarter tossed on the blanket to be sure it was taut and that type of thing.

Was this your first time away from home or school?

Yes, I would say that's so.

What was that like?

Well, it was not a great problem because I did, of course, have summer jobs while I was in school and before I went to University of Nebraska, I went to State Teachers College

in Mineth, North Dakota, and neither of these locations were my home so I was used to being away from home.

So there weren't any difficult life style adjustments for you?

Not really, it was about what I expected it would be.

Where did you go after the preflight training?

I went to Primary Flight School in Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

And the Primary Flight Training, how long was that?

That again, was probably about 2 months.

And what did that consist of?

It consisted of a lot of study on aeronautics and weather and of course, actual flying time.

So you actually did have some in-plane flying time?

Yes.

Did you solo before you graduated?

We didn't graduate until going through 3 phases of flight school. So this was Primary, then there was Basic, then there was Advanced. Then you graduated. I took only my Primary training at Pine Bluff.

And while you were at Pine Bluff, did you actually solo?

Yes.

You did. What kind of planes were you flying?

PT 19 Fairchild.

I'm not familiar with that particular plane. Is that wing over?

It was wing under and it was open cockpit.

From the Primary, roughly how many of your class graduated? What was the ratio of those that made it through Primary to those who washed out?

I would only be guessing. But I would guess that probably that 25 per cent of them washed out.

Any crashes in your class?

Not any serious ones.

Just sort of a tough landing?

My first solo flight was a tough landing. I bounced about 30 feet in the air and fortunately I had the presence of mind to reapply the power and get up in the air again and come around and do another landing which turned out to be all right.

After your Primary Training at Pine Bluff, where did you go for Basic Training?

Went to Waco, Texas, and I took both Secondary and Advanced Training at that same Lackland Airforce Base.

So Basic and Advanced were both at Lackland?

They were both at Lackland.

How long were each of those segments?

Well, let's see, I went to Basic in January and we graduated in May.

Of '43?

Of '43.

In the Basic, that was, it looks like about 4 months.

That's Basic and Advanced.

Oh, that's the two of them together.

Yeah.

What planes were you flying for your Basic Training?

It was a BT 6, I believe. I really don't remember. It was also a low wing mono plane.

So, we're still single engine planes?

Yes, still single engine plane, however, this one had a canopy on it.

Uh, huh.

And more power and more speed.

At what point did they determine what type of planes you'd be flying once you graduated, whether it was going to be a fighter or a bomber?

Not until after you graduated or during that period of time.

So, at this point, then, you don't know what you're going to be flying?

You don't know, no. And in the Advanced Training, we did fly two engine planes.

And what plane was that, or what planes were they?

One of them was an AT 9 and I can't tell you what the other one was but there was another plane that we also flew.

And one of them was a multi-engine?

Both of them were.

Oh, both of them, I see. Any interesting experiences during your flight training, either Basic or Advanced?

Not anything that I particularly recall. It was fairly routine. I don't remember any major injuries or accidents or deaths.

Besides learning to fly these planes, did they have you doing anything other maneuvers, like strafing ground targets, or anything like that?

There was no armor on any of the planes in training.

And they didn't have you dropping simulated bombs, or shooting at...?

No.

Targets?

No.

Nothing yet. O.K.

The most different thing was that you did some cross country flying to learn navigation.

Uh, huh. And you say none of these training planes had any armament on them?

No. They did not.

So Advanced Training you finished up in about May of '43.

'43, that's correct.

O.K. You left Waco then, did you?

Yes. We were given, as I recall, 10 days leave to give us chance to go home and visit family and so forth.

Was this your first leave since you had gone into the Air Force?

Yes. Yes.

And you went back to Nebraska?

I didn't have any more family in Nebraska, other than one brother. So I visited a brother in Chicago. My mother, at that time, was living in Reno, Nevada.

Did you have any other family members at that time besides your mother and your brother?

Yes, I had four sisters in Nevada, Fallon, Nevada [and Reno. In addition to the brother in Chicago, I had brothers in Omaha, Milwaukee and Texas.]

Did you have a girl friend at the time or any romance going?

I had a girl friend in Waco.

Oh, somebody you met when you were in the Air Force.

Yes. But that was of short duration, of course.

So after Waco, where did you go next?

I was assigned to a B-17 base in Euphrata, Washington.

And what did you do there?

Trained on B-17's. I was assigned as a co-pilot. There was already a crew there with a pilot and the remainder of the crew and I filled in on that crew. Basically, we did a lot of flying time. Some of it cross country and out over the Pacific Ocean. Of course, that was armed. I didn't do a lot of firing. As a matter of fact, I don't remember that I did any firing from the co-pilot's position, there is no armament there. But we did, our gunners did, out over the ocean, we had planes trailing a...target sleeve.

So you did do exercises where you simulated shooting at air born targets?

Yes, yes.

Now on the B-17 typically, what does the crew consist of? You've got a Pilot and a Co-Pilot and what else?

A Bombardier and a Navigator and they were all officers, Second Lieutenant rank.

Uh, huh. And how 'bout the other positions, the radio or gunner?

Yes. There were six other positions: [An Engineer], Radio Operator/Gunner. The Radio Operator also operated the top turret gun. Ball Turret Gunner, Right Waist Gunner, Left Waist Gunner, and a Tail Gunner. That should come to ten.

How long was the B-17 training at Euphrata, Washington?

I went there early in June and we were on our way [to England] at the end of July, so it was less than two months.

At the completion of training, what happened next?

We were assigned to the 8th Air Force in England and we flew the plane that we had trained in in Euphrata, to Kearney, Nebraska.

How do you spell Kearney?

Kearney, K-e-a-r-n-e-y.

O.K.

Kearney, Nebraska. And picked up a new plane there, a new B-17.

Did you get any leave then before you left Kearney?

No.

Part 4: Going Overseas

Where did you go next?

We departed Kearney on our trip to England and we made stops in Bangor, Maine, Goose Bay, Labrador, Iceland and landed in Prestwick, Scotland.

Was that the site of your new base?

No. No. Our new base was at Kimbolton, K-i-m-b-o-l-t-o-n, Kimbolton, England. Northeast of London.

What was the designation of your unit within the 8th Air Force?

The 379th Bomb Group.

What was its mission?

All of the 8th Air Force, at that time, was flying bombing missions, primarily over Germany and such other targets as might be designated: Italy, some in France, Romania.

And you arrived in Prestwick when, Norm?

August the 1st of 1943.

And before you actually went out on your first mission, what did you do?

We had about two weeks of orientation and flight training. I believe the base was Wattford and I can't tell you exactly where it was.

What was your rank at that time?

Second Lieutenant.

So you had a couple of weeks to sort of get oriented to your new location?

Yes, and do some flying time for getting used to England.

During that time, what was life like for you?

Well, other than the fact that we had to fly, we did get some time in London, not much, but we were able to visit there.

Any experiences there that you want to share with me?

The main thing that we experienced there was that the officer crew was out on a bicycling jaunt along the lanes of jolly ol' England and the English bicycles had hand brakes on the front wheel. Our Pilot applied his brakes.

Just the front one?

Just the front one and of course, the wheel cramped and he went head over heels on a pavement, not a pavement, a macadam road and he peeled all the skin off of his forehead and nose and had a bout of amnesia. So our crew lost him. He was out of commission for all of the time that I was flying out of England. However, the other interesting part of that is that he returned to flight duty after his recovery, and he finished his 25 missions and returned home whereas I was shot down on my second mission and I don't even know what happened to all of the others. I would judge that there weren't a lot that made 25 missions, but he did.

So you lose him and you have to then get acquainted with a new pilot.

With new crews.

Oh, you got a whole new crew, not just a new Pilot?

Well, we ended up being fill-ins wherever there was a need. If somebody had a tail gunner sick on the morning of a flight, they would call on maybe our guy and he would go.

So, at this time, rather than assign a new pilot to the plane, the plane stays assigned to that pilot?

No, I'm sure the plane was used by whomever.

Oh, I see. But they just broke up your crew.

They broke up our crew and used us wherever they needed us.

So, if it wasn't for this incident, things would have been different.

They would have been a little different.

A little, yeah.

They would have been a little different.

Well during this short time that you were in England, where did you sleep and what were your quarters like?

Our quarters were adequate. They were typical military quarters and I would say I have no complaints about them.

And the food you ate – in a military mess?

Military mess, always.

Were you in touch with your family at this time?

By letter only, there was no Internet.

(Laughter by both parties.)

But you did have some correspondence?

Yes, oh, yes.

Besides your visits to London and the fateful bicycle outing, was there any other off duty entertainment that you had? For instance, USO shows?

Not that I recall. It was such a short time.

Part 5: Combat

I understand that you had only two missions. I'll let you tell it. When was your first mission?

The first mission was on the 18th or the 19th of August, 1943, which was aborted. I believe, as I recall, because of weather. If the target was under cloud cover when you got there, you tended to be aborted.

Now, were you already in the air?

Oh, yes.

And saw the cloud conditions?

Oh, yes.

This was a situation where you were assigned to a plane that was missing a co-pilot?

That's true.

O.K. What was your second mission?

It was the mission to Holland which was a secret mission. We didn't know what the target was.

What date was that?

It was August the 27th.

O.K.

It, of course, was a short mission and what was called a "milk run" because you weren't over enemy territory for any length of time. But the target, we later learned, was one of the first installments of the launch sites for the V-Bomb. And we carried the big 5,000 pound block buster bombs because they were concrete installations.

How many of those bombs would you be able to fit in your plane.

No more than two.

Is that what you were carrying, two of them?

As I recall.

What happened on that particular mission?

It was fairly uneventful. We encountered light anti-aircraft fire over the target. We did see some enemy planes, fighter planes, but they did not attack. We were over enemy territory for a relatively short period of time.

Any idea why they didn't attack?

No. We do know, of course, that it was very unpleasant for a German fighter to attack a bomber formation because there were 10 machine guns on every plane.

How many planes would be in a formation?

Oh, there could be anything from, I think one of them was 187 planes and all the way up to 6 or 700.

So did any of the anti-aircraft make contact with your plane?

No, not on this one.

Were any of the other planes hit?

I can't answer that, I don't know.

And you did release both bombs?

Yes.

Roughly, how much time would you have been in the air for a run like that, from the time you left England.

Well, from take off to landing is how you measure those things. It's surprisingly long because you took off and you had to make formation with many planes that took off from other air bases. So, we probably did not leave from time of take off until we crossed the English border, probably was as much as two hours to gain altitude. First of all, you're heavily loaded with bombs and fuel and the planes didn't climb real fast. And secondly, you had to get into formation with all these other planes. So, I would think that mission probably lasted for another hour over the target then hopefully a half an hour on the way home. So I would say a four hour mission. Even though it was a short distance.

I know the next mission is to be the last one. Was there anything that happened between this mission and the next one that we should discuss? Did you have any other leave or any other experiences back in England?

No. We need to remember that this is now what, 1943? So that's 56, that's more than 60 years ago. So my memory of some of this is not as sharp as it might be.

Understandably so. Well, let's get to that second actual mission, third mission altogether. When was that?

That was on September the 3rd, 1943.

September 3rd, 1943? O.K. Would you describe what happened? Let's start with your briefing and your getting on the plane and so forth.

Well the briefing, of course, was interesting. It was always you're awakened at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning. You went first to the briefing room which is the first time you learned where you were going, how long it would take, you went into the briefing room and there was a sheet over the map and then they removed the sheet. That's the first time any of the crews knew where they were going because it had to be secret so there wouldn't be any leaks.

Sure.

So we were up at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, went to the briefing room, then went to breakfast and then went to our planes to await the signal to taxi and take off.

In the briefing, where did they tell you you were going?

The first one, they told us what our location was but they didn't tell us what our target was. On the second one, we were going to Romilly Air Force Base which was in France but it was a German flying base for fighter planes. It was perhaps 100 miles southeast of Paris. My miles might be off, I don't remember. But we did know that we were going to bomb an air base.

Norm, how do you spell Romilly?

R-O-M-I-L-L-Y

Thank you. So you get the briefings and breakfast and then you're on your plane. Did you know any of the other crew members on that plane? Had you ever met them before?

Yes. I had flown with, let's see. I can tell you who I had flown with before. The Pilot and I had flown with the tail gunner, and that was it.

What was the pilot's name?

Julius Krafft. K-R-A-F-F-T.

And the tail gunner?

Robert A. Vandergriff V-A-N-D-E-R-G-R-I-F-F.

O.K., what happened then?

We did make a successful run on the target, dropped our bombs. Since we never got back to base, I don't know exactly how successful it was because we never got the report.

Well, how many bombers were on that mission, do you think?

I thought I had a number here, but I don't see it. I'm going to guess probably 180.

So, the mission was successful as far as bombing the base?

Yes.

And then you're turning around to go back to England and then what?

It seemed like, again, what would be called a "milk run" because there was not heavy anti-aircraft fire over the airport. There was some. And we again did see fighters circling off in the distance. We were on the way back. The pilot, of course, had flown the plane on take off and assembly and across the target and then after we came away from the target, he turned the controls of the plane over to me as a copilot and we were flying what we thought would be an uneventful trip back to England. And as a matter of fact, we got past Paris to the west and we probably were no more than 10 minutes from getting to the English Channel. We encountered some sparse anti-aircraft fire. I saw the bursts beginning to appear off of the right wing and I was sitting on the right hand side of the cockpit, of course, as copilot. I saw another burst move in and another one move in; it was light so I didn't think too much about it except that I thought that I should have had my steel helmet on. We had a steel helmet on the back of our seat. But I was flying so I couldn't stop and put it on – flying in formation. So, all of a sudden there was a mighty shake and a burst and we were hit by a burst, a direct hit, by a burst of anti-aircraft fire in the number two engine which was the inside engine on the left side of the plane. It created a hole, probably 3 feet in diameter, partly in the wing and partly in the engine itself. Of course, immediately, fire. Fire says 100 Octane Gasoline. So you know nothing good can come of that. We lost our intercom so we couldn't communicate with the crew back in the plane. The pilot and I both stayed with the plane for what seemed like an interminable time but I doubt if it was more than two minutes when he signaled me to leave. I think everybody on the plane would have known that it was time to leave. And he signaled me to go. The bombardier had opened the bomb bay doors for a quick exit. So I went back and straddled the bomb bay and pulled my feet together and dropped through.

Had any of the other crew already gone?

Of course, they were in the back and I didn't really know. Again, you assume that they would that it was time to go.

Right, you had no intercom.

Right.

So at this point, you didn't know who had left.

No. I did not.

When you say straddling the bomb bay, you mean you have a foot on either side of the...?

Yes

What was going through your mind then?

Well, it was simply to exit the plane.

Frightened?

Frightened, of course.

Had you ever jumped, made a parachute jump before?

No.

What about the conditions inside the plane? Was there smoke filling the plane?

No, the smoke was coming off the engine and of course, you're flying forward, so the fire was not inside the plane, but it was trailing the plane.

O.K. You're straddling and you're looking down. Roughly, what was your altitude, do you think?

We were flying at about 22,000 feet. Of course, the minute we were hit, we dropped out of formation and I would gather that when I bailed out that we were still at around 20,000 feet maybe.

Pretty cold up there?

Cold, yes.

Was the plane flying level at that time or was it angling downward?

At that time it was in a slight spiral.

Slight spiral?

Yeah, slight. You'd lost power, some power on that left hand side, of course because you only had one engine over there.

Was it difficult to keep your balance while you were deciding when to jump?

No, the plane was still under control.

O.K., then what happened?

What happened to me from that point was that I dropped through and ended up with my feet going first, of course, and it whipped me upside-down.

Did you have to pull your own rip cord or were you able to use a static ...?

No, that came a little later. I waited for some 10 seconds to pull the rip cord to make sure to be clear of the plane and any formation or anything and then I pulled the rip cord and falling head first, I had what is, I guess known as a “red out.” You get that jolt, that hard shot when the chute opens, and I passed out temporarily [probably from blood rushing to my head].

Did you say you were falling head first?

Yes, head first.

You went out feet first but then tumbled to head first?

Right

And then you were unconscious?

Right.

So you passed out for, you have any idea how long?

I don't know how long. It probably was a matter of 10 or 15 seconds. However, it was long enough that when I came to, when I looked down at the ground, I saw the plane down there in three parts. The fuselage in one part, a wing part over here and a tail part somewhere else and burning.

What kind of terrain was it, rural?

Rural, very rural.

What was your landing like?

It was a jolt, of course.

But you were prepared?

I was prepared for it. Other than when I dropped through the bombay, I had on fur flying boots because, of course, it's cold up there and you don't have heat. And the wind tore them off so I landed stocking footed.

I understand that you'd never made any parachute jump.

No. [I hadn't.]

But had you had any instructions on how to flex your legs or anything about landing?

No.

So how was your landing?

It was a jolt, of course. My only injury from the landing was to one of the arches of one of my feet which didn't end up being a serious thing but it hurt at the time.

So this was September ?

3rd.

September 3rd, 1943? So it wasn't too cold yet.

Oh, it was a beautiful day.

A beautiful day for flying.

Yeah.

What happened after you landed?

Immediately, of course, thought of escape, if it was possible which we had been trained to try to do.

Did you see any of the other crew members at this time?

Not at that time, I did not. So I heard a motor cycle coming and I assumed that that would probably be a German, a German on patrol or whatever. So I was kind of behind a hedge row.

We ran out of tape; I switched the cartridge. Norm when we did stop, you were telling me about the moments after you were on the ground and you heard a motor cycle coming and what did you do then?

I was sort of behind a hedge row. So I turned my back to the hedge row and gathered that white silk chute to my body to try to be sure that nobody could see it from the road.

The motor cycle did pass. I, of course, didn't see it, didn't see who was on it because my back was to the road. Within minutes after that, I was approached by a gentleman across the field, across the meadow. He was obviously French and obviously didn't speak English and I didn't speak French. But he made it clear that he wanted me to follow him, in some degree of excitement, of course, which I did. The net result of that was that after a walk of perhaps two miles...

In your stocking feet.

In my stocking feet, I was delivered into a barn and there was a hay mow up there with lots of hay in it. I was delivered up there and with signal language that indicated that he would be back to do whatever he could for me. While there, there were three other airmen that were brought. One was the tail gunner from my plane.

And he's one you knew from before, you'd been on another ...?

Yeah, he was from my crew.

That would be Robert Vandergriff.

Vandergriff. He was brought there and the other one was a waist gunner and he was not from my crew. His name was Delbert Klump. K-L-U-M-P.

What condition were those two gentlemen in?

They were in good condition. They were fine. The fourth one was a navigator from a British plane. Of course, he wasn't shot down when we were because the British always flew at night and we always flew in the day time. I suppose I knew at the time, but I don't know how he came to be in the hands of "The Underground." We, obviously, were in the hands of "The Underground." We stayed in that barn, I suppose, for three or four days. Of course, they brought us food and water and so forth. And me and my number 12 size shoes, I don't think there were very many Frenchmen that wear shoes that big, so they very kindly had a pair of shoes made for me by a shoemaker and brought them to me. They also had false identification made up for each of us. We were all turned French all of a sudden. I was a baker, a French baker, by trade.

So they gave you the papers, what did they do with you after they got you clothing and papers?

Well, we were in the hands of The French Underground, and the four of us together the entire time. We were in the hands of The French Underground from September the 3rd until November the 18th. We moved from pillar to post. They never left us any one place very long.

Did you ever have any close calls where you were almost discovered?

We had some where we hid under the bed. I don't know how close they were. The French people told us to hide ourselves.

Did you ever have to use those papers?

We did use them and successfully.

How did you get around the fact that you didn't speak French?

We were hidden most of the time. We were not in public view. We moved at night, in the dark, from one place to the other. The Underground took us on one trip to Paris to send us South to go by train to the South, close to the Spanish border and then the idea was to walk across.

So you were going to be on a passenger train?

Yes.

With other French passengers?

Yes. Then we did use the passports, not passports, but identification. You had to show them when you went through the gates to get into the train station and you also had to show them when the train conductor came through to check tickets. Fortunately, the guards were German and they couldn't speak either French or English, I don't think. So they just looked at them and handed them back to us, fortunately.

You're moving along and then on November 18th, what happened?

This was long before November the 18th. On that trip, the connections were not made and we had to go back. We went back to our location which was northwest of Paris, probably about 100 miles, near Rouen, R-O-U-E-N. So we had to go back and again, we had to use the identification and we did so successfully. So then we spent more time moving from one place to another in an effort to not be found. The French people were almost as afraid of their own neighbors as they were the Germans because there were French people who collaborated with the Germans to gain favors and would have turned us in had they come to know about us. That was why the frequent moving about. But then on our final journey which was just before the 18th, we were on a train, I believe we were on it overnight, I really don't remember. But we returned to Paris again, used our identification successfully, got on to the train and we were probably no more than 100 miles from the Spanish border when the Gestapo came through checking. They could speak English and they could speak French. Of course, the jig was immediately up and we were taken prisoners on the train by the Gestapo.

Part 6: Prisoner of War

How many of you were there?

Four.

The four that you described?

Yeah.

What did they do with, were you traveling with underground members?

We were traveling with a young lady.

What happened to her?

I'm fearful, I never heard the final, but I'm very fearful that she suffered, undoubtedly, death. I always wondered why she shouldn't have been in another compartment, separate from us, but she was in our compartment. I'm very much afraid that she didn't make it. We, of course, don't know.

They separated you from her immediately?

Oh, yes.

So then what happened with you?

They took us to a location in Bayonne, France, and of course, interrogated us. The timing of some of these things is fuzzy because, No. 1, you were tense and worried and concerned and, No. 2, you were very uncomfortable. But they ended up taking us, eventually, to Paris.

Now the interrogation occurred at Bayon?

Yes.

What was the object of the interrogation? Was it to learn about The Underground and your movements?

I was very surprised. They didn't pursue The Underground with us, at least with me. We were never interrogated in a group.

Oh, certainly.

We were interrogated individually. They never interrogated me [about the underground] because, one of the things that we had been very much instructed in by the military was that if you are to become a prisoner of war, you are to give your name, your rank and your serial number and beyond that, under the Geneva Convention, you are not obligated to give them any more information.

So do you think that they sort of lost interest in you because they realized that you were not going to cooperate?

They, of course, continued to ask questions, and I don't remember what they all were. Originally they were more about where I was based in England and they were more military oriented. I relied on the name, rank and serial number. Of course, they did threaten. Well, you're captured in civilian clothes, you're ...

A spy?

You're a spy as far as they're concerned. We did have dog tags. We had been careful to maintain them but, of course, they are under our clothing.

But they had no interest about how you got the identity papers?

Because I wouldn't answer the other questions, I assume that that's why they didn't pursue it because they didn't, and I was very surprised that they didn't put the heat on.

What did they do with you in Paris?

We were put in a civilian prison in Paris. It was FRENNES, F-R-E-N-N-E-S. It was not a military prison. It was a civilian prison. We were still spies as far as we knew in their estimation. And we were still in the hands of the Gestapo not the German military.

Were you in the general population in that prison?

Yes. Well, I say yes, there were four of us in a cell. Upon arrival in Paris, officers were separated from the enlisted men and went in different directions. So after getting to Paris, I never saw the enlisted men that I was with. I never saw them again in all the time that I was there. But I did end up in a prison cell with four other men. They were all American flyers.

Before we go any further with your experience here, I probably should find out if you know what happened to the other crew members on the plane that you were in when it went down.

I can tell you that. I can't tell you how it happened. The ball turret gunner, whom I did not know, Frank P. Frydryk, was killed in action. Donald B. Armstrong, right waist gunner was killed in action. Now, I can tell you this, Delbert W. Klump, who I was with in the time we were evading, saw those two men in the body of the plane. The ball turret gunner had exited the turret and was in the body of the plane. Of course, the top turret gunner, I'm sorry, the right waist gunner was also there. He, Klump, signaled them to go, you know, let's go and he went. He assumed they went. So, neither he nor I, nor probably anybody else, knows what happened to them. My speculation is that the plane was still under control, I mean it wasn't out of control, and that they were afraid to jump and that they would rather take their chances with the plane until something happened than to jump. That's pure speculation on my part. But we do know, I do know, that they were not injured, that they were free to jump and that Delbert Klump had signaled them to let's go. Now the other one was Julius Krafft the pilot. He was killed in action. Delbert Klump saw his body on the ground near the plane, however he was outside the plane and he said that his chute had been pulled out but not billowed. Again, pure speculation, that after I left that plane, either there was an explosion or that left wing fell off before the pilot exited or had a chance to exit. So, when that happens, of course, you really got centrifugal force to deal with. These other two, even if they weren't hurt or injured or anything, if they didn't get out of there before that centrifugal force set in, they probably couldn't get out. And he, since he had signaled me to go, he obviously was behind me and my thought is that he had been able to fight his way clear of the plane and had pulled his rip cord but it was milliseconds too close to the ground.

What about the bombardier, what happened to him?

I don't know what happened to any of the rest of the crew. I don't know because I never saw them.

That was sort of an aside but I wanted to make sure that we didn't forget about that.

Yes.

So we have you in a civilian prison in Frennes and you're in a cell with ..

It's actually in Paris. Frennes was the name of prison. Yes.

How long were you there?

Again, memory escapes me. I'm going to guess 8 to 10 days.

O.K. How were you treated during that time?

In this entire experience, I was never physically mistreated. Never, never physically harmed.

But during the day, were you in the company of other prisoners?

Only the four of us.

Only the four of you. You weren't mixed in the general population?

No.

Any other experiences to talk about during your 8 – 10 days in Frennes?

Well, we were repeatedly interrogated again by the Gestapo. What we did here was, we didn't know where it was but it obviously was out in a arena, an open area in the center of the prison. Regularly, in the morning, there would be executions out there by firing squad. Sometimes you heard nothing but that. At other times you heard people crying and shouting prior to their execution.

What effect did that have on you and the other flyers?

It was pretty depressing.

Did you actually witness any of the executions?

Yes.

But you could hear it?

No.

What did they do with you after Frennes?

We were sent to a Luftwaffe - which is the German Air Force - to a Luftwaffe interrogation center in Frankfort, Germany.

How long were you there?

Again, probably 8 – 10 days.

What happened there?

There, we were in solitary confinement, or I was. I can't speak for anybody else. I was in solitary confinement. By solitary, I don't mean in a dungeon. I was in a military type

building with a cot and a chair. Small, of course but without windows or at least any that I could look out of. Periodically interrogated there. Now, by Luftwaffe personnel, not Gestapo. Gestapo released us to the Luftwaffe.

What was the general topic of their interrogation?

Again, they did not pursue anything about our experiences with The Underground but did want to know what plane we were on and who our crew was and that kind of information. I finally told them, "Look, you know more about me than I do." And it's true. After all, they had spies in England.

Did they give you any information in return such as that they notified the U.S. that you were alive?

No.

At that time, did you know whether the military knew that you were still alive?

No. At that time, I doubt even in England that they knew. I don't know how soon the French might have communicated. If they became aware of these three bodies and if they communicated through their channels to England. But I don't know.

Were the Germans required, if they pick up a body, to notify anybody that we now have a flyer that's deceased?

Under the Geneva Convention, they are obligated to tell. I think the conduit was through the Swiss Red Cross. To tell who has been killed and who are prisoners.

What did you learn afterwards? Did your family know that you were shot down?

My family was advised that I was Missing In Action.

But how long, if you recall, were they under that cloud that you were Missing in Action?

They were under cloud until March of 1944.

During the time at the Luftwaffe interrogation center, how were you treated when you weren't being interrogated?

Civilly.

And you stayed with your name, rank and serial number responses?

Yes.

What happened after the interrogation center?

We were put on a train, the typical four horses, forty men, train and transported from Frankfort to Barth, Germany. Barth was up on the Baltic Sea. Between Rostock and Denmark.

How long were you at that location?

I finally got to that location on December the 26th of 1943 and was there until May of 1945.

Norm, I know you have to leave. It's 11:00 now and we agreed ahead of time that we would stop at 11:00 and there is a lot more – some of the most interesting experiences are yet to be described and discussed. So we'll go off record now and we'll pick this up at a later time to conclude the interview. Thank you for all the information so far and we'll be back.

You're most welcome.

Thanks again.

Today is November 16, 2004. My name is Martin W. Thomas with me is Norman Toft. We are again at the Indian Prairie Public Library continuing the interview which we commenced on October 5th, 2004.

We ended our first session, Norm, with you telling me about being transferred by train in a box car commonly referred to as a 40 and 8 from the interrogation center in Frankfurt to a facility in Barth, Germany.

Yes.

Which was on the Baltic Sea between Rostok and Denmark. You said that you arrived there on December 26th, 1943 and were there until May of 1945. That means that you spent Christmas of 1943 on the train. So before we discuss your internment at Barth, would you please describe for me your transit?

To the best of my ability, it is very vague in my memory now. I never sought to retain it. We, of course, were crowded in the cars and had very little in the way of sanitary facilities. It was rather cold. About all I remember about it is it was a rather unpleasant journey of some, I believe, close to three days.

Three days?

Yes.

And you said it was crowded. Now, I understand that the box cars commonly known as 40 and 8's, were for 40 men or 8 horses. How many prisoners did they have in your box car?

I don't know. I would think quite a few more than 40.

Uh, huh.

But I really don't know. I don't remember.

And you commented on the lack of sanitary facilities. Did they have any means for taking care of your ...?

Not really. The corner of the box car was about the only place for relief.

There was no hole in the floor?

No, no.

What sort of order was there in the car? Did somebody among the prisoners have the responsibility for keeping order?

Not really. There, of course, were guards in each car.

There were guards inside the car?

Oh, yes. There were guards inside the car. And, of course, we had not been afforded opportunities to organize. I came directly from my solitary confinement to the rail car. So I hadn't known any of the people nor had we had a chance to organize. I imagine they had similar experiences to mine.

Were any of the prisoners sick?

Not that I recall. It's very vague in my memory.

How did they feed the prisoners?

Piece of bread and a cup of soup, potato soup.

And that was already in the box car when you got on?

No, I believe they brought it to us from whatever their supply car was.

So was the train making periodic stops?

Yes, oh yes.

Did they allow you out to relieve yourselves?

No, I don't recall that we did. I think we were retained in the box car.

And you ate inside the box car?

Yes.

What did you have with you, personally, when you boarded the train? What belongings, if any?

The clothes on my back and dog tags.

That was it?

That was it.

You said that you were en route on December 25th. Did the prisoners do anything to mark the day?

Not in my recollection, Marty. I probably should have remembered it, but I don't.

You don't remember, for example, singing Christmas Carols?

I don't remember. I would be surprised if we didn't, but I don't remember.

Do you remember meeting any prisoners before you got to know them on that trip?

I really don't because we were all strangers to one another; there wasn't anybody there that I knew and the conditions were miserable. I don't think we did a lot of socializing there.

Did the guards discourage that in any way?

Not that I recall.

So then you get to Barth on December 26th. What happened then?

We were processed by the German authorities. Photographed, questioned, not so much about the military matters as just name, rank and serial number and whatever would normally be on an identification, finger prints and so forth.

How long had that POW camp been established, if you know.

I don't know. It hadn't been established for very long because when I got there, there were probably not more than 1000 or so prisoners there. When I left there, there were 9000.

Were there any other nationalities represented besides US prisoners?

Yes there were. Some of the soldiers who had been captured very early on in the war. Mainly British, South African. We had a South African Padre and a British Protestant Minister, who were captured.

Was the POW camp referred to as a Stalag?

Yes it was. Stalag 1.

Stalag 1. Does that 1 mean anything, like it was the first one?

No. It doesn't because Stalag 3 was certainly established before Stalag 1. I don't know how they numbered it. I really don't have an answer.

Do you know why they had this stalag located where they did, in Barth?

No. I don't. How they selected their sites, I have no idea. They were scattered widely, as you saw on that map. So, I don't know. It was sort of an out of the way place. Probably difficult to, if you were fortunate enough to get on the outside, you'd be a long ways getting anywhere for freedom.

The map you referred to just a second ago, we did look at before we started the tape was in a book you showed me called The Last Escape by John Nickel and Terry Renek?

That's correct.

It shows Barth as being right on the coast.

Yes.

The facility itself, could you describe that for me? For example, the perimeter, how they established a perimeter? Then we could talk about what the various buildings

were like, where you lived, where sanitary facilities existed, if they did and cooking and that sort of thing.

Yes. The perimeter was a double barbed wire fence with the two fences being, probably, six feet apart and I would say maybe 8 feet high and then all of the area within that 6 or 8 feet between those two fences was coiled barbed wire. All around that perimeter on every corner, at interim spaces, there were guard towers probably a good 25 or 30 feet high with guards and obviously, rifles.

Did they have machine gun positions up there as well?

Not in the beginning, not in the beginning they didn't have. Later on, at the time of the Battle of Bastogne, the Germans, somehow or another, they got the impression that maybe the war had been turned around and things deteriorated a little bit. One interesting thing is that they then dug machine gun pits all the way around the outside of the perimeter of the camp with the pits facing in.

Facing in.

That, of course, was not very encouraging. This was in, probably, January or February, of 1945. I have since read, in various accounts, that there had been elements in the German hierarchy, of wanting to eradicate the prisoners. However, the prisoners, were almost all flyers, and the Luftwaffe under Goerhing, for whatever else he may have been, he had an affinity for anybody who flew. That was his ... I think we were, well, not only we, I don't think they did that anywhere where they came in and mowed down the prisoners; if they did, I've never been aware of it. But the threat was always there. One interesting thing was that as people arrived, there were a number of Jewish prisoners and they were scattered among the population at random, like anybody else. But when this happened, when they dug those machine gun pits, they segregated all the Jewish prisoners into one barracks. That, of course, boded ill. Not that we thought that maybe the rest of us wouldn't get it, too, but our interpretation of that was that they wanted to be sure that they got all them.

We just went off record for a moment while we were talking about the segregation of the Jewish prisoners from the rest of the population. Norm, you said they actually then housed them in a separate barracks?

Yes, separate barracks.

First of all, did the German authorities give any reason to the population as to why they were doing that?

Not that I'm aware of.

Was there speculation as to what was going on?

Much speculation. Speculation being that if there was a decision made to exterminate the camp, that they wanted to be very sure that they eradicated all of those folks in case anybody else escaped which would have been very unlikely.

How did the Jewish prisoners react to that?

Well, very much as any one of us would react if we were in some way segregated in a way that we knew was unfavorable. We knew what the Germans' attitude was toward the Jewish population, so you just had to know that it just couldn't be good news. So we felt compassion for the Jewish prisoners who were so segregated. In the face of that, as so many times, I think it was the American sense of humor that kept everybody able to cope from day to day. A classic example of that was that one day one of the boys from the Jewish barracks came over to our barracks and his comment was, "I will give \$100 for an old used foreskin."

(Interviewer Laughs)

At that time, did people really know, or, at least the people that you were with at that time, did they know anything about the extermination camps?

No, at least we didn't know the extent of them.

Did you know, at least, that the Jewish local people were being rounded up and put into camps? Didn't know that either?

No. I can't say that we did, I can't say that we did. We didn't know much of anything that was going on locally. We got no local news; we got no local television or radio or anything like that. The Germans kept us as excluded from news as they possibly could.

I have a number of questions to ask you about the living conditions and your access to news and so forth. But first, just to wrap up on the physical description of the compound itself. Roughly, how big would you say the areas was inside the perimeter fence?

There were at least two different compounds. I would gather that each of them probably occupied an area of at least five acres.

When you say two compounds, they each had their own, separate perimeters?

Separate perimeters, yes.

Was there any distinction of the type of prisoners in the two different compounds?

No to my knowledge. As a matter of fact, I, myself, moved from the original compound over into the second one that was built. I'm not aware of any particular reason. I really don't know of any particular reason.

You told me, a little while ago, that when you got there, there were roughly 1,000 prisoners and by the end of the war there were 9,000.

Correct.

Was that second compound erected while you were there?

Oh, yes, yes it was.

Did they use any prisoners to work on the building of that compound?

No. Almost all of the prisoners in our camp were officers. Under the Geneva convention, officers were to be excluded from work details. The privates and non officers could be used for, presumably, non military work details, work on farms and things like that.

Did they, in fact, do that to your noncoms at your compound?

We didn't have that many; I'm not going to say there weren't any non-commissioned but very few, and if there were they were probably clerical within the camp.

Roughly, how many buildings on these 5 acre sites?

I would say that each of them had 15 barracks, 20 maybe.

How would you describe the construction of the barracks?

The barracks looked, from the outside, probably very much like any military barracks including what the Germans probably had.

How many stories?

1 story.

Wood?

Wood, wood construction.

You spent two winters there. What were the heating and insulating?

The only heat was with a stove in each room. Each room, for the most part, housed about 14 to 16 men.

How many rooms to a barrack, I mean to a building?

I'm guessing probably 16.

They were big buildings then. So about 16 rooms, each one housing 14, approximately.

14 to 16 people. And that was in double level bunks and not a lot of room beyond that.

How would you describe your living conditions and did they change over time?

Mainly the changes were in food supply. Early on, we got very little help from the Red Cross because I assume it takes time to start the line of communication and so forth. Later on we did get sometimes, Red Cross parcels which were more than welcome. I can't remember everything that was in them, but there were cigarettes in them which became the monetary system for the camp, trading cigarettes for other things. If you didn't smoke, you were wealthy. There was D Bars, they were called D Bars, they were concentrated chocolate bars which, by themselves, weren't very good. They were a little too strong. There was a can of klim which was condensed milk. That's milk spelled backwards. Condensed, powdered milk. Not condensed milk, powdered milk. As I recall sometimes there was some sugar in there, sometimes there was some jam. I really don't remember what else was in them.

Now these packages, would there be individual packages for each prisoner or would it just be a general package for the group?

Yes. When we were fortunate enough to get them, they would be brought into the camp and each prisoner would get a, probably a ten by ten package that might be four inches high packed rather well with whatever they could get in there.

Now you said at first you weren't getting those packages

No.

Because perhaps the lines weren't set up. In the latter months before your liberation, were those packages still coming and were the guards actually letting them make it all the way through to you?

Sporadically. They came. They didn't come on any kind of a regular pattern. I am sure that packages disappeared into the German countryside. One of my brothers sent me a box of cigars which never arrived, and I'm sure they were confiscated by someone,

somewhere. Of course, I'm sure that there was no way of knowing that there were cigars in there but, of course, I can understand that the Germans would have to open packages to be sure that there wasn't contraband of some kind coming in and they would discover what it was. So, I never received them.

We were talking about the Red Cross packages in the context of it supplementing the rations that you received. Could you describe the rations that the Germans provided you and if that changed over the course of your time there? Describe how it got better or worse.

Well, again, I would say that it varied from time to time. I would say that there was never a time when we had enough to eat. I don't mean by that that we were starving, but you were hungry an awful lot, and in this 16 man room the conversations very often turned to food and home and Thanksgiving and the food that you had to eat with longing remembrances, of course. But, as I recall the fare, we were served in a mess hall twice a day, morning and afternoon, maybe early or late afternoon. The fare was, at breakfast times there would be the German bread which tended to be sour and produced a lot of flatulence which added to the comedy of the existence of the typical bathroom humor which you can imagine with nobody but men around. Occasionally, a very small dab of some kind of jelly. I don't remember of ever having cheese, very occasionally maybe a small slice of sausage but not very often. Then in the evening, it was usually potato soup, sometimes with a little barley added and the potatoes as they came in, which you saw a pile of them in one of the pictures, were often not in very good condition, had quite a bit of rot in them and so forth. And the barley often was wormy; another piece of the sustaining humor was that if you got a worm in your barley, of course it was dead and cooked and it was just more protein – you got more protein than somebody else who didn't get any.

You mentioned, Norm, the potatoes in a picture. You showed me some photographs; I'm going to talk about those in a little more detail towards the end of the interview, but one of the photographs showed the supply of potatoes on the ground and another photograph was labeled the Ersatz bread. You just told me about the bread. What ingredients went into the bread and what would cause the flatulence?

Obviously, we don't know what went into the bread. We were very suspicious that it might have had some saw dust in it. I can't verify that. We didn't have any scientific laboratory to analyze what we got. But it did tend to be somewhat moist and sour and not really very tasty.

Do you know whether your German guards ate different food than what was given the prisoners?

I don't know. Under the Geneva Convention, we should have eaten the same as the German military.

Both quantity and quality?

Yes. However, I really wouldn't have expected that considering the fact that we were blowing up their trains and their manufacturing facilities and so forth. And, I am relatively confident that the German soldier didn't do all that well in terms of food either; I'm sure there was deprivation, even among the civilian population.

We've talked quite a bit about the living conditions. Is there any other aspect of the living conditions that you think might be of importance or interest?

Well, each barracks was equipped with a latrine facility that sometimes worked and sometimes didn't. But you went down there to shave.

Was it modern plumbing?

Yes.

Flush toilets?

When they worked. And usually they did. There were sinks; you'd go down there to shave. After eating there was no warm water [to wash utensils]. You would heat, I referred to the klim, which came in a can, about a one pound can that looked pretty much like a coffee can. Everybody saved them, too, because they not only were used to heat water so that you could take it down to shave with, but there were all kinds of manufacturing operations using them.

What, for example?

Oh, boy. I'm sorry I brought it up because I can't remember it that well.

We went off record for a moment because Norm said he was having a hard time thinking of some of the other uses made of the klim cans and we expanded our discussion to talk about all the things in the Red Cross package. What kind of Yankee ingenuity was applied to these things to make your life better. Norm told me an interesting, humorous anecdote off record. If you would, Norm, about the use of the things you got.

One of the uses, I was reminded in our off the record conversation, and that is they were used, some guys were very innovative in creating things from these Red Cross packages. There was sometimes raisins or prunes and so with milk and chocolate and fruit, they could create some things that were really very tasty. It might remind you of a Christmas

Plum Pudding or something like that and the klim can would be used to prepare it. Of course, that fruit was also used for other purposes, such as a little fermentation and the logical result of that - a little bit of alcoholic flavor.

How strong would that end up? Would it be stronger than say, a wine? Did you have any way of fortifying it?

If you had some sugar you could fortify it. But I never made any of it. I never created any of it.

Did you ever taste it?

You know, I don't remember.

I was going to ask you how it tasted.

I don't remember. I imagine it would taste like home made wine, something like that. It wasn't perhaps as important to me as some others. But one other thing that I will relate with apologies to tender ears. One of the concoctions that were made out of the contents of these Red Cross boxes was to take some of the klim

That's the powdered milk.

The powdered milk and shave some of the chocolate off of that concentrated D Bar and if you could find some sugar, add a little bit of sugar and then add some water to it all and stir it up and it would come out very like, somewhat like, a milk shake. Of course, it would not be frozen, it wouldn't be cold, but in taste and texture it would be somewhat like a chocolate milk or a good milk shake. Really, when you had so little sugar, which the Germans did not furnish us with, when you had so little sugar, anything sweet was a real treat. [A 25 second segment was omitted at request of veteran].

So, would this particular concoction, first of all did you ever have one of those?

Oh, indeed I did.

That would be a sort of a special occasion I would think.

It would be, and you tended to make special occasions out of it. There were occasions where each person did their own, but there were also occasions where the 16 guys in the room would contribute various parts or elements that they happened to have and make something that could be shared equally among everybody in the room.

In additions to the food, as you think back, can you recall any other examples of the prisoners' ingenuity in making life a little more bearable, less unpleasant?

Well, the Red Cross did send in to us athletic equipment and there was a parade ground in each of the compounds. When we were not called out on parade for counting, it provided a place where you could play ball, and we did. The other thing that the Red Cross provided were some musical instruments. Of course, in a crowd the size of that camp, there were some great musicians. We had some great musical programs that they provided, and we went back into the mess hall for that much like an auditorium. As a matter of fact, the German commander and some of his staff used to come in for them, to listen to them. Also, there were thespians among the group. They would do plays and of course, again, was part of what made life almost bearable was to see some of those guys dressed in drag to be the female part of a theater presentation.

You mentioned the staff or some of the administration coming and sitting in the mess hall to listen to these performances. That prompts a question. What was the general guard/prisoner relationship? How did they treat the prisoners, the guards?

Of course, the command of the prison was that there was to be NO intercourse, by that I mean verbal. There was to be no fraternization between the guards and the prisoners – absolutely not. Of course, you couldn't get to the ones on the towers but there were guards on the gates. Obviously, we were on the inside and they were on the outside. With cigarettes we had and the chocolate and some of the other things that they NEVER could get from their sources, they really wanted badly and they LOVED the American cigarettes. I never exchanged any with any of them, but I do know for a fact that they got eggs occasionally. (They) would exchange eggs from a guard to the prisoner on the inside. I'm sure there were many other things. I really don't know what because I did not participate in that activity. They were not supposed to fraternize with us in any way. If they were caught in something like that, I would imagine they would have been severely reprimanded.

How about medical care during this time?

There was medical care. You could go on sick call. Their facilities were very primitive. They didn't have a lot of things like salves and band aids and so forth. However, I had a place on my leg which probably could be best described as scurvy from lack of acidic – citrus kind of foods and it itched terribly, just terribly. Of course, you had to try not to scratch it. I was given occasionally some salve that was not often all that helpful, but at least they did acknowledge it and try to do something about it.

Norm, while you were telling me this, you reached down to scratch your leg. Is that just because you're recalling it or do you still have a condition?

I don't have anything that's visible there but I do get itchy there.

The same spot?

The same spot.

The medical staff, were they all Germans?

Yes.

Were there any prisoners inside the camp that were flight surgeons?

Not that I'm aware of. I would just comment on the relationship between our commandant. Of course, we in the camp were a military organization. The senior [American] officer, at any given time, was the commanding officer of our camp as the German commanding officer was his opposite. I never participated in any of those meetings, but I'm sure there were some sharp exchanges there. I did know these gentlemen, and I think they were very, very forthright with the Germans and represented us extremely well to the best of their possible ability. But on the other side, Hitler had no love for the prisoners, and he [the commandant] had to be careful, regardless of how he felt, and couldn't be seen to be coddling. I understand that – it's war. The German population and the German soldiers were deprived and so should we get everything we need?

You mentioned the ranking prisoner, American officer. What were his responsibilities as far as keeping order and discipline among the prisoners?

It was a very military like organization. Each of our barracks had what would be the equivalent of a sergeant on a normal military base.

Our tape ran out and we switched over the tape and just talked informally, off record for a couple of minutes. I am going to ask Norm to share with us another example of American ingenuity. Where we left off, we were talking about the discipline in the camp and what responsibility the American ranking officers had to keep discipline. Would you continue with that, please?

I think I just started to say that we were a definite, military type organization with a chain of command. Each barracks had a barracks leader who served as what would normally be, probably, a staff sergeant position to call everybody out to attention, to call everybody out to parade and get the formation set up; call them to attention when the German guards came by to count. Of course, you were at attention at that time so there wouldn't be movement and confusion. It was a full military organization within the camp.

Do you know if the American hierarchy ever had to convene disciplinary hearings on any of the other prisoners?

I'm not aware of it. Of course, I don't think they would publicize it if it happened. I was not aware of it. Nobody I was with in my barracks or in my room were so called or so chastised.

Also, off record, you mentioned a very interesting example of American ingenuity. That was getting a radio made up. Would you tell me about that, please?

Yes. Of course, every plane had a radio man on it. Many of the other officers were very good. You know, among 9,000 men there are people with talents in every field. Creating a radio, I couldn't do it, but as I understand it, is not that complicated. You asked earlier about the use of klim cans. I have no doubt that some of the klim cans provided some of the elements of a radio that was created inside the camp. It was so constructed that it could be dismantled. It was dismantled at all times except when the BBC broadcast came on. So, we were fairly well informed on what was happening in the war in the main, not in detail. When there was the crossing of the Rhine, we heard about it within hours.

Did you actually hear the radio yourself?

No, I never did. As a matter of fact, I'm sure that that was a very, very small nucleus of people and then they typed up a little piece of paper and there were runners that went to each barracks and delivered the news and destroyed the paper. That radio, I'm sure it was dismantled and scattered around the camp to where nobody could identify it. I mean any of the parts as being part of a radio and then reassembled to get the news.

So you did get some news.

We did. Nothing from the Germans, nothing at all.

Speaking of getting news, you told me in the first interview that we did, that your family, finally in March, I believe it would have been 1944, knew that you were a prisoner.

Correct.

Did you start exchanging letters with them, correspondence?

Yes, in a very limited (way). We were given postcards for one. Then a fold over sheet that would have been probably 9 inches high and maybe 4 inches wide, 3 or 4 inches wide that then could be folded up like a letter and you could write on the inside of that. Of course, all of that was censored.

I was going to ask you, was it censored by English speaking or at least English reading Germans?

Yes.

How about mail coming to you?

It was also quite sparse as well, but I did get notes from home.

Were they censored, the incoming mail?

Of course they were. One way that I wanted my family to know when I wrote my initial card – I had a sister who, shortly before I was shot down, was going into the WACS. So, in writing home, in an effort to get around the German censorship, I wrote that I hoped that my sister, Elmora, was enjoying her new dress. I'm sure my family knew, but I don't think the Germans could possibly know what I was talking about or find it offensive.

You said that it was sporadic.

Yes.

How was the mail transported? What was the agency that actually moved the mail from you to home and vice versa?

To my knowledge, all of the mail went through Switzerland.

Switzerland. So it was the Red Cross?

Probably, I don't know that; I wasn't there. But it's my impression that everything went through Switzerland and then back, after the Germans had cleared it. Then incoming, there, and then it had to come from Switzerland to us.

Do you have any idea how long it would take a piece of mail typically to get from you to home?

There was no rhyme nor reason to the length of time. Sometimes it might take 2 weeks and sometimes you might get something that was 2 months old.

Who were you corresponding with?

Primarily with my mother because you were allowed limited numbers of communications out. So, primarily, with my mother.

Do you have any of the letters sent or received?

I only have one or two. I have one that I wrote that my sister retained and gave to me. I don't remember exactly what I have.

We've been off record briefly while Joe Popowitch, the Veterans History Project Coordinator, brought us back a good number of photographs that you brought in today. He had them scanned into the computer and several of those will accompany the transcript. Without going into the specific photographs in too much detail, I noticed there was one of the guard tower, kind of reminiscent of American frontier outposts. In this picture, what is this material here that the fence is made of?

This along here, I believe, if I remember correctly, was toward the administration building of the Germans and they really didn't wish us to be observing everything that went on.

So sort of a privacy screen?

As you go down here, I don't think you will find the same thing. We could see through the fences.

So this is a large fence with some material sort of woven into it?

Yes, yes.

Are those sticks?

I don't know what they are, I don't even remember. Here, you can see there's nothing like that here. I'm sure it was to shield their administration buildings and the activity that went on there.

You've provided a few photos that are actually pictures of daily life inside the prison camp. The top one?

The top one is the delivery by the German of potatoes which then our own people would prepare into potato soup or whatever, however it could be done. This second one is loaves of the German bread that came in which were parceled out. I don't even remember what shares we got but I would imagine that each one of those loaves was probably shared by at least 4 or 5 people. Here's where the Germans brought in the barley soup in these containers.

It's a picture of a wooden hand cart/wagon, with what really look like milk cans.

That's what they look like, milk containers, yes. Probably ten gallons, maybe less, maybe 7 or 8 gallon containers.

One question about seasons. You mentioned that for morale you had the musical instruments and the baseball equipment, you said playing ball?

Yes.

That's fine during the months we can get outside and play sports. What type of activity substituted for athletics in the winter time?

Well, the Red Cross also brought in books. One of the ones that I read, with great interest; I'm not a medical person, was about the Mayo brothers, the history of the Mayo brothers. It was a long book, like 600 pages or something like that and I found it to be very interesting. There weren't a lot of them that were that interesting. A lot of them were English novels which were as predictable as our own Westerns are. The titled man and the poor girl who developed a love relationship.

With those activities and I phrased it as morale builders, what was the general morale of the camp?

It rose and fell pretty much with the news that we got from the radio that we discussed earlier. One other source of news, of course, was new arrivals. That was constant during the time that I was there. There would be new arrivals come in and, of course, that brought news that they had.

So you say the general morale sort of rose and fell. What, if you had to describe it as being hopeful or resigned, how would you describe it, if you can at all, in general?

I think we all felt that we were going to win the war and that all we had to do was to survive until it was over. You can imagine, as I described earlier about the machine gun pits being dug and pointed inward, that was not really uplifting...

Not a morale builder.

Not really a morale builder. During the Battle of the Bulge at Bastogne when the Germans were more than happy to tell us about what was happening was one time, because Hitler convinced them that this was a reversal of the war and that things were going famously. Of course, that lasted through what, 3 or 4 weeks, maybe, and then that collapsed. That's just an example of how it could rise and fall. I remember, one day, seeing a B-17 with parachutes coming down from it. And that was not a happy day. You know, having done it yourself and knowing what happened, it was not a fun experience to see. I don't know where the raid had been. There wasn't like a huge armada overhead, so obviously it had not been able to keep up with the formation and eventually had decided that it had to abandon.

So, how were your spirits?

I would rate them as being reasonably good. I had a big family; I had four brothers and four sisters, all of them older than myself. My mother was living, my father wasn't. I had a very solid sense of support from them even when I didn't hear from them. My health, you asked a little bit about my health, my health was basically good there. I did seek to go out and walk and keep a little bit of exercise and so forth. I never suffered an illness or a debilitating kind of thing. Nights, in bed, were sometimes not fun because the mind would wander, you know, into unpleasant areas as sometimes happens when you can't sleep at night.

As your time in the camp progressed into early 1945, first of all, was the news up to date enough that you knew the war might be ending?

We certainly knew about the Normandy, D-Day invasion. We knew about Patton and his activities and we knew that the Russians were closing in from the East and that up in the north of Germany that Montgomery was closing in from the West. It was obvious even to everybody, including the German Wehrmacht, that it was all over. Hitler just wouldn't quit.

Did their treatment or attitudes toward you change as that realization became more common?

I didn't deal enough with them. Our senior officers would be able to answer that, but I wasn't privy to that.

And the Jewish barracks, were they still segregated?

They were still segregated. Nothing dire happened to them to my knowledge.

I'm about to ask you about the actual liberation, but we've covered quite a bit here on your prison camp experience. First of all, you told me a couple of very amusing anecdotes and I don't want to make this sound too light because, of course, it was hard experience, but were there any other light moments or anything else that you reflect on that you want to share?

I mentioned the music; I mentioned the theatricals; I mentioned the sense of humor that everybody tried to maintain. I think the American Spirit was pretty indomitable there. I did mention that there were 2 or 3 people who ended their lives there, self-inflicted.

Actually, you told me that off record. Anybody in your barracks?

No. You asked about ups and downs. That was always a very disturbing thing for everybody, and I remember personally not having a feeling that I wanted to do that. But I had a sinking feeling that at some point I might want to, but that never occurred.

Well, you had all this time on your hands, and I would imagine that after one of these incidents there would be a lot of discussion about it. Did any of the people that knew these individuals that committed suicide, did they say they had any forewarning?

On the contrary. I think people talked about it VERY little. It was not...

Oh, I see.

They just...

Subject wasn't discussed.

Subject was not. At least not among the group that I was with.

I see. Just the fact that it happened and you trying to talk about the cause. Do you know how they committed suicide? Was that discussed?

No I don't [know. It was not discussed in my presence.]

In general, was there anything else about your experience over this, roughly, 18 months that we haven't talked about that you think might be of interest?

You mentioned the ending. That's about the only thing that I think is left.

Yeah, let's talk about the liberation.

I believe it was on May the 8th that ,come morning, our guards were gone; they just disappeared.

Disappeared.

For a few hours, and I can't be specific in this because I don't remember, for a few hours there was nothing going on. But then the Russians came. When I say the Russians, a very small contingent came. By that time we knew that we had been liberated. We were then, I believe, about 10 days, 8 or 9 days, still in the camp even after we were liberated because...

No transportation?

...there was no transportation. What happened was, they stripped down, took all the machine guns and so forth and other gear off the B-17's and there was an airport in Barth about 3 miles from our camp. They flew a flotilla of B-17's on a relay basis in there and

loaded on about 35 prisoners on each one and flew us to camp Lucky Strike in Northwest France.

You said they stripped the armament of these planes to lighten the load?

To lighten it, yes.

Before you actually were transported out, you said the Russians came and you were there for how many days?

7 or 8 at least.

Who was responsible, at that point, for feeding you and so forth?

Some of the supplies, the Red Cross supplies, were stored in a warehouse [near the camp], so we got more Red Cross supplies than we ever had because we were then in control. Our officers were in control. But an interesting thing is that our officers, very wisely I think, very much discouraged people from leaving the camp, even though we were liberated.

When you say liberated, it was really the Germans abandoned their post or did the Russians say...?

When the Germans left...

When you see the Russians, you know the Germans aren't in control.

The Russians came, the gates were open.

Did those Russians stay there or did they just move on?

Well, there were always Russians around there, but not an army of Russians just a representative group of them as they were advancing, I'm sure they went on.

7 or 8 days now, you know you're going home and you're eating Red Cross rations. Norm, one question, during your 18 months there, do you have any idea how much weight you lost?

I lost very little. I was 6 ft., 3 and I weighed 155 when I went in.

O.K. (laughing)

I was very slender so I lost very little weight; I would say probably no more than 5 or 8 pounds.

Part 7: Return to the States

So now we have the prisoners being shuttled over to the nearby airport and flying out on the stripped down bombers. You, personally, could you just described your journey from the prison camp in Barth through camp Lucky Strike back to the United States?

Yes. We marched, I say marched, we weren't exactly in military formation but we did walk from the prison camp to the airport, boarded the plane.

About how far was that?

3 miles. Boarded the planes and flew to camp Lucky Strike which was in the northwest part of France. Again, I spent maybe 4 or 5 days there waiting for transportation home. We boarded a troop ship at, I believe, Cherbourg, and crossed and landed at Boston.

Was the trip across the Atlantic eventful?

Only in terms of it being very crowded and uncomfortable. Of course, they loaded as many people on it as they could because there were a lot of prisoners and a lot of soldiers returning home. You know they were starting to reduce the presence of the military over there.

Now, was your family aware that you'd been liberated and that you were on your way home?

You know, I don't remember how that happened. You know, a long distance telephone call in those days was a not heard of kind of thing.

I didn't know if the Red Cross in any way made a communication.

No. I really don't remember how that came about. I'm confident that I wrote them a letter as soon as I got into camp Lucky Strike and sent it off and told them where I was and what the imminent plans were.

So the ship probably was uncomfortable, but at least it's going someplace you want to go. Brings you back, then what happened?

We were transported by train to Ft. Sheridan on the Great Lakes and given a leave. My brother and his girl friend who lived in Chicago, came up in their automobile and picked me up there.

Now, you're still in the military. One question, what rank were you when you were shot down?

Second Lieutenant.

And what rank were you at this point?

I was mustered out in December of 1945 and was automatically put into the reserves. The war was over. But nevertheless, I didn't ask to be put in the reserves, but I was put in the reserves and with a reserve appointment of First Lieutenant.

Going back, you had your leave. How long did that leave last?

I believe I had a 60 day leave.

60?

Yeah.

Would you describe your homecoming?

The most memorable, I guess, was with my brother and his girlfriend because that was the first woman I'd touched, among other things and first family contact. But then my mother, at the time, was living in Reno with one of my sisters. Of course, my homecoming there was very warm and joyful.

When you reunited with your mother, was that here or out in Reno?

That was in Reno.

You weren't discharged from active duty until December, did I get that right?

Yes. That's correct.

What did they have you doing from August until December? Where were you stationed?

I was stationed in Randolph Field in Texas.

Oh, so you were transferred down to Texas?

Yes. And that is where I was discharged. Now I remember. I was on the way down there at the time of the Japanese surrender. So I was on the way down there. I can't answer why the discharge took so long.

Part 8: Life After Military

So after you were finally discharged, what did you then?

I went back to Reno for a short period of time, then I went back to school. I had had about 3 years of college. But I went into Northwestern University, finished and got my Bachelor of Science in Business Administration.

Was that on the GI Bill?

Yes.

And after that?

After that I went to work for Continental Illinois National Bank. I was there for about 15 months. One of my military buddies was in the personnel department over at Kraft, and he recruited me to come to work for Kraft Foods, which I did. I spent 37 years there.

That was your career. You subsequently married?

Oh, yes.

When did you marry?

I married on May 23rd of 1953.

Children?

Two children.

One of the questions I was going to ask you and actually you led into it when you said you were recruited by a war time buddy to go to work for Kraft.

Yes.

What contact have you had with wartime buddies, especially fellow POW's?

Almost none.

The gentleman from Kraft, where did you know him from?

From Northwestern.

I see. Did you say he was also a wartime buddy or did I misunderstand?

No.

No, he was not.

No, he was not. I knew him from Northwestern University.

So you don't have any contact today with any of your...?

I don't. I'm a member of my graduating flying class [organization], but I've never attended any of their conventions or anything.

Conventions, reunions?

But I paid a life membership.

Do you get any periodic newsletters?

Yes, I get a newsletter about once a quarter.

Any other organizations, VFW or anything you joined?

Not the VFW. Of course I talked with the Veterans Administration to whatever extent necessary, but I'm not on any pension or anything so my contact with them is minimal.

I think it was before we went on record, I'm not sure at this point, but you mentioned these photographs that you have here. You use those in a presentation. Have you made many presentations?

No. I made one to the Men's club at the Presbyterian Church that I attend and this one. That's the only ones I have done.

And this one was where?

It was at Plymouth Place in La Grange. It was on July the 1st, 2004 and, of course, Plymouth Place is a retirement facility and a lot of our church members are over there.

Norm, I'm about ready to wrap up. The first thing I should ask you, is there anything at all, we've covered quite a bit in several hours in this interview, but is there anything at all that you think might be of interest that we haven't discussed?

Well, one thing that I thought about that I would like to put on the record and that is my admiration for the French Underground. I was with them for two and half months. Every

day of their life that I was with them, they were in danger. In other words, if the Germans had ever caught them sheltering us, it would have been curtains immediately.

And you told me that fact probably did happen to the young lady that escorted you.

I think it's very possible that it did, yes. But they were very selfless; they fed us a whole lot better than the Germans and had a lot less resources, I imagine. Although, I was almost all the time in the countryside. One of the places I was with a man who was on a farm but he was a butcher. Of course, I'm sure he wasn't supposed to, but he occasionally butchered an animal and didn't keep it all himself, spread it all around. Somebody else would probably bring him an animal, he'd butcher it and spread it all around. Had the Germans caught him at that they maybe not have killed him but they would certainly have censured him in some way. The French were daring; they were compassionate; they were caring, and I can't say enough good about the treatment I received in the underground.

Part 9: Conclusion

Norm, probably a final question would be, your experience both in the air and as a prisoner of war, how would you say that's affected or guided your life since then?

I don't know that it's had a great impact on it. For one thing, you know, being a flyer you're rather sanitized from the war. It's not like seeing your buddies blasted in front of you and having severe injuries yourself. I expected pretty much what I got when I was a prisoner of war. I didn't expect to be treated like a visitor. Therefore, I was not really traumatized by that. Again, being in a somewhat sanitized situation, I don't have the bad dreams that I'm sure some people have. I decided not to stay in the military, so I sort of divorced myself from that and started up where I left off. Went back to school and proceeded with my life as if that was behind me.

Do you have anything else you'd like to add to the record?

I wanted to get that in about the French Underground. And one that's kind of funny. When I was in solitary in Frankfurt, the British came over at night on a raid. I was terrified. I was there alone, for one thing, and you're confined for another. I was under the cot in my room and I don't think those bombs fell within 15 miles of me. I think they were off in the distance. You know, you always entertain the notion that they might be coming this way or something like that. That was a frightening experience. Think of the Germans, the German population that were in the midst of where those bombs were dropping.

If you don't have anything else, I thank you very much for sharing all this information with me and with The Veterans History Project and the Library of Congress.

You're more than welcome. You've been very courteous and helpful, too. I'm glad that I found you as long as I was going to do it.

Thank you, again and we're going off record.