

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

John William Baber

Conducted by Martin Willard Thomas

April 19, 2005

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In partnership with the Library of Congress

Part 1: Introduction

This interview is being conducted on April 19, 2005 at the Indian Prairie Public Library. My name is Martin W. Thomas. I am speaking with Mr. John William Baber. Mr. Baber was born on October 28th, 1919 in Maywood, Illinois and now lives in Westchester, Illinois. Mr. Baber learned of the Veterans History Project through Dorothy Ogden. Miss Ogden is the sister of Edna Madigan whom Mr. Baber is dating currently. He has kindly consented to be interviewed for the project. Here is his story.

Mr. Baber, how would you prefer to be addressed during this interview?

It's up to you. It doesn't make any difference to me.

Would you rather have me call you John or Mr. Baber?

Whatever you feel comfortable with.

If you don't mind, I'll refer to you as John.

Sure.

O.K. and you refer to me as Marty.

Part 2: Entering the Military

John, when did you enter the military?

I enlisted in July of '41.

That was before we were actually at war with any country.

That's correct.

Where were you living at that time?

I was living at my parents' place in Maywood.

What were you doing at that time?

At that time I was working as a photographer.

Who were you employed by?

Lawson Studios, Chicago.

So you were at portrait photographer?

No we were doing a lot of commercial stuff.

How did you get your background in photography? Was it all on the job training?

No, most of it has been through my years in school. I was always into photography quite a bit.

So this is an interest you had before you started the work with Lawson?

Right.

You already told me you enlisted; you weren't drafted. What prompted you to join the military?

Well, I wanted to get into the cadet training program, and I was told that what I'd have to do would be to go through the initial military indoctrination program. That's getting into, I would have to become a Private, etc., etc., to get into it.

So you enlisted in the U.S. Army?

That's right. At that time the Army and the Navy were one and the same at that time.

Army and Navy or Army and Air Force?

Air Force.

Army Air Corps. Where did you take your boot camp?

This was done at Camp Polk, Louisiana.

What were your first days like at boot camp?

Boy, you're taxing my memory here.

Any special memories, I mean either pleasant or unpleasant?

I would say it was a little bit of everything there because we got into a lot of indoctrination stuff, training programs and so forth. So it was all kinds of things that I had never got involved in before.

And probably after. I mean a lot of infantry training I would expect.

Yes.

Riflery and marching and drills and close combat.

Yes, all of that stuff.

You weren't a cadet yet was that right?

No, I wasn't a cadet because the cadet program was pretty well filled up.

Were you promised a spot in the cadet program?

Yes, right. I went through, let's see, after I got out of that I was with the Third Armored Division, Headquarters, Headquarters and within about, oh, I'm guessing, three to four months, Third Armored was shipped out and I was transferred to Seventh Armored Division, again Headquarters, Headquarters, and I was all the time, both at Third and at the Seventh, I was driver for a General.

So they were just holding you there waiting for a spot in the cadet program?

That's exactly what it was.

Any interesting experiences you recollect from your time with the Third and the Seventh Armored?

Nothing that would be outstanding. And at the end of the... The Seventh was moved out, and then they transferred me again to the Eleventh Armored Division. Again, I was just driving the Generals.

How were you notified that your slot became available in the cadet program?

I don't recall exactly. All I know is that I was transferred to, let's see, at that time I think I went to..., my primary was in, I forget the name of that first base now.

What state was it in?

It was in Missouri. Can't think of it right now.

Part 3: Training

That's O.K. If you think of it later we'll put it in. Basically, what did the primary training consist of?

Flight training, usually in PT-19's.

A lot of Ground School classes?

A lot of Ground School. To go through a cadet program, you went through, I believe it was nine weeks, I'm going back from memory now. Nine weeks on Primary, then you had another nine weeks in Basic, and then you went to Advanced and graduated as a Second Lieutenant out of Advanced, and that was at Altus, Oklahoma.

How do you spell Altus?

A-L-T-U-S. I hope I'm right on that spelling.

Well, the Primary you said was nine weeks and that was ground, and you actually flew. Before you're out of Primary, do you solo?

No, you solo in Primary. But you get a lot of ground school training before you get into your flight.

Any interesting experiences in Primary that you had?

Nothing that I can think of right now.

How big was your class? How many started, and how many finished roughly?

If I remember correctly, we probably had a class of, I'm really guessing on this, but I think it was around thirty, thirty-five people, men.

Roughly, how many didn't make it, washed out?

I would say that about half of the Primary washed out.

Really? So you were in the half that made it, and then you go to Basic. Do you remember where your Basic training was?

Basic was at ... I don't honestly remember right now.

John, do you remember what State?

I think that was, I think the Basic was Nebraska.

I think you said that was about nine weeks also?

Yeah, all of the programs were, the different phases, were about nine weeks.

How did Basic training differ from Primary training? What kind of planes were you flying?

Well, we'd get into a higher horse power engine. It was still a single engine type of deal.

Still a single engine. What kind of plane would you have flown then?

That was the BT-13.

Did you say BT or PT?

BT. B-T thirteen.

That was a single engine?

It was a single engine. It was made by two or three different manufacturers. I don't recall the names right now.

Did you learn any particular advanced skills on the BT-13, maneuvering or anything?

Well, this was what your Basic was for. You'd get into a little bit more operation of a higher powered air craft. You'd get into more maneuverability and so forth and so on.

At what point do they determine what type of military aircraft you're going to end up flying, whether it's a fighter or a bomber?

That isn't decided until the end of your Advanced Training.

Any particular memorable experiences in your Basic training?

That's fifty some years ago. I really don't recall anything specific.

Well, then, moving to the Advanced Training, what did that consist of?

Well, then we went into, in my case, we went into a Eighteen-Nine and that was meaning that we were really going to be put in bombers.

Oh, I see. I've heard of the Eighteen-Nine. Did that have a nickname? Was that the "Vibrator?" Just describe that plane for me.

The Eighteen-Nine was an all metal, two engine plane. I don't recall any code name for it.

What was that plane like to fly?

Very nice. That was a nice plane.

Very fast, very powerful?

Well, it wasn't that fast really. I don't recall the exact speeds on it, but it was a nice trim ship, nice to fly, but I don't recall any of the details on it, no.

Were you saying that once they assigned you to Eighteen-Nine training that that means that you're going to be a bomber?

I think that was the designation at that time. Some of the fellas' went into some of the single engine aircraft, the fighter aircraft. I don't even recall what they were flying now to be honest with you. But I knew once we got into the Eighteen-Nines, we'd be flying bombers.

Did that training include any tactical maneuvering or dropping simulated bombs?

Not in that Eighteen-Nine, no.

Did you fly any other planes before you graduated from Advanced?

No.

Anything else that we should discuss about Advanced Training before we move ahead?

Nothing that I can think of other than when we graduated from the Advanced training that's when we received our Commission and at that particular time, we were changed over from being an enlisted man, so to speak, and we were given our Officer designation and so forth at that time.

So you get your wings and your Second Lieutenant bars?

Get the wings and graduating to the Lieutenant bars.

How did you feel once you got your wings and your Commission? Was there a special pride there?

I suppose it was, sure, sure. It was really very, very interesting on it, shall we say.

You told me that only half of the class made it through on the Primary, and I didn't ask you, roughly how many people, what percentage made it through Basic?

I'm going to be guessing on this now. I'd say that probably seventy-five per cent got out of Basic and then in Advanced, I don't think we had many drop outs in Advanced. I think almost all of them graduated.

Still you must have had a feeling of accomplishment once you squeaked through.

Oh, sure, definitely.

During this time now, how long have you been in the service at the time you get your wings and your Commission?

Let me start calculating now. I went into the training class that I went into was Forty-three F. Meaning that I would graduate in, I think that was a, (let's see, A, B, C, D, E, F) that would be in June of '43.

And at that time you would have been in the service, this counts your time with the Armored Divisions, for almost two years?

Yes.

So, we've covered roughly, not quite, two years of your time in the service. Did you have any home leaves during that time?

Yes, I think I did. I don't recall exactly. I know it was a push program. We weren't really given any leave time unless it was something of an emergency set up on it. But I don't think I could give you the exact details of when we had leave and so forth right now.

Up to this point you'd been living at home before you went in the military. Were you still single?

At that time, yeah. I got married just before I went overseas.

How long after you got your wings and your Commission did you go overseas?

Well, we went into a Advanced or I should say a B-17 training program. We were shipped out, I think we were shipped out probably in November of '43.

So just a few months stateside for your ... Oh, where was your B-17 training?

B-17 was at, that was Altus, Oklahoma.

Oh, that was Altus. What did that training consist of?

Well, basically it was getting used to the B-17 aircraft. We would take certain missions, longer rides, so to speak, so that we'd know what it was like to be there for a longer ride and go on practice bomb runs and so forth and so on.

What did you drop when you did your practice bomb runs?

Well, we were dropping on a targeted area, but it was just a field, so to speak.

Somewhere out in Oklahoma, there's plenty of those.

Right.

And what did you drop?

Oh, we were dropping real bombs.

Oh, real bombs, not flour bags or ...?

I'm sure it wasn't high explosive type thing, but we were dropping real bombs so that you see the effect of what you were doing.

Was there any interval after you finished the B-17 training before you went overseas?

No, we were shipped out almost immediately.

John, you told me a few minutes ago that you did get married right before you went overseas.

Just before, the day before.

You told me that her name was Rosemary?

Rosemary came down to our so-called graduation affair.

Oh, I see.

We got married that one night, shipped out the next day.

Then she went back home? Was she living with her family?

She was a nurse at St. Cloud Hospital.

St. Cloud, Minnesota?

St. Cloud, Minnesota, and then she went back to her job, and she stayed there through the whole time I was in service.

Well, we'll talk a little bit later on; I don't want to get ahead of the game, your time in the military and time in the POW camp. So you departed for overseas. How did you get from the States to your overseas assignment?

We were shipped over on the Queen Elizabeth.

And you sailed out of New York?

Sailed out of New York. I'm pretty sure of that now. I don't say I could say that positively, but I'm pretty sure it was New York.

The reason I ask that is that I've heard some pilots actually flew their planes over, the ones that they were going to...

There were some that were doing that, but not at the time that I went over.

Anything noteworthy about your trip overseas?

I don't know what I could tell you except that they really worked that ship over to hold a lot of people. All the ballrooms were set up as a big barracks type of thing and so forth.

You were a photographer in civilian life; did you have a personal camera with you at any time?

No. I didn't over there.

So you don't have pictures of the...?

I didn't. I had almost everything that I had in the camp was lost when I went down, so I don't have any of that at all.

So you sailed to England, is that correct?

Yes, yes. Let's see, I think we landed in Scotland, and then we were, we went down by train, down to, the first place that we were set up, and I can't even remember the small town near Ipswich. Immediately went into our indoctrination program there. And we were flying missions within probably a week after we got there.

What outfit were you assigned to?

If I remember correctly, and I didn't have a chance to check this before I left today, I think it was the 95th Bomb Squadron.

95th Squadron. What Wing or Group?

I don't think I can tell you that now.

It was the 95th Squadron and your base was where?

Well, that's the exact town I don't know, but it was close to Ipswich. I don't remember the small town that we were in.

Do you remember anything about the indoctrination that we should talk about? Your week you spent before they actually put you in combat? Like what types of subjects they covered?

I don't really know of anything that was that different from a routine type of just getting acquainted. We were supposed to know the aircraft and at that time we didn't have the... Let's see I think the first planes that we had were just the E's, the B-17-E.

How does the B-17-E differ from non E?

Well, you've had the E and the F. Let's see, the F brought out the bomb... yeah, I think that was the bomb turret; I mean the turret under the plane. I'm trying to remember now, which plane had what. The F had the, no the G had the nose turret and we didn't have any... We had a gun up in the nose on the F, and I'm trying to remember, I think we were flying F's at the time that we went down. The G had just been coming. They were just bringing the G in as I remember correctly.

I'm going to ask you a question in a minute about being assigned a specific plane. But first, this indoctrination, did it include anything about what to expect, what to do if you are, in fact, shot down and survive?

Oh, sure, we were given all ??? on that. We were issued, of course, a 45 gun, but we were told that you're probably better off if you didn't carry the gun, because if you did get shot down, there was more chance that they would take a pot shot at you if you had a gun. So most of us did not carry a gun with us.

Did they give you any other survival tips like how to behave on being captured?

Oh, sure, sure. That was the usual on it. You would end up making sure that you didn't give them anything but your name, rank and serial number and of course, anything else was on the QT on it.

O.K., now I'm ready to ask you that question. You mentioned flying B-17-F and B-17-E so it sounds like you weren't assigned a specific ship that was yours for every mission?

We were assigned, a group was assigned a ship when we got there, and those were the F's that we were flying at that particular time.

Before we went on record here, we were looking at some photographs that you brought and a book that you have that refers to the San Antone Rose, was that the name?

San Antonio Rose, I think it was.

And I asked you about what I refer to as “Nose Art,” an illustration on the nose of the plane. You said that you didn’t have.

We didn’t have anything on our particular plane.

In your squadron were there ships that had “Nose Art?”

Oh yeah, sure. This was something that was... many of the guys wanted to get something like that on the plane and they did, you know, but not all ships had that.

It would seem that you’d be assigned to a specific ship before you’d go to the effort of decorating it?

Yeah, that’s right.

Do you think eventually you would have been assigned a specific ship?

Well, I think we were given a ship, and that was our plane,

Oh, O.K.

for that particular period of time. See, I was transferred out of the 95th into, and I don’t recall the number now, but we were flying the PFF equipment out of Alchomberry, and that’s the name of the town near where we were flying. It was kind of a secret type base because this was pretty classified equipment on it.

Before I talk to you about your Pathfinder equipment, did you fly any combat missions before you were assigned to ...?

Alchomberry?

Yes.

Yes, we did. As a matter of fact, I think we had eight missions, if I remember correctly, at the first base, the 95th.

So you flew eight combat missions with the 95th?

Yeah.

And then just two more with...?

With Alchomberry.

Let's just divide them, if we can, into the two stints. First the eight missions before PFF. What were your missions then?

I don't think I can remember the missions themselves.

Maybe not the locations but what was your task?

The task was to bomb. We would get up; we would go out as a group and go up to altitude. Usually we assembled over England, and we would get our formation set up and so forth. Then we would pick up the rest of a group or the flight that was going in on whatever it was. We would go in in our usual formation.

Typically, how many planes?

Each group had nine planes, and then you'd assemble three groups of nine, and that would become, I even forget the designation right now, and I don't recall but that was the way they were flown.

What type of targets would you have? I mean, were they tactical or were they strategic, bombing factories?

Almost all that was tactical.

So you were bombing troop units?

We were bombing, probably, I don't think it was troop units necessarily; most of it was bombing installations where we wanted to knock out some of their capability of making war, factories and so forth.

Oh, so there were some factories as well?

Oh, yeah. Most of what we went in on everything was going into factory areas.

Were these all in Germany?

Yes. Now wait, I take that back. Two of those were in France where they were just putting in some of the anti-aircraft stuff or the.... I'm trying to think of it now. Things they were shooting off.

You mentioned that on the phone. The Buzz Bombs, the V-1', the V-2's?

Yeah. V-2s is what they were called.

Did you actually hit one of those V-2 installations?

I really don't know whether we hit them or not.

But you know it was a target?

We went over there. Those were short missions. I think I only went on two of them, and those were ones where some of the planes would get two missions in a day because it was just going over into France. That was all along the France northern seaport areas and that, you know.

Do you remember any of the cities that were on your target list?

I know we did Frankfurt one time. Other than that I really can't remember the names of the towns in it.

Let's talk about your particular plane and crew. John, first of all, at this point, what was your rank?

At that time I was just, I think I made First Lieutenant somewhere in there, I don't remember just where.

What was your position on the plane?

I was flying two positions. One, I was pilot on some of them and co-pilot on some. Most of it was co-pilot.

Is there really much difference between being a pilot and a co-pilot on a mission like that?

Other than the command situation was with the pilot on it, and he was usually the older designated person on it.

Did you fly with the same crew every time you went up?

Every time up until when we changed.

Over to the PFFA?

We changed over to the PFFA Group, yeah.

Then you got different crew members?

No, we, the whole crew was transferred. There when we took off, and keep in mind I only flew two missions out of there, and we went down. When we took off, we would take off and fly to the base that was going to be the lead crew for that night. Then we would land at that unit and get the indoctrination, the check out what they're going to do etc., etc. Then we would take off and be the lead for that particular crew for that night. Usually what would happen is, we would pick up whoever was the commanding officer

of that base or that group that was going to be flying and in turn we would then be the lead crew for that mission.

I think before we talk about your missions and some of those experiences it might be good time just to find out about your life over there when you weren't up in the air flying a combat mission. What period of time are we covering here, roughly how long?

We went over there, we were put in, let's see, it was in November of '43. Of course, we did our general indoctrination of the area etc., etc. I would imagine that was probably well into December.

When were you shot down?

I was shot down February 21st, 1944.

So something maybe short or roughly four months that you were over there.

The first month I'm sure was all training, initial training around there.

During that time when you weren't actually performing missions, did you have any time off? Did you have any passes or leave time?

Oh yeah, we had passes to go into London if we wanted. But it was all short term stuff. Maybe we'd get out for a day. I don't recall ever actually going over there and getting... I don't think I was ever in any hotel or anything out of the base area.

So you'd go out for like a day trip?

Yeah, most of it was that.

You were already married. How were you staying in touch with your wife and your family?

Actually, that wasn't too much. I'd make a few phone calls. I don't think I even made that many phone calls.

You actually did make an overseas phone call?

Yeah.

That's the first time I've heard that.

That was very, very rare.

Pretty expensive wasn't it?

I think the only reason I did that was because I had a chance to get to a phone where it wasn't going to cost me anything, and I made the call.

Oh, it didn't cost you anything. How was the connection? I know it's fifty some years ago or maybe sixty.

To be honest with you, I don't think I could tell you exactly. I know it was a short call.

You heard her voice.

Yeah, yeah, that's about it.

How about letters?

Letters, we didn't get that many; we did get some. I would say, at the time, I was probably getting maybe one or two letters a week on it.

From your wife?

From my wife, mother and so forth.

And your mother did write also?

Yeah, but not that much. They knew that we were busy, and we had told them not to bother because we were being transferred and so forth all the time.

John, did you have siblings?

At that time, no. I just got married.

No, no siblings. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

Oh, sisters. I have two sisters and one brother.

Older or younger than you?

They were all younger.

Did they ever write you?

No, I don't think we ever had any of that because they knew what the situation was there. You couldn't expect to get things in on time, and we never knew whether we were going to be one place or another place.

I imagine so your mother handled the chore or the duty of writing to you.

Yeah, and it wasn't that much that they wrote really.

I was just wondering if your sisters were all looking up to you as the "Flyboy?"

No, no, I don't think so.

And your wife was still being a nurse in St. Cloud?

My wife went back to nursing in St. Cloud. Like I say, I think I only talked to her one time when I had that chance.

You say it was a free call?

Yeah.

How did you manage that?

I don't remember what the story was on that. I think it was we were in some office there and had a chance to make a phone call if I wanted.

Nice.

I don't even recall just exactly what it was all ... I know I was told that we're not to be able to mention where we're at or anything like that, you know. See, mail all came through, didn't even designate... Let's see, I think we just had a designation of a military post office box.

APO.

Yeah, APO.

You were using V-mail?

V-mail?

Was that what you were using, the little ...?

The little sheets, yeah.

The compact, light weight sheets.

Yeah.

During the roughly four months that you were over there, did you ever get to see any USO shows?

I don't think, I don't think I saw any USO shows over there. Not before the capture. The only time I saw the USO show was when we went back to Camp Lucky Strike.

O.K., we'll talk about that a little bit later. Anything else that you did to entertain yourselves when you were off duty?

Really, there wasn't that much to do. There wasn't that much to do. It was just .. We were supposed to be always prepared, and they would notify you the night before that tomorrow was a mission. Naturally, you're supposed to get some sleep on it 'cause you're up early to get briefed and so forth on it.

During the days, in these four months, subtracting the time you were in the indoctrination, you had ten combat missions, what did you do the rest of the time during the day? Were you getting other flying time or other duties? How did you occupy your time?

I really can't think right now of where we did anything other than playing cards, just killing time between missions. Because technically speaking, you were there, you were able to be scheduled for anything at that particular time.

Part 5: Combat

I'm ready to talk about your combat missions if you are.

I don't know whether I can tell you much about the combat missions. Now what ...?

Well, you had eight of them, and we've already talked about the targets. Of those eight bombing missions, was there any, well first of all, defense, enemy defenses against your missions, did you encounter attacks by enemy fighters?

One time we had a fighter come through, fly right through the group.

A single fighter?

A single fighter. He was dead before he got through very far because he was just running into all kinds of fire, fire power. At least we thought he was dead anyway. I heard from some of the other crew members saying that he's down, or going down or something like that.

But he actually came in guns blazing?

Oh, yeah, yeah, he did. Now, if he'd hit, he'd do some damage, you know. But they took a chance once in a while to fly through a particular group. Either that or maybe he was dead before he went through.

So, he was flying at you straight on.

Coming right straight through. Don't forget, we're flying in a group of nine planes and we're staggered.

Right.

The whole thing's staggered. So, he came through, I know I could see, I saw him coming in on the particular thing and didn't have a chance to see much else on it. He was going into the particular group, and I just heard from some of the others saying, "He's down" or something like that.

So, he's taking on nine planes, and how many forward facing guns would we have? You said you had nose turrets.

No, we didn't have a nose turrets. We weren't flying ... We didn't have the nose turrets in there, but we did have a Top Gun.

Top Gun, so that's nine.

The Top Gun was the same thing.

Right. So there's nine there. And what other forward facing weaponry did you have?

Well, that's about all we had. They had ... That's about the only gun that he would have had there, the Top Gunner.

They got him anyway. Did you have a Belly Gun?

We had the Belly Gun. The F had the Belly Gun.

Could he face forward?

End Tape 1 side A

We just ran out of tape and when we did John was telling me about the armament on the B-17's that he flew and we just agreed that the German fighter plane that went through the formation didn't really stand much of a chance.

John, were there any other attacks by air against your group?

Mostly, most of it was flack. That we hit almost every time.

Almost every mission you encountered ...

Some flack

Flack. Describe that in general. What's it like to be flying in a plane and you go through a flack field.

Well, you're flying and you see one burst up ahead of you then you see a second burst and then you wait for the third one to see if it hit you or whether you got through. The tail gunner, lots of times, would holler out that he had a burst at, you know, at six o'clock or whatever it was that he was giving us notification of.

What did the flack look like visually?

It's just a big, like an explosion of a shell.

I've heard it described as leaving a lot of black smoke, darken the sky?

Yeah, it's just a ... If you've seen the explosion of any shell, it's just you get black and fire, kind of a fiery center for a momentary deal and the rest of it is all smoke.

What did it sound like?

We couldn't hear it.

You did not really hear it.

No, you couldn't hear it up there.

Did any fragments, flack fragments, hit your plane?

Oh, yeah. We were hit quite a few times, but it didn't do any damage, not appreciable damage. In some cases they had kept the plane out; it had to be repaired and so forth, but they were very good at repairing these ships quickly. They would patch them up pretty good.

Of those eight missions, what things stand out in your mind the most, either by being hit by flack or by ...?

I think the flack was the thing that we always worried about more than anything else. On the mission that we were hit, this is the flack, the flack knocked out two engines. This just made us ... we were out of the picture altogether.

This was on that tenth mission?

Right.

I've heard that, maybe even the intent of the flack, one of the biggest, most devastating effects is it gets sucked into the propellers and the super charger and chews up the guts of the engine is that?

See, we were flying prop planes.

Right.

There was no super charger on them.

Oh, they didn't have a super charger for the carburetors?

No, no.

But it would somehow get into the manifold and start chewing things up.

Well, if it got, if you started getting hit in the engine, the biggest thing there, the bad thing there was if they hit an oil line or something like that where you lose your oil ...

Or hydraulic line.

Then the engine, as a matter of fact, one engine in our particular case, one engine was running wild. The prop had, the crankshaft had broken. The prop was just spinning, so to speak, and you just couldn't do anything on it at all and that becomes more of a drag than anything else on it, you know.

Before we get to the mission where you were shot down, is there anything else that you want to talk about on those eight bombing missions?

Nothing, nothing really happened other than we were hit by flack, but nothing that was really damaging. It would damage the plane to the extent that it had holes in it and so forth, but nothing that wouldn't let it fly.

What were the general emotions of you specifically, but also the crew?

I think we were all scared most of the time.

And did you talk about your mission, after the fact, with the crew?

Oh, sure. You'd review what happened. This guy came in and he was doing this and that.

Sort of lessons learned?

Yeah, yeah. I don't recall any of that kind of stuff, though.

Roughly, what was the longest mission in terms of either air time or distance?

I think the longest that we were up was running about, I think it was around nine hours, yeah, that's about the longest.

I'm ready to talk about missions nine and ten. You said that you were assigned to this different...

Elkenberry.

Elkenberry.

Which was Pathfinder equipment.

Would you describe the Pathfinder, what it did, how it worked as much as you can?

The object of the Pathfinder was to be able to bomb through the clouds so that we would get our figure. The Bombardier would be able to see the configuration on the ground through the clouds on it. It was a radar type of device that was picking it up. He would be able to bomb through the clouds and get the visual indication of where the factory was and so forth and so on.

It worked on a radar principle?

It was radar, yeah.

Mission nine, how did that go?

I don't recall specifically on it. Nothing eventful.

Let's talk about Mission Ten then.

Well, Mission Ten was the one that we were hit. Once we ...I'm sure it was flack that got us. We must've been hit by one of the explosions in the air.

And you said it got two engines?

We had four engines.

But I mean...

Two engines were hit.

Both on the same wing?

No, one was on one wing and one was on the other. But the reason we were really lost the power and everything else was the fact that the oil pressure was down.

So if that oil line hadn't been severed, could you, theoretically, made it back on two engines?

It depends on where your oil pressure is knocked out. If your oil pressure is knocked out some places, you could knock out all four engines at one time. I think that's what happened in our case because we were just losing altitude. We started losing altitude pretty fast, couldn't keep up with it.

So, who makes the decision to abandon the plane?

Well, the decision there, see, don't forget, we go, when we flew into this other base, it was going to be the lead crew. We would be the lead plane, but we would pick up the Commander or whoever was the one designated by that unit to fly the mission. He would then become the First Pilot on that setup.

Had you already made your bomb run before you were hit?

We had made the bomb run.

So at least you're not carrying your bombs anymore.

Right.

You've got this secret equipment on board, what are your orders in case your plane is going to go down?

We didn't have any specific orders on that other than the fact that we were to act ignorant as to what we had and so forth and so on.

Were there any devices on board to destroy the equipment like a thermite grenade or anything you could destroy your...?

To my knowledge there was nothing in there that would destroy that equipment. I know the bombardier was the one who was in charge of that. I'm not sure just whether he had any instructions to do something about that or not, I don't recall now.

Where were you when your plane went down? Were you over Germany?

We were actually; we were hit as we were coming into Holland, coming back. The plane went down in the Zierter Sea. We know that because we didn't hear anything at the interrogation when we were captured. If they had known what we were flying, we'd still be there, and they'd be talking to us. But the plane went in the Zierter Sea.

How deep is that?

Boy, I don't really know. Deep enough that it's going to hide a plane. They're not going to get at it right away.

So, the order is given to bail out, what happened then?

Once the decision was made to do that, the object was to get everybody out, and they usually went out through the bomb bay in most cases. Actually, the Tail Gunner would have to get out and the guy that was in the Ball Turret would have to end up getting up. Most of us went out through the bomb bay.

John, how many crew members were there on the plane?

When we were flying that one, we had actually, we had nine crew members, but we had the one extra person, which made ten.

What was the extra person?

That was the Commander.

Oh, I misunderstood. When you said you picked him up, you physically picked him up; had him in your plane.

We landed at their base; he then took over as the First Pilot.

What rank was he?

I don't recall. I would imagine he was probably Lieutenant Colonel, Major, one rank like that.

So, there were ten of you on board, did anybody go down with the plane?

One did not show up.

You don't know if he bailed out or not?

We don't know what happened in that particular case. We think that he probably got out and might have gone into the Zieten Sea.

What order were you going out of the plane, roughly?

See I was kind of an extra passenger at that particular time.

Were you Pilot or Co-pilot?

I was Co-pilot on the ship that day, so the first pilot took the co-pilot position, so I was the extra man, so to speak, on the particular deal. I would say I wasn't the first out, but I was probably third or fourth out, something like that.

Did you go out the bomb bay doors?

Bomb bays.

Did you have any hesitation in actually jumping?

Oh, my God. That's the first time I came close to doing it in my pants that I can ever think of.

Laughter

Psychologically, that's a helluva sensation.

Yeah, sure. Had you ever had any training at all on how to land?

Oh, we got training on what to do and so forth and so on. We'd never practiced anything.

You never actually did a jump?

I had never jumped before until that time.

But, I mean, they told you a little bit about how to land and roll?

Sure they told you how to do it and so forth and so on.

So when you jump, you don't have a static line, right? You have to pull your own rip cord?

Oh, yeah, yeah. There's no static line. But that was easy enough to get at, you know.

What were you thinking while you were walking back to that bomb bay?

To be honest with you, I don't remember exactly, but I know full well, I think I was like everybody else at the time; "What the hell's going to happen now?"

I bet as you got close to looking down and seeing daylight, you had some ...

Not only that, but don't forget, there were clouds down there, too. So actually, we got out and I would say, the majority of us just got out at the minute that we could've gotten out.

So you really didn't have a whole lot of time to contemplate, you were just there and fall.

Yeah.

So, then what happened? Now, you're out, you pull your rip cord, then what?

Once I pull the rip cord, you got the chute there, you're going down through the clouds and I noticed that I was coming into some tree so naturally, I pulled the cords on one side to try and ease myself away from the trees.

So you did have some training in spilling air to move the chute?

Oh, yeah, well, we knew that; that's all basic training in handling one of those. We didn't have the kind of chutes in those days they have today which you can really steer yourself pretty well. All we had to do was pull the air out of one side or the other so that we could drift this way or that way on it.

Roughly, how long did it take you from the time you left, I mean if you have any recollection, until you hit the ground?

To be honest with you, I couldn't give you any time sequence on it.

I mean do you have time to be thinking while you're in the air?

All I'm thinking of is, "Now, what am I going to do when I get through these clouds?" And the clouds were, my guess at that time was that I probably came out of the clouds at about, maybe, two thousand feet, something like that. That's when I saw the trees and that's when I started to pull.

So you had presence of mind to do that?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

I've heard from some others in your situation that when the chute opened some of them were injured from that. Was that a sharp ..?

I didn't...

How about your landing, what was that like?

Well, the landing on it, it must have been a hard landing because I was out for probably twenty minutes.

Oh, it knocked you out?

Yeah, yeah. I was either unconscious or just didn't have my whole wits about me, or whatever it was.

So you hit really hard.

Yeah, that was what you get from spilling the air.

I see.

See, when you start spilling the air, you're start going down faster.

What kind of helmet, if any, were you wearing?

All I had on was my regular goggles and the strip.

Just that soft leather ...?

Yeah and not only that, I only had on the heated suit. The heated suit is just a thin thing like a thin jacket.

This was in February. What was the weather like then?

It was cold, it was cold. I was out over night. I managed to, when I got down, I pulled the chute and hid it as best I could. Then I started walking and usually trying to keep myself so I couldn't be seen.

Man, you've already been knocked out.

Well, I was out for, I'm guessing I was probably out some period maybe five minutes, ten minutes, something like that.

Probably, sure. Were you registering any pain yet?

No, I didn't have any indication of anything that was wrong.

You didn't see any of your fellow crew members yet, at that time?

No. I didn't see them until we got back to Frankfort where they were bringing all of the people into Frankfort for indoctrination.

So you walked and then what happened?

Well, I was out over night on the particular thing.

With this thin jumpsuit.

Yeah, I was getting cold. As a matter of fact, I thought a couple of times of going back and maybe getting the chute to get some warmth on the thing. I said, "Well, no, that maybe that isn't a smart deal."

Were there any houses around?

I didn't see anything where I landed.

So you didn't have an option of just going up and knocking on a door and saying, "Take me in."

Oh, no, I wouldn't have tried that.

But this was Holland.

Yeah, this was Holland, but I didn't know it at the time, but it was Holland.

Oh, I see.

Part 6: Capture and Confinement

But it was Holland. But I did, the next morning and this was early in the morning when just at the break of daylight, I was walking and this other individual noticed me, and he led me to believe that he would take me someplace where I could get some food and so forth. Seemed like he was friendly.

He was a civilian.

Yeah, he was a civilian, sure. I think he really was probably thinking that he was doing me a favor because what he did, they brought me into a house, they were feeding me and then the Luftwaffe came in. They came in and someone said, "For you, the war is over," or something like that.

You're the third person that's told me that. It must've been a phrase they knew in English, "For you, the war is over."

Yeah, yeah.

So these were military ...?

These were Air Force, German Air Force personnel. I really feel, that because it was Air Force, I was treated better than I would have been if it had been Army personnel.

So what happened then?

They took me into a, I don't know whether it was a police station or some kind of a military operation. There I was just put in a holding cell for the time being. Then I was transferred over to this indoctrination center. Let's see, I took the train ride... Yeah, that was I went from that local town and then I was taken by train to Frankfurt. This is where people, I was alone, and I probably had three military people taking me to this place, and I'm glad I had those military there.

To protect you against the civilians?

Oh, the civilians were throwing tomatoes and other stuff like that at me.

This was at the train station in Frankfurt?

At the train station, yeah. Going into that station, not inside it but going into it.

So, they were actually targeting you with tomatoes and so forth?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

I've heard that they actually grabbed people and hung them there, too.

I've heard that story, but I didn't see any indication of that.

At this point, you're still by yourself?

Yeah, yeah.

With the three military people.

I haven't been brought to the interrogation center, and I was being brought into that interrogation center in Frankfurt.

Then what?

When I got in there, they put us into individual rooms. It was very cold; I know that because I didn't have the...all I had was that heated suit, and that doesn't have any warmth to it at all. Other than that, I went through the program, I think it was the next day I got to talk to some officer that could speak English, and he was asking questions like, "Why do you come in and bomb our, your homeland?" That's what he said to me because my name is Baber, so he recognized it as German.

So his questions were like philosophical questions, he wasn't trying to get real information from you?

He was asking, "Who were going to bomb?" I went through the usual that we were told to do: name, rank and serial number, and I think they understood that. And I think, at the

time, they probably had a lot of other people to interrogate, so I got through it pretty quickly on the particular deal. Next thing I knew, I think it was about a day after that, they put us in a boxcar for Barth, Germany.

Roughly, how long a train ride was that?

Oh, boy. I went through two bombings where... You know, we were bombing over there all the time, and I would say that we were probably in there for, it must have been almost three days.

On the train?

On the train.

Did they ever let you out?

Well, we just got out to.. Once in a while we were able to get out and walk around just a little bit.

Go to the bathroom?

Yeah, well, you were supposed to be able to do that in the car. They had a thing there that you could use as a bathroom in the car, you know. They had a lot of straw in that place.

Did they feed you?

They fed us, but it wasn't very much.

You say you went through two bombings, in other words Allied bombing attacks on the railroad while you were moving on it?

While we were moving from there over. Well, when I say I went through two bombings, they didn't hit our thing at all, but I could hear the bombing. What happened was: they pulled the train into a yard if they know it's going to be that way, and they make it look as if it's just a train that's not moving.

But if the trains were being used to transport prisoners, didn't they have any markings on the roofs of the cars to show that there ...?

I really don't know, I really don't know whether they had it or not, I doubt that. I doubt if they had it. I think what they would have love have had done would be to have one of our planes bomb one of these trains and kill all of us.

Do you have any idea how many boxcars there were with prisoners in them on your train?

I really don't think I can give you the answer on that.

Well, how many were in your car?

Oh, we were filled in that car. I'm going to, I'll make a guess that we probably had, oh, maybe twenty, twenty-five in that car.

So there were a lot of planes being shot down in that period.

Oh, yeah, that was the time when we were really hitting them in those days, and we were losing planes, too. Our chance of coming back, statistically, was always figured. We've got a hundred and twenty-five per cent chance of not coming back – that's how we were losing the planes.

So, three days in transit to Barth, what happened when you arrived?

Well, we wound up getting into the Barth area, and we were just met by, I think it was, I think that was still Air Force personnel, too. Met by Air Force personnel, and we were marched out to where Barth was. They didn't have trucks for carrying you or anything like that.

You just had to march.

You had to march.

You were still wearing just your jumpsuit?

Yeah.

How long was the march, roughly, distance or time?

From the station to the other?

Yeah.

Oh, probably wasn't that far. My guess would probably be, maybe, well maybe, a mile, mile and a half, that's about all.

This is still February, right?

Yeah, yeah. But don't forget really, up in that part of the country, that sun, if the sun's out, that sun warms up that area awful fast. We used to lay out at the barracks, lay at the side of the barracks where the sun was shining, and we'd lay out there with just our shorts on so we'd get sun tans.

Even in February?

Oh, yeah, yeah. You really could.

I may be getting a little bit ahead of myself but, during the entire eighteen months that you were there, did you ever get any other clothing to wear, or were you in that jumpsuit the whole time?

No, no. We were given... What were we given, let's see. I'm trying to remember now. I know the jacket, I still wore the jacket. That was the only coat that I had was that jacket during the whole time I was there.

That was something that the prison camp issued to you?

No, no. That's the one that I had.

Oh, you had a jacket with you?

Well, the jacket is my flight jacket which is a heated suit jacket.

Oh, oh, I thought it was like a jump suit, so it was just a jacket and then?

No, I'm trying to think of what they issued us, now. I think they gave us, what the devil did they give us at that time? I honestly don't remember right now.

Well just thin, would you describe it as cloth with wires running through it, like an electric blanket?

Yeah, that's exactly what it was. It was a, it was a, like a summer jacket but heated coils, heated wires through the whole suit.

So none of this fleece lined leather ...?

But that's only, that's only if you're plugged into something in the plane, yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

No there was no leather on it at all. But that was the standard thing that we wore.

So it's just whatever you, sort of a come as you are party. Whatever you were shot down in, that's what you're going to be wearing.

Yeah, that's exactly right for that period of time. Then, I'm trying to remember they gave us... They must have given us some clothes, but I can't remember ever, ever getting clothes, now that I think about it, but they must've given us some clothes.

Do you remember anything at all about your initial processing when you first got to the ...?

To the camp?

Yes.

I don't think there was much processing on it.

Did they issue you a prison I.D. or anything like that? An identification card?

We didn't have any prisoner number or anything like that, that I recall.

As far as order and discipline in your camp, was that administered by the German guards, by your own officers, or a mixture of both?

We were permitted to operate as a military unit using the personnel that we had that were the commanders for our particular camps. The main camp, Camp Unit One over there, was where we had all the key officers. We had Lieutenant Colonel and Majors and stuff like that were in one particular placement over there. Other than that, we had one person that was assigned to being the Room Commander, and he was nothing more than a figure head.

Well, how many men to a room?

There were sixteen men to the average room.

Did you stay in that same room with the same fifteen other men the entire time you were there?

Yeah, other than a couple of times there was a couple of changes of personnel in there. But most of it was, through that whole period, was one group of sixteen men.

What caused the change of personnel?

I believe it was where one was transferred over to a sick bay for an extended period of time, then they put somebody else in there. That's the only thing I can think of where there was a change of personnel on it.

I have a number of questions about your treatment, your food, your living conditions, morale and so forth. But maybe that's going to be difficult to answer when we're covering the whole sixteen months, er, eighteen months.

Well, it's not eighteen months, it probably ended up being what, about fourteen, about fifteen months probably, something like that.

I'll probably just ask the questions and then if you, as you think about it, well these things changed over the time that I was there, you just fill that in.

O.K.

First question would be: How did your German captors at the prison camp, guards, treat you.

The guards were doing their job. Most of them didn't speak English. They were looking for things that we were trying to do to get out and so forth. They would have different; we'd call them ferrets, that would be going under the floors.

Of the barracks?

We were all in barracks that the floor boards were up about, about that high, so that somebody could crawl under this thing.

Showing about two and a half feet.

Yeah, something like that. And they were doing it to come in and listen periodically. Of course, we were always alert to the fact that if we heard anything we would advise everybody else to keep quite and so forth and so on.

This ferret activity, was that a day-to-day thing or just periodically?

I think it was really a periodic thing. It's not where they did it every night. You'd never know when they they're going to end up doing it.

During the time you were there, John, were there any escape attempts?

Oh, we had quite a few. They had a couple. Well, one, we had a tunnel; it was dug outside of the main compound, and the problems we had there, we were hiding the dirt. I wasn't involved in digging or anything like that. But there were one or two others at the other group, barracks, that were doing it. What they did, we had to lose the dirt so the guys were all taking their walks around the compound and they would lose it gradually on the walk around the compound. They stored it up in the attic, so to speak. They also flushed it down the toilet until it got everything clogged and so forth and so on.

When they would take it on their walks, were they hiding it inside their clothing?

What they would do, they had set up a bag that each one could carry on both sides of the pants and they as you walk along you would have another string that would just let part of that out.

Down the pant leg?

Yeah, just a little bit at a time as you're walking.

It seems to me they'd be walking sort of funny.

Well, it worked. I didn't get involved in it, but it was working. I know the guys lost an awful lot of the dirt around there.

And the idea of the tunnel was to just tunnel under the outer perimeter?

They actually had the tunnel finished outside of it. What they did, they caught them almost immediately as soon as they got out of the other end of the tunnel.

What happened to them?

Well, the guys that they caught there, I think that they put them in the, I think it was three weeks or four weeks in the hoosegow, a room they had for bad boys, and the room was probably the size of this table here only higher, of course. So, you were there for that period of time.

Were there any other escape attempts?

There were a few other things that they tried. I don't recall. We even had an "Escape Committee." If you were going to plan on going through an escape, you had to do so through this Escape Committee so they knew what was going on. Then they'd try to work it out so they could do it, you know.

Were there any successful escapes?

The only successful one that we had, we had, I think, a half a dozen of them got out, but they were caught, probably, I'm going back on what I heard, they were caught in the next town or somewhere around there, and they were all brought back. And we were notified that they were all brought back, too.

Sure they wanted you to know that it was not successful.

Yeah. But there was nobody that was ever, one thing that I always thought that they might find and be... somebody'd get shot. Because we played baseball and things like that and there were, let's say that that's the fence over there. They had another string of wire here which was six foot or eight foot from that fence. And you were never to go beyond this particular wire. If they did the guards had a right to shoot you. A couple of the guys' baseballs got over there and they, the guards actually took shots at them. Or they were trying to make you think they were taking shots at them. If a ball went over there, we were supposed to call a guard and the guard would go over and get it for us.

In talking about their treatment of you, were there any guards that stood out as being particularly sympathetic or particularly sadistic?

I don't recall of any of them that was really sadistic. We had guards that would want to trade and guards that were friendly from that point of view.

What did you have that they wanted to ...?

Food. D Bars, cigarettes. Oh, cigarettes was a good trade. But they had to be careful, because if they were caught with American cigarettes, something was going on, you know.

You mentioned the food. Were the D Bars coming through Red Cross packages?

Sure, that was the only way we got them.

O.K. How was your supply of Red Cross packages? How often did they come? Do you have any feeling that any of them were being stolen before they got to you?

Well, we always figured that they were probably stealing part of them. I tell you, most cases we probably were given the equivalent of one box per week.

Per man?

Per man which was, I would say that they probably shipped in three for every one that we got. So they were probably taking it and using it other places on the thing.

Before they even made it to the camp?

Sure.

To your recollection, if you can, what would be in a box?

Well, for example, one was the chocolate D Bar which was probably a four to five ounce bar of concentrated chocolate.

Did it really taste sweet like chocolate or was it just strictly nutrition?

It was, it had a sweetness taste to it, but it was more nutrition. Everything in the boxes we got, the Red Cross parcels as we called them, everything there was highly nutritious food. They would always have a can of Spam.

So, there would be one D Bar?

Yeah, usually only one bar in each package.

And a can of Spam.

A can of Spam. We'd get, what else did we have in there? We'd usually have a box of prunes. That incidentally was good for making home brew. I'll explain that ...

Please do.

What else did they have in there, now that I think about it? Gee, I'm trying to think now what else was in there.

Anything to drink, canned milk?

No. Oh, come to think of it yeah, they did, they had

KLIM?

The KLIM, yeah. We did get that. That was, as a matter of fact, that was the biggest part of the Red Cross parcel because that was the round can about that tall, you know. That's right, that was the milk there.

Cigarettes?

Cigarettes were a part of that parcel, too.

How many cigarettes in a pack would be in there?

I think it was two or three packs in each carton. See I didn't smoke, so I used to use it for trading or we'd gamble with them. We'd play cards for cigarettes. What else was it we had now? I think they had some coffee in there and tea.

Any candies, I mean besides the D Bars?

I don't think there was any candy except the D Bar. We did have salt, some salt and pepper was always in there and then the coffee, I remember that.

What about your actual prison rations? What kind of food were they giving you?

Well, that, the only thing that they brought in, the only thing they brought in for us was rutabagas ...

End Side 2

Once again, we ran out of tape, and after the tape ran out, but before I realized that we were out, John and I did discuss a little bit more about the prison rations specifically rice and potatoes. John would you please tell me again about the rice, the condition it was when it came in and what happened with that?

Usually they would bring the rice in, the big bags, I'm not sure the weight factor, but I thought it was probably fifty to eighty pound bags, something like that. Whoever was on cooking duty at that time would take the rice and dump it into the vat that was being used at that time. In most cases, the rice they brought in was full of bugs. So, anytime we cooked rice, you'd have to start by skimming off on the hot water all the particular bugs, which they did.

You mentioned before, I think, when we were actually out of tape, that one of your photographs shows this big cooking vat.

Yeah, I think there are one or two of them in there that shows the vats that they used in cooking.

We'll try to incorporate those photographs with the transcripts.

O.K.

Who was doing the cooking? Was that German personnel or prisoners?

No, no. This was our personnel.

Your personnel. You had a community kitchen?

Yeah. Had a community kitchen that took care of the whole compound. As a matter of fact, that community kitchen, let me see, did that take care of both one and two? I think, if I remember correctly, that took care of one and two and then as they built the new compounds, they had a complete kitchen in each one of the new compounds.

I see. We also talked, after the tape ran out, about potatoes. One of your photographs shows a big load of potatoes being spilled out onto the ground outside. What was the condition of the potatoes?

I don't think I ever had a chance to really examine it. I would imagine it's a... never heard any comments on it. Probably a typical potato. But the problem is that somebody had to do the cutting of potatoes, peeling them and so forth. So, they had different guys that did KP work, you know.

Absent the Red Cross packages, in other words, just the food that the prison authorities provided you, what would a typical meal have been and how many meals a day did you eat?

We just had one main meal a day. Other than that we would use our own little KLIM Can Furnaces that we made up in each room.

So you're saying that the prison authorities only provided one meal a day.

That was all we ate at the Mess Hall, yeah.

And what would that typically consist of?

Well, that was usually, if we had any meat at all, that was usually going to be meat that came in, horse meat. I don't think we, I can't recall when we ever had any kind of meat

except horse meat on it. We would take and make up something with Spam. Each Red Cross parcel had one can of Spam.

I want to ask you some specific questions about prisoner innovations with meals that you made up. The Mess Hall meal that was once a day. What time of day would have been?

Well, usually that was towards the evening hour.

Late afternoon or early evening?

Late afternoon, something like that.

Of course, we've talked about the potatoes and the rice and the rutabagas and the horse meat. That was basically it, no jam, butter, bread?

We had jelly that came in with the Red Cross parcels periodically. I don't think I've ever seen anything furnished by the Germans in the form of jelly, jam, peanut butter, anything like that.

No bread?

Bread, they would give us bread. We'd get one loaf of bread per person every two weeks.

Every two weeks?

Yeah, but this was the heavy, heavy bread. The only thing we had a problem there was that it would get moldy. What we would do, we'd have to cut off the mold and once we cut the mold off then we had more bread left. But we got the equivalent of one loaf of bread every two weeks.

So, now going to the other meals that you fed yourselves, were those kitchens authorized by the authorities, or were they clandestine kitchens?

Well, they were there; the Germans knew they were making up the meals in that kitchen, if that's what you mean?

Yes. So would your kitchen be right in your own sixteen man room?

No, no, no, no. This was a kitchen for the compound itself. That's why I was saying, one, compound one and compound two were the originals of this camp, and they only had one kitchen and one bath facility for those two compounds.

Well, now, the KLIM Can furnaces, excuse me, stoves, where would you set those up?

Usually it was in one corner close to wherever the heating facility was for that particular room.

So that would actually be in your room?

That's in the room.

And they didn't have any prohibition for fire reasons, fire safety?

Well, we were, they looked at it and said it was O.K. In most cases each room had an area for a stove, and we would do this in conjunction with that area. Of course, there was kind of a brick base in there and so forth so that it would, more or less, keep from starting a fire.

You already described the KLIM Can as being, sounds like it would be close to the size of a tomato juice can or would it be smaller than that?

No. KLIM Can was closer to the size of a... , how am I going to describe it? The powdered, you know the powdered milk cans that you get today? They're roughly four to five inches in diameter.

O.K.

And they were a height of approximately three, three and a half inches, that's what we would call a KLIM Can.

How did you make those into a stove?

First of all they would take and, take the bottom and top off of it. Now you've got a sheet of tin. Now we start forming the tin together so that you can have bigger pieces of tin, and then you make up what would be the equivalent of a stove area, and that's the way we did it.

What would you use for fuel?

For that we were using the pieces of coal, we had pieces of coal that we would get for our furnace there. Use some of that, and that's about the only thing we had on it, yeah.

Then your cooking utensils, would you make those out of KLIM Cans also, the pots or pans or whatever?

Some of them did do that, yes, they were made out of that.

What sort of things would you cook in your homemade cooking facilities?

Most of it was for small meals; coffee, we made coffee, we were always heating coffee on something like that.

Was this a community effort? Would you all go into ...?

Each room would make your own coffee and so forth. Of course, you still had coffee that you could have in the main kitchen for your regular meal, too.

What about the cans that the Spam came in, were those handy for anything else other than holding the Spam?

I never got involved in anything like that, but I think that some of the guys were taking the KLIM Cans, I mean the Spam cans, and taking and making other pieces of tin and making things out of it.

Typically, how did you eat the Spam? Did you heat it or eat it cold?

Most of the Spam we kept with the kitchen itself, and the kitchen would make up meals that would incorporate the Spam out of it.

There's an interesting Spam Museum in Austin, Minnesota, if you ever get up in that area, I think you'd enjoy it. They have a section in there on Spam in World War II, how it kept a lot of civilian population alive ...

It did.

And Spam in the military. I don't know if they mentioned it as Red Cross packages but certainly as GI rations. What did you personally think of Spam?

I hated it! For the first three years after I got back, I didn't even want to hear the name Spam mentioned.

Because it tasted ... because you had it so often?

I think that's what it was, sure. It wasn't that bad.

It was just having nothing else to eat but that.

Yeah, you get so tired of the same thing one night after the other.

Any other innovations that came up with making things out of your Red Cross packages?

Oh, the most interesting thing I think was is that we used to take the prunes and we would make ourselves a little liquor. The way we did that was take the water they used to have at the end of each barrack a water bucket of which was probably three foot in diameter,

had a cover on it and was full of water. We'd empty the water out on the particular set up and take the prunes and make our mash in there and this is the way we would make our liquor, so to speak. We'd let it ferment in there and so forth and so on.

How long would it take to make a batch?

I never got involved with the making of it myself, but some guys that knew how to make this liquor used to do it. I'd say, if I remember correctly, it was a matter of in about three or four weeks they'd have a viable product in there.

Did they drink it as wine, or did they actually cook it off to distill it into a liquor?

I don't recall any cooking in those, maybe they did the cooking before hand.

Did you ever have any?

Oh, it tasted awful. I know a few guys over did it, and they did get sick from it, too.

Were they actually able to get drunk on it as well?

Oh, there were some guys that did, or at least they did a good imitation of being drunk anyway.

Besides the prune liquor, any other innovations?

They used to use the raisins, too, sometimes.

But I mean as far as, say, taking the KLIM and the chocolate and mixing that to make a drink, anything like that that you recall?

I don't recall, I don't recall anything being made on it. I don't doubt but probably somebody did make up a chocolate drink or something along that line. We never did in our ...my experiences I never ran into it.

Sanitation, showers and toilet facilities, how was that?

Each barracks had the one room which was the bathroom area and shower.

Separate from the living area?

Yes. This was one room that was set up there for the bathroom. Not showers, the showers were only at this one building, and there you went out about once a week or sometimes it ran two weeks where you'd go and get your shower on the set up.

But your bathroom attached to the room had a toilet and a sink for shaving?

No, no. Each barracks had one room that was set up with, they had two or three of the big round sinks with multiple faucets on it. You could do your washing, daily hand washing, face, etc., etc., like that. Then they had the other room connected with that which was for the toilets.

You say there was one of these set ups per barracks. How many rooms, how many sixteen man rooms would there be in a barracks?

Let's see. Generally each barrack was, one, two, three, four, five ... I believe it was twelve rooms to each particular barracks. That would have been six big rooms on each side.

And each of those rooms holds sixteen men, right?

Sixteen and some of them they were even trying... I think they were getting some more than, I think it was twenty-one men in some of them.

So you easily had two hundred men in a barracks all sharing this facility.

Oh, yes. Of any one, each... Don't forget, the compound consisted of probably at least ten barracks in each compound. It might have even been ...

So that's a couple thousand in each compound.

There might have even been more barracks in there. I'd have to think about it.

How many POWs do you think there were at that particular Stalag?

At the end, we had in there, I think it was twenty, I think it was twenty-six thousand men, but we were really crowded towards the end, and they were bringing in enlisted personnel towards the last.

A question or two more on the sanitary facilities. When you wash or shave or whatever, I mean, you need other than just water and a sink. Did they provide you with razors and shave cream and soap?

No, only what came in the Red Cross parcels.

Now, were there razors in the Red Cross packages?

I'm trying to remember if they had a razor in each one.

Well, personally, you, what did you shave with?

All I did was shave; I had my own razor.

But I mean, you didn't bring ...?

No, it came from a Red Cross parcel.

Oh, O.K. I mean it wasn't something you carried with you from the plane.

It was either... I don't think they ever issued anything at all in razor equipment.

So, probably in a Red Cross package you got a razor and shave cream.

Yeah, yeah.

What about soap and a towel?

We always had soap in the Red Cross parcel, too.

I see, and a towel, too?

No. The towels, I don't think they ever had any towels. I'm trying to back in my memory on what did these Red Cross parcels contain and as we talk, now I can think of other things that came up. Towels, I don't recall ever seeing a Red Cross parcel with towels.

Dry yourself off as best you can.

Yeah, yeah.

You said the showers you went to once a week or every couple weeks. Soap was available at the shower?

No, we had to take our own soap. We had to take our own soap. All they were furnishing was the shower, and you'd go in there and there were, I'd make a guess again that they probably had maybe ten to twelve spigots that you could be where the water would come down. That was the way they would do it over there.

Was it hot water?

Yeah, yeah, they had hot water on.

How about laundry? How did your clothes get clean or didn't they?

Well, the only way you could do it was do it in the area where they had the big sink. So you would be able to take and go in there and get it all wet and soap it up and so forth.

Soap with the regular bar of soap?

There was never any laundry equipment or anything like that.

You only got the clothes that you went out of the plane in, how ...?

I'm trying to think, I never recall being issued clothes but I'm sure that we probably had clothes issued to us, but I just don't recall being issued any clothes.

Did you have your own, you had your own bunk, I take it in the (barracks).

Usually it was a two bunk deal, one below and one up. Some places, some rooms, they were trying it with three.

Did you have any sort of container or receptacle to put your personal effects in?

Under the bed.

Just set them lose under the bed?

Yeah.

I understand that this is sixty years ago, but do remember what sort of personal effects you had?

The only thing that I had there probably, the most of it was the cigarettes, and that was something that I'd won playing cards or some that I got in my parcels, and I'd never smoke, so I'd use them for trading.

So you had your cigarettes, some toiletries.

Basically, most of that you could probably have it at some point on your bed if you wanted. I think some of them did that. You could innovate and make almost anything yourself on something like that.

Well, cigarettes had some value; I mean they were used for bartering. Did anyone ever steal any of them from you?

No, really, I've heard of people saying that they were stolen, but I never saw it happen in any of my rooms.

No first hand experience.

No first hand experience.

What was the morale like and again this may have changed over time. Let's start with you, what was your morale over that fifteen months?

Well, I think we were all thinking to ourself, "This has got to be over pretty soon."

Was that just based on hope, or were you getting information from the guards or radios?

No, it was all hope. No, we didn't get anything from the guards. We did get information from a secret radio that we had. This was a radio each of about six guys would carry part of the radio. Then it would have to be put back together so they could listen to it, you know. Getting back to the, almost like the old crystal sets we used to use many years ago.

One of your photographs showed a man sitting there with the little head phones and what looked like it could have been a clandestine radio. It looked sort of home made.

I think that that's probably what it was.

So, one person would listen, then he'd pass the word to everybody else?

That's usually the way it was done. We had to be very, very quiet on that one, too.

What was he listening to, BBC or something else?

I think BBC was what they usually listened to, yeah.

So your morale was one hoping and expecting things are going to be over.

Oh, yeah, we'd hear things that were happening and so forth and so on. Naturally, the Germans would try to, if we had a radio, they would have tried to have taken it away from us, that's why we had to break it up into different people carrying parts of it.

So your overall morale, did ever have any really down days?

Oh, I suppose we had down days, sure.

I was speaking specifically of you first.

I think I had days where I was kind of discouraged and saying, "Are we ever going to get away from this type of thing?" But I think all of us realized the day was going to come where we would get out of it.

Were you receiving mail, and were you allowed to write letters?

In there?

Yes.

We received, I would say in the whole time that I was there I probably received maybe a half a dozen letters.

Who were the letters from?

The letters were from family.

From your wife as well?

Yeah, yeah. They didn't ... They would always tell us, "Well, your mail was bombed, the mail car was bombed." We never really got to the point where we figured we'd be getting that much on it.

But you got, roughly, a half a dozen?

I'd say in the whole time, yeah.

What was it like when you'd get a letter? What was it like for you?

It's like, you know, Oh boy. But then again you'd look at it and say, "They're not going to say anything, they can't." We couldn't send anything out.

Were you able to send letters though?

I'm trying to remember now whether we did. I don't recall. I don't recall sending anything. I don't think we were really allowed to get anything out.

But somehow, just by the fact that you received letters, it told you that they knew you were alive

Yeah, yeah.

and they knew you were safe.

I think that this was all part of the Geneva Convention. They were told that they had to let us send mail out and so forth and so on. But I don't think there's many of us sent anything out because we figured that we couldn't say anything or anything on it so they'd probably pull the letters anyway.

But nevertheless it was a good day when you'd get a letter?

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

I was asking about your morale. How about the people that you lived with or people you knew? Were there anybody that developed mental problems because of their incarceration?

I think there were probably a few people in the camp that got to the point where they just went bazook over it.

Did you ever hear of any suicides?

No, I never heard of anything myself.

Day-to-day life in the POW camp, what would a typical day be?

Get up in the morning, you'd get your cup of coffee or maybe make a piece of toast, then you'd go out and walk around the compound.

Was there any...?

We did get good exercise.

You were allowed to have good exercise?

Well, walking. Walking was the one thing that was the salvation for all of us.

I would agree but was that a requirement?

No.

In other words, if somebody just wanted to lie in bed all day, could they do it?

Sure. You could do whatever you wanted.

Neither the German authorities nor the Allied authorities?

The only thing we had to do, we had to make a roll call. Everybody met a roll call in the morning so they could count what they had in the camp. And after that you were free for the day on the particular thing. Unless there was some other mandatory roll call or something where they wanted to find out something.

What was your typical day like? What would you do besides the walks?

Most of it would be taking the walks, getting into a card game and basically that is... Sometimes you got into some good conversations, but most of the time the conversations after the first week or two, that's it, nobody was talking anymore.

One of the, or maybe two of the photographs that you showed me were some shows or plays that were put on by the prisoners, POWs, excuse me. Would you tell me about those, how many and what ...

There was a group of them that just liked to act and so forth and the Germans said, "O.K., you can put this kind of stuff on." They probably furnished them with costumes or maybe something that they needed to make the scene.

Well, one of them showed a person in a business suit. It would seem like that would be a great thing to have if you actually escaped the camp.

I know. I thought of that many times, and I'm sure that that was part of the reason they probably held some of the plays, just to be able to get those kind of clothes, too.

Did you participate in any of the shows?

No.

Did you attend any of them?

We attended them, sure.

Were they scripted by the POWs themselves?

Oh, yeah. These were all people that had a show business background, knew how to do it and so forth.

How would you judge the quality?

Oh, I would say, there's good and there's bad, you know.

Besides the plays, were there any musical shows?

Yeah, some of the guys were able to come in. They would give them some instruments to play some music on. But they, I think they took the instruments back.

Well, John, one thing that you told me, I'm not sure if it was off tape or not, and we saw the photograph of the gentleman who made his own violin. Would you describe that for me?

That was Klein. He made ...

His name was Cline?

His name was Cline. He made... It's C-L-I-N-E.

Like Patsy Cline.

Yeah. He made it out of, I think he had four bed slats; he made the whole thing out of. I don't know what he made his... maybe he got some glue to glue off the stem of the violin

because no bed slats could be that thick on it. And he probably glued something together on that. But he did a remarkable job; you'd look at that and you would swear it was made by some manufacturer. But it was all done with scraping. Did every bit of his... he'd just keep scraping the thing down like that with the... And I think he was using some of the, for the scraping he was using some of the tin cans stuff, things like to do his scraping. He spent all of his time, but he enjoyed it. That was recreation for him to do that.

Now after he made it, did he play it?

I never heard him play it in there. I did hear it play at the show that we put on.

This is a show after you got out?

Yeah.

O.K. I want to make sure we talk about that.

I don't think... I never heard him play it at all. First of all, he didn't get ... I think he needed some things for the strings to be on, I don't know what they call it.

Oh, the frets?

Whatever they call the set up on it. Then he needed the strings, and I think he made a deal with some of the German guards to get some of the strings. And the Germans knew that he was creating this particular deal because, you know, they'd see the thing there and they'd let him do it. No one ever stopped him from doing it.

Before we come to the liberation point, is there anything else that you can think of that would be of interest about your day to day life or anything about what went on in the camp while you were there, any other memorable incidents?

Oh, the guys would get together and they'd have baseball games, and then they would run... They let them bring certain number of people from one of the other compounds in to our compound and reverse so that you could have teams playing against teams.

Where did the recreation equipment come from?

I don't think I can give you an answer on that. I'm not sure. I know they had baseballs; they had footballs; and I would imagine that most of that came in through Red Cross arrangements.

Somebody told me that it was originally donated by the YMCA and whether it came through the Red Cross ...

Could be. YMCA was doing a lot to, what they could, you know, to help out all the guys down there.

So besides baseball, you showed me some photographs of boxing matches.

Yeah, boxing matches, they had some of those, too. What else did they have? They had small race things, you know, a hundred yard dash, stuff like that. Nothing real big where they're running around a track or something like that. The guys would do, try to get into any kind of a program that's going to help them pass the day. The object was to keep the men interested in doing something so they didn't want to go out and start doing other things.

Were there any incidents that you ever knew about where people did get involved in other activities, fights or any other kind of antisocial behavior?

I don't recall any specific thing, but I know there were individual guys that got into fights in the thing, but I can't recall where anybody was ever hurt or anything on it.

Overall, during your fifteen months in the prison camp, was your health affected in any way? Did you lose much weight, that sort of thing?

Shortly after I got there I had jaundice. I was really turning yellow, and they put me in the camp hospital there. I was in there for, I think I was almost in there two weeks. They had me all purple.

Purple?

That's the way they did it. They give you whatever they give you that was put on you. It was purple.

You said they paint your skin with something?

Well, whatever they put on turned purple. That's the way they cleared up the jaundice on it.

How about your weight? Were you eating enough or did you lose weight?

Oh, I wasn't. I weighed, when I got out of there, I weighed a hundred, twenty-eight pounds.

Roughly, how much did you weight when you went in?

About a hundred fifty, fifty-five. I felt better and I was more qualified for being physically fit when we came out than I went in.

Really?

Really. Because that's what we did. We were walking all the time, and we were going into exercise programs, anything to kill time. Then we'd have guys that'd get together with different conferences, try to learn how to do this or that. Some guys would start teaching classes and stuff like that.

Did you attend any of those classes?

I can't recall that I ever did.

Can you think of anything else we should talk about before we talk about the day that you were liberated?

No. Really, it became a situation of living day to day trying to just keep going until we knew the ultimate end would be that we'll get liberated some day.

Well, let's talk about liberation day. First of all, in the days before that, did you have any warning that it was about over?

Oh, we'd have some voice would come up and say, "Oh, this thing is going to be over pretty quick," or, "They bombed such and such and that's going to help us." Until the last, it was all a matter of conversation, making conversation on the thing.

Were you hearing battle sounds at all in the days before?

Oh, we'd hear bombs once in a while, but not too much.

But not ground fire or art... not artillery?

No, no, no, we didn't have any ground fire at all. I'll tell you, the one thing we did know, we had an air base near there, and they were flying, they were flying some very, very fast aircraft out of there.

You say, "We had." Do you mean the Allies had or the Germans?

Well, I know what it was now; they were flying jets.

Oh, the Germans were.

The Germans were flying the jets out of there. And at first we didn't, you know we could see the plane (was) really going. We didn't know what the hell was going on, but don't forget, we're flying B-17's, and our normal flight speed there was 155, a hundred and fifty-five miles an hour. When these jets were coming in, we thought, "Oh, my God, what have they got?" And we were, you know, all of us were curious. We didn't know what it was all about until later on, we found out what it was and so forth and so on.

So the day of liberation, what happened?

Well, the day of liberation basically, we woke up in the morning, and the German guards were all gone. The whole German group that was taking care of the camp had taken off.

Not a one left? They all left during the night?

Everybody left. They did it over night. So the next morning there was nothing there. That was when we were able to come in and kind of take over, and all of the guys that were more or less in charge of our camp, so to speak, our personnel, took over and started dictating what we were going to do and so forth and so on. That was when I was told to go in and take over the dark room and see what you can do with that.

And they did this just because they knew about your background?

Well, they knew I had the background on it. They knew I ...

Were you a one man operation, or did you take anybody else to work with you?

Actually, I was the only one that volunteered for it. There was nobody else that came in to volunteer on the particular thing, so all I did was just spent my time trying to get together all the stuff that I could there. That's when I accumulated all these negative that they have there.

With the negatives, did you start making prints right then?

Oh, yeah. They had chemicals there so I was... But I wasn't doing a good job on the chemical composition on it. My ferrotype plates were lousy that they had there, and my chemicals, my background in chemicals was not that good.

And you found a camera there, right?

Leica, they had one Leica there, and I ended up taking that, and I used that while I was there.

And you went around and took photographs?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

How many photos would you say you took?

I ran through, I think I ran through about four rolls. Thirty six roll deals. That's what I shot in the whole time. And I developed the film on it there, too.

Now some of the photos that you showed me today were pictures that you'd taken as well, right?

Yeah, yeah. It was mixed. Most of the stuff that, where the Germans are in there, it's pretty obvious. That was all done by them. And all of the groups, where they had the groups together, that was all taken by the Germans. I got a chance to get at the negative.

The activity shots and so forth?

Sure.

And when we were looking at the photos you told me that they were probably sort of having propaganda purposes...

Oh, sure. I'm sure that they're taking pictures of the fight that we had.

Boxing matches.

Boxing matches.

Did they take the photograph of Mr. Cline with the violin?

No, I took that.

Oh, you took that.

Yeah, that was taken in the... Let's see, I think he was outside the room when I took that, too, right at the Sahara Barracks there.

Oh, you told me that he was in your room.

He was in our room, living in our room.

What was his first name?

I'm trying to remember that; I don't remember that; I remember it was Cline.

That's O.K.

I tell you, I could probably, I might be able to pick that up in some of the other stuff that I've got there.

Oh, in the book that you brought.

It's very possible I could have it there.

The book that you brought, is that entitled "Behind Barb Wire?"

No.

That's a different book.

No. "Behind Barb Wire" was made by one of the guys that was in our particular room and he produced the book after he came back.

End Tape 2 side 1

Start Tape 2 side 2

Well, we're back on record. Unfortunately we ran out of tape again and I wasn't watching. John, when we ran out of tape, we were talking about the photographs that you took and the ones that you made copies of from the German archive negatives. I went back trying to find out what we covered and I think we did not cover the details of liberation day. You told me that that occurred on May 3, 1945 when you all woke up one morning and the guards were gone.

Yes.

And there was a period of about a week while you were there before you were evacuated.

It was actually a little more than a week.

A little more than a week, I'm sorry. And you knew that the war was just about over, but the day after the guards disappeared, did you tell me that some Russians came and you told me there were no troops, just officers. Would you describe that again, them coming on the compound and what happened from that point?

Well, basically, it was they came in, and it was one car, really, was all they had. It was a jeep.

You told me there is a photograph in your...

Yeah and then they had a few other people, Russians presumably, too, that were on horseback, and they had maybe one or two vehicles that were horse drawn. They didn't have a mechanized infantry or something like that that came in on this.

So you said there was a jeep, and you have a photograph of that.

I think I've got that in photographs.

I saw some horse drawn wagons in your photos, was that the Russian vehicle?

No. I don't recall anything that I took on that.

Did you take the photograph of the Russians and the jeep?

I think that's the one I took, yeah.

So you were right up there when all this went on.

Well, we knew that they were coming in.

How did the dealings seem to be? Could you hear what was going on? Did you hear the English interpretation?

No. I didn't.

Did it seem like they were getting along? I mean, we're supposed to be allies.

I didn't see where they weren't getting along. I know most of the top echelon guys were, they were talking to them and so forth, and I think that's the time they made arrangements that they were going to contact our military and find out what to do. In other words, they didn't, nobody wanted us to go back into Russia.

Well, you told me, I think that we may have missed this on the tape, that the Russian plan was to march you all back into their territory of control.

That's what they wanted to do originally, yeah.

Sounds like a bad idea.

Yeah, that would've been because that would have been a very long march, and that kind of man power, with what they had, they would have had one helluva a job doing that.

Do you have any estimate as to what the distance would have been if they would have marched you back?

We'd have lost a number of people, I imagine because how far were they going to march us back. Nobody knew. I'm sure, if they were going to march us any place, they'd have to have a pretty good compound or something where they could keep us. They were going to be responsible for us. So they would have had to had some compound to keep us during that particular period of time.

You told me, maybe not on tape, that their rationale was that they wanted to get you out of harms way in case there was combat activity there. Were there any suspicions by any of you that they had other motives in mind in moving you under their control?

No, not really. At that time we were just glad to be free.

So this week to ten days or whatever, after... First of all you told me that the Russians were there and then they left.

Right. They made arrangements; I think some arrangements were made to bring in some more cows so that we could actually do our own slaughtering and so forth.

And what were those week to ten days like for you?

Well, as far as I was concerned, I knew where the dark room was, I was trying to get as much as I could out of the dark room. That's what I was doing, trying to take some pictures around there. Went out to one of the... they had, I think it would be a prisoner type of operation or maybe it was a hospital, where they were keeping prisoners in and this was one where when we got in there I saw some of the people were dead.

In the hospital?

Yeah, in a, this was a prisoner type of operation, a jail so to speak, that they had close by there.

For military prisoners or civilians?

No these were civilian people.

I see, criminals.

Criminals.

Or accused.

Or accused of some kind. Anyway, they had been starved to almost... You've seen pictures of the people with just bones, that's basically what they had there on those. So, they were really in bad shape.

Was this strictly a criminal prison facility or was it a concentration camp?

I would say it's more of a concentration camp type of thing.

And you saw this?

Yeah, yeah.

Were they wearing any type of insignia like you heard for the Jewish concentration camp, the yellow star on the ...

I, at that time, I didn't see that at all. I wasn't there long enough to really determine the whole... All I did was get a few pictures in there, and I got the heck out. It had a stench to it that was terrific.

You said there were dead bodies in there?

Oh, yeah. Some of them were still dead in the beds, they'd died. They were lying in their own excretion.

Are those pictures in those ...?

I think I've got one or two in there. I probably didn't put many of those in that particular deal.

Because they were so gruesome?

Yeah, I wouldn't...

This was in or near Barth?

Yeah, this was right, actually it wasn't that far from the airport there. See the airport was very close to Barth. Or, I would say, it probably might have been in Barth. See, we were just outside of the city of Barth. It's just a small, small town.

Then the arrangements were made for these flights to come in and off load some twenty some thousand prisoners.

Yeah.

How did that go?

Well, what they did, arrangements were made, they started flying in both the B-24s and B-17s, and they did that for approximately two days. They were loading us up. They would fly in, land, come to the end of the taxi strip, and either load up there or taxi back without shutting off the engines, load up and take off.

How did they make the determination, the order in which you got evacuated?

I don't think there was any specific order that I know of.

Just line up, just line up?

Yeah, basically, that's about what it amounted to.

That's a long line.

Well, I'm sure there was some kind of arrangement made previously, but I wasn't privy to what they did.

Well, then, you personally, did you just get in line?

At the time I was still, I don't think I even got any of the pictures of the planes landing and that. I was too engrossed in trying to make sure that I got all this other that I could out. Other than that, I don't remember the details of how we did that. All I know is this is the way it was done.

So your collection of negatives and the film that you'd shot, did you hand carry that on the plane with you?

Yeah, that's exactly the way I had to do it.

Anything else you took out with you besides that?

The Leica, I took that out, that's about all.

What happened to the Leica?

You know, to this day, I can't figure out what happened to that.

You didn't end up with it?

I had it; I brought it home with me, but I don't know what happened to that now. I was looking for that, oh, probably ten, fifteen years ago. I tried to find out what I had done with that.

Was that a thirty-five millimeter format?

All thirty-five millimeter.

Yeah, you said thirty-six exposure roll so I figured that.

Thirty-six per. Most, I'm guessing there on whether it was thirty-six rolls. I think they all had that at that time.

You say, they're bringing these planes in and never shutting the engines off; load 'em up and were they flying them all to the same place, Camp Lucky Strike?

Camp Lucky Strike. As I understand it, they were all going back to Camp Lucky Strike.

They were able to move twenty some thousand prisoners in a span of two days?

They did it. It was about... I wasn't the last one there, but they were still flying them out when I left, and they say that it took about two days to get the whole thing done.

It must have looked really busy to see planes coming in and... How many air strips were there there?

There was only, only one strip that they were landing on. It's a small airport.

I mean, you pull in and you've got to ...

See, the thing I'd be concerned about, and I never even got to find out what the length of that strip was, but they were doing it. They were flying in and they came back, loaded up on the particular deal and just took off. They didn't shut the engines off at all, that's how fast they did it.

Roughly, what was your time in the air, if you recall, from there to Camp Lucky Strike?

I couldn't say exactly, but I would think it was something less than, had to be less than an hour.

So you go back to Lucky Strike and what happens then?

Then we were put into tents that they had there. They had a big, big tent city there on that.

Were they doing any kind of administrative processing?

Sure, all the time they were doing interrogation, and all of that stuff was going on at the time.

One-on-one interrogation? I mean like somebody sitting down with you and ...?

I don't think it was, I don't recall where we had any ... We had some one-on-one stuff.

What types of things were they trying to find out? Your treatment...

No, it wasn't much there. Most of it was administrative type of stuff.

Getting your records brought up to date?

Getting things organized and how this was going to be done and so forth and so on, you know.

Did you have a medical check up there?

Oh, yeah, they had medical check ups on them.

Psychological evaluations, do you recall?

I don't recall anything on psychological.

Then after you go through the processing... Well, how long were you there at Camp Lucky Strike?

Well, that's another kind of an unusual thing. I think we were there probably five to six days, and there were a group of us that got pretty tired of just sitting around doing nothing. So, we decided what we'll do is go over to pick up a ship here in France, go over to England, hop a ship over (to England), it was easy to do at that time, and go back to our old base, and we would fly back.. We did that. There was about a half a dozen of us that did this. I probably shouldn't put this in here because that's something that we weren't supposed to do.

I don't think you'll get in trouble. So, your goal is to get back to Elkenberry?

We went back to Elk... Everything had gone.

You got back there, and they were all gone?

There wasn't a plane around. So then they shipped us down to Bournemouth.

How do you spell that, do you know?

Bournemouth is on the coast. Bournemouth is one of the facilities that took care of all people that were hurt and so forth. It was a big hospital complex. And they put us in there...

Bournemouth is on the coast of England?

Yeah, right, right. We stayed there. They fed us and so forth there. We had the freedom of getting around wherever we could go around there, but there wasn't any place else that we could really go. We didn't have any other military base that we knew of that where we could fly back.. So now we figured, we gotta stay here, then they'll ship us back, which they did.

When you say ship, you mean by ship?

Brought us back on Liberty ships.

Before we have you take off in the Liberty ship, had you been able from the time that you were liberated until that point when you were about to go on the Liberty ship, to make any contact with your family or your wife back home?

No, no. I got hell from that when I got home.

So, now you got on a wonderful Liberty ship sailing to what, New York?

Yeah.

Was that memorable, that trip?

That was a very memorable trip. I think I was sick the whole time I was on that ship. I don't think I ate more than a couple of meals when it was calm. It just... Those things were just bouncing like that.

Do you by any chance remember the name of the ship that transported you back?

No.

It was not a pleasure cruise.

No, definitely not.

So, you get to New York and then what?

Well, from New York I went home and was immediately transferred down for recuperation and evaluation down to Florida. Went down there and we weren't there more than two or three days and they cut orders for me to go back to New York or make arrangements to work with this show that the YMCA was putting on.

Before we have you go back to New York, I've heard about this recuperation in Florida and all the hotels were full of ex POWs like yourself. Did your wife join you down there?

Yeah, oh, yeah, she was there with us.

So this is really your first real honeymoon.

That's right. That's right, we thought we were going to, we had, what did we have? I think we had seventy-five or ninety days coming, and we were going to really enjoy ourselves down there. It was all paid for and everything else, you know. And then when they cut the orders on this other thing, so we had no choice, we had to go back.

So, you were detailed or attached to this unit that was doing this YMCA presentation?

Yeah. There was a group of us that went back on that.

Was that something you had volunteered for or did they just say, "We need John Baber to...?"

No. That was it. They cut the orders and my orders stated that I was to go back there and work with this show.

To New York City?

Yeah.

What did that consist of from your participation?

Well, really it was an easy deal, no question about it. We had a chance to tour the city and do a lot of stuff and that but mainly we were spending our time trying to organize this show while they were... If there were questions that came up about things, we were asked about it and so forth and so on but that was ... give us an awful lot of free time up there. So, I think we were there probably oh, I think it was a month or two before that show was completely set up so it could be operating.

Meanwhile, the war in the Pacific is still going on. I know a lot of you were concerned that that would be your next assignment.

That's what we thought. That's why we were figuring, "Oh my gosh, we're enjoying ourselves now." It would be a longer time before we have to get back into the mix of it again.

Did your show travel outside of New York while you were a part of it?

While I was there I went up to, for one day I think we, no it was two days, we went up to Canada.

Oh, really? Now, was your wife up there with you then?

She came with me, yeah. She was there with me. But she didn't like New York any better than I did. So we got this that we had to be back on it. And finally we got released on that particular deal. Then we were able to go back on our vacation period.

Oh, you got to resume down in Florida?

Well, we didn't go back there. It was still part time that I had coming.

Your accumulated leave from when you were in (the POW) camp?

Yeah, right. We went back home on it and then we were going to go down there and go into it again. But at that time, that was about the same time it looked like the war was going to be over on the thing; we knew we wouldn't be going any place after that. So then, how did I do that? I think we had the option of going back in and going into the inactive reserve. Anyway, we were discharged from there; I didn't have to go back into any other service center. We got the discharge.

Was this before or after VJ Day?

Oh, this was ... Was this before or after? It had to be after.

I would think so, but some time in August?

Yeah, it had to be after.

Now, at the time you got out, what was your rank?

I was a Major.

Really? When you were shot down, what rank were you?

I was only a First, First Lieutenant.

And so you got promotions while you were in camp?

You see, you get it in time.

I didn't realize it, I thought that some people just marked time and they didn't get their...

No, you get your... You will get automatic promotions... I got automatic promotions to Captain and then I got the automatic promotion to Major.

Did you know this while you were in the POW camp? Did that information get transmitted to you?

No, no.

As the promotions came through, were they increasing the benefits and pay to your wife for her?

I don't know about that.

Yeah, I've never know that before. For your time in the POW camp, were you given any other special consideration? I know there's not a medal for that but did you receive any medals or citations?

Oh, I got a POW medal which just shows that you served time as a POW.

That is a Congressionally authorized military medal?

Yeah, I've got that ... I don't think I've got it with me there. They issued a medal on it.

Is there any other compensation or special treatment you get or received at that time from having been a POW?

Compensation?

Yeah, or any other special recognition?

Oh, yeah, there was a lot of recognition part but I don't think there's any, there's no special compensation as being a POW. There are a lot of benefits on being a POW. I get all my medical, now, through Hines.

I see, through the Hines Veterans Administration Hospital.

Hines gives me, they take care of dental, hearing aides, stuff like that. Anything that happens to me, I just go over to Hines and it's taken care of which is not true of all military personnel.

Correct. So, you get your discharge from the Air Force. Did you participate in any active reserves after...?

Oh, yeah.

What did you?

Well, let's see. I was assigned to, I was assigned as instructor for a Civil Air Patrol Unit, and I stuck with them for quite a few years. We went down to Texas a couple of times and picked up some planes and brought them back to our area.

Were you attached to any specific reserve unit here?

Oh, yeah, sure. We were attached to a reserve, well it's a, you're thinking of a reserve unit that's active?

Well, yeah. Did you go to meetings at a specific base?

Most of it was at O'Hare.

Do you remember the name of the unit?

No, I don't.

I don't either, but I lived up by there and had friends that were in a reserve unit right at the ...

Right at the corner.

Yeah, Higgins and Mannheim.

When I was there doing that, that was when they had it further in. At the beginning, they had this further in, not right at the corner. It was farther in.

That's the one I'm thinking of. There actually was some other Army Base right at the very corner but you go in half a mile and there was...

Yeah. That was there, we did that for, geez that was quite a few years that we did that.

Do you remember what the last year would have been, would it have been up into the sixties?

I really don't remember the last years.

They had a nice little Officers Club right there near the field.

Yeah, I remember, I've been in the Officers Club there. But I can't remember the numbers. I'd have to go back to look at the records to see just what the numbers were.

Part 7: Life After the Service

Besides your reserve duty, what did you do after you got out of the service?

Well, when I got out of service, basically, I went to school.

On the GI Bill?

On the GI Bill.

Where did you go to school?

I went to ATI.

I don't know what that is.

American Television Institute and I ended up getting a BS degree out of that.

Where was that located, John?

They were downtown in Chicago and they also had a facility we were doing some schooling at out on North Broadway approximately maybe fifty-five, fifty-six hundred North Broadway.

So you got a Bachelor of Science Degree in what discipline?

In Television. Bachelor of Science. Let's see, it's a Bachelor of Science, oh boy, I've really forgotten.

What I was wondering is, was this in the production of television shows or in the technical aspect?

No, in the technical aspect.

Cameras and that sort of thing?

Technical more than anything else, on televisions. That's what they specified on that.

When you completed the college, what did you do then?

Then I was working for, let's see, I started working for Pioneer Electric in Forest Park.

What did you do for them?

I was part of their engineering staff. Then I stuck with Pioneer for quite a while. Let's see, they moved and I was doing work for them on one of their production lines. Then I went over to... I went to Cook Electric Company. I was working with their inland testing labs over there, and then after I left there I went to Geartneer Scientific.

How do you spell that?

G-E-A-R-T-N-E-E-R

G-E-A-R ?

T-N-E-R

During this time, did you start a family?

Oh, yeah. Family was started as soon as I got back.

How many children did you...?

I just had two girls.

Two girls, uh-huh. In your years after getting out of the service, did you stay in contact with any of your wartime buddies either the crew...?

You mean the crew and that?

or fellow POWs?

I would say, there probably were a couple of them that I had some conversations with, telephone calls and so forth. Maybe the first year or two, after that it all petered out.

Everybody went their own way and got on with their lives.

Yeah, and I couldn't even tell you now where they are living now or anything.

Did you ever join any veterans organizations?

Not really. I keep getting all kinds of stuff on it, but I never did get involved in any of them.

Are there any reunions of POWs of any of these camps?

POW has, they have a magazine that they put out, and I'm a permanent member of that, Lifetime Member they call it.

What's the name of the magazine?

POW. I think it's just POW, POW magazine.

How often does that magazine come out?

Comes out once a month.

Really? You say you're a permanent member, you mean you have a lifetime subscription or do you actually contribute to it?

They gave me a lifetime subscription to it. I really got into it on a Lifetime subscription when I first started with it. So I still get that.

Did they ever publish any of your photos?

No, no, never did. Never even told them anything about it. I stay away from as much as I can on that. I've got a few lots over in Meadow Creek which is an Air Park. The guys are always trying to get me to come out and talk to the groups, you know, and so forth, but I don't want to spend my time on it.

Meadow Creek is?

Meadow Creek Air Park.

Where is that?

That's out at Harlem Avenue and Manhattan Monee Road.

What is it, sort of an air strip with a community around it?

Yeah. Matter of fact, a group of the guys I was doing some real estate stuff with, started this thing. At the same time I bought in on that, I think I bought a group of lots over there.

That must have appreciated.

Yeah, right now, I've got ten of them left.

Oh, my gosh.

Each one of those I wouldn't sell for less than a hundred thousand a piece.

You're sitting on a fortune, yeah. John, I've really run out of the questions I have except for some wrap ups. But before I get to that and before we run out of tape again...

Is it gone again?

No, no, no, but I always worry. Is there anything else that, thinking back on what we've talked about, that you want to add anything to the record? We've talked about your training, your experiences, your missions.

Well, the only other thing I could say is that I probably spent a lot of time with Civil Air Patrol and again, we were training the kids, taking them up for rides and so forth and so on over the years. I owned a Fairchild 24-H for a few years and got rid of that.

Did you own that by yourself or was it a group?

With three other fellows, yeah. Of course, with Civil Air Patrol we had a Cub available to us.

Piper Cub?

Yeah. I've since been down to, with them to pick up some of the planes. Go down there in Texas, pick them up and bring them back here to the local group there.

You'd fly them back for them?

Yeah, yeah. Other than that I've haven't... Here lately, I just haven't been getting into anything because I'm getting to the point where I wouldn't attempt to fly right now.

It's remarkable. When was the last time you flew?

Last time I flew, we flew down to Arkansas to look at some land. Now, that's probably twenty years ago.

So, I'm trying to figure out how old you were at the time.

I'm eighty-five right now; I would have been sixty-five at that time.

Sixty-five and you were flying then.

I could, I would never go out and fly anything right now without a real good pre-indoctrination program. It would be foolish for me to do it. From the technical point of view, I think I could do it, and I think I could handle it.

I think you could, too.

I really do. I wouldn't buy a plane or own a plane right now because I don't feel that I'd have the confidence. Well, I'd probably have the confidence, but you lose your strength, really and you get to the point where this leg bothers you a little bit and so forth and so on.

Part 8: Conclusion

In closing, your experience in the military was, you certainly had experiences that most didn't: combat missions and being a POW for fifteen months. How do you feel that all those experiences affected your life, if they did, your life and your thinking and your approach to life?

Well, it's been an interesting experience. It's kind of guided me a little bit in what I'm into. I do a lot of real estate stuff right now. I find myself from time to time... The thing that is interesting, if you get in with a group, and you start saying you're a POW, the first thing everybody comes out and says, "Oh, what was it like?" And they want to know all about it, just like you do only you're giving a question which is trying to get a history of it.

I've got an excuse.

Where they're looking to find out what it was that attracted me to it and how I got out of it that way. It's a different nature.

Well, that's probably a good question to ask you before I close. Is there any answer that you have for them that we haven't talked about here for the record? What it was like?

What it was like being a POW?

Yes.

I'd say it's an experience, something I don't think I'd want to go through again. I think I learned things there; I learned patience for one thing because that's one thing that you had to have over there.

Now you say that you learned that. Do you really think that in the sixty years since then, you've been a more patient person than you would have been had you not gone through that experience?

That's a hard question to answer; I really don't know although it might have contributed to it. I wouldn't tie it back to anything specific on that.

All in all, you're eight-five and you look very healthy.

Thank you.

No, I mean it. And in every way young. I just wonder if that dropping down to one hundred twenty-eight pounds or whatever, actually is one of the secrets to a long healthy life.

I'll tell you, I wish like the devil I could get back to that hundred, twenty-eight pounds.

Be careful what you wish for. And as we said in the outset of the interview, you're seeing a lady, in fact, that's how you found out about this program or we found out about you. I guess, for my part in closing, I want to thank you very much for participating in the interview and wish you the best of luck in the future.

Thank you.

Do you have anything else before we go off record?

Nothing that I've got.

Thank you. Well, we're going off record.

O.K.