

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II, B-17 Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 1287

ROBERT A. HERMAN

Interviewed

by

Joseph Nuzzi

on

October 16, 1989

ROBERT A. HERMAN

Mr. Robert A. Herman was born and raised in Austintown, Ohio where he graduated from Austintown Fitch High School in 1939. He entered the military on February 11, 1942 and flew in B-17's as a tail gunner.

He received his basic training at Keisler Field in Biloxi, Mississippi.

From May 1942 to September 1942 he was stationed at Lowery Field in Denver, Colorado, where he learned aerial and ground photography. Consequently he and his group mapped the entire area of Colorado while he was stationed there.

He eventually went to bombardier school at Deming, New Mexico and gunnery school at Kingman, Arizona.

In January of 1945 he left Fort Dix, New Jersey on a cruise ship to England. There they docked at Liverpool, England about eight days later. From Liverpool, he and his crew was transported to Sudberry, England. There he was attached to the 832nd Bomb Squadron under the command of the 486th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force.

His first mission was on March 1, 1945. On his eleventh mission, March 30, 1945, his aircraft was hit over Hamburg, Germany. They had just dropped their bomb load when flak hit the number two engine. The plane broke up and Herman was trapped in the tail section as it leafed back to earth. However, he managed to bail out about 1,200 feet over the small German village of Pinneburg.

He was captured by a German sailor that was home on leave. The sailor took him to the village's jail. He stayed there for a few days and was transferred to a hospital about an hour's walk from the village. He stayed there about seven days when he was

transported to Stalag, Luft I in Barth Germany. He remained at Barth until liberated by the Russian Army on May 14, 1945.

After the war he returned to Youngstown where he graduated from Youngstown University with a B.S. Degree in Education. From 1950-1954 he taught in Vienna, Ohio and Austintown Local Schools from 1954 to his retirement in 1978.

Mr. Herman is married. He and his wife, Margaret, have two children: Carol, and Sharon.

He attends the Canfield Methodist Church.

He belongs to the 486th Bomb Group Association and the 8th Air Force Association. His hobbies include traveling and playing with his grandchildren.

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT A. HERMAN

INTERVIEWER: Joseph Nuzzi

SUBJECT: World War II, B-17

DATE: October 16, 1989

N: This is an interview with Robert Herman for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project, by Joseph A. Nuzzi at Mr. Herman's address, which is 134 DeHoff Road in Austintown, Ohio. Today's date is October 16th. The time is eighteen fifteen hours (6:15pm).

N: You were born and raised where Mr. Herman?

H: In Austintown.

N: What schools did you attend?

H: Austintown Fitch.

N: What year did you graduate?

H: 1939.

N: Did you attend college?

H: I attended Ohio University, then I transferred to Youngstown College. I graduated from Youngstown College in 1950. Then I graduated from Westminster College, with a master's degree in 1960.

N: What's your master's degree in Mr. Herman?

H: Education.

N: Were you a teacher here?

H: Yes.

N: Whereabouts sir?

H: I taught in Vienna at Vienna High School for four years and was a basketball coach. Then in 1954, I came to Austintown and taught in the junior high, and then taught in the middle schools. They made them into middle schools.

N: What were your subject areas?

H: Social Studies, mostly American History.

N: When did you go into the military then?

H: February 11, 1942.

N: What did you do for a couple years there?

H: I worked G.M. McKelvey Company for about a year as a stock boy in the toy department. Then I worked up in MacDonald Mills in the billing department.

N: What made you go into the Military? World War II?

H: When the war started, I just decided to enlist.

N: You were on B-17's is that correct?

H: I flew on B-17's yes.

N: What was your position on B-17's?

H: I was tail gunner.

N: Can you talk a little about your military experience? Where did you receive your basic training?

H: Biloxi, Mississippi. Keisler Field.

N: I know that area well. How long were you there?

H: Three months, from February until the middle of May.

N: Where did you go from there?

H: I went to Lowery Field, Denver, Colorado. Photography school.

N: That was in May 1942?

H: Right.

N: You spent how long there?

H: I was in Lowery Field until September.

N: September of 42'? You learned photography there?

H: Yes.

N: What type of photography?

H: Aerial photography and ground photography.

N: How did you like Lowery?

H: Fine.

N: It was a beautiful area.

H: Denver is a nice town.

N: I was stationed two years myself in the sixties. What did you do back in Denver?
How long was your schooling and what was it like?

H: Right after I graduated, I was shipped to Colorado Springs in an area of
photography.

N: This is from Lowery?

H: From Lowery, they sent you to Colorado Springs.

N: How long was your training?

H: Three months.

N: How long were your classes?

H: Eight until four.

N: Monday through Friday?

H: Yes.

N: What kind of things did you guys do socially after five o'clock?

H: We weren't allowed off the base during the week, the only time we were off the base was on Saturday night.

N: That was it?

H: And Sunday.

N: Why didn't they allow you off the base?

H: We had to be up at six o'clock in the morning, so they didn't want us running around at night.

N: I see. What rank were you at that time?

H: I was a private until after I finished school then I was promoted to private first class.

N: So you went from Lowery then to Colorado Springs for advanced training in aerial photography?

H: There I was assigned to what they called an air drome squadron.

N: What's an air drome squadron?

H: They do photo mapping. We mapped the whole Rocky Mountain area.

N: What was the base you went to at Colorado Springs?

H: I just know it as the Colorado Air Base, I think later on it was named Peterson Field, after the pilot that was killed there.

N: I believe you're right, it was Peterson Field. Did you guys map the entire Colorado area?

H: Yes. The Rocky Mountain area. We flew in B-25's.

N: What type of plane is a B-25? A two engine?

H: Yes.

N: How many people were on that aircraft, do you know?

H: There's a pilot, copilot... usually about five.

N: What type of equipment did you use?

H: It was a big aerial photography camera. I don't know the name of it anymore.

N: Do you know who it was made by?

H: Bell and Howell.

N: How long was your training at Colorado Springs?

H: I was there about six months or so.

N: Where you allowed off base then?

H: Yes.

N: Once you got to Colorado Springs, you were allowed off base then?

H: Right.

N: Did you have a chance to go up to the mountains, and see the kissing camels and all of that up there?

H: Yeah a friend and I, a fellow I met there at Colorado Springs, we used to take a bus to the end of the line toward...you know where Helen Hunt Jackson's grave is?

N: Yeah.

H: We used to take the bus up there, then hike up to the mountains, up around her grave and all through the mountains there.

N: It's a pretty area isn't it?

H: Yeah.

N: So you spent six months in advanced aerial school, after which you went where?

H: From there I went to Salt Lake City.

N: Salt Lake? Did you spend some time in Salt Lake City, too?

H: A few months.

N: What did you do in Salt Lake?

H: I worked in a photo lab.

N: What type of photography did you do there?

H: We didn't do any flying, it was all ground photography.

N: What did you develop?

H: Anything they wanted shot around the airfield otherwise we did lab work.

N: After you did all of this training in aerial photography what was the purpose of sending you to Salt Lake City?

H: I don't know.

N: What was the name of the base, do you remember?

H: No I don't.

N: I know there's one there now, it's called Hill Air Force Base, but what it was called back then I don't know. How long did you stay at Salt Lake City?

H: I was there about four or five months. From there I went to Boise, Idaho. Back to an air drome squadron.

N: Where you back in an aircraft then?

H: No, they didn't have any aircraft assigned at Boise. We were just, where the squadron was formed, and we were supposed to ship out, and they broke the whole unit up.

N: Wait a minute, you were supposed to ship out, and they broke the unit up? Why?

H: We sent guys to different areas and that, and I had put in for Flying Cadets, so they kept me there, and then I went from there to Santa Anna, California for pre-flight training.

N: What was the name of the Santa Anna base, do you remember?

H: No, I don't remember the name of the base there. Just Santa Anna Air Base, That's all I know.

N: What was pre-flight training?

H: Santa Anna was more or less of a staging area where you did tests and things like that.

N: Where did you go from there?

H: Phoenix, Arizona to Arizona State University.

N: What did you do at the university?

H: Well, we went to school there.

N: For what?

H: Took up physics, math and history.

N: Everything you basically needed to fly.

H: That's what they give you. Of course, when I was there we also had some flight training on small planes.

N: A single engine aircraft?

H: Yes, Piper cubs.

N: Piper cubs J3. I used to fly those.

H: We had twelve hours of flying instructions and from there we finished what you'd call pre-flight training at the college. We were sent a series of tests and that. I was there three months.

N: Now, did you guys get a chance to solo at that point, you said you had twelve hours of flight?

H: No, we flew, but you always had an instructor with you.

N: What was it like at Phoenix, Arizona at that time?

H: Phoenix was a small town, it was nice though. People were very nice to you and I enjoyed it there.

N: Where you allowed to get out at all?

H: Oh yeah, we were allowed out. Not during the week, you weren't allowed out then, but on Saturdays and Sundays you were allowed out.

N: We are talking about 1943 now?

H: Yeah.

N: In what month?

H: This is during the summer.

N: Did people in Phoenix, Arizona or in any of these places that you went really think about the war a lot?

H: No they didn't. I really didn't have that much contact with too many people when I was there in Phoenix.

N: Where did you go from Phoenix, Arizona?

H: From there I went to Deming, New Mexico. I was assigned there to bombardier training.

N: Oh, you learned how to drop bombs?

H: Yeah, you learned how to drop bombs. I washed out in the last three weeks of the training.

N: How did you manage to do that?

H: I could not keep the bomb within a certain area.

N: How long was schooling there?

H: Three months.

N: What was it like in Deming, New Mexico at that time? Was it a small town?

H: Small town, small desert town.

N: You guys are out basically by yourself then?

H: Yeah, you were out away from everything.

N: Most of the bases that you have gone to at that time, how was the food and recreation, things of that nature on base? Pretty good or what?

H: The food was good. No complaints.

N: After New Mexico, after you washed out of bomb school, what did you do then? What did you put in for?

H: When you washed out you went before a group of officers and they went over your records. They wanted to send me to officer training school but I turned it down. After we left Santa Anna I went to Kingman, Arizona and took aerial gunnery. That was before I went to Deming, New Mexico.

N: How long did that last?

H: That was about a ten week course.

N: What was that like?

H: You did a lot of ground shooting, skeet shooting and that. Then we did aerial, we had B-17's, that they had rigged up with machine guns. Then we flew a target plane. You had to fire into the target.

N: This is while you are in the air?

H: While you are in the air yes.

N: You are in a B-17 at his point and you are firing fifty calibers, right?

H: Yeah.

N: The other one is a skeet shoot and you are firing what? What type of weapon?

H: Shot gun. It was called a fourteen gauge, it was a small gauge.

N: What made you go from gunnery school to bomb school?

H: That was the training that they gave you if you were assigned as a navigator or to go to navigation or bombardier school they sent you to gunnery school. If you were a bombardier or a navigator you would still have to operate a machine gun in combat.

N: Oh I see that makes sense.

H: In the gunnery school you had to learn to tear down the machine gun and everything else and put it back together.

N: And that school in Kingman, Arizona was a ten week school?

H: Yeah.

N: Why did you turn down the officer's training school?

H: I wanted to stay on flying. I asked to be assigned to a B-17 crew.

N: What did they tell you?

H: Okay.

N: Where did you go for that?

H: I went to the airbase in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was assigned a flight crew.

N: You trained with these guys then once you got in?

H: Then from there we were sent to Alexandria, Louisiana where we did flight training.

N: They shipped you to Nebraska where you picked up a flight crew and then just shipped you straight from there?

H: Yes.

N: You didn't have a stopover?

H: No. I was there just a few weeks.

N: What did you do while you were there for a few weeks?

H: Nothing.

N: Where did you say you went to after that?

H: Alexandria, Louisiana.

N: What did you and your crew do then?

H: We were assigned to a B-17. That is where they took B-17 training was at Alexandria, at one of the bases. We did flight training there. You did individual and group flying and went on simulated bombing missions.

N: Can you describe a typical day at the airbase?

H: A typical day included getting up about six in the morning, eating breakfast, going to the flight line to pick up a plane and whatever they had scheduled for that day, then we would practice take offs and landings . We were required to fly together as a unit.

N: What did it feel like the first time in the tail when you were back there all by yourself?

H: Strange.

N: Did you ask yourself what you were doing there?

H: You're isolated. You're back there all by yourself in the B-17. You get used to it though, after a few flights. We were there about three months, and had ten men on the crew. After we finished our training they called our pilot in and told him we were going to have to leave one man back.

N: Why's that?

H: They were only planning to take nine over. The radio operator, pilot and engineer had to stay with the plane and being there were three gunners we decided to leave one behind. The pilot said the only fair way I know is to draw straws and I picked the short straw so I stayed behind and picked up another crew. As a result I had to go through the same training again with that crew.

N: They made you go through all that training again?

H: Yes.

N: So it took you almost six months then?

H: Yeah.

N: Did you finally get your chance with that crew?

H: I went overseas with that crew, it was the last one I flew with.

N: When did you go overseas?

H: In January. I left Alexandria in the middle of January and went to Fort Dix. I was there for about two weeks.

N: Where is Fort Dix at?

H: In New Jersey. Right outside of New York City. From there we went on the Mauritania ship to England.

N: Did you have a chance to go home before you got shipped out?

H: No, I was home.

N: So you were actually in training for over a year, you had been home, but trained in the United States for one year and then went straight to New Jersey. So you got on the Mauritania, and they shipped you right out from there?

H: Yeah.

N: How long did it take you to get to England?

H: About eight days.

N: Where did you land at?

H: Liverpool.

N: This is still 1944?

H: No, 1945.

N: Where did you go from there?

H: I went to Sudberry.

N: How many men were on your ship at that time?

H: There was about twenty-two hundred, I'd say.

N: How were the accommodations on the Mauritania?

H: Crowded.

N: Did you guys have cots?

H: Yeah they had cots and bunk beds.

N: How was the food?

H: The food was good.

N: Were you guys able to sleep ok? Did you have any work to do?

H: No, no work to do on the ship going over.

N: Just rest. What did you do for entertainment?

H: Read, talked with other guys on the ship. There were army, air force, and military, it was made up of all different replacements.

N: When you landed did they immediately put you aboard a troop train?

H: When we docked at Liverpool, they hauled us by truck, we went to a staging area then we were separated. From there we went to the base and were assigned to where we were supposed to go.

N: That was where at, Sudberry?

H: We went to Sudberry then, the four hundred eighty-sixth bomb group.

N: What was your squadron?

H: Eight thirty second.

N: How many men were in your squadron?

H: I don't remember how many men, there were a couple hundred in a squadron.

N: How many other squadrons were with you in the forty-sixth bomb group?

H: There were four I think.

N: Four other?

H: There were three other, so four squadrons.

N: Do you remember their names?

H: They were the eight thirty third, eight thirty fourth and the eight thirty fifth.

N: What were the living conditions at this time?

H: We lived in quansa huts.

N: How many men to a quansa hut?

H: There were about ten men.

N: Did you have your toilet facilities inside or outside the quansa hut?

H: No, you had to go outside.

N: How about the heating?

H: Heating? The stove.

N: Wood burning stove, or did they supply you with coal?

H: Coal.

N: It must have been very cold at that time.

H: Damp. I guess it was February when we got to Sudberry. It was the middle of January when we went to Fort Dix.

N: The English weather condition in the winter time is miserable. How did you guys combat that?

H: You were in good physical condition, so you didn't get sick very much.

N: How was the training when you got there, did you guys train at all or did you go right into combat?

H: We were there about a week before we flew our first mission.

N: What was a typical day like while you were there before you started to fly a mission?

H: Before we flew a mission they gave us a three day pass and told us to go to London and have a good time.

N: What did you do in London?

H: We went to some of the historical places and to an English theatre to see an English Vaudeville.

N: English Vaudeville?

H: Yes, it was fun.

N: Do you remember what you saw?

H: No I don't remember any of the characters who were there, but they had a couple of comedians, dancers, music and that.

N: Did you guys wear your uniforms into town?

H: Oh yeah, you had to wear your uniform, no civilian clothes.

N: Even back here in the states?

H: When you came home on furlough, you had to stay in uniform too.

N: Did you have to wear your uniform during your training in the United States too?

H: Yes. After I entered the service and was inducted in Columbus at Fort Hayes they gave us a box and told us to put all of our civilian clothes in it and ship them home.

N: I never knew that I wonder why? How did the English treat you when you were over there?

H: The English people did not pay much attention to us. Once we got into Sudberry we didn't go off the base.

N: Why is that? Too busy or what?

H: Yeah, well when you came back from a mission you were tired. You didn't feel like running around. So you did not have much contact with the people in Sudberry. When I was in London the English people that I met were friendly.

N: How often did they fly you, every day?

H: We started around the first of March in 1945. Then we got shot down March 30th of 45'. That was my tenth mission. Actually it was my eleventh because one of the missions we started we had to abort because we had engine trouble and we couldn't keep up with the group so we had to go back.

N: What did you do to get prepared for the mission? Did you go to breakfast? Did you go to a briefing?

H: What time we got up depended on the mission. It could be anywhere from 3:30 to 6:00 in the morning. If the mission was only six hours we got up at 6:00am. When you went on missions they'd give you anything you wanted to eat and then you'd go to the briefing where they'd inform you where you were going and what flak you'd be likely to encounter.

N: One guy told me that he always worried about how long the stream was. Does that bring back memories?

H: Yeah.

N: He told me depending on how long the stream was, you knew how long a journey you had. What was the average flying time for you guys?

H: Usually around six or seven hours. On one mission we went into Czechoslovakia that was eleven hours.

N: Do you remember where at in Czechoslovakia.

H: Dobien.

N: You had a bombing mission over there?

H: Yeah.

N: What did you bomb, do you remember?

H: A factory. I don't know what kind though. We flew another long mission in Berlin.

N: How long are we talking about there?

H: About eight hours.

N: Okay, after breakfast you had your briefing and what did you do then?

H: You would go to the flight line and pick up your plane. Well, first you would go pick up your machine guns.

N: The machine guns were not in the plane yet?

H: Nope they kept them in storage. Before we went on a mission you would have to go in and get your machine guns and take them to the plane. A jeep would take

you to your plane where the mounts were already set up and all you'd have to do is hook them up and arm them with bullets.

N: How many rounds of ammunition did you carry?

H: I had two canisters.

N: Did you have any extra ammunition aboard your aircraft?

H: No, that was it.

N: You couldn't borrow any?

H: No.

N: How did you get into the aircraft?

H: All the crew entered the aircraft in the front where they had the escape.

N: Drop hatch right?

H: Right. We always came in towards the center of the plane on the side where the hatch was opening the door.

N: From underneath or on the side?

H: It was on the side.

N: Where the waste gunners were?

H: The waste gunner was just in front of that. From there I would go back into the tail. Of course when we picked up the machine gun we also picked up our parachutes.

N: What type of chute did you have?

H: Chest pack. The harness and that.

N: When did you actually get into your turret, before take-off or after?

H: I took off and landed in the tail on every mission. In the states, now they would not let you ride in the tail on take off or landing.

N: Why is that?

H: Just a rule they had.

N: Once you got up in the aircraft did you guys have your radios on at that time?

H: You didn't have any contact with anyone. The only one that had contact with the other aircraft was the pilot, and of course the radio man could get contact.

N: Did you guys talk a lot to each other in the aircraft or was it pretty quiet.

H: Pretty quiet. They would tell you in the briefing to stay off the intercom unless it was absolutely essential.

N: So you were left pretty much to your thoughts and day dreams?

H: Yeah.

N: What were some of the things that went through your mind?

H: Once you got over enemy territory you were all busy watching all the time to see if there were any fighters in the area. Before that, I don't know you would be busy doing things like checking things and making sure that everything was all right. Most of our missions except one we flew over twenty thousand feet so you had to be constantly checking your oxygen and your equipment.

N: Did you guys fly over twenty thousand feet a lot?

H: Yeah only one mission we flew under and that was when we went to Orionburg to bomb a bridge. We flew in at ten thousand feet on that mission.

N: Did you knock out that bridge?

H: We got beaten up pretty bad that day.

N: What happened?

H: Another aircraft tore our plane up. It was amazing that none of us got hit.

N: Any fighters attack you at that point?

H: No. I only saw fighters a couple of times and they never bothered our group.

N: Why is that?

H: I had a colonel that believed in flying a tight formation. A fighter could not get through our formation if he tried. He would run right into the planes if he tried to come through. The Germans weren't as anxious to fly into another plane like the Japanese would do. I did see fighters attack other groups and take planes down. One day I saw two German jets attack a group of B-24's and with two passes they took down two B-24's.

N: What was going through your mind?

H: I wished we were close enough to help those guys but we were too far away.

N: You guys had heard that the Germans had jets I would imagine.

H: Oh yeah we knew that they had jets.

N: But you never saw them in actual combat?

H: Not until that day.

N: Did you guys have any photo reconnaissance of what the jets looked like? Did you know what to expect?

H: We had pictures. They showed us pictures of what the jets looked like. As part of your training, they'd flash on the screen different types of aircraft without any markings or anything on them and you have to identify them.

N: Yeah and you'd better identify the right ones too. How fast were the jets going at that time?

H: They went well over three hundred miles an hour because our P-51's I think went three hundred and fifty miles an hour. So they probably went four hundred miles an hour, because we couldn't catch them.

N: It must have made it a heck of a time for our guys to try to leave the aircraft.

H: Fortunately there weren't too many Germans.

N: That is what I understand, they not only lacked the jets but they also lacked the guys to fly them at that time as well.

H: At our base in Sudberry everyday or night they would send over a buzz bomb.

N: You had V2's?

H: Yes, the Germans sent them over about every night we could hear them coming. We knew they were coming as long as we could hear the noise when it got quiet we'd duck because you knew they were coming down.

N: Did they bomb your base at all?

H: No. One night we were attacked by a German fighter bomber.

N: A fighter?

H: One bomber! They sent over one bomber and he attacked our base at Sudberry, but he didn't get anybody or anything.

N: What the heck was the significance of that?

H: I suppose they sent other bombers along but they probably went different places.

N: What type of bomber was it?

H: I don't know because you could not see them. If any German planes were coming they'd shut down all the lights on the base so they would not know where it was. So he missed everything

N: There is probably not much he can hit, not being able to identify a target. You said that your group flew in a tight formation and no one could shoot you down. How then were you shot down?

H: March 30, 1945.

N: Did you take flak at that point?

H: Yeah, we got a direct hit.

N: Where was your mission at that point?

H: We were bombing the submarine pens at Hamburg, Germany.

N: Where did you take the hit?

H: We were flying at twenty seven thousand feet and we got hit between the number one and two engines and the main gas tank.

N: That must have gone up like fireworks.

H: When we got hit the plane just shuttered and then the pilot said get out. Nobody could get out though because it took the wing off.

N: It took the left wing off?

H: It took the right wing off. Then we went into a dive and a spin and fire came all through the plane and in the process the plane blew up.

N: I thought the one and two engines were on the left side?

H: If you are in the pilot seat, the one and two is to your right.

N: Did you guys manage to bomb Hamburg?

- H: Yeah we had just dropped our bombs and were in the process of turning away from the target when we got hit.
- N: What happened? You say it took off the right wing and what?
- H: The plane went into a dive and spin and in the process I was thrown from the plane. I was thrown back up against the tail guns. I had lost my oxygen and evidently I passed out because of lack of oxygen and then the plane blew up. I came to about twelve or fifteen thousand feet and I was leafing down in the tail. So I crawled up to the escape hatch, kicked it out and sat in the escape hatch until I bailed out.
- N: You mean all this time the tail section is leafing back in and out just like a leaf would fall? What happened when you bailed out? Did you make a good landing or did you hurt yourself?
- H: It was a very windy day and I landed in between a barbed wire fence and a green house. My parachute came down on one side of the barbed wire fence and I came down on the other.
- N: How did you get out of that mess?
- H: I got out of the harness and I just let it hang there and I crawled over the fence and I went into a clump of heavy pine trees. There was a sailor home on leave and he saw me go in there and he came after me with a rifle. He could speak a little English, not much but he said come out. So I went out. And he said pistole? And I said yeah. He asked where and I said here and took it out and handed it to him.
- N: What kind of pistol did you have?

H: 45 caliber.

N: Some of the guys told me they carried them, other guys told me they were not allowed to carry them.

H: Yeah some groups were not allowed to carry them, but we were allowed to carry them.

N: You handed over your 45 to him then what?

H: Then he took me back to a building and an older guy there I found out later was what we would call a police chief of the little town of Pinneburg outside of Hamburg held a pistol on me and started beating me up. The young sailor stopped him and said "he's my prisoner leave him alone."

N: He started hitting you just for the heck of it?

H: Yeah.

N: What happened then?

H: Then they took me into a building. I was banged up pretty well. I had my flight glasses and all I had left of them was two rims. The glass was broken out and there were a lot of little cuts on my face from it and on the back of my head. I got a big knot from when I was thrown back over the tail guns. I hurt my back so I had a hard time walking. In this building it was not long until a big German officer came and started talking to me.

N: What rank was the officer?

H: He was equivalent to a first lieutenant in our military. He spoke very good English and he started asking me questions. I would not tell him anything

outside of my name, rank, and serial number. After a while he went out of the room and when he came back said “okay you don’t want to tell me I’ll tell you.” So he told me how many missions I had flown.

N: The whole bit?

H: The whole bit.

N: I’ve heard this from other guys too. It’s amazing! Did he also tell you what high school you went to and everything?

H: No.

N: Did he tell you about the rest of the guys on your flight?

H: Yes, there was only one other guy that survived. Seven of them were killed. The navigator was blown out of the nose of the plane and I was in the tail.

N: The officer, did he have a whole dossier on each one of you gentlemen? Where you were from and so forth?

H: I don’t know.

N: How much did he tell you about? Do you remember?

H: He told me when I got in England, when I flew my first mission, and how many missions I had flown.

N: Standard stuff. What did he do to you at that point?

H: He was alright. He made me stand up against the wall. After I stood there for a while I said if you don’t let me sit down I’m going to collapse. So he said “okay sit down.” Then they kept me there and told me later on in the evening that some German officers would come and take me to another building. So they came in an automobile and took me. I was probably in the car for about fifteen to twenty

minutes. Then they took me to this big building and there were about five or six German officers and they questioned me but I didn't give them any information.

N: These were all German officers? None were enlisted?

H: None were enlisted.

N: What was the highest ranking officer?

H: A major I think.

N: What were some of the questions they were asking you?

H: How many men were in your squadron? How many squadrons are there? Different things like that. They were interested in the Northern bomb site. What do you know about the Northern bomb site? Things like that.

N: How long did you stay with these guys?

H: Probably about a half an hour or so was all they interrogated me. After they turned me over to a corporal and had him put me in a cell.

N: Once they put you in the cell were you by yourself?

H: Yeah. It was a room in the basement. There was a little window about street level. You could not see out of it or anything though because they had it blocked in some way. All that was in the room was a bare bunk and the door had a little peep hole in it that they kept closed once they locked you in. I suppose the room was about four foot wide about six feet long. Once they shut the door on you they closed the peep hole and that was it.

N: Was it completely dark at that point?

H: No there was one little light that was coming through. No heat. Of course I had my flying clothes on. Leather fleeced lined flying jacket, pants and boots. They kept me there all night.

N: What happened then?

H: Then they took me from there to Hamburg Germany. There were two of us then that they took. There was a Canadian flyer that had been captured the same day I was captured. There was a sergeant and a corporal assigned to escort us by foot.

N: You walked to Hamburg? How long did it take?

H: Evidently we were on the outskirts of Pinneburg. They made us walk quite a distance. The corporal kept his gun to our backs and pushed us telling us to run. The Canadian soldier and myself stopped and said to the sergeant "tell him to cut it out." I don't know if the sergeant understood English or not but he said something to the corporeal and the corporal left us alone after that.

N: What time was this early in the morning?

H: Yes.

N: Did they feed you before you went on this march? Give you water?

H: Nothing.

N: What part of Canada was the Canadian from?

H: I don't remember anymore.

N: Were you allowed to talk to each other while you were marching?

H: We started to and they told us to shut up but we did it anyway.

N: Did you ever find out which outfit he was from?

H: I don't remember. It was out of Toronto that's all I know.

N: Do you remember his bomber squadron or anything like that?

H: I think he was a fighter pilot. He was one of the flying sergeants.

N: So was he American or Canadian then?

H: He was Canadian.

N: I'll have to look that up. I have a book at home about the flying sergeants. So they are marching you guys towards Hamburg now. Do you remember how long it took?

H: Probably about an hour. They took us to a railroad station but we ended up in a small hospital.

N: Why did they take you to the hospital?

H: Because I was having a hard time walking. My back hurt. They took me to the exam room and had the doctor examine me and then put me in the hospital. I stayed there a week.

N: What type of treatment did you have when you were in the hospital? Did they feed you? Were the nurses and doctors nice to you?

H: The nurses were nice to us. There were about seven or eight of us. There were a couple of fighter pilots, and a couple of bomber pilots, and myself.

N: Were they all from the United States?

H: Yes. One of the fellows there with us studied and could speak German and he asked one of the nurses why she treated us so nice? She told him that she had a husband in the German Army and that he was in the East front and that she had not heard from him in a long time. She said if he's hurt somewhere and in the hospital, I hope someone, some nurse would take good care of him too. They

didn't know what to do for me. They didn't have much equipment there. The only thing they did for me was put an electric light bulb on my back for heat a couple times a day. After six or seven days the doctor came in and said tomorrow we are going to move some of you guys out. At the time there was a bomber pilot that had been shot down and two fighter pilots that had been burned pretty badly and they could not be sent anywhere. The rest of us were told that they were going to ship us out to a prison camp. The bomber pilot said to me do you want to go? I said yeah. He said ok I'll talk to the doctor when he comes in again. So when the doctor came in he told him that I wanted to go and the doctor said that I shouldn't go but he told him that he'd take care of me.

N: Why did you want to go to the prison camp?

H: I didn't want to stay in the hospital.

N: Did they feed you well while you were in the hospital?

H: You got a little bit of soup and that was all.

N: Were there German guards all the way around the hospital? Did they walk through a lot?

H: We didn't see them but we knew there would be German guards there so that you couldn't get out. Also they locked you in the ward. If you had to go to the bathroom, you had to make a ruckus to get somebody's attention to help you to the bathroom. So I just wanted out of there. The pilot told the doctor he'd take care of me and then they took us to the train that is when I met my navigator. I didn't know at that point if anyone else had gotten out of the plane or not.

N: So you met him at the train. I bet he was glad to see a friendly face. When you guys were assigned to your aircraft all of you guys got pretty chummy I would imagine. The whole crew got pretty well acquainted?

H: Yeah we were all pretty close. You got close.

N: Was it military bearing on you guys? The officers and enlisted men? Or did you forget about it?

H: The officers that you flew with, they didn't want you to salute them or anything. You just called them by their first name.

N: Was it the flight engineer that you met in Germany?

H: He was the navigator.

N: What rank was he?

H: He was a second lieutenant. The pilot was a second lieutenant. The co-pilot was a flight officer. Those were the three officers in the plane.

N: You lost me. What was the flight officer? What rank was that?

H: It was below a second lieutenant. They were making a lot of pilots and that, not second lieutenants but they were graduating them at what you would call flight officers. They had a blue bar instead of a gold bar.

N: Like a warrant officer?

H: Yeah. That is the same rank.

N: So you got aboard the train with this guy. Where was he from?

H: He was from Wisconsin.

N: Do you remember his name?

H: Don. I just got a letter from him about a year ago. I can't think of his last name right now.

N: That's ok. So, he is alive and well right now?

H: Yes, he lives in South Carolina.

N: You guys still keep in touch with one another?

H: He doesn't write very often. It took me quite a while to locate him. He lived in Wisconsin. I wanted them to find him. So I wrote a letter to his old home address and put on the envelope 'if he does not live here, if you know where he is please forward.' So whoever lived there now knew his address and he mailed it to him.

N: So you guys get aboard the same train in Hamburg and where did they take you from there?

H: Up to Barth. Up to Stalag, Luft I.

N: Well so far I had guys who were in Luft III and Luft IV you are now Luft I. What was the train ride like? How many guys per train were there?

H: You could not sit down or anything. They just jammed everybody into the ...Have you ever seen a German boxcar?

N: Yeah they're small.

H: Yeah they are small. They just jammed us in there and pushed the door so it would be just open.

N: Then you had to stand up shoulder to shoulder?

H: Just about.

N: Where did you go to the bathroom?

H: You didn't.

N: How long was the train ride?

H: Just a couple of hours.

N: And they took you to Barth?

H: Yes. And then from there we got off the train at Barth and walked to Stalag.

N: How long was that?

H: It wasn't too far. Probably a half an hour or so.

N: Did they parade you through town? Or did you go through the back streets?

H: We went right through town.

N: What did the German people do to you guys?

H: Nothing.

N: Some of the guys were telling me that they were specifically avoiding towns, going down the country roads because the German people would throw things at them and spit on them and so forth. How many troops are you talking about?

H: Probably forty or fifty.

N: Nobody yelled any obscenities at you?

H: They hollered at us.

N: They cursed at you but nobody threw anything at you or spit at you?

H: No. They had quite a few guards with us that escorted us from the train.

N: How many guards do you think they had?

H: Probably ten or twelve guards.

N: What kind of weapons were they carrying at this time?

H: Rifles.

N: Do you remember the division that the guards were assigned to?

H: No.

N: They weren't SS or anything of that nature were they?

H: The only SS I had contact with was in Hamburg, Germany. When they had taken me into Hamburg. This SS guy came walking by and he could have avoided me but he just walked up to me and gave me a shove. There were two civilians a man and a wife standing there and after the guy left they said are you hurt? Did he hurt you? I said no he didn't hurt me. They said that there was no reason for that and talked to me for a while. They told me that they had been to the United States and had family in Ohio.

N: Where about?

H: In the Youngstown area. They had been to Youngstown to visit relatives.

N: That's interesting and unusual. You went four thousand miles and met somebody that visited your own town.

H: They talked to me for a while and told me that the war would be over soon. Then the guard told them to move on.

N: This was in Hamburg?

H: Yes.

N: What did they do once you got to Stalag Luft I. What was the first thing you saw and did?

H: They just assigned us to different barracks. Of course we saw Colonel Gabreski. He was a prisoner of war there. He was the American commander of the American compound the highest ranking officer in there. He was a fighter pilot from Ohio that was shot down over Germany.

N: What was he a full bird?

H: No he was a colonel. He said don't try to escape and don't try to be a hero. Nobody will really bother you if you don't bother anybody.

N: You were an enlisted man right? And still you were put in with the officers?

H: Oh yeah. There were officials in each barrack. They were in charge of the barracks that we were put into.

N: So you had one officer per barrack.

H: No, there were a couple of officers in my barrack. Captain Bishop was the highest ranking officer in my barracks. He was in charge of the barracks actually but there were a couple of lieutenants in there too.

N: Some of the other guys were telling me that they specifically segregated the guys. The enlisted personnel.

H: Oh, they did but there were always in each barrack some officers in charge of the barracks.

N: Was that pretty much standard throughout the rest of the POW camps?

H: It was in our camp. I don't know about the other camps.

N: What did you guys do for fun and excitement while you were in the camps?

H: There were a few books around. You could read books and that. We had an underground connection... a radio.

N: Oh you had a radio?

H: They kept us informed every night. We would get a briefing of what they had heard on the radio. Somebody knew where the radio was but they kept it.

N: How many guys were in your camp in Stalag, Luft I?

H: I forget how many were up there at Barth. There was a British section and an American section. I forget how many barracks there were.

N: How many guys per barracks?

H: There were ten guys in the room that I was in. I forget how many rooms per barrack. So you probably had about forty or fifty guys per barrack. I do know that there were several thousand prisoners up there at Barth but the exact number I couldn't tell you.

N: What did you guys have for heat? Did you have a wooden stove in each barrack?

H: Yes, there was a stove in each room.

N: Did you sleep in double cots, single cots?

H: We slept on the floor.

N: Did they give you a blanket?

H: Yes.

N: What did you guys have to eat?

H: They gave us Red Cross packages once a week, but they would take out the chocolate. What they wanted they would take out. What we mostly got were the sardines and things like that. In the barracks everyone would put their things together and you'd fix from that. Once in a while they would give us a bowl of soup. They would have a few potatoes and other vegetables in it. It looked like they drug a piece of meat through it.

N: After you ate all those sardines can you stand to look at a sardine today?

H: No.

N: What was a typical day like in Stalag, Luft I? What time did you have to get up?

Did you have to take roll call? Exercises?

H: Every morning, the Germans would yell everyone out and they would check roster to make sure everybody was there.

N: What time was this?

H: Probably about eight o'clock in the morning. Then you would clean up your room, fold up your blanket and so forth to keep it clean. We mopped it down every once in awhile when they didn't shut the water off on us.

N: Why would they shut the water off on you?

H: I suppose out of meanness or something. A lot of times if you wanted any water you could not get it because they had it shut off.

N: What about showers and baths?

H: Showers well once a week you could get a shower.

N: Some of the guys told me that they could not get any showers at all. They had to sponge bath.

H: Mostly that is what you had to take because they would cut the water off on you.

N: At that time you said you were not on work detail?

H: No.

N: You were not allowed to work because of your rank.

H: Instead you had to do kitchen duty with your own group. You did have certain days when you had to help the cook and stuff.

N: What time did you have to go to bed at night?

H: They would shut off the lights at about nine o'clock.

N: That's when they let the dogs out?

H: Yeah. They would have the dogs in the compound. At dusk they'd lock you in the barracks.

N: Were your barracks raised up off the ground?

H: Yeah. Then at nine o'clock they turned off the lights and you were supposed to shut the wooden slats that you had to slide across the window.

N: What did you do for fun and excitement talk to each other?

H: Well, there was always somebody in the camp that you knew from flying before. A couple of guys there I knew from training in the states. So I would go and see them. I met a fellow from Youngstown who was in prison camp with me. He was a lieutenant and I was a staff sergeant. He and I became good friends.

N: Do you remember his name?

H: Alex Harrisym. I don't know his address or if he lives in Youngstown now I lost contact with him. I got to know other guys there as well and there were a few books you could read to pass the time.

N: Where did you get the books from?

H: I don't know where they got them but they got passed around.

N: How old were the German guards at Stalag?

H: Most of them were fairly young but there were a few older ones.

N: How did they treat you?

H: They didn't bother you.

N: Were there any beatings or shootings by the guards?

H: Not that I saw. Colonel Gabreski did tell us to stay away from the fence. He said if we got too close to the fence they might shoot you from the towers. Of course they had electric fences too.

N: What was it a double fence?

H: Yeah. The outside fence was an electric fence. The inside was plain barbed wire. I guess Colonel Gabreski and some other of the high ranking officials told the German commander to leave the guys alone if they didn't want us to bother anything so they pretty much left us alone. At night they patrolled the compound with dogs.

N: What type of dogs did they have?

H: Police dogs. German Sheperds.

N: Any Dobermans?

H: Not that I saw.

N: Did anyone ever escape from Stalag?

H: I understand that before I got there two guys escaped from the camp but those are the only two that I'd heard of.

N: Did they make it out alive?

H: No. They got outside but they were caught and shot.

N: So the general idea at the time was do not leave. Just to stay where you were and wait it through. How long were you at the camp?

H: I was there until the war ended on May 14th something like that. We waited for about another week after the war ended for clearance before we were taken out of there.

N: You stayed in the camp after the war was over?

H: Yeah, we took the fences down and everything. We could have walked right out if we wanted to but they advised us to stay around.

N: Who came in?

H: The Russians.

N: Do you remember what Russian division liberated you?

H: No. One day we heard all this shelling going on so we were ordered to dig trenches around the building so that if the shelling got too close we could get down in those trenches. So we hand dug trenches with tin cans.

N: That must have taken forever!

H: It took quite a while. It kept us busy. We dug trenches deep enough so that we could lay down in them. One night we went to bed and the next morning there were no guards. They'd moved out. We then proceeded to tear down all the fences. We could have come and gone if we wanted to but they advised us not to go too far. The higher ups were afraid how the German civilians would react. It was just a relief to know that the fences were down and the guards were gone. We also had to stick around because we didn't know when they were going to come in and announce if we were shipping out. I was there about a week. Then finally they negotiated with the Russians to let us out of the area.

N: Who negotiated with them?

H: I guess Gabreski and the English commander there in charge of the English compound.

N: Who was the English commander?

H: I don't know who he was. Some Red Cross people and other army officials I suppose also negotiated with Gabreski too.

N: What outfit was Gabreski in?

H: He was a fighter pilot. I don't know what fighter group he flew with. They told us when we left that we would go from Barth to Camp Lucky Strike. We flew to Reams then from Reams they trucked us to Lucky Strike.

N: Where was Lucky Strike?

H: It was at Le Havre, France.

N: What did you do at Lucky Strike?

H: They put us on a special diet and kept us there about a week. General Eisenhower came in while I was there and talked to us.

N: Did you get to meet him?

H: Yes.

N: What was he like?

H: Nice guy.

N: Did he shake your hand and everything?

H: Yes, he went around shaking all the guys hands that were there.

N: How many guys were there?

H: I don't know a bunch of them, all prisoners of war.

N: What did he do give a big speech?

H: No, not a big speech. He welcomed us back and talked to us. "You'll be going home as soon as we can make arrangements to get ships to take you home" he told us. But he said "we will keep you here probably anywhere from three to ten

days to put you on a special diet before you go back.” I suppose I was there about another week. Then forty-five of us were put on a liberty ship.

N: Before they put you on the ship what did you do at Le Havre? Did they issue you passes to go into town or anything?

H: We could go into town we didn't have to have a pass. The small town near Camp Lucky Strike wasn't Le Havre though; Le Havre was on the coast.

N: What did you guys do?

H: We walked down the hill to the little town and back. There wasn't much to do in that town we walked mostly to get away from the camp.

N: Did you do any shopping or anything like that?

H: No.

N: How many guys were aboard the liberty ship with you at the time?

H: There were about forty-five.

N: How many guys could the ship hold at one time?

H: That probably was the capacity, they were small ships.

N: Where did the Liberty ship take you then?

H: To Virginia.

N: You mean this small ship crossed the Atlantic Ocean with forty-five guys?

H: Yeah, well the crew too.

N: How big of a ship is this?

H: It's a small ship they used it to haul freight and stuff. It was probably seventy or eighty feet.

N: Where did you land in Virginia?