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Personal Experience

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ALVIN SKARDON

Interviewed

by

Tom Hess

on

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H: This is an interview with Dr. Alvin Skardon for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on World War II Combat Veterans, by Tom Hess, on December 8, 1975.

S: I might explain first how I happened to be captured. I was captured December 19, 1944. My unit was right across the border from Belgium in Germany. It was the occasion of Hitler's bread through and the Battle of the Bulge. I was a member of the 106th Division, Battery of the 590th, field artillery battalion. We were a green outfit which had been sent over to quiet the sector. We were not fully equipped or fully trained, but it was believed that this sector would remain quiet and we could get our training on the front lines. We were on the front lines roughly about a week when the Germans counter-attacked, and this was the beginning of the famous Battle of the Bulge. I have been interested in this counter-attack that came completely by surprise, as far as we were concerned. We were not expecting it and our intelligence had been sending information, but this information apparently was wrongly construed.

Apparently, the American high command did not believe that the Germans would counter-attack through the Ardennes Forest in the dead of winter. Of course, that is what they did. The first thing we knew was that we were under heavy artillery fire and then that the Germans were at the rear of us. We held out for three days, but we ran out of heavy ammunition and surrendered on orders from our commanding general, Alan Jones. General Jones has the unpleasant distinction of having surrendered more American soldiers than any other general in our history. He had a difficult time living down this reputation. It has been pointed out, both in German documents as well as in American, that we could have kept fighting and delayed the German advance for some time, but in that case, the 106th Division itself would have been wiped out. We are inclined to be glad that General Jones surrendered when he did. I was on a hillside with the rest of my outfit when the order to surrender came down. We first cannibalized our weapons. That is, we pulled out parts of our carbines and howitzers and threw them away, thus making them useless to the enemy. We marched down in a big crowd and that was the first time I saw a German during my whole military career. Being in artillery, we fired from a great distance and we did not see any individual soldiers.

The Germans took so many prisoners that day and subsequent days during the Battle of the Bulge that they were totally unprepared for us. We were marched to the rear under guard. The guards appeared to be sort of older German soldiers. They did not deliberately mistreat us, but they were just a small group while they had crowds of Americans. The prisoners numbered in the thousands. We did not know that we were part of a big battle until we found prisoners from the 9th Armored Division and some from the 101st Airborne Division were being brought in, too. Those were the two divisions that were supposed to come up and rescue us. The Germans had a great deal of difficulty taking care of us. We slept in barns and vacant lots. I remember this was in the dead of winter and for about two days, all that we got to eat was the snow we picked up off of the ground, drink for that matter. We finally came to a collecting point for prisoners, which was swamped with American prisoners, and there we got a loaf of bread

and some sorghum molasses. That was the first thing we had to eat.

I might add; the 101st Airborne Division was sent up to rescue us. They completely failed at that mission and were driven back into Bastogne, where they made their famous stand. The movies and books that have been written about this completely ignore that failure and point out that heroic stand at Bastogne where the General called the German general "nuts." So you might say that the 101st Division Association today is to cut the 101st Airborne down to size. Their mission had failed.

At this collecting point we were loaded in box cars. We were so crowded in that some had to stand up and some had to sit down. There was not room enough for all of us to sit down at one time, or lie down. We were in that box car for roughly two weeks. I remember we were captured on December 19. We had Christmas Day in the box cars. We alternated standing up and sitting down. What I principally remember was not so much the lack of food, but the lack of water. We were thirsty all the time and we got very little water. Finally, one day the guards opened the box car and said that five men could go out and bring back some drinking water. I managed to get on that detail. I went and tried to fill my canteen and the guard knocked me down. That is the only time I suffered any personal maltreatment by a German guard. Those of us on the water detail drank our fill before we got back to the car. The water was very cold, and we thought we were dying of thirst, so we drank a lot of water until we were dying of pains, terrible pains from drinking all that cold water when we were very thirsty.

Late in December, I think it was roughly December 28, we arrived at a camp near Munich, Germany, by box car. It was located at the little town of Muhlberg, and the camp consisted largely of British prisoners. They practically ran the camp, however. They processed the American prisoners. This was the first time we had any kind of processing. We were first put in a big cellar which was freezing cold. To keep from freezing we had to walk around in groups of ten until we were tired, and then we laid down and caught some sleep. If we felt we were freezing cold, whoever felt it first would jump up and kick everybody else and make them get up and start walking again to warm up, and then lie down again. We kept that up until we were taken out individually and were processed.

When we got out, we were asked by a man, who I later found out was a British prisoner of war, a large number of questions. Under the Geneva Convention, a prisoner of war is expected to answer only three questions, his name, his rank, and his serial number. Someone told us if you refused to answer the questions that they would report it to the German guards. Then we would be put back in what we called the freezer. Most of us caved in and answered the other questions. I found out later that what the Germans were after was to find out who was a skilled laborer. The British prisoner carefully glossed over that occupation if you gave him anything, to get involved in becoming a skilled person. For example, I, at the time I had entered the Army, had been a hotel manager. So he put down my occupation was kanghai, which was a German word for salesman. Something that would not be of any use to anybody during the time of war.

After violating our military orders not to talk, we were given a cup of weak tea, then we were stuck in wherever there was space with the British prisoners. I found that you only got a small amount of food, but you got tea six times a day because the English

Red Cross made sure the English prisoners got tea. I also was struck by the fact that the what the British called a "hut," for six hundred prisoners, was in charge of a man who was called a hut commander. I am using the accent the British used with commander. He ran the hut. I found the whole camp was practically run by British prisoners. The British were glad to do that because that meant they did not come in contact with the Germans. The Germans were glad that they had less military personnel tied up. However, once a day, a German officer would inspect the hut. The hut commander would go up to him and salute. They both would strut through and the hut commander would invariably try to out strut the German. This was my first experience really with a German, other than being knocked down by a guard. The British prisoners told us always out strut the Germans and shout at them. If a German guard shouts at you, you shout back even louder. If he struts, you strut. That impressed the Germans and you could brow beat the Germans any way you like. And this did seem to be true consistently throughout my career as prisoner of war. If you could out shout, out strut, and brow beat the German, you could get the better of them, even though they had the guns and you did not.

We remained there two weeks. I would have been glad to remain there because the British prisoners had everything organized. Things were orderly, there were activities being carried forward so you would not get bored or restless. I was particularly struck by the fact that the Sunday following Christmas I attended church services at the camp and right under the eyes of the German guards, we had, first of all, prayers for our family back home that they would not worry about us and, secondly, prayers for an Allied victory. These two prayers struck me with this: I already had a brother who was a prisoner of war of the Japs and I knew this was going to be an additional blow to my family to have a second son a prisoner of war. Incidentally, I thought that having been through this experience already, they would react mildly, but I found this was not the case. My brother was a professional soldier, they thought he could handle himself. But they were convinced when they got the missing in action notice about me that I was dead, being just an ex-hotel manager I would not be able to last very long in a battle, my family thought.

The American prisoners were moved out of that camp and sent to an American camp. While we were at this camp at Furstenburg-oder, we were sent through another process of registration, where the Germans definitely took our names, our serial numbers, gave us a prisoner of war serial number, and they painted on our back a black triangle, so if we were running and a guard took aim, he would have a definite target to fire at. We were then loaded in to box cars. The box cars were much cleaner. I might say that the previous box cars that brought us to Muhlberg, the floor of the car was covered with horse droppings, it had not been cleaned out apparently it had been needed to transport horses before, and the Germans just loaded prisoners there. So you did not particularly want to sit down unless you were desperately tired. These box cars at least were clean, although they were just as crowded. The trip took only two days.

One thing that I left out was that we noticed all along the railroad, the railroad itself might be intact, and the town itself may have been intact, but the station had been invariably bombed. Therefore, when we heard air-raid sirens going off, we knew that

American bombers were coming over and that their most customary targets were railroad stations. We were in the cars one night when the air-raid sounded and the bombs begin to fall. We were right at a station. One car load of prisoners managed to break out and they opened the other cars. We ran away from the station and the train we were in. We thought the train was the target, but we were wrong. We ran toward a mill, which was the target. We ran right into the bombing there, rather than out of it. On that occasion, quite a number of Americans were killed and wounded. I barely missed being killed myself; I got splattered by debris from a bomb explosion.

Going back now to the trip from Muhlberg, our next place was a town called Furstenburg-oder, which is in the East of Germany. There we were, in a huge camp where there were mostly American prisoners. I regret to say that American prisoners did not adjust to prisoner of war conditions as the British prisoners did. They seemed to be too docile and brow beaten at first, and if they got that spirit back, they became very aggressive. In either case, I simply did not want to get shot because some of my fellow prisoners got too aggressive. In this camp, I got a chance to see more of the Germans. There was a guard for each "hut." In reality, the huts were barracks. There were towers on each corner with a machine gun on top of the tower. We stayed there roughly two months, I think. And then we were marched across Germany, I think in February, to a camp near Berlin called Lukenwalde, not to be confused with a concentration camp by the name of Buchenwald.

At this last camp, which I remember most vividly, we were put in huge tents, there were about four hundred men in a tent. We slept on the ground, which was covered in straw. At both Furstenburg-Oder and Lukenwalde, we did get American Red Cross parcels. A Red Cross parcel as supposed to furnish you with enough to eat when combined with your German prisoner of war rations. Very rarely did one prisoner get a full box. It had to be shared with several prisoners. That is where we became very near to starving. The conditions were quite terrible at this camp. We were all almost starved. We were infested with lice. We had no sanitary facilities, no bath houses or anything like that.

Roughly in May of 1945, we were liberated by the Russians. A rumor went through the camp to the effect that Adolph Hitler had ordered all prisoners of war shot, when he realized that Germany was defeated. We were prepared for a revolt. The prisoner of war camps, all three of them, had underground organizations. You had one man in charge of you who was part of the camp organization and who sort of worked with the Germans, but the other man was in charge of the underground operation. We would have jumped the guards and got their rifles and then started shooting at the machine gunners on the tower. While we drew their fire, fellows who were good at climbing were going to climb up and overpower him. I believe that this plan would have been successful, even though some would have been killed. The German Army refused to carry out Hitler's order. The one thing that we never found out was, did a German guard actually have bullets in his rifle? If he did have bullets in his rifle, then it was very foolish, because prisoners could jump him and get the rifle and start shooting. But if he did not have bullets, then why did he carry the rifle? We never found out.

The Russians liberated us in May and that was a rather simple process. They just turned the command of the camp over to the senior allied officer, who happened to be a British Air Force officer. He took over the running of the camp. At that time we sent out foraging to get food for the camp and they found that the Germans had plenty of food in the neighborhood, including stores of Red Cross boxes. We wondered why it was that they did not feed us better. One conjecture was that if they fed us well it might make us energetic and we might revolt. If they starved us, we might revolt, but if they just gave us barely enough to keep us alive, we would be too weak to revolt, but still we would not be so desperate that we might revolt from starvation. So, we do not know why, we did find a good bit of food in the neighborhood.

I then had a chance to explore this camp once the Russians were there. Right across from our compound, the American compound, there were Norwegian prisoners, and then on another compound there were French prisoners. Then on other compounds there were Russian and Yugoslavian prisoners. The first thing I did when the Russians put the camp under charge of the senior Allied officer was to go over to the camp office. I went through the file and got my papers out which the Germans had on me. I particularly wanted to get those out because those were the only evidence that I had violated military law and had talked when I was a prisoner of war. I got those out and I brought them back and I have them locked up in a strong box, I think the statute of limitation has run out now. I might have been tried for violating military law.

Recent research under the auspices of a historian named Murray Gilbert discloses that Luckenwalde was originally a concentration camp, but was changed into a prisoner of war camp at the time of the Battle of the Bulge. It was one of the first concentration camps, but was changed to a prisoner of war camp when the larger and more famous ones went into operation. I was told by other prisoners that many people had been executed there by a means that I have not heard of since. Large numbers of people would be pushed into a big stone building, the door would be locked, there would be just a small window, and then a heater would be turned on and these people would die of suffocation, and their bodies were removed. I went over and I checked on these stone buildings. I actually saw them. They were as described. I went in the building. It had very heavy doors to the entrance and there was also a little window up at the top where they said the guards could watch and see how the process was going along. I also saw the heater. But I have never heard from any other source about this method of annihilating people.

We also found the bodies of several people who apparently had starved to death. We buried those bodies. After being there under Russian control for a while, a number of prisoners just took off and headed for what they thought were the American liners, but the Russians drove them back. They made them come back. They said that they got some credit on lend-lease for every American prisoner of war that they liberated. They also wanted to get us all registered. We were registered, but the Americans went down to one hut and the English to another. The English were furious, they said the bloody Americans always get the liquor and the women. It turned out we were registered by Russian WAC's (Women's Air Corps) and the English by Russian soldiers. I saw the way the WAC's wrote my name in Russian.

One day an American convoy passed on a nearby autobahn going into Berlin and the commander said that he could not do anything for us because he was going into Berlin, but he would make it a point to be at that intersection at a certain time on a certain day. If we got out there and jumped on the trucks the Russians could not do anything to us. So on that particular day, we were rushing out, four thousand Americans. About two-thirds of us got on the trucks before the Russians knew what was happening. But that is the way I got out of the prison camp. The convoy took us on into an American collecting point and they began transporting us back. We got on a hospital train, which we found quite luxurious and that got us as far as Ronen, and then we would take it to a camp where there were thousands of American ex-prisoners of war. Incidentally, we were called RAMPS, Recovered Allied Military Personnel. The camps' name was Lucky Strike.

From Camp Lucky Strike, we were taken into La Haure. There we were put aboard ships. Prisoners of war had third priority. The first priority going home was the wounded, second the sick, and third the prisoners of war. I think that the American commanders were trying to get us out of Europe as fast as possible because prisoners of war have a tendency to go wandering around the country and doing other things when liberated. For example, the night that the Russians took over, there was a whole prisoner of war camp charging into a German town, Luckenwalde, and really raped the town.

So then when I got back, we were sent to a Camp Khmer, New Jersey, and from there to Camp in Fayetteville in North Carolina. Here I had a rather interesting experience that many men could tell you about, and that is that you meet people in the Army that you met years ago and never thought that you would see again. You just run into them through coincidence. I was waiting for the sergeant to call out my name, he was calling one name after another. Finally I went up to him and asked him if he had the papers for Skardon. He said, "Oh, I gave you your papers yesterday." I said, "Oh no, I was not here yesterday. I just arrived early this morning." And he said, "What is your name?" I gave him my name and he said there was another Skardon through here. It turned out that that was my brother who had just returned from Burma. The sergeant knew our names because he was the brother-in-law of my brother. He had been the best man in my brother's wedding. So this was sort of a double coincidence. Then I was sent to Miami Beach for recuperation for two weeks.

H: All together, how long were you a prisoner of war?

S: Roughly six months.

H: When your 106th outfit was captured, what was your particular responsibility or rank?

S: At that time I was a corporal, but I had been made a supply sergeant, the rank for that was staff sergeant. I did not get the actual staff sergeant rank until I was discharged, but I was actually the supply sergeant of the outfit.

H: Do you think that, the reason I ask this is because in Korea we noticed that many of the

fellows had been so poorly trained that they were not able to withstand being a prisoner. Do you think that your training that you had had before you were captured could have stood you in better stead for being a prisoner?

S: Yes. We were told what we should do if we were prisoners of war. For example, we were told first of all that there was a convention by which we had to be treated. I think that the regular German only tried to carry out what you call the Geneva Convention. We were fortunate for being captured by the Wehrmacht. I do not know how to pronounce that, but some other Americans were captured by storm troopers just a few miles away. At Nalmedy were all shot by the Germans. But to a certain extent you knew what to expect. I believe practically everyone knew that we were not supposed to talk under any circumstances. We received a military training film on how to behave when you are a prisoner of war. I think prisoner of war conditions were quite different at that time then from earlier in the war when American and British prisoners were well treated. I think it was that the Germans captured so many prisoners that they were just swamped with them.

H: As far as your personal equipment was concerned, were you fully equipped? We ran into some boys that did not have all their equipment, like boots, for one thing.

S: I was wearing boots without any shoes when I was captured. I did not find that a particular difficult thing, though. But at the first stop, the Germans made us take off our boots and leave them. Most of us at that time cut the boots so they could not be used. I left my boots on until I was given a pair of shoes by the Red Cross at the second camp.

H: This first camp that you went to at Muhlberg with the British more or less running it, did you have any resentment, maybe not you personally, but did you see the other American soldiers feel or express a resentment toward the British?

S: I was glad to be in that camp because it seemed to be so well run. Most Americans just seemed to resent the British and the British seemed to resent us. I think they had good grounds for it. I do not glamorize American soldiers, the Americans behaved like a bunch of rowdies. I think the British had good grounds for resenting Americans, and of course the Americans just did not like their accent and mannerisms. Incidentally there were a good many British soldiers who were actually Polish. They had gotten out of Poland during the German invasion and joined the British Army.

H: What would a days ration consist of?

S: At Muhlberg, and the American camp, a days ration consisted in the morning of some coffee, which we called ersatz coffee and it was made from corn shucks. Then at noon you got a piece of bread. Then in the evening you got six small potatoes and a cup of soup. That was to be supplemented by Red Cross boxes, but they did not always come. When they did come you had to divide Red Cross boxes with other prisoners. That was

barely adequate just to keep body and soul together.

H: Have you ever heard what the calorie content was estimated to be?

S: There was a Red Cross inspector from Switzerland there, and he stated that we were below subsistence.

H: How often did the Swiss come for the Red Cross?

S: Just once the whole time I was there.

H: Just once in the whole six months?

S: The only other work the Red Cross would do, besides getting us food parcels was, the second camp in Furstenburg-Oder had an excellent library and you could get books out and read them. You had plenty of time. The Germans were in some ways rather strict on the Geneva Convention. I was a non-com, and therefore I did not have to work. So what you did was get a book and walked up and down to keep warm. You could not very well read at the tent. You had to read outdoors. You were always walking up and down reading. I got a good deal of reading done. Reading was the one good thing about the camp, though.

H: The work that they would have the other fellows doing, what sort of work would this be?

S: I do not know, but I know that at the first camp the privates were all rounded up and they were sonder commandos. I do not know what the meaning of the German word is, but it really meant work detail. At Furstenburg-Oder and Luckenwalde we had a person appointed known as an interpreter. It is a German word for interpreter. If the guard said anything to you, even if you knew German, you were supposed to pretend that you did not, you would yell dormahter, and he would come and interpret between you and the guard. The guard might know English and you might know German, but you always used the excuse to get a third party there.

We did not have much trouble with the German guards at the last two camps. They were mostly old men and unfit for military duty. They got pretty chummy with the prisoners. When an officer would come through, they would start strutting around. We were warned that however friendly we might get with a German guard, never to assume that he was going to go against his officer. If an officer came, he was going to start strutting around and shouting, too. Then there were work details, just keeping up the camp, which you got assigned from time to time, and those people were called the arbeiter.

H: You mentioned that your first two journeys were by railroad. And then a third journey from the Oder over to near Berlin was a march?

- S: Yes, a march. I think we were told the Swiss had insisted that the Germans move prisoners of war from the Eastern front, since the Russians were advancing. Apparently the German transportation was pretty well shot up by then. That was the way they marched us. They put us in barns at night. During that time, we just got a piece of bread a day, that was all.
- H: How much did you weigh when you got out?
- S: I do not know, but when we got our first shower, my buddy was staring at me and I at him. There was the outline of his skeleton on his body.
- H: Where did you get this first shower?
- S: This was at camp Lucky Strike.
- H: You had almost been six months without a shower?
- S: Almost, yes. We got a shower at the first camp at Muhlberg. Once we had an opportunity of getting a shower, I think at Furstenburg; but you had to undress outside in the snow and cold, go in and take a hot shower, and come back out again. I did not think I could stand it. It did not get really bad until it suddenly got warm in May.
- H: Lice would be a problem. Was there no relief from the lice problem?
- S: The Germans gave us some lice powder, which I think they captured from the Russians because the writing on it was Russian. When you put it on, it caused such terrific itching, and it seemed to hurt your skin, that we just decided to put up with the lice. Some of the bitterest disputes in camp were when some of the fellows tried to pick the lice off of themselves, and they threw them off. You could not throw anything in there without hitting somebody else. Others who just did not care about the lice claimed that they were throwing the lice on them. The rule was that if you took the lice off of your body, you had to press the head and burst it before you could throw it down. It was useless to try and pick them off your body. It was not until after you got your first shower and later on that you got sprayed by some kind of chemical to get rid of lice.
- H: This would be at Lucky Strike?
- S: At Lucky Strike, yes.
- H: Where was Lucky Strike, in France or Belgium?
- S: In France, somewhere near La Haure.

H: Could you recall an average day at Luckenwalde?

S: Yes. You got up in the morning roughly around 7:00 and they had a count of the prisoners then. We always tried to fool the guard. One guard had to count four hundred prisoners. He would start counting and after the prisoners were counted, those at the rear would slip around and go up to the front, where they would be counted twice. So the guard always got more prisoners than he was supposed to have. The next day it would be arranged so that he would have much less. They never got an accurate count. There were always some fellows trying to escape. There had been men in there who had escaped. They did not go east or west because then they would run into the fighting, and north was difficult because that would take you to the Baltic. The best way to escape would be across into Switzerland, but the Germans had gotten on to that. Most of them were caught at the Swiss border. They say there was no difficulty in going through Germany at all, because there were so many different types of men in different types of uniforms that you practically never got stopped. It was only when you got to the Swiss border that you would be captured and sent back. Under military law you are required to try and escape, but most of us felt that the war was almost over. Therefore it was best to stay where we were.

H: One thing that might be a little personal, but I would like to ask you the question anyhow. You seem very conscientious about your record there. You said that when the Russians took over the camp that you wanted to destroy your record. The extent of your conscientiousness was in the information that you gave the British soldier?

S: In other words, I felt that we were told we could be court martialed if we talked because we could give information. They pump information out of you that may be very valuable to the enemy. I realized that I had given information there rather than go back to the freezer. I think there were extenuating circumstances, you might say. For two weeks we had practically nothing to eat. We had been in the box cars and all that sort of thing. Then having to be put in the freezer, I really lost track of time.

H: You had been in the freezer?

S: I had been in the freezer, yes.

H: When you came off the box cars they put you in the freezer to start with?

S: Yes. Then after being in the freezer for a while, they took you out. I did not know at the time that the man asking me these questions, which was all a fraud, was a British prisoner. What the British had decided to do was simply to write in such vague information that the Germans could not possibly use it. I did not know that then, but I think it was not safe. I just wanted to make sure that I was not going to get court martialed to get the evidence. I did not destroy it, I still have it.

- H: Did any of your buddies that were in prison with you have the same feeling?
- S: Oh yes, a whole bunch of us went to get our files. We found them all.
- H: Now this of course is, of course, asking you to make an evaluation in retrospect, but you have heard about the Korean court martials of the fellows regarding the brainwashing and so forth there. Was your situation somewhat similar to theirs, would you say?
- S: I do not think so. From what I have read, it was quite a different situation. There was really no attempted brainwashing, and we were never actually interrogated. We were simply told you have to answer this or you go back into the freezer. By that time we were starved, cold, and worn out. I think that if they have lined a big bunch of American soldiers and said, "Alright, answer these questions or we are going to shoot you," we would have defied them. But you were an individual there alone and you had just come through two weeks of travel and then spent some time in the freezer. Your morale had just collapsed.

The Germans did try to propagandize us. I still have some of the German propaganda. One was a very beautiful magazine entitled Signal. It had beautiful pictures and very fine articles and was written in French. That was distributed in camp. Then there was a prisoner of war newspaper in which there was genuine news mixed in with German propaganda. But the most interesting thing was that in every camp that I was in, without exception, there was an underground radio. Now I know how it worked at Luckenwalde. Each fellow had a different part of the radio and they would stay away from each other. But in the afternoon when they had the British broadcasting on, they would come together, put the radio together, and listen in. Some fellows could take it down in shorthand. Then each one would go to a tent and yell out, "Let's play ping-pong." That was a signal for you to look around and see if there was a guard or any other camp official around. If you did see one you would yell, "Oh, no, I do not want to play ping-pong." That would be for the fellow to go. But if nobody objected, he would read the news.

The Germans knew that we had the radio because when the guard came around to read the official German news, we would all laugh at it. We had heard it from the British radio. To the best of my knowledge, the Germans never caught up with it. It is not too difficult to build a crude radio. I think that the parts that they could not manufacture, they managed to steal out of a German supply house.

Then there was always a fellow who would lay on the straw, or in a bunk, at the opening of the tent, or the barracks, and if a German guard came in, he would yell, "Air-raid! Woooo!" This was a signal that there was a guard coming in and everybody was to watch out. One day an officer came in and he stopped, and the fellow on the bunk, I guess, had fallen asleep. The German yelled out, "Ya, ya, it is me. Air-raid! Woooo!" I do not know if he felt that it was some sort of an honor, or whether he realized why they yelled out air-raid.

H: It sounds like the camp was pretty well organized. Maybe some of the things that we see dramatized in the movies about camps are not as farfetched as we thought.

S: I do not know about that. Remember, I was in at the close of the war. Early in the war some of the camps were pretty good. The Germans had particularly singled out Americans and Englishmen for good treatment. They were rough on other prisoners, but singled out Americans. Towards the close of the war, I think the prisoner of war system just broke down. In particular, I think that the program Hogan's Heroes is the biggest fraud. It is really an outrage, I think.

Many of my experiences might appear and seem funny, although they did not seem funny then. I know that sometimes funny things did happen. It did not happen at my camp, but I know one camp where the prisoners were very much irritated because early in the war, prisoners were always trying to escape, but now they had give up and decided to sit until the end of the war. There had been a guard put at each gate and the guard had the key chained to him. He was always solemn and sworn that he would not lose that key over his dead body. Although the gate itself was decaying.

One night they went out and bargained with the guard. The guards were always bringing stuff into the camp to sell to us. They went in a little house where there was a stove and while they were in there, some other prisoners came and lifted the gate off of its hinges and threw it in the latrine. The prisoners ran back and the guards were still involved with settling with the others. He came out. You could hear a lot of hollering and yelling and the guard was out showing the commandant the key. He still had the key, but the gate was gone. The next day the commandant made the prisoners get the gate out of the latrine, wash it off, and put it back on the hinges.

H: You mentioned a moment ago something that has been of interest. The different sort of treatment for the different nationalities of the prisoners of war. Would you elaborate on that a little bit?

S: Yes. They treated the Russians the worst. The Russians had to go to the camps cleaning up latrines. They were almost always on starvation rations. The German guards seemed to be utterly ruthless with them. For the most part, they left the English and the Americans alone. I do not know exactly how they treated the French. The Norwegians seemed to be well-treated, too, as far as prison treatment is concerned.

You could escape easily from that camp if you wanted to. All you had to do was pay the guard three cigarettes. That seemed to be about the standard price. We got them in our American Red Cross parcels. The Russians had one advantage. They were taken out each day on work details and some of them managed to but food with American cigarettes. They brought the food back to camp and sold it to us for American cigarettes, so they did do themselves a business.

H: Now, is this compound where all the different nationalities of troops divided? But did you still have an opportunity to mix?

S: Not until the Russians liberated us. Right across the barbed wire from us were Norwegians and a little further down were the English. That is why I know more about them. It was not until after the Russians liberated that we could go over to the Russian compound. By that time the Russian prisoners were gone. We did not mingle too much with the French.

H: The Russians took their prisoners and the Slavs out with them when they left?

S: There was one rather shocking incident. When the Russians took over, they lined up all their remaining prisoners of war. Any one of them who was denounced was immediately lined up against the wall and shot, without any kind of investigation or trial or anything like that. I could have just said that you collaborated with the Germans, and you could say I had collaborated with them, too. I would get fired at. Over two hundred men were shot at by the Russians. They were far rougher on their own than on anybody else.

Another one of my souvenirs; the Russian complained that they could not tell the difference between Americans and Germans. Well, there in the office quarters at the camp there were curtains with red and white stripes. So we got those curtains and cut them into small pieces and put blue ink on one corner of them so they would look like the American Flag. We sewed them on the back of our overcoats so the Russians could not claim they mistook us for a German. I still have that little flag.

H: You talked about these execution chambers there at Luckenwalde. Who were the victims?

S: I do not know. Remember, we got there towards the closing days of the war and we were just there three months at the most.

H: You were there in 1945?

S: 1945.

H: The spring and early summer of 1945?

S: I would say winter and spring. I am not quite sure of the dates. In other words, I was captured on December 19, and I am sure of that date, and we made our bread for the American convoy in May.

H: Can you think of any other incident or anything that might be of interest?

S: One thing. You were interested in the attitude of the Germans toward the prisoners of war. You very rarely came in contact with the Germans. It was mostly the other prisoners and then the hut had a man in charge of it who was also a prisoner. The guard, all he had to do was walk around. Incidentally, the guard at Luckenwalde looked very

much like an elderly merchant from my home town in South Carolina who came from Germany.

H: Most all of these men that were German guards were older men?

S: They were older men or men who had been wounded. For example, when we got to Muhlberg, we were taken out on some kind of a detail and we had a German guard, a young man whose leg had been shot off. He kidded us. He said let's see whether American prisoners can out-run a German with one leg. We raced him, and of course we were exhausted by that time. He had a very good artificial leg on and so he out ran us. Many of them claimed that they had children in the United States, or a son in the American Army. At first we were inclined to laugh at that, but some of them knew so much about someplace specifically from the United States, say Detroit. It was obvious that they had some special information about it.

H: You did not have very much contact with the elite of the military establishment or anything like that?

S: Just occasionally, we saw an officer and we noticed how the guards strutted.

H: Did you have any relationship with the German civilians?

S: We were just warned that we must not fraternize with German civilians. That was relaxed, too. We must not fraternize with German civilians over seven years old. We could fraternize with children. This did not happen to me, but other fellows said that whenever they were caught talking with a German girl, they would say how should I know she was over seven years old. I did not ask for her birth certificate. You would walk down the street and see German girls and you would say, "Gutten morgen, mein kinder." Good morning my child.

H: Well, thank you very much for your time and for your information.

End of Interview