

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II--POW

Personal Experience

O.H. 1009

HENRY BEBEN

Interviewed

by

Jeffrey Scott Suchanek

on

May 8, 1981

HENRY MICHAEL BEBEN

Henry Michael Beben served as an engineer aboard aircraft in the United States Army during World War II. Trained in numerous four-engined planes, Mr. Beben was responsible for all electrical and mechanical systems on board each aircraft to which he was assigned. Sent to England in 1943, Henry was assigned to the 303rd Bombardment Group, nicknamed the "Hell's Angels." The 303rd flew B-17 Flying Fortresses over Europe. Henry's B-17 was shot down on his fifth mission in January of 1944 during a raid on a ball bearing factory. Although badly injured, he received no medical treatment from his German captors and was forced to undergo strenuous interrogation. Henry was taken to the POW camp for American airmen at Krems, Austria, and had many interesting experiences there. As such, he gives a first hand account of what it was like to be a POW in Austria during World War II.

Born on September 1, 1921, in Albert, West Virginia, the son of John and Catherine Beben, Henry's family moved to Warren when he was very young. A graduate of Warren Harding High School, he is currently self-employed as a printer. For his service in the defense of his country, Henry received the Air Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, the Purple Heart, and the Presidential Citation.

A member of the Holy Cross Polish National Catholic Church, he is also active in such community organizations as the Disabled American Veterans, Buckeye Barbed Wire Veterans (Ohio Chapter), and the Young Men's Association. His hobbies include reading, music, painting, woodwork, and gardening.

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INTERVIEWEE: HENRY BEBEN
INTERVIEWER: Jeffrey Scott Suchanek
SUBJECT: Prisoners of War, B-17's, training, Austria,
treatment, food, medicine, life as a POW,
bombing missions, air battles
DATE: May 8, 1981

S: This is an interview with Henry Beben for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Prisoners of War, by Jeffrey Scott Suchanek, at Mr. Beben's home, 550 Comstock Street, Warren, Ohio, on May 8, 1981, at 1:15 p.m.

Okay Mr. Beben, let's begin with some of your background. When and where were you born?

B: I was born in the small town called Albert, West Virginia, near what they call the area of Black Falls. I don't recollect too much about there because we left when I was quite young. I wasn't even in school at the time. Our first move was to a town in Ohio. Our stay there wasn't very long, and my recollection of that is very slight. My next recollection would be New Kensington, Pennsylvania, outside of Pittsburgh. I believe I was just old enough to start school. I think I went through the first grade there, and then moved to Warren, Ohio. Then, I started in the grade-school level, and I was put back one grade for the simple reason that my family spoke the Polish language almost exclusively with my parents, my step dad, and my mother. My difficulty going into school was that I would switch into both languages. The principal at the time of my early grade levels requested that more English be spoken in

the family. Because of the difficulty my parents had communicating in the English language, I had a disadvantage when going to school. However, that was overcome. I progressed through the educational system at Warren, Ohio, through the grade schools and junior high schools, and then graduated out of Warren G. Harding High School in June of 1940. Then, I became employed. I worked at the Warren Tool corporation until I was drafted into the service in 1942.

I think I was 21 years old at the time when I was inducted into the service. I went through Camp Perry, Ohio Induction Center. Of course, I was inducted in Cleveland first, where I had my physicals. Eventually, I ended up in Camp Perry, Ohio. After some testing, I was introduced into the Air Force.

S: You seem to know quite a bit about your family background. Can you go into that a little bit? Where were your grandparents from?

B: My grandparents on my mother's side would be the Sien-iawski family.

Now, my father's side, the name of Beben. . . . Inflections of the language had a little bit of a different pronunciation, but here in the States, we pronounce it Be-ben. When my father immigrated, they mispronounced his name and misspelled it continuously. I had no knowledge of this until the passing away of my mother. I got into her papers and found a certificate of my father and my mother's marriage, and we found the correct spelling of my name. So, I sent through the legal process of taking my name back as Beben. The name Beben in Poland is extensive to one degree because it is a large family. There is much history connected with it that I'm not too familiar with. I am like some people are, looking into my background and trying to find more about my father's side of the family.

Now, my mother's side, they came out of the small town on the Southeastern part of Poland. The family was also large. There are many members of my family yet in Europe that I correspond with. I do gain much knowledge from that type of correspondence. I had one member of my family visit four years ago, a cousin of mine who is now married, back in Poland. She gave me some nice background on my family, which I'm very proud to know about. Also, I've met some relatives that are now citizens of Canada. She also has given me quite a bit of family historical background that I never knew of, especially on my uncles that were brothers to my father. Some of my family had immigrated to Chicago to get out of the coal mines.

S: What year did your grandparents immigrate?

B: Somewhere around the beginning of the 19th century. My mother's age at the time she came over was 16. My father, I'm not too familiar with, because I don't remember my real dad. I was real young when he passed away. But my stepdad, who's name was of Slovanic origin, more from the Ukrainian, Russian, Polish background, he also was born in the same area where my parents were born. He also immigrated approximately in the 19th century. His background was coal mining and then leaving the coal mine and coming up into this area for employment in the steel mills of Warren, Ohio.

S: Do you think that this was the general pattern for people out of Eastern Europe to come to the United States and maybe go into the steel mills or maybe go into the coal mines as a profession?

B: My mother was very fluent in telling us stories. One of the big reasons that most of the people, she felt, left Europe was for economic reasons. One must recall that there were wars before World War I. There was the partition of Poland, there was the Russian domination, the Austrian domination, and the Prussian domination. My mother's section of Poland was dominated by Austria-Hungry. Economic reasons were the determining factors of a lot of the young children immigrating which my mother was 16 years old when she immigrated and left her family and never was able to see her parents anymore. It was, itself, quite a hardship for her. She did not know English when she came into this country. She ended up down in the coal fields of West Virginia, and she married my father. Eventually, she also bore other children besides myself. There were six of us, seven actually, total.

S: How many boys and how many girls?

B: There were four brothers and three sisters. I had one half-brother which I've counted in already. But, he was of my stepfather and my mother. There was seven children total.

S: Can you remember how your parents learned English?

B: Yes, I can remember especially from my mother. My mother's educational process in Europe was very little. I think she had a total of maybe four years to six years. That's undetermined. She was very fluent in her own language. She read extremely well, and she wrote extremely well in her own language. My mother, in fact, was more or less a poet. She could write poetry in Polish very well. Now, as far as her English education, it was self-assimilated by picking up the

papers and learning to talk to other people and learning to read the newspaper. Eventually, before my mother died, she was well versed, pronounced brokenly, but she could read the Polish language and the English papers for her own benefit. Her mathematic [skills] were very good. She picked that by herself. So, all in all, I'd say that my mother's education would be equivalent, without going through the process of an educational system, to a high school graduate. If she were to take a test today, I would think that she wouldn't have any problem passing certain areas of it. Maybe the language would give her some difficulty.

S: Did you have a large garden?

B: Yes, we always had a large garden. It was no problem for us to have that type of food in the family. We kept a cow and with what milk we didn't use, we made butter, and we sold it to the neighborhood. That was one way to make a little extra money.

S: Describe your neighborhood for us.

B: Okay. The neighborhoods were very cosmopolitan. This neighborhood of North Warren, Ohio, was an extremely cosmopolitan area. You had not only the Polish language, but Slovak, Russian, Italian, German, Rumanian, and some French--not very much, one or two families. So, this cosmopolitan area of people had a great understanding of each other because generally, they all immigrated for the same purpose. It seemed to me--of course, I was a youngster--that all of them had that same type of hard work intuition, to do as best as they could with whatever they had. I could say that we were poor, but we never starved during the Depression. Eventually, around 1935 to 1939, when the work started picking up and then the war came along and work was very plentiful, it got better as far as the monetary situations.

S: What did your parents do during the war?

B: My dad, as far as I know, worked in the steel mill. My brother was the first draftee in this area. He picked up the first number, so he went to war in the first grouping. He worked in the tool shop here at Warren Tool. And another little interesting fact about my brother: he not only went first, but he was the first one to come back as a wounded soldier. My other brother, slightly younger than I was, ended up on the Merchant Marine Ship on the Lakes. He couldn't make the service because of ear problems, but he was so intense about serving that he went. Also, in my family, at the time, I had two cousins. The one living with me when the war broke out enlisted in the Navy because his

brother was killed at the first bombing of Pearl Harbor. He also felt an intense desire to get into the service. Unfortunately, he also was killed in the service. My family, my cousins and all of us, were service-connected during the war. Most of us [were], except for my brother. I recall, because of his ear problems, he wasn't draftable, but he still ended up doing some kind of war work on the ship. Then, the rest of my family, I could honestly say that they had an extensive part in the war.

S: Okay, there is one last question I would like to ask on your background before we get into your military career. You said that you put away a lot of food for the winter. Did you have a fruit cellar or something?

B: A lot of food was canned. A lot of food was put in a tunnel that my father made. It wasn't exactly a tunnel, it was a way that they had to store things like potatoes.

S: How large was this?

B: I could say he stored maybe 10 or 15 bushels of potatoes that were home grown. Cabbage was put up in barrels, shredded cabbage to make sauerkraut. Tomatoes, of course, were canned and so were beets, beans, corn, and carrots. We made ketchup. All the staples that you can almost find in the store, you'd find on our shelves. Apples and mushrooms were dried. There were other things that I can't recollect right now, but there was a complete cellar full: jams, jellies, and blackberries. We'd go out as a family unit and pick bushels of blackberries and come home. Mother would either can them or make special pies for us.

S: What intrigued me is the part about the tunnel.

B: Okay, I'll try to describe it. He would dig down into the earth, down below the frost lines. Then, he would take open barrels on one end and close off the other. And he would fill these up with potatoes. He would bury them. He would cover them with earth and some protective covering so the water wouldn't seep in. They would keep. They would keep as fresh as the day he put them in. That is about as close as I can describe it, because I've never done it myself.

S: I never heard of that before. That's why I asked.

B: He wasn't the only one. Other people did it. But, I know from him doing it. I have seen it.

S: Is this something that you think he brought over?

B: I think so, because they used to bury potatoes that way in Europe. You'd find it, even I think, here in the States. In certain areas, they always had tunneled into the hill or something and they buried certain kinds of foods. That's where, I think, the temperature would stay the same and wouldn't freeze, and [this would] protect it.

S: Okay, let's get into your military career now. How did your parents feel about you being drafted?

B: My mother, of course, had the extreme fear always, because she had a family that was killed in the service. She had, I think, a brother that was in the First World War, and other members of her family. I think, like any other mother, she would have that fear for her family. I recall that when my brother was drafted, it shook her quite a bit. And when I was drafted, she didn't show her emotions as totally, but I could feel it. I could feel the emotion. Then, the day I went, she broke down considerably. When I was down in Nashville, Tennessee--I was studying aircraft in that area--I got a letter from my sister that said my brother was missing in action, presumed dead.

S: Where was your brother stationed?

B: He was in Africa at the time. My sister had written this letter, and she was extremely wrought about it. She didn't know how to really approach my mother because my mother had gone sort of hysterical then. I said, "Was the telegram definitely stating that they presumed him dead?" There was a little bit of disqualification there. Eventually, it came out that he was wounded, and that he was in the hospital, and they were going to bring him back to the States. I found out that my brother was in the Nashville Hospital. I asked my commanding officer for time off, but he said, "No." I couldn't leave the base. I explained to him that it would be very important for me because I would be going to see my brother in the hospital, possibly. His refusal did not deter me from going over his head at that particular time. If I was going to suffer some consequences, I might as well suffer them at that time. So, I went over his head, and he got counter-manned. I got the pass, and I went to the hospital. My brother wasn't there. They said he was on a pass. I was walking down through Nashville, Tennessee, and who did I see? It was my brother approaching me, and that's how we met. I didn't see him again until I got home.

S: How did your father react?

B: My stepdad didn't show as much emotion, but there was always that feeling that he missed us. Eventually, I

found out by talking to my mother and family that he would always ask about the letters and involve himself that way.

S: How did you get into the Air Force?

B: I was drafted, and I was sent to Camp Perry, Ohio. We were indoctrinated by testing, and I tested out for the Air Force. I ended up in Atlantic City Basic Training. Basic training in Atlantic City was just like any other basic training, I would think; learning how to march, learning how to take command, and learning how to get up early in the morning and stay up late on the drill fields. That was basic training like everybody else had, possibly. Then, I got orders that I would be shipped to a machinist school because I rated out for that. We were on the train, and we were heading . . . I think the school was going to be up in Chicago or somewhere. I can't exactly recollect, but they changed the orders while we were on the train. They said that they were going to send us to Goldsboro, North Carolina for Air Force training.

S: How did that strike you?

B: I didn't know exactly what it was going to be about. Even though I was in the Air Force, I took machinist training because, I guess, they needed a lot of machinists then. I ended up down in Goldsboro, and I got my basic training for airplane mechanics, airplane electrical, and other areas of aircraft.

S: What type of aircraft were you training on?

B: I was just training on a B-dive bomber. Then, my recollection would be that we went from Goldsboro to Nashville, Tennessee, where they were making Ball-T dive bombers. Now, there I thought I was going to be on the ship I was working on. It would be what they call a radio engineer gunner.

S: You would be in the rear of that.

B: Yes. We trained and we had school. We weren't in a regular Army camp. We were, more or less, in a group of homes. Our house mother was somebody that they hired to take care and feed us and make up our beds.

That's where I got my first airplane ride, incidentally. They used to take the planes off and they would test them, and then, we would have our orientation. My recollection, a good recollection on this would be, the pilot who took us up asked me if I ever flew in an airplane. I said, "No, I never had a flight." I really didn't know what was going to come on, and I was

kind of apprehensive. It was something new to me, something great, yet I was looking forward to it. I think the mistake I made was telling him that I never flew in an airplane before, because he did what they do on dive bombers. He laid it over on a wing and straight down. So, that was my orientation. (Laughter) It was pretty tough, but I had the enjoyment out of it, too. I was kind of shaken up.

Then, I ended up in Fort Myers, Florida, for air training. That's where I got my basic air training.

S: What were you training on there?

B: They were small planes. They call them TC-6's, I think. I'm not sure, but I think that was the number. We trained over the gulf. We trained strafing, air-to-air flying, and formation flying. Then, we were scheduled to go. I think they were going to send us back, but then we were sent to Salt Lake City. I ended up down at Pyote, Texas, Rattlesnake Air Force Base. That's where I got my heavy bombardment training and mission training.

S: What was your initial reaction to the B-17?

B: I thought it was stupid. Here I'm training on dive bombers. I learned the mechanics and everything on it, and they turned around and said, "Here, you're going to go to a heavy bombardment." I never saw the plane before. Most trainees went to Washington where they were being made. They were being trained there. I ended up down in Texas.

S: Was that more responsibility?

B: Absolutely. In fact, on my crew, there was one that was trained for heavy bombardment on the B-17's. He became the assistant engineer, and I became the head engineer. I would run this ship in the cockpit with the pilot and co-pilot. I would run the top gun turret and take off and landing with the pilot and co-pilot. I could never understand why I was picked over the other fellow, because I had to retrain myself completely. Of course, we had some classes, some schooling on it. We did a lot of mission flying out of the base. We did daytime flying and nighttime flying and went out of patrols.

S: Just a quick note here. Did you notice any modifications on the B-17 from the time that you started training on them until the time you were shot down?

B: They were E's, G's, and H's modifications. The biggest modification was the fire power. They changed from

caliber 50. I think the H's had like 20 millimeters if I'm not mistaken. But, as far as the rest of the plane, it was basically the same. It was a good ship. There was nothing wrong with it. If I were to fly any heavy ship, it would have been a B-17. I think it had a better quality to it. It was stronger and it held up to combat more than the B-24, even though the B-24 was faster than we were.

S: Do you think that every flyer feels that the ship that he's flying is the best, because he has to put his life on the line in it?

B: He probably had that idea that it was the best ship for him. My pilot, of course, was a hotdog pilot. He was a good pilot. He was young and very intelligent. [His name was] Halden. I knew a little about him for the short time that we flew together. He had an outlook on life that was great. He enjoyed his life and he knew that he was in the war. He said, "What we got to do is to be the best we know how." He kept a tight ship with us. He made sure that the crew was always on the ball with it. He wouldn't let anything by chance go wrong, even though, like I said, he was hot dogging.

I'll tell you a little story about him. When we were down in Dyersburgh, Tennessee, we used to fly along the Mississippi River, and one time he laid us down right on the river, almost on the bed of the river. And these barges were on the river. You can't hear a plane coming when you are really low to the ground. You might hear a roar or something. Of course, the guy on the barge didn't hear anything but his own engines. He saw this big bird coming at him, and he threw whatever he was doing and he jumped into the river. Now, that was like a hot dog. Esposito brought his B-17 right down to Yankee Stadium. They buzzed it. Of course, they were put under armed guard later on, but they sort of let it go. Also, down in Texas, they would go into a low flying formation and scatter herds of cattle and sometimes even machine gun them for practice, which was wrong. The government probably paid a couple good bills on that. But that is the funny side of the story. But, back to the B-17, I think it was the right ship for me.

S: How did you get overseas, then? When did that happen?

B: We were in Texas training, and they were talking about getting our flights together to fly over. But, they took the planes and they flew them over ahead of us. We ended up in Camp Kilmer where we got on a boat.

S: What boat? Do you remember?

B: The Queen Elizabeth. That's how they got us to England. I think there was 20,000 people on in a convoy about one day or so, until we got in the open seas. Then, we raised the cross and zigzagged all the way across. They felt, at that time, that they could out race any submarine. We came to England through the Clyde of Firth in Scotland. After a couple small bases, we ended up in our regular flying field.

S: Okay, what group were you attached to?

B: I was attached to the 303rd Bomb Group, 360 Bomb Squadron, the Hell's Angels Squadron.

S: Does every unit have a nickname for itself, usually?

B: Well, the Hell's Angels came out of World War I. When you said that you are with the Hell's Angels group, why, you were like top dog.

S: You had a reputation.

B: We had a beautiful reputation. Our government made this book to give us an idea of what the Hell's Angels did during World War I; the missions they flew, the area they bombed, and the credibility of the whole system with the Hell's Angels. January 11, 1944, the day that I was shot down, the air fight was rated as the most fierce, the most intense air battle in any war in history.

S: What base were you assigned to in England?

B: I was outside of London, North Hampton. Our base was situated in that area with several other bases.

S: Did you ever come under any air attacks while you were there?

B: Yes, we were under air attack over in a small place where we were sort of in transit. I can't remember the name of the town, but it was Shire. We did some military training there until we got to our regular air base. Until we were assigned to our regular air base, we came under air raids.

S: Describe the air base that you were assigned to. When you came into that base, what did you see?

B: Quonset huts.

S: How many?

B: Oh, I couldn't tell you.

S: How many runways?

B: Runways, I can't recollect because they were camouflaged.

S: Was there barbed wire around these bases?

B: I think they were controlled by gates and barbed wire. Yes, that would be my recollection.

My recollection of the base is not too vivid really, except for the Quonset huts, going out for briefing, and going out to the aprons to pick up our planes. Most of the time, we were going early in the morning and you didn't see very much. Flying in, you would see some of it. I couldn't honestly give you a very good description, except for the areas that I was familiar with.

S: How many planes were in the 303rd?

B: Let me give you some idea how they would run. I think with the 303rd, there was the 358th Squadron, the 359th, the 360th, 427th, 444th Sub Depot, 3rd Station Compliment Squadron, 101st, 684th Ordnance Company, 1,199th Military Police Company, 863rd Chemical Company, 18th Weather and Squadron Detachment, 107, 2097th Engineer's Fire Fighting Platoon, 1,144th Quartermaster Company, and the 202nd Finance Section. So, it was a complete unit.

S: I see. [It was] completely self-sufficient, then?

B: Yes.

S: Describe a briefing. How soon would you know before you were going on a mission?

B: Usually, we were notified in the barracks that there would be a briefing if the weather was good. You'd never know where you were going. You'd be up maybe at 4 o'clock in the morning and sometimes earlier, depending. Briefing was with the complete unit. You'd meet in a briefing hall. You'd have your weather briefing officers and ordnance officers. You would have a commanding officer telling you what flight patterns you would take and who would be in the front echelon, in the outer echelons, and on the outer parameters, whatever your plane was and whatever flight echelon you would be [in]. These briefings would take place before you went out on your raids.

S: Okay, was the whole crew there?

B: Yes, you were always there.

S: Would they have a map?

B: They would have a map. They would have a large map, usually. I'll give you a sample briefing, okay?

S: Okay.

B: The logistic officer would tell you exactly how you would get up into formation. [He would tell you] who would be the lead plane and who would be the lead poster. They would explain the line of direction to your target. They would orientate you to different things that might happen while you went overseas. If it was in the wintertime and you ditched or you had to bail out, you might as well say "Good-bye," because you would only last so long in the North Sea. You would have that as a main target. It might be closed in by the weather, so you might have a secondary target. If your flight was successful, you'd come back to base and you had a debriefing.

The debriefing was usually scheduled with the officers and the pilot, co-pilot, the engineer, and then the members of the crew, because everybody saw something. They wanted to glean all the information they could. These debriefings were very concise, very well put together, and very well thought out. When you went into your flight patterns, you were hopeful that you weren't sitting on the outside. You were hopeful that maybe you'd be in the center, because you had a lot of protection. You had a lot of fighter power from everybody that protected the inner. I think that that was always the safest place to be.

S: Were these box-cut types of formations?

B: They were usually in three. However, if you were sitting on the outside, as you can see from this picture, you wouldn't know if you were higher than these because he was going to come front running. But they would have high threes and low threes, and your formations would build up that way. So, anytime any fighter planes were coming in, you'd have a complete unit always protecting the other unit.

S: I see. And this is what you would see if you looked out of a window? (looking at a photograph)

B: Yes, if I was looking at another plane--at this plane here. . . . This happened to be our ensign, the Triangle C.

S: What was the most dangerous part of the formation to fly?

B: I think it was the outside echelons.

S: Would each crew, as they were assigned to that, dread that type of assignment?

B: I don't know if there was a dread, but I think that they would have been happier if they were inside. It's just a matter of pure knowledge right there. You would then pick it up anyway. You would say to yourself that all of these guns are on the outside protecting the insides. Really, when the Germans hit the formation, they would barrel roll in from the upside-down areas. They would come out of the sun, and usually they would hit the outer echelons first, where they tried to pick up a strafe.

S: How many missions did you fly?

B: I went down on my fifth mission.

S: What missions did you participate in before you were shot down? Do you remember your destinations?

B: Le Havre, Bordeaux, Kiel, Hamburg, and then, Oschersleben. Well, we had a couple of aborts because of the weather. I think one of the aborts was Frankfurt and the other one was, I think, Bordeaux.

S: Were there different types of bomb loads or payloads for different targets?

B: Our bomb load seemed to be always the same.

S: High explosive?

B: High explosive, destructive type of bomb that would do the most damage to any given area.

S: Describe the feeling of a crew when they know that they are going into an area that is highly protected.

B: Going into the area that they call flight bound, the briefing officer would always say that you are going to hit flak in this area. You are going to be hitting heavy flak and probably picking up fighter planes. This would probably be the most dangerous part of our mission. You always have that anticipation. Seeing flak from a distance has a beauty about it. I don't know why I say that, but it does. But, these black puffs of smoke signaled a definite danger. You knew it, because you saw planes blowing up. You saw planes come back with holes in them. You saw some guys torn up with flak. You had seen people maimed or even killed by flak. You saw planes knocked down by flak.

S: What was more dangerous, the fighters or the flak?

B: In my case, it was fighters, because we were shot down by fighters. Flak fields, sometimes you can get over, and the Germans had that good. . . . It would lift them up pretty high. I'm not sure how high. I think 20,000 feet.

S: So, you could get above the fire?

B: [You could] get above some of it. You come in a little lower at target areas.

S: Describe the atmosphere, if you can, inside that plane when you were entering the area when you figure you are going to pick up German fighter escorts. Would there be a flurry of activity inside that plane?

B: Usually you were always on the lookout, because there were known cases of German fighters coming right over Britain, even picking up some planes and going up into formations. You were always in a tense situation when you got over the channels. You would get the order to clear your guns. You went around the plane. You'd say, "Waste gunner, I cleared my gun and everything is okay," and so forth and so on.

S: What do you mean "clear your guns?"

B: You'd shoot a burst to make sure that they were operating. Then, you check in with your gunner sergeant and say, "Okay, my gun is all right." If you had a problem, then he would either rectify it or tell you what was wrong so that you could fix it. Once you cleared the guns, you had some of that tension released because you were relieved that the guns were okay. But then, you were always on the lookout for picking up the fighters, a fighter escort. You always wished you had. . . . We had some good fighter squadrons connected with going out on missions, but their travel length was not as far as the B-17's. They could only go so far and come back because they would run out of fuel.

I think the P-38 had a longer range. Eventually, I heard that they . . . with extra gas they carried. Otherwise, your fighter escort was only as good as the distance they could travel.

S: Okay, so you were describing this. . . .

B: This feeling you get?

S: Right.

B: I think it was always intense. The best similarity I could give you would be . . . take somebody who is in a sport. He's going to play football or he's going to be up to bat the first time. He has an awful lot of tension until that release comes.

S: Would the adrenaline flow?

B: Yes. You never knew what was going to happen.

S: Describe the day you were shot down, from the time you took off to the end of that day.

B: We made our formation and our briefing was that we were going to a ball bearing factory just a little bit southeast of Berlin. The reason that it was such a valuable target was they felt that if they could knock that out, they could knock out the German Air Support and German air machine.

S: Because everything runs on ball bearings, right?

B: Yes, that's true. Okay, when we were in formation, we had what they called a complete bombing schedule. I think all the squadrons and all the groups in England were alerted for that raid. Somehow, maybe the Germans in their intelligence picked it up, because we got hit by fighters immediately over the channel. They picked us up immediately, and they worked us in. There happened to be a German Flying Circus which picked us up over the channel and worked us all the way in until our plane was blown up. From talking to other fellows that were shot down on that trip, they said that they were hit by fighters all the way into the target and back. It was a massacre. It was really a bad, bad air battle all the way through.

S: Describe your particular situation.

B: The fighting was so hot and heavy that you were hearing planes at 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock, and you could see them coming in. They were really coming in. The odd part about it was we lost our fighter cover. There was a recall of fighter cover. I think the reason was because the weather went bad or something. We were on radio silence, and nobody knew exactly what had taken place. But General Travis, who was leading the raid at the time, decided to go straight in. Then, there was some recall of some of the bomb squadrons and they returned to base. But the 303rd and a few other groups kept heading in. My individual experience was of intense battle. There was nothing that I could see except planes coming in, planes coming in, and planes coming in.

S: Were any getting hit?

B: I honestly feel--and I have it on record--that I have three and two probables or whatever. I got it on record somewhere that way. I ran out of ammunition. I didn't have anything else to shoot. That's how intense the battle was. Then, I heard this screaming, "Bail out! Bail out!" I didn't know where it was coming from. Our plane got hit and my turret got hit, and it froze it in an angle spot.

S: Did you know that it was hit?

B: It wouldn't move anymore, so I figured something happened. But I did feel something on top of my head, and there was no way of knowing what was happening. But then, I heard this intense, "Bail out! Bail out! Plane on fire!" I looked over, and I saw one of the wings completely engulfed. Normally, the engineer gunner goes out through the bomb-bay if he can open it. You can't wear a chute in the turret because you are restricted. You can't back chute and you can't wear a chest chute. I used to hang my chute over the co-pilot's seat. So, when I heard to bail out, I couldn't get through there. I couldn't get back to get my chute and go out of the bomb-bay, so I reversed myself to get my chute. I didn't have a chute. I couldn't see that the pilot was bending over and that he was dead already. He got hit by a 20 millimeter or something. He was dead. He was really hit hard. My co-pilot was not in his seat. I couldn't find my chute. I became, what you call, in a hysterical mode. [I yelled,] "What happened? Where's my chute?" The plane is on fire and there is no chute and we are way upstairs. I could jump out of the plane without a chute, that's true, or I could stay with the plane and hopefully I could come down. I happened to look down in the cat lock and my chute was there bouncing toward the opening, and I dove for it. That was real quick. How many seconds it took, I could never tell you, but I know it was fast. I snapped the chute on, which was the chest chute. I started heading for the opening and then the plane blew. It blew apart. Fortunately, we theorize that since I was at the opening, it blew me out of the opening. I happened to have my hand on the chute release, and then, when it knocked me out unconscious, I must have automatically pulled the release, because my next recollection was floating down. I was still above the cloud level. Then, as I came floating down, an ME-109 pilot circled me. I thought that he was going to maybe gun me down, but no. He saluted me. I think that was nice of him to do. "Well, I know that you are not going anywhere now. From one airman to another, I salute you." He probably radioed my position because they were waiting for me when I got down.

B: Who was waiting for you?

B: The Germans.

S: Troops?

B: The German Land Army. Kids. They had kids with guns bigger than they were. They had these people, I think they had a name for them, the Land Army they called them. They conscripted all kinds of people for it, for their own protection. And that's how I got captured. Of course, when I hit the ground . . . I'll tell you again, I got knocked out. I didn't have any shoes on. Everything was blown up in my feet. I was in pretty bad shape at that one particular time.

S: Now, you had no [gun] or anything in case you wanted to defend yourself?

B: There was no reason for it. They took them back and said that if you had a side arm and if you opened it and you had no way to use it, they'd probably shoot you down because you had it. This way, at least, you were protected, supposedly, under the Geneva Convention. Of course, we had an escape pack that was sort of a flight uniform that had a pack that kind of protected us . . . flapped over and tied in, but I couldn't make any use of it. I tried to hide it eventually, but they picked it up. I didn't have any chance for escape.

S: When you were floating down after you regained consciousness, did it occur to you that you were going to be captured? What were your thoughts?

B: I had no idea about what was going to happen. I come out of a strong Christian family. I don't want to bring religion into this, but I will for this reason. I think that I was thanking God that He let me come down the way I was coming down. So, He's giving me a second chance, I figured. For some reason, God was good to me then. He gave me a second chance. As I came down, I had no idea what was going to happen to me. I thought that if I came in some area where nobody was going to be, that I might have a chance to hide, because we were also briefed on how to escape. We had people that had escaped from prison camps and that bailed out over Europe and came back and orientated us to these kind of conditions. Those thoughts crossed my mind, but I was hurting too bad, really. I don't know how to tell people, but when you are hurting sometimes, you don't care about anything. When I hit the ground really hard, I went out again, and then, I was captured.

My first night was really bad. It was really bad. They put us in a place that was nothing. . . . It wasn't a regular jail house. It was out in the open and in the cold. It was like a farm place. And it was 1944, January, and the weather wasn't warm. I was hurt and my bones were all sort of busted up. My joints, my back, and my head. . . . I had blood coming out of the top of my head. We didn't get any medical attention.

S: Not at all?

B: Not at all. I didn't get any medical attention.

S: Did you ever think about if any of your other crew members got out?

B: When we heard the bail out, right away I presumed that there were some already leaving. But my concern was my ball turret operator, if he got out and the tail gunner, I didn't know. But the next day, we found out that the two that were killed were my pilot and co-pilot. But my co-pilot was not killed in the cockpit. We theorized that he was going up to see if everybody was out of the nose of the plane--the navigator and the bombardier. They had the easiest access to get out. They went right through the opening. That's the opening that I got blown out [of]. The Germans made us pick our co-pilot up the next day. I couldn't hardly walk, but I walked under sheer determination. I didn't want them to think that I was that badly hurt. And you always had the impression that they'd maybe shoot you or something. He [the co-pilot] was all busted up. There wasn't a bone in his body that wasn't broken. So, he was probably blown out unconscious and never had a chance to open up his chute. But my pilot, I know that he was killed from gun shot wounds.

S: How close were your crew members? Were you able to get close to one another? I mean, when you said that your pilot was dead, did that affect you in a way?

B: Yes. It affected me terribly because he was newly married, and I had met his wife while we were training in the States. To go a little ahead of my story, after the war, when I came back, she made contact with me and wanted to know exactly what happened to her husband. It was a sad situation to try to explain exactly what happened. What my recollection was and how it could have happened and this and that. We had gone out. We didn't fraternize that closely, but we had the friendship as a crew. I had gone out with the family a couple of times in training, where we had gone on leave into town or something like that.

S: Describe the feeling, before we get into your actual incarceration, during an air battle as you saw another plane going down.

B: I have two descriptions: one of our own planes and then the German planes. Over the base, we were making a formation one day for a rail. I think we were going to Kiel. I'm pretty sure. But, two planes collided in making formation, and you could see the burst of fire. We never knew what happened or what caused it or why it happened. Somehow, somebody messed up, and they collided. We went on our mission and came back, and I found out that it was one of my best friends. It was one of my best friends that I've known in the States. We got together and went overseas together. My recollection of that would be why would it have happened. The man didn't even have a chance to fight for his life.

In an air fight, if I saw a German plane go down, I had a sense of elation. You said, "Look. We got him. There's one less to worry about." Yet, if I looked at it from my own Christian viewpoint, my own humanity today, I'd say, "Well, there was a life lost." Today, what bothers me the most is the fact that I know my bombs killed children and killed people. It's still bothering me today.

S: Did you see the results of your bombing raid? Would they tell you the results?

B: Sometimes the path finders would take pictures of them later on, and then, you would see the briefing of them. Of course, you see a bomb burst 20,000 feet above. You don't know how many people were killed or how many houses were destroyed. Of course, you try to destroy the military targets or factories, or something. People work in factories. The Germans always had the expression that every time a raid took place that they bombed civilian areas. Maybe a stray bomb went or something. I don't know. I can't tell you honestly. But, from my viewpoint, today, the way I look at it, I have an intense feeling today worse than I had then, because it bothers me to know that maybe innocent people were killed.

S: Was there any animosity towards, maybe, the American pilots and the British flyers, because the British left them a chance of flying during the night time?

B: I don't know how the officers felt. I met a lot of nice British people. To me, they were great fighters. The Polish fighters had an intense desire to fight the Germans constantly, because they were the first ones in the war. When they went over to escape to England and

they became a part of the English Flying Air Force, they were even denied airplanes for a while for one reason: they would go over and never want to come back. They'd fly past their mission capability. They had a habit of knocking every German plane that they could find. They were very aggressive. They were known as pilots that would take chances that normally other pilots wouldn't take, but they wanted to fight that way.

S: Now, you said that you were interrogated once you were captured. How many days was that?

B: [It was] about two weeks. We were interrogated by German officers through a system of silence isolation, hot and cold treatment.

S: What was that?

B: They would turn the heat off completely, and then they would turn it on, turn it off, and turn it on. The food was once a day. It wasn't anything that you would think about.

S: Where you interrogated individually?

B: Individually, everyone was interrogated individually.

S: What did they ask you?

B: When we got an interrogation officer, he knew quite a bit about you right off the bat. He knew what group you came out of and where you flew out of because the place that blew up had its insignia. They wanted to know my name and my background. They always thought that I was German right off the bat. I got a sort of Germanic name. [They wanted to know] why I was flying, why I wanted to bomb innocent people, how much bomb load we were carrying, where we were going, how much gasoline we were carrying, the whole bit. They wanted to know. They were gleaning information, also. They could get rough with you, really.

S: Did you see or know of any cases where they got rough?

B: Just the treatment itself at the beginning. You know that they weren't going to be easy on you. They offered you a cigarette to passify you if you were a smoker, and then that was it. If you didn't answer certain questions, well, they started hinting, "Hey, listen. We can do this to you. We can do that. We can say you were a spy." They had a lot of experience. It was rough.

S: Did you know of any cases where maybe a man was beaten?

B: Cases of men being beaten? Personally, I don't know, because I was in a room by myself. I was in isolation. I was in total darkness for two or three days. I couldn't tell you if the man next to me was beaten or not, because we'd never see him. When we got together, we matched up stories. I would say I was slapped around, and others would say that they got the same sort of interrogation. Of course, to be honest with you, we were bombed when we were there, too.

S: Okay, tell us about the bombing?

B: We were bombed that night by the British. They came over Frankfurt, and they bombed. They missed us.

S: When did they move you out to a regular camp?

B: They moved us out in a trainload in regular boxcars. They packed us in like sardines, and they moved us out. They took us to a transit camp first. I can't recall which one it was, but it was controlled more by the British. British officers and noncommissioned officers ran it. Then, we were moved from there. We were put in the trainload, and we headed out. We didn't know where we were going. It seemed like night and day worked itself together until we got to our destination. The food was almost non-existent. It was a difficult journey for a lot of people.

S: Were you all flyers?

B: Yes, we were all mostly Air Force guys.

S: How many were there?

B: On that trainload, I couldn't give you an idea. I don't know how many boxcars hold, but they hold plenty. There was hardly any place to sit down. Sometimes, if you were lucky, you stood up. Who ever couldn't get out to urinate, he urinated himself over there or defecated. That was there. It became very smelly before we got there.

S: Were there any people that you knew?

B: Only my crew members that I couldn't talk to or see. A couple of them weren't in the same carload.

S: But there were crew members there?

B: Yes, when we got to camp, all my crew members were together. We were in the same camp, so we were fortunate in one way, because we could associate in one way or another.

S: Did you ever find out from them exactly what happened during those crucial moments?

B: My tail gunners tell me that he had a little difficulty getting out of the tail section, but he got out. They all got out before I did. Most of them made the jump pretty good. It's almost explainable because up in the front, there was five of us. There was the bombardier navigator, co-pilot, pilot, engineer, gunner, and myself. Two out of the five got killed out of the cockpit. So, all the main force of whatever shot up that cockpit came in that area. I would say that I was very fortunate. I was very fortunate.

And then, we got to Stalag . . . our camp of incarceration. That was out in Austria, on the Danube. We went through like a delousing place and building where they gave us a hot shower and deloused us. The Germans examined us for lice and stuff like that.

S: Did they have different camps for different services?

B: Yes, non-commission officers. This picture will describe the American Compound. We went through this compound. You were going into the Russian compound and the Italian. . . . But here was the Air Force, most of them. This happened to be the graveyard.

S: As you walked into this camp, describe what you would see.

B: When we came in here off the train, we marched down through sort of a tree lined road--it was more like a dirt road--until we came to this gate, and we saw the barbed wire and the towers.

S: How many towers could you see?

B: Every time you passed one, you could see one. They were on the corners and in the middle.

S: Now, who would man those towers? [Were they] regular German soldiers or were they SS?

B: They were German Soldiers. Once we were in the compound and assigned to our barracks, there were restrictions of what we could do and what we couldn't do.

S: What were some of the restrictions?

B: Stay away from the barbed wire fences, because you can't escape. That was the first. Of course, we were always briefed on trying to escape. That's part of the

American military advice that you get. When you are a captured soldier, you are on AWOL anyway. So, the main theory is try to escape always.

S: Were there ever escape attempts that you know of?

B: Oh, yes. There were escape attempts all the time.

S: Like?

B: Digging tunnels.

S: Underground tunnels.

B: [In] this camp, especially after the war. . . . If you ever have your briefing with Allen, he'll probably mention that fact that when they went back to see this, this became an air field. When they were bulldozing, they were falling in these tunnels.

S: Did you know personally about any of these tunnels?

B: Yes. Barrack 19, where I was situated at this end here. This Barrack 20, it was sort of a one time low. . . . They wouldn't keep any POW's in there, because it was too close to the fence. But, they were digging a tunnel from under our barracks out through here, and they were trying to get this graveyard. Once they got that, they had a chance to hide.

S: How were they hiding the dirt?

B: We had air raid shelters, so they mix it up with the dirt and take it out in their pockets.

S: Did you help in the digging?

B: Oh, yes. Everybody helped to a degree.

S: How many men would be involved? Was it the whole barrack? How many men were in a barrack?

B: I can't remember exactly how many men were in our barrack totally. Every place for sleeping was four. I would figure, say 80 or 120. I can't give you an honest answer.

S: Now, they'd all be in and on this plan, obviously?

B: No, not everybody, but who ever wanted to work it. They wouldn't take their chance of getting in that tunnel, because it was a dangerous operation. The Americans were very ingenious to fix up little fans

made out of tin cans to blow the air in so that they could get air down in that tunnel. But the tunnel that I know was being dug out of here. . . .

S: How far did it get?

B: They popped it out, but the Germans were waiting. They either had an informer or they had knowledge of it.

S: What happened to those men?

B: Well, most of them that were in the tunnel escaped back through and cut. But they picked them out. They always put them in isolation or took them somewhere else, and they kept them isolated for a while. But, there was always continuous types of escape. One of the best ways would be to get yourself on the Russian compound and get in the work force so that you could go out and work. Then, your chances are a little bit better.

S: Okay, take us through the doorway of that barrack. As you are standing in that doorway, what would you see?

B: You'd walk in the barracks and you see these bedlocks on each side. As you walk through the middle of the barracks, you come to a place where there's a stone type of stove that was built in Europe at that time. That was what we used as our heating element, and they gave us so much burning units. It was very little. Sometimes, you'd heat water on it if you'd get a chance. But generally, there was a chimney next to where we were sleeping and it had a hole in there, and if you did it right and you had the contraptions made, you could take a sheet of paper, and if you burned it right, you could heat a can of water. It would really boil. You'd be surprised how much heat you can get out of one piece of paper. We had a lot of smart people in that camp that were ingenious in inventing for themselves that way.

S: In this camp, was there a senior officer?

B: We went under the democratic principles. We elected a barrack's chief. The highest rank was Tech Sergeant, and you might find Master Sergeant here and there. But, our senior officer was Major Beaumont. He was a medical officer. There was Major Cochran, and then, there was another captain. And then, we had an American Chaplain. He was a captain. Now, our barrack chief was always chosen by democratic process. What I'm trying to say is that the compound and the officer who you elected to become the leader of the whole camp. . . . We laid our rules and regulations out that way for ourselves. What we can do with this? What we

can do with that? What we should do, what we shouldn't do, if there was an escape to notify. If you are going to escape, make sure that you notify or try to get arrangement to do it, because we had maps drawn up, and it was organized to a degree.

We had some vigilantes, too, that disrupted. We had cases of stealing among our own members. We had cases where they court-martialed under the articles of war for stealing food off another prisoner that they had sentenced them to be hung. We told the Germans to get him out of the camp or he'd be hung the next day. I think that the Germans took him out of the camp. His name, I don't know, but there's a story about him. So, these things took place. The rations weren't very good.

S: Describe the food.

B: We got hot water in the morning from the kitchen, and we made coffee. Generally, they'd give us some soup once in a while. The rations weren't very good. Rutabaga, rotten potatoes, leavings and swill out of the . . . they call it a jam. I think it was grapes that they made wine out of, and then, they ended up making some sort of a jam. They would give some of that to us.

One time, the rations broke down to one bread to every four. Then, it broke down to eventually one loaf of bread to 64 units. Then, we were on the march after we left the camp towards the end of the war. We were on a march, and our rations were very bad. If you were like me where you could speak the language, like the Polish language, if you'd hit somebody, you could talk to them, so maybe you could finagle a little bit extra. That was my case. I was fortunate that way.

S: Was there much bartering or trading going on?

B: Cigarette bartering.

S: With the Germans?

B: Some with the Germans, because cigarettes were valuable. We used to get Red Cross parcel. There was what they called a D-Bar in it. The guys used to shave it to make chocolate in hot water. They would mix it with a little bit of powder and it made a nice little drink. Some used that as a barter. The cigarettes became valuable like money. The guys that didn't smoke, it was good for them. The guys that smoked, it was a little worse.

S: [What were your] medical facilities and medical attention?

B: Very little that I know of. I never got any medical treatment.

S: Not at all?

B: Never. I never got any. It was six months before I was able to walk good again. Then, the person has to realize that if you are hurt and you get proper medical attention and you get the proper food, your body will recover very good. Even if you don't get enough food, it will have a tendency to recover. It's strong, and it will recover, especially if you are young, but the residual effects are there. They never leave.

S: Are you still affected by your injuries?

B: Oh, yes. It turned to an arthritic condition. It gets awful bad sometimes. And there's the trauma of depression. There's the trauma of the nightmares that come in. The trauma of reliving certain experiences that you don't ever want to relive. But, they are there, and they don't ever stop. Sometimes, as you grow older, they get worse. I'll tell you how I know about this. My wife tells me or my daughter that I will wake up sometimes in the middle of the night, and I'm reliving something that I don't even know.

I'm going to Barbed Wire Buckeyes. I find out that I'm not an individual case. I wouldn't say it to anybody if I thought I was just [an] individual case. I'd say, "Forget it. It's your own problem." But, when you find out that others are reliving the same situations. . . . The only thing that I would say about myself--I'm going to be honest with myself. If I hadn't been hurt so bad, I'd probably recover a lot better, but I didn't. I was hurt too much.

S: Were there fits of depression for the POW's?

B: Oh, yes. We had one that went berserk. He climbed the fence, and they shot him. There's others that went into fits of depression because their families didn't understand why they were captured. There was even actual stories. There was fits of depression when people knew that they couldn't be let loose. They had to stay in that barbed wire confinement. There were stronger individuals. They took up something or doing something. I think it's one big mistake about the camp that you were tied up in a group and you couldn't do nothing else. Say for instance, if I had to talk to my friend, and we had something in common, we could forget for a moment. But, if a person would sit back and

never associate, then he could go into a catatonic state. And then, on the other hand, we had some people who seemed to get along real good, but maybe that was an outward way of doing it.

S: What activities could you participate in or could you do while you were in camp to take your mind off of it? What was a typical day like?

B: In my case, it was good because they played cards. They killed time with cards. I learned to play bridge there, but I forgot it to my regret. We had a guy who used to be a caricaturist for one of the eastern papers, and he was a very good artist and a good teacher. I said to myself at the time, "I wish I could do that." So, he had little training classes and I picked it up.

One of the nicest stories that I can tell about my own incarceration was that a fellow from Elmira, New York asked me to do his picture portrait with the little materials that we had and a piece of paper. For some reason, it came out real good. I bragged about it a little bit. We had some badly injured POW's that were going to be on an exchange. I think I was there on my tenth month.

S: What do you mean?

B: They were going to be exchanged through Geneva and sent home. Some of them were badly injured and really sick, even worse than I. So on the exchange, this portrait--I asked one of the fellow's family that lived in Elmira, New York. After the war, I got the nicest letter from his wife. She said that when she got that, it was just like God's gift to her. I suppose they kept it. I have never heard from them since, but it was nice for me to know these things. That was probably one of my outlets. I did that type of sketching and work for myself to learn.

S: Was there a lot of disease?

B: Lice, scabies. I think Peter and myself and a few others that came became rampant with the disease of scabies. In fact, they discharged me out of the service, which they should have never done. It's never been cleared out completely. They think it's residual.

S: How often did you get mail? How often did you write?

B: They allowed us to write. I think they gave us a form letter once a month, if I'm not mistaken. I could be wrong about that, too.

S: Do you imagine that your letters were censored?

B: Oh yes, they were censored. I don't think that anything went out of that camp without being censored.

S: What would you write home about?

B: Oh, I'd tell them about different things. I'd most generally try to slant my letters toward them than myself. I got a parcel from my mother twice, which was good. But then, I could blame the Red Cross for not [getting] more because they told my mother and family that they were only allowed to send one so many. . . . But then, on the other hand, there was guys that got parcels more often. Like I told you, my mother had a lot of intuitive reasoning behind her parcels, too, because they sent me salami, hard salami to keep. We had a big party. And I sliced them as thin as I could. And who ever could get a thin slice of it, we had a party that way.

S: After you got home, how did you find out how your family reacted to you being a prisoner of war?

B: First of all, I think my family knew about it for some time because they didn't get a letter for six months or so, or a notification from me. I didn't get anything from them for over six months. How they found out was through picking up shortwave. [They found out] the name of the prisoners that were shot down and who was and who wasn't alive. The first reaction was like my brother Vic. I think they thought that I was shot down and killed. Eventually, they found out that I became a prisoner. People from all over the United States either sent them a letter or something like that. My mother and family got notification that way.

S: You mentioned the Red Cross packages. How often would you get these?

B: I got two of them. Two parcels.

S: Two parcels?

B: Two parcels in 16 months.

S: How about war news? Did you have any indication on how the war was progressing?

B: Oh, yes.

S: How did you find out?

B: [From] crystal sets made right in the camp.

S: You mean, you would build your own?

B: Yes.

S: I mean, since you were an engineer, could you build a radio?

B: We had fellows that were radio operators that learned. Some of them had built crystal sets when they were young and in school. They got the diode somewhere and whatever was needed to make the crystal. They'd buy them either through a pack of cigarettes and build them. But eventually, a lot of them were confiscated by the SS.

S: These were verboten?

B: Verboten, most certainly. We knew about the invasion. We told the Germans about the invasion.

S: (Laughter) What was their reaction?

B: They said that it didn't happen. The hell it didn't. We know it. They said, "June 6, Normandy. We are going to get you. You had better start hiding."

S: That brings up another question that I wanted to ask you. What was their attitude toward you? How did German guards view you as prisoners? Were you treated humanely? Were you treated like animals?

B: Some of them were strictly military. Some of them gloated. Some of them were bad. One from Youngstown, who happened to be visiting Germany when the war broke out, became conscripted and became a German soldier. He was one of our guards. He worked in the steel mills of Youngstown, and he couldn't wait to get back.

S: Is that right?

B: Yes. He stood in our tower right by our barracks. He used to tell us, "I know Youngstown real good." The guy said, "You better not come back to Youngstown because I'm looking for you." But, he wasn't a bad guy. We had Sergeant Strock. He was kind of mean. Sergeant Gerlock was another one. The one we called Big Stoop, he never counted our barracks, but he counted other barracks. We knew that most of them could speak English to a degree. Some of them put on that they never knew how to speak English, but eventually you'd find out somehow or other, by trick or something. But, Big Stoop wanted to learn English. So, they taught him very correctly. When he walked in the morning, the first thing in the morning he'd holler out, "I'm a son of a bitch!" (Laughter) It became

comical. That's what they used to teach them. "I'm a rat," and things like that. But, that was more or less for relief. He was typically an older person that probably wouldn't make the Army anywhere except for that reason. They were very military. SS soldiers were bad. We hated them. They come in and they would keep us outside. I recall one time they kept us out for almost three days in the compounds while they searched the barracks. They'd come through every so often for searching the barracks.

S: This would be the SS, then?

B: Yes, SS soldiers.

S: Were they part of the regular?

B: No, they'd come in when they wanted to. They'd bring their dogs in.

S: Is that right?

B: Yes.

S: You mentioned the tunnel that you were digging. How did you hide the tunnel inside the barracks?

B: Under the boards and then right under the stove. We'd move the stove. That was about the only logical place that you could really dig from and still keep somebody from moving it that easily. Then, when you laid the boards, you'd lay the dirt back so they wouldn't have any idea that the tunnel was being dug. You'd lay a board, and then, you'd put some dirt over it. Then, when they moved you from the barracks, you know that if they moved the stove, you'd see dirt. You made sure that it always looked the same. It took pains. It took a lot of work.

S: You mentioned that there were role calls. Is that right?

B: They would have a count on us everyday.

S: Do you know of any escape attempts that were successful?

B: There were escape attempts, and generally they caught them back. But, there was one escape into the camp. What he did was, he'd come in the camp to get fed and then, he would go. I don't know. He was just an escapee. And then, we had one. . . . Do you remember the movie Stalag 17B, about the one that they hit?

S: Yes.

- B: The only difference there really was that they hit them in the latrine. They put him under the lip of the latrine right in the mess. There was defecation up to his neck. The dogs couldn't get any smell of him. No matter how they probed with the probes, they couldn't catch him that way. Now, on the individual basis, I think the majority of the guys had a feeling of trying to escape or had the notion that they wanted to escape. There were guys that tried it and didn't make it and other guys that got hurt because of it. We got one that was shot because of it. Of course, he lost his head a little bit. He was trying to go over through the barbed wire. In fact, he was going the wrong way to get out anyway. He was going toward the Russian compound, and the Germans shot him anyway.
- S: Were there any incidents in the camp where people were beaten or got a rifle butt in the back if you didn't understand the language?
- B: I couldn't tell you if there was any bad that way, but I know that they could move you fast. I know that when the SS guards came in with their dogs, you either hit the top of the bunks as they went through or else they took you out in the compound. If they were loose, man, that was it. They were trained. In fact, there is a story about an SS soldier sending a dog under the barracks to sniff out. He put his hand in there to come out, and the damn dog bit him instead. That's how mean they were.
- S: You mentioned that you were moved out of the camp? Do you remember that? Why were you moved?
- B: The Russian Army was coming in. We could hear already some artillery pounding. They were going into the Vienna area already. They moved us out, and they marched us west. They marched us down through Innsbruck [and] up to Salzburg. We finally ended up after 18 or 19 days through the mountains in Bavaria. Of course, on the way--now we know definitely that they were marching us through Mauthausen, which was a concentration camp. It was a gas chamber camp. They were taking the Jews. We'd see them marching the Jews there. They were deplorable and in very bad shape. Some of them were dying on the side of the road. They were being bayoneted, or they were shot. Allen tells me and a few others say that that's where they were taking us. But of course, like I told you previously, we had already laid out plans through our democratic process of what we were going to do in case. We had set up formations of regular military strike back forces if necessary.

S: You mean you were going to fight?

B: Oh, definitely. We could have possibly taken the camp over then. But, it was more plausible for us to march out as a unit and get away because we had an idea that the war was coming to conclude. We thought so. Around that march, we did pick up on the crystal set that President Roosevelt had finally died. It was a sad time for us, especially if you were a Roosevelt fan. If you were brought up like my family, they believed that he was almost a god to poor people. So, it was a sad occasion, but we knew about it.

S: Was there opportunity to escape on this march?

B: Oh, anytime. But, like I said, it was better for you to stay as a unit because you were going towards it. It was true, because eventually, the Americans came across the Inn River, and we were liberated.

S: Describe the day of liberation.

B: On the day of liberation, we were in the woods. We knew across the river there was a tank outfit, but they had some units that had come through first. They were a reckon unit, and they had told us that we were already free. We were liberated. Now, I'm talking about our unit in this force, we were bivouacked. But, for some reason, the Germans kept their guns and arms. The guards like Gerlock, Strock, and the rest of them, we couldn't stand them. But, when the tank commander came through, eventually they got through. There were some SS guards and some diehards that were sniping. They were holding up pontoon bridges coming across. But eventually, when they got across, this tank commander came in on the tank. The tank commander wanted to know why I was standing there. I knew that the Germans had their side arms and their arms yet. He said, "You're not his prisoner, man. He's your prisoner now." That was the release. That was the time when the Americans took over. American soldiers took over, GI's like myself.

S: Did you grab their guns?

B: They took their side arms. In fact, some of them got awful mean with them. Gerlock . . . they ran his ass up and down that road with dogs on his back until he fell over or whatever. But, they got it out of their system. They said, "What you did to me for this amount of time, you're going to get it back." I don't know whatever happened to him. Somebody said that he was court-martialed. No, Sergeant Strock. . . . I could be wrong on the story, but I'm going to say it anyway. After we were liberated, there was one of the small

towns, and he was in the center of town. Some GI shot him. That is a hearsay story.

S: Describe the feeling when you finally realized at that moment that you were no longer a prisoner of war?

B: Great! Real great. Real good.

S: What kind of physical shape were you in?

B: At that time, I went down as low as 112 pounds for a while.

S: And your normal weight was?

B: Army weight was 150 to 155 pounds. I was physically, when I went to the service, in excellent shape. After I got out of the service, my body caught up to me to a degree, I put on weight, but I got residual injuries, and I've got the other stuff that's with it. I can, in all fairness, say that my government was not too good to me after the war, but I'm not complaining that much.

S: The last question that I want to ask is, what do you think that your experiences as a prisoner of war did to help or hinder you?

B: My prisoner of war experiences were brutal for me for the longest time. I couldn't cope with situations which other people would say are normal. It didn't hinder my work, don't get me wrong, but my mind wouldn't stay with one job long enough, so I'd leave it. I rationalized when I was leaving this job, and I rationalized with this job. I rationalized when I left this job. But, in the back of my mind, if I got tied up in a corner with a job, it would put me back in confinement, and something was tugging me to get the hell away from it. Anytime that I'm put in that position, even today, I could feel my nerves going on it.

Another thing that it taught me was not to throw food away. I've talked to many Barbed Wire friends of mine, and most of them would say, "I never leave food on my plate." I notice it. They've gotten that idea that maybe one day they may not have it, which is another thing that stays with some of us.

Now, healthwise, we know that we are in an attrition group. We are strictly in an attrition group that is fading out faster than the public norm. We have more people that are dying off faster. We have people that are getting sick faster. We've got their residual sicknesses that are coming up on them. For what reason? Because of their incarceration. Your body is good to you, but it does leave some problems.

- S: After your liberation, were you debriefed at all?
- B: Yes, we were debriefed. We were debriefed in Camp Lucky Strike.
- S: What did that consist of? Did they ask you your treatment?
- B: They asked us the treatment and abnormal treatment and people that they thought they should be prosecuting. They all came out similar to what I'm telling you, stories about rough treatment. Yes, there was rough treatment like at. . . . I can't recall some of the guards names. I know Sergeant Strock and Sergeant Gerlock, because they were in our counters.

The debriefing was total, too. [They asked] how many planes we shot down and this and that, the reaction and prison condition. It was a total debriefing. Then at Camp Lucky Strike, they had what they called Field Calls for giving out the medals that were earned. But, a lot of us became sick from diarrhea. The food got too high, too quick. They didn't know too much about how to bring a prisoner of war back into. . . . They brought them back too fast.

- S: It was like a shock.
- B: Yes, it was a shock to the system. Many of them stayed with diarrhea for a long time, because there is what they call immediate dysentery connected with lots of ex-prisoners of war. The one that I think I read about from the notices that I get from Barbed Wire Buckeye, the ones out of Japan are in even worse condition, because they had malarial affect. A lot of them had. But, in this debriefing . . . mine was pretty total. I think why, for one reason, was because I was the only one left out in that airplane from the cockpit that had the knowledge of what happened, especially when the air fight.
- S: Can you think of anything that you'd want to add that I haven't?
- B: There's probably a million and one things that I could go over, but it's been, as I go along, the stories. This is more like a brief resume, because I put a total of 60 months in it. But, when you take the total experience, there's a lot of things that I don't remember, and they come back to me. Like I mentioned, in all fairness to myself, I don't try to think about these things too much. But my wife tells me and my daughter tells me that sometimes they do blow out in [the] night. Hopefully, it doesn't affect me during

the day time. But sometimes, like I say, I can't be closed in. Maybe I'm one of the few, but I've talked to others that say they can't either. Even with my work . . . I work for myself, because I can't get a job anywhere else. Nobody will take me as soon as they find that I had this kind of experience. I used to be a mailman, but I can't walk. I can't hack the route anymore. I couldn't even throw mail all day in the clerk. They even put me inside to work, but I couldn't because I got this arthritic condition that blows on me real quick as soon as I strain certain parts of my body. I work for myself because of one reason. If I need the rest right at this hour, I can take it, but when I'm under a time card, I can't do it.

S: Okay, I'd like to thank you for this interview.

B: I appreciate you giving me the chance to talk about some of my experiences. I hope that I was helpful.

S: You certainly were. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW