

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War 1939-1945

Personal Experience

O.H. 1044

THOMAS CALDRONE

Interviewed

by

Tom Hess

on

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H: This is an interview with Thomas Caldron for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the World War II Project, by Thomas Hess, at 223 Berkshire Drive, on December 17, 1975.

C: I will start with the dates.

H: Okay, that is fine.

C: Belgium, on December 17, 1944, I had orders from our general to hold this road crossing at all costs, that the Germans were breaking through and the Americans were coming out full force. At that time I took my squad and we dug in to hold the position where we had been. During that day it was getting really foggy. It was 4:00 p.m. and snowing, so we dug in. I set my men in positions to sit there and Americans were coming out of the forest, leaving their trucks and jeeps and ammunition there and wanted to know what we were doing there. We told them to hold that road crossing at all costs. Evening came around 7:00 that night. When all the Americans got out of there, we heard some tanks coming up. During that time, I had ordered the men to stay in their position. We spotted a tank coming up at the road crossing and that was the only way to get back to Bastogne, on that one road that was open. When that tank approached, I told that bazooka man to fire on him. I told him to try and see if he could hit the wheel, which he did, and he knocked that one tank out. This other one that came up, it was on the side. Our machine guns open fired and the bazooka man fired again. The bazooka man got hit by a German rifleman, so we sent him back to the hospital. For a while, everything was quiet when that happened.

The next attack came about 9:00 that night when the infantry started coming through. As the infantry came through, they sort of over ran us a little bit. I wired back to headquarters telling them that the infantry was coming through and that we just could not hold that road crossing anymore. He said, "Well, try the best you can and give us their position." So we gave them the position and our artillery started coming in. When our artillery started coming in, the German artillery started coming in. We were in between both fires. In back of us there was sort of a big hill, and as they were going up this hill, that is when our artillery started. I could hear them all screaming and hollering. That sort of quieted down until about 6:00 in the morning. Then we got the third attack. The third attack came and they over ran us and we dug in. At that time, when we had the third attack, I had twelve men, but there was only three of us left, the rest had died, got killed. Then I called back again and he said, "Hold your position and we will try to get the tanks down to get you out." Well, the tanks never did come down, so I called in again and they said, "No, we cannot get in there because the Germans have you all surrounded." He said, "Destroy your radio and everything and just hope for the best." Just as we destroyed our radio, the Germans started coming in. They were searching the fox holes. At the same time, I had gotten wounded. I got hit on the back of my head and I had some white phosphate burn on my face. When they came in, the three of us put our hands up and they took us prisoners.

They marched us back to where the tanks were. They were talking something in German. We could not understand what they were saying. One said, "Line them up and shoot them down. They were the ones that caused the tanks to be knocked out and killed." Some of the men were killed. They lined us up and were ready to shoot us when a German officer came by and said, "No, take them back to headquarters. Interview them to find out what they know." So they marched us back through the mud and water, in fact, they even took our boots off of us. They marched us back, I think we marched all that day, back in the German lines. They took us to Bonne, Germany. That was our first place. They interrogated us and asked us different questions. What outfit we were from and where we came from. Of course, we did not tell them.

From there, they moved us to a town near Hanover and they kept us there for two days. From there they put us on a train and took it to Hanover. We stayed there, you know, camped there for a couple of days. We did not receive anything to eat, just hot water that was supposed to be coffee and some soup that was made out of potato peels. We stayed there two days and from there they took us to, I believe it was Brenin, Germany. We stayed there over night then. That was not too far from Buchenwald, down below Hanover. Then they put us on a train and they took us to another town in Germany. That night we stayed in these box cars. They would only put about, I would say, twenty-five in there to sit comfortably. I think they had about 200 of us in one box car. Then we hit a British prison camp there, we stopped on the outside of this British prison camp. The prisoners that did not eat their meal that day saved it for us and they gave it to us. It was cow beets and coffee, so we were glad to have it. In fact, that was on Christmas Eve. We stayed there for 24 hours. From there, they moved us to another town in Germany. In the meantime, while they were taking us, our Air Force came over and were strafing the box cars. Of course, they did not know who they were, but a lot of boys got killed. A lot of them were wounded and they did not get any medical attention. They were just laying in the box car dead and bleeding while we were sitting there.

Whatever they gave us to eat was very little. If you had to move your bowels, you had to do it in your helmet and there was a little window there on the side of the box car you had to throw it out of. When we got in this one camp, and my feet at that time were bad. They had been frozen when I was taken prisoner because of walking in that snow and mud. They were wet and they were swollen up and I was afraid to take my shoes off. There was a British doctor, he looked at them and he said they were in bad shape. I was losing my toe nails. Then he said, "If you can take it, I am going to have to cut that open to let that drain out of there." So that is what he did. He got a razor, and he did not have a bandage, nothing clean. He cut it with a razor on both of my heels. He had these paper towels and he wrapped them up with that, so I had to lay there.

About two weeks later they moved us out of that camp there and we heard they were going to move us to Goerlitz, that was a town on the river Ore. Part of the time we had to walk, and my feet were in bad shape. I had to force my shoes on and I had to get two sticks, just like a cane. Some of the boys helped me. I think we walked about, I would say, one hundred miles in about a week, little by little. Then from there, they took us to Goerlitz and we stayed there. We got there about January, so we were getting

treated pretty bad there. In the meantime, they mistook me for a Jew with my beard and I was heavy. The S.S. troopers came in and they were asking me questions in German as if I were a Jew, and they were beating me up. One hit me with a rifle butt there. They hit me in the stomach and knocked me out.

We got pretty acquainted with a guard there. He was a police guard. I guess when they took over Poland, they used him as a guard there. He always talked about how he wanted to come to the United States, so he said, "You know, I can help you boys get out of here." He said, "If you would help me to get back to the United States, I have relatives there." I said, "Well yes, if you do, we will try. We will get you back to the United States." In the meantime he says, "I will let you know when we can do it." In January when the Germans or the Russians had closed down, how do you pronounce that, Auschwitz, they were close and they were coming near to our camp.

I remember. They took us out to work one day. We were coming past a German kitchen there and this guard was with us and he said, "I am going to get a cup of coffee, you boys wait here. I will be right out." As the cook came out we saw him dump something in the garbage can there, so we went over and looked and it was a horse head. They were having horse meat that day cooking. We got the idea to take this horse's head and bring it back to camp and clean it up and maybe make some soup with the bones. On our way, we asked the guard if he would let us pick up some dandelions. We brought them back and we cleaned the head up and everything. Then we got some water in a can and we made some soup with dandelions. It tasted really good, and we kept them going for about a month, almost a month anyhow. We kept boiling them over and over because it helped us out to have something to eat.

Now this was about the middle of March when he came in, this guard, and he said, "Tomorrow morning I am going to come in here and I am going to need four guys to go out to work. This is the right time to take this out. The Americans, I understand, are up around the Elb River. It is not too far. Maybe we can make it all the way up there and get across the Elb River." The next morning at 6:00 a.m. he came in and got us to go out. We went out and we passed the guard, so we started down the road. That night we got into a barn there and we slept there. There were four of us. We stayed over night. The next morning we got up and we moved out again and he acted like our guard. We walked in front of him.

The second day we were out we saw a lot of commotion down the road. It seemed there was a bunch of people there and some guards. When we got close to it, we saw that they had striped uniforms on and they were Jewish prisoners. At the time they had moved them out, they were moving them from Auschwitz and they were taking them to Buchenwald. We approached them. The guard stopped them, they were S.S. Troopers. They stopped and they questioned the guard that was with us. They left him go and we started moving out. They said, "You stay there," so we stayed. One of them could speak English and he asked us, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, I do not know. He came out and got us to go to work and we were following him." He said, "No, you guys must have escaped from the prison camp. You get over there." We got over on the side of the road. While we were waiting there was a lot of commotion with these

Jewish prisoners. There must have been about six to eight hundred of them, so we got to talking to some of them. They were telling us that they were moved out of Auschwitz because the Russians got down there pretty close. They were taking the camp over and had left some of them there. They were telling us how they were treated.

Finally, we moved out of there that night. I would say we must have walked about thirty to forty miles. Then the next day this one officer says, "Take these boys and bring them to Buchenwald." They put us on a truck and took us to Buchenwald. When we got there, Eichmann was standing at the gate and we walked in. I will never forget that when we walked in there, you could smell the flesh and the death. You could see them laying all over, all over the place, dead. They had them stacked up just like logs. They had these bulldozers and they put them in these trenches. I guess they spread this lime or something on them, or maybe they covered them up. They were running around and we got to talking. They were just skin and bones, that is all they were. I guess when we got there they were all excited because the Americans were getting pretty close and they were moving them out of there, too. We stayed there that day, that evening. The next day they moved us out of there. We went to a town called Erfurt. I will never forget the way that Buchenwald was, that smell and the gas chamber they had there.

When we got in this town, Erfurt, they put us in a barn there and we stayed there over night. They had four S.S. Troopers there to guard us. The next morning when we got up, they came out and gave us coffee. Some girl came over and she could speak English pretty good. She said, "Americans?" We said, "Yes." She said, "Well, they are talking about putting you out in front of the firing squad because you escaped out of the prison camp." We tried to tell the guard came out and got us and we were supposed to go to work. She said, "Well, I could help you." We did not know if the guards sent her there to get information so we said, "What do you want to help us for?" She said, "I am an American girl. I used to live in Brooklyn, New York. I am married to a German officer who is fighting on the Russian front. You fellows think it over and then you let me know." We got to talking and we figured, what did we have to lose.

When she came back she said, "Now they are going to move some of these Jewish prisoners over on the other side of Elbe River. You boys are going with us. I am moving with the guards and I can help you." I said, "How can you help us?" She said, "Well, when we get near this town, and when they get across the bridge, you guys can get off. There are woods there, you can get off of that. I will keep the guards occupied. Then, after that, you walk down a road about a mile. There is a flat down there. When you get down to the flat in the middle apartment, you go in there and you ask for these people. They will take it from there and they will help you." I cannot mention any names because the government at that time told us to forget about the names when we got back. The reason why I am telling you this here is that they could have been our American agents. Of course, we only knew them by their first names. I could probably use them, but they could be a code name. When I was interrogated by our Intelligence when we got out, they told us not to mention any names.

So we said, "Well, okay." That afternoon, when they were bringing up these prisoners, the Jewish prisoners were all lined up, so they put us with them and we started

down the road. We must have walked fifteen miles that evening. She came by and I said, "The bridge is right over there." And she said, "That is going across the Elbe River. When you get there, I will take care of the guards. You go ahead and do what I told you." So that is what we did.

In the meantime, while we got there, I guess some of these Jewish prisoners knew what we were going to do. They started a little commotion up on the front. It kept the guards busy up there as we took off. We ran in the woods and we stayed there. After everybody went by, we waited fifteen, twenty minutes, maybe a half an hour, and then we started back on the road. We went down about a mile and, sure as hell, that flat was there. We went to the middle flat there and knocked on the door. This old man came to the door and we told him what she told to say. He said, "Come on in." We went in. He took us downstairs and a woman came in there and spoke to us. She gave us some food and everything, and said, "You boys will stay here tonight." "Tomorrow afternoon you will go out of here as a trustee. You will have a card on your shoulder and you walk through town just like you were one of the citizens here." So that is what we did.

The next day she told us where the Americans were at, right on the other side of the Elbe River. That afternoon, about four o'clock, we started out and walked right down through town, like we were walking in our hometown. Two in the front and two in the back. The German people there looked and did not say anything. There were some soldiers running around and they did not say anything, so we got to the square of the town. Some big German there stopped us and asked if anything was wrong. One of the boys could talk German a little bit. He explained to him that we were on our way back to this farm, you know, that we were working on this place. He said, "Well you boys better hurry up because it is going to get dark." We started down the road again and we passed a big German hospital there. About two miles from there was this forest. On the other side was the Elbe River. When we got there, I think it was dark, so we were sitting there. We could hear the Germans and the Americans, so I got to thinking. I said, "Geez, if the Germans come over here, especially at night, they will wind up shooting us. And if the Americans come across the river, we are going to have to answer a password and we do not even know it." So we thought it over and said, "Well, why do we not go back to that hospital, see what happens, see if we can get in there within the next day. Americans should be able to." That is what we did.

We walked all the way back. We thought up a story that there was one kid that was to have been sick and they were moved from one prison camp to another. We had to wait there, a wagon was supposed to come in and pick us up and take us back to camp, and it never did. We did not know whether to ask, and we were running around. So we went back to the hospital and this kid laid on the lawn there. The boy that could speak German and I walked into the hospital. There was a sergeant sitting at the desk there and when he saw us, he dropped his book. He ran, and about two minutes later here comes this officer. This officer comes up, he clicks his heels, salutes us, and hands me his pistol. Now that is a little bit comical there. I said, "It is getting a little complicated here." He thought we were the Americans. They were waiting for the Americans to come in, and he thought we were the Americans that crossed the Elbe River and took

over the town. I handed his pistol back to him, so he said, "Where is the one that is sick?" They sent a stretcher out and brought him upstairs. This hospital was all German soldiers, it was a German hospital.

While we were waiting there in the hallway and they were examining George, that was his name, there was a little French soldier that came up. He was the only one that was in there. He asked me, "Sergeant, when are the Americans going to get here? Do you know?" He thought we were advanced guards. So there was a soul in there to talk English to us. So I said to him, "Maybe in a day or so." One of the doctors, he was a colonel, he looked up and said, "What did you say, sergeant? I thought you did not know where you were at." He called me over and spoke to me. I said, "Well, we were wondering around here. I could hear the small fire. I can hear the Germans fire, we can tell the difference." He says, "What do you think the Americans are going to do with us when they get in town here? I said, "Well, I do not know." He said, "I understand they are going to send us to Siberia." I said, "No." Then he asked how we got treated in a prison camp, and I told him exactly the truth, not too good. He said, "Okay, you will get treated pretty good here. When the Americans come, how about putting in a good word for us?" We said, "Okay."

That night they made us go over and take a shower. They gave us some food and everything, then we went to bed. At about seven o'clock in the morning I was laying on the bed, I heard a big noise like an explosion and my buddy came over. He looked down and said, "Tom, the Americans are coming in." I said, "Now, come on." Then I heard the second shot and I looked out the window and there were these two big Sherman tanks coming down. The Americans moved in and in about ten minutes, there was a lieutenant that came in with about five or six soldiers. He said, "What the hell are you guys doing over here?" We told him that we escaped from the prison camp, got taken over here, knew they were out there in the woods and we did not want to stay out there, so we came over here. So he said, "Okay, you guys get ready because in about a half an hour they are going to have a plane here and they are going to take you back to France." That is where our intelligence was.

Within about a half an hour, there was a plane in there and they took us back to our intelligence. He wanted to know where all these prison camps were at on this big map. We showed him on a map and everything, and that is when we told him. He said, "How did you guys get out?" We explained it to him. We told him there was this one girl who helped us. She was married to a German officer that is fighting on the Russian front, and about these two old people. I told him, "They were pretty good to us." He said, "From now on, just wipe the name out of your mind." I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, they could be our agents." I said, "She is married to a German officer." He said, "That does not make a difference. You would be surprised how many Germans are married to American girls and do not even know they are German agents, you know."

- H: What organization were you with? What outfit were you with when you were captured?
- C: I was in the Second Infantry Division.

- H: Had you been on the line long?
- C: Well, we were on the line from D-Day plus one.
- H: You had gone in on plus one?
- C: Plus one, yes. And I got wounded once. It was around St. Lo and I was in the hospital for about ten days. It was a piece of shrapnel, which was not that serious.
- H: Had you been part of the break out at St. Lo?
- C: Yes, I was part of the break out at St. Lo, and we went right through there. Then from there we went down to Brest, France. That is down in the southern part of the peninsula. They told us it would take us about two weeks to clean that thing out, but we stayed there from, I believe, August to the last part of September.
- H: When the Germans hit up there in December, in Belgium, were you very well prepared? Did you know their attack was coming?
- C: Before we got hit up there in Belgium, everything was quiet. I think we had it pretty well under control, probably because they used to call us the Sitting Bull. But then the 106th came from the States and relieved us on the front line. I think they were there for about two days when all hell broke loose. They knew it was a new outfit that came up there. They figured that was about the weakest spot. I remember when they came there, we asked them where they were fighting before, and they said, "No, we came straight from the States." Their rifles and machine guns still had causmoline on them.
- H: That is the 106th.
- C: Yes. So we told them. "Look, we have our machine guns in position over here." I said, they are all lined up and everything. Why don't you just give us yours. We are going back to rest for a few days and we can clean them up. This way, you do not have to go on the front line. You are not going to be able to clean those machine guns on the front line." They said, "No." One of them said, "No. After all, they are charged up to us. You know, the serial number." I said, "Serial number does not mean anything up here anymore. You just forget about that." So I stayed back to help them out on the reconnaissance, me and my lieutenant, Lieutenant Graham was his name.
- H: Do you remember where he was from?
- C: He was from Chicago. Otto Graham was his brother. We stayed back. We had to contact L company. In between there, you had about a three mile no man's land. I had to patrol out that night and I went along with him. I knew because I had made that patrol so

many times through there that I told him, "If we see a German patrol coming through here, just let them go because that is our order. Do not fire because it is new men." So we did run in to a patrol and we just let them go. When we went up to contact the L company, one of them asked for a password, so I gave it to him. I could hear the one guy say, "No, that is not the password. They are Germans. Shoot them." Then I told him to wait a while. I said, "Don't. I will move up and be recognized." When I moved up, he said, "That is not the password." I said, "Well, what is the password? This is the latest password we got and we got it today." They gave me a password. I said, "Where did you get that at?" He said, "Well, we got it from the States." They were disorganized.

H: This company was from the 101st?

C: 106th. See, they replaced our L company and the one I was with replaced my company, which was K company, 9th infantry. So we got that straightened out.

When we started back, they had their lights on their jeep, and they were running around on the front line. I said, "You had better put them lights out." They said, "Oh, there is nobody around here. We have not seen any of them." I said, "They are there." As I turned around and started back with the patrol, all of a sudden, the artillery started moving in. The German artillery. I said, "Let's get the hell out of here." I told the guy I was with, because they had their lights on in the jeep and everything. When we got back to the company, I had to go out at three o'clock that morning again, so I told him what happened. I said, "I am not going out. These guys are disorganized." He said, "Well, they know the way now. Just let them go." So I did not go out with them that second time and they ran into a lot of trouble.

The next day we pulled out of there and we went back to this rest camp. We were there, in fact, twenty-four hours when we got orders to move out. When we got orders to move out of there, we went back to one of our companies. One of our heavy weapons, M company, I believe, and they were in a little trouble. So he asked me, "What is the matter?" I said, "Well, they kind of have us all surrounded here." The next day we moved out and that evening we got orders to move out at about eleven o'clock. In fact, when I got back to that company, I ran into a friend of mine from Youngstown here. I happened to walk over. You know, there is a lot of snow there and they had these pine tree branches over the fox holes so the snow cannot get in. I stepped on one and sunk in. When this gentleman came out, it was this buddy of mine from Youngstown. We were together, but he was in a different company. I said, "What the hell, I have come back here to help you guys." And we started laughing.

We got our mail that day, we got our Christmas packages and everything. So at eleven o'clock that night, the runner came down and said, "Sergeant, the captain wants to see us." And he said, "Get your men together and we are going to have to move out. We are going to go to a mine field."

Now that I can give you, it is all written out, if you want a copy. It is a citation from the war department. I got the silver star, so I can give you a whole thing there. That is how that all started. Then I had to move. We moved up to Belgium and we went to

this mine. We started fighting with the Germans up there.

H: When you were hit by these Germans in the attack, did you recognize what kind of troops they were that hit you? The Germans had the Wermacht.

C: This was the SS shock troopers and their tanks. What do you call them, tiger tanks? They were the best. The ones that hit us up there were the last ones up, and they are the best.

H: This was the spearhead troop.

C: The spearhead, yes. What's-his-name was the leader of that. He was the same one. Remember, he got killed there. He was a young fellow. I think he even fought down in Africa, too. He was one of aces. I cannot remember his name.

H: We can look that up. That was the outfit? It was not just a regular Wermacht?

C: No, it was regular.

H: You mentioned before that they had threatened to kill you when you were captured. How far were you from Malmady, where the fellows were shot down dead?

C: We went through there.

H: You went through Malmady?

C: Right after that had happened, because that one road there that I was protecting was the only road to get to Bastogne. From Bastogne, they figured by Christmas Eve they were going to be in Paris. That was their song that they were singing there. I would say it was not much further than maybe six or eight miles.

H: And you went through Malmady before the fellows were killed or after?

C: Before. See, that happened after, when they broke through us.

H: Were you ever up against the Wermacht troops that you could maybe make a comparison for us between them and these SS fellows that you hit. Were the Wermacht different?

C: Well, the SS troopers were more fanatic. I mean, they fought to the last minute. They would not give up unless they were out of ammunition, and even then they would not do it. You would have to kill them.

H: Were they usually younger fellows?

- C: They were all younger fellows. Now this other was, the Wermacht, they were a little more mature than the SS troopers.
- H: I know you do not know exactly but, just estimating, what would you say the ages of these boys were that hit you?
- C: Well, the young ones at that time, any that I ran into even when we were fighting in France, were at the ages between maybe twenty-two, and some were even twenty-five.
- H: The reason I asked that is because some reports have been using teenagers.
- C: Well, some of them might have been teenagers. I know, in fact now that you mention it, when we were fighting in Brest, I had the assault squad there. We got just like the square of Youngstown. You know, the center of town, and there was a hill and this pill box right on the top of this hill. When we were up there, we got pinned down. The company commander came up and said, "What is the matter? What is holding you down?" I said, "Well, there is a pill box up there and we cannot move. There is too much open ground between us and that pill box." He said, "Well, let's see. Maybe we can get a bazooka up here, maybe that can help out." So while we were waiting for a bazooka, a young fellow, he must have been seventeen or eighteen years old, came running out of the pill box. He crossed the street and jumped over this bank, and about ten minutes later, he was coming back with two boxes of ammunition. There was a company commander in front of me. My first sergeant was in front of me and my lieutenant. I was in back of the lieutenant. As he was coming back, the company commander was trying to holler him to come over. Then I was thinking, if that guy gets in that pill box with that ammunition we are in trouble. I said, "I got the assault squad, and I have to attack them. There is not going to be any of us left." So I pulled up my rifle, in between the lieutenant and the sergeant. I started at his head and I came down. Just when I was in the middle of his back, I pulled the trigger and hit him. He flew up in the air and fell down. Then, as he laid down, the guy in the pill box gave up. So they carried the guy over that I hit and, the way he was running when I aimed at him, the bullet went through the bone here and it came out over here.
- H: Way low in his foot?
- C: Yes, because the way he was running he had his foot up. I aimed for his head and I figured if I found the center of his body, his back, it has got to hit him some place. That is where it hit him, in his ankle. He could speak English, most of the SS troopers could speak English, and I asked him He was about eighteen years old, and he was an SS trooper. He was glad that I did not kill him and he was happy that I only shot him in the foot.
- H: He spoke English, though?

- C: He spoke English very good. So then I looked at him and I asked him how old he was. He said he was eighteen years old.
- H: Did they ever have a distinctive uniform, even in combat?
- C: Oh, yes. Their uniform was all together different from what you would call a regular soldier's. Even the ones that occupied Poland, they had some Polish in their army, their uniforms were all together different. The SS trooper you could pick up right away because on their shoulder they had the SS, on their hat was the SS.
- H: They even wore that distinction right into combat?
- C: Into combat, that is right. So, while we were talking there, he said, "Now down over the hill there in the village there is a company of soldiers. There is two hundred and fifty men in there." So we walked over, me and the squad, and we looked down. They were in there and they all came out, one by one. There were two hundred and fifty. There was a colonel, a full-fledged colonel, and he said, "Well, I am not going to give up to a captain or a sergeant." He said, "I want to give up to an officer of my own rank." So we had to get on our radio and call Colonel Hershellow, he was another commander, and he had to come over.
- H: Now, this group that gave up, were they SS or were they the regular German army?
- C: They were the regular German army. The only ones that were SS troopers were the three that were in that pill box, they were regular troopers. So finally our colonel came over and they had a little ceremony right on the square, that they had given up, and at twelve o'clock that day they surrendered. The whole town surrendered.
- H: That was Brest, France?
- C: That was Brest, France, yes.
- H: Now, what kind of guards did you have at different times? Were your guards always the younger men, or was there someplace that you ran into older guards?
- C: Oh, yes, there were older men.
- H: Could you make a guess at how old maybe some of them were?
- C: Well, I would say that some were even over fifty. Now, the guy that helped us out of the camp, he must have been about fifty-six years old at the time.
- H: You mentioned earlier that somebody gave you a rifle butt in the gut. What kind of

soldier was that?

C: He was an SS trooper. Of course, my beard was heavy and they used to take me for a Jew, a lot of those troopers. There were many times I got a beating. The worst beating I got was when that one young fellow hit me with that rifle butt and hit me over the shoulder with a gun.

H: Were you in an American uniform then?

C: Oh yes, all the time in an American uniform, yes.

H: Dog tags and everything?

C: Oh, everything. The only dog tags I had different were the tags from prison camp.

H: Now, on your dog tags, I am just making a guess, but you would have been marked C, Catholic, would you not?

C: Yes, there was a C on it. That is what they had to show them there.

H: Do you recall any of the prisoners that might have had a J on their dog tags? Did you ever run into one of them?

C: No, I never ran into one of them because if they did, they stayed pretty quiet.

H: Well they should be quiet.

C: I do not even think they would tell me, unless there was only one that I knew and he was not from ours. I met him in the prison camp. I walked over to the latrine one morning and I ran into a prisoner there. He said to me, "Where you from, soldier?" I said, "Youngstown, Ohio." He said, "We got a young fellow here from Youngstown, Ohio, from my company." I asked him for his name.

H: Do you remember it?

C: Lasaso, Richard Lasaso. That was Dick's cousin. He did not live too far from where I lived, about two blocks from Clay Street on the East Side. So I walked in there and here he was, laying on the floor, and he was sick. I said, "Rick, we just got here the other day." He said, "I have been here since before Christmas." We got to talking and I said, "I am in the barracks right across from here." He said, "Funny, I did not see you." I said, "We just got here the other day." This fellow that was with him was Jewish. He told me he was Jewish.

H: But American?

C: But American, right. He kept it very, very quiet. I remember when we were getting ready to escape, when this guy picked us up. Of course, the guys that escaped were guys from my own company. We were real, real close. I said to them, "This fellow from Youngstown, do you mind if we take him along with us?" They said, "Well, I like him." So I went over and told him, and he said, "Well, if you take my buddy. We were together in the army and we are close." I said, "They told me you are okay. We cannot take two more guys. That would be too many." He said, "Okay," and wished me good luck and that was the last I saw of him until I got back in the States. That was in June of 1945, because I was at Cleveland Hospital. I was taking treatment for my feet.

H: Maybe this is a good place to lead us back to those feet. When they captured you, they took your boots. What did you have on your feet besides your boots?

C: Just my shoes.

H: Low cuts?

C: No, the ones at the ankle.

H: Yes, ankle high. But regular G.I.?

C: Yes, the regular G.I. shoes.

H: And you would have had shoe packs over those. That is what they took away from you?

C: That is what they took away. They used them themselves. And, of course, when they marched us to Bonn, Germany, there were puddles of water there and they did not let us go around because they did not let us move. They would walk you straight in the middle of the road and you had to step in that water, that mud, and about an hour after your feet were about as wet as that water.

H: You mentioned you had some wounds, white sulfur or white phosphorous and so forth. Did you get any treatment for this?

C: The only thing that British doctor had was some salve, that is all.

H: But not until you got to the British doctor.

C: Not until I got to the British doctor. Nothing was done to my feet or anything until about two weeks after I was captured. I would not dare take my shoes off. I knew they were swollen up and hurting and I knew I could never get them back on because, at that time,

they were moving us pretty fast.

H: One thing that is interesting is the way that prisoners of different nations were treated. Did you have any opportunity to see perhaps how Russian prisoners or maybe some Italian prisoners were treated?

C: Well, yes. This one camp that we were in, it was in Hanover or outside of Hanover. There were Italian prisoners there, there were Polish prisoners there, there were Russian prisoners. Most of them looked like, what do they call them, Mongolians or something?

H: You mean the Russian prisoners?

C: Well, they were Russians, but they looked a little bit like Japanese or Chinese. They had that look on them. They really treated them just about as bad as they treated the Jews.

H: But you did not notice the difference?

C: Yes. The Italians, they were allowed to go out and work. They had a lot of trust in the Italian prisoners. They would take them out in the morning, they would go to town. Let's say for instance, if you had a ring you would give it to them, and when they would go to town to work, you know you work among civilians, they would trade it maybe for a loaf of bread or something, maybe even two loaves. They would give you one and then at night, if you would see them by the fence, they would sneak you one. They would buy the guards. The way you would buy the guards was with cigarettes. If you had any cigarettes, they were like gold. You would give them to these guards, these SS troopers I am talking about. Polish or regular German soldiers. There were two classes of Germans over there, I understand. The one that I said was not a fanatic. He was just a regular German. Now when you got in touch with one of them, they treated you pretty good, too.

H: But they were usually older men?

C: They were the older people, not the young ones. The young ones, nine out of ten were SS troopers. They would just rather kill you than say hello to you.

H: Did you notice a difference in the older men, difference between their enlisted men and their officers? Several people have indicated that maybe their officers, even though they are older, they were more rigid or fanatic.

C: Yes, they were. I mean, if they did not, they would lose that position, you know.

H: Were you able to talk to these Italian prisoners?

C: Yes.

H: I am guessing that maybe you can speak Italian a little bit.

C: Well, a little bit that I learned, but not like they talk. When I talked to them, I was ashamed to talk to them. I could understand what they were saying. We snuck in their compound one night and this one boy from New Haven, Connecticut, he snuck in there a couple of times. They were pretty good because, like I said, they were out to work and that is why they say if you have any rings or jewelry, they can get food with it. One night, he went over there and bribed the guard. He gave him a couple of cigarettes and we had a good time in there. They had good coffee, bread, and they had some cheese. They had some Limburger cheese and some goose liver and he gave it to me.

We were over here, a compound was here, and their's was there. There was a fence between us. You could reach over just to keep them over. So we stayed there about two, three hours and on our way out, they changed the guard. I told him, "How the hell are we going to get out of here now?" He said, "It is all right. When we say that name, we will hand him a couple of cigarettes." That was my first experience, he had done it before. So we started out and he handed him a couple of cigarettes there, we walked about five feet and he said, "Halt." He had the gun pointed at our backs, so we turned around and said, "What is the matter?" He said, "You are supposed to get back in." We walked back into the compound and we told an Italian, there was an Italian colonel there, too. He said, "Well, some of them guards you cannot bribe, you know, and he might be one of them. What we will do tomorrow morning when go out to work, you come with us and when we get so far, you sneak off. See?" I said, "That may be hard to do. We might have SS troopers come and pick us up. You do not know." He said, "Let us see what we can figure out."

So we walked around the compound and by the fence there was a little hole that was dug out. We called a couple of our boys and told them to see if they could clean it out a little more. Then the search light went on around camp. We said, "Why do you not go up and talk to the guard." So when the light went by George jumped underneath the fence and he made it alright. Then I waited for the light to go around and I jumped underneath the fence and made it alright. That is how we got back.

H: You mentioned that there was a colonel in with the Italians. Did they have the officers right in with the enlisted men?

C: Well, some of the time. We had officers where we were at in Guerlitz. We had British and Americans. Now the one that was in charge at our camp was a British colonel. Then they had a couple of captains. They were in charge of the whole compound.

H: Amongst your own fellows in your compound, did they have any trouble with discipline?

C: We had discipline just once. I guess the Germans were happy. I think I even told my wife about this one time. They had to give us some food. It was a Red Cross package. They had one package to two guys. You had to split it up. That was the only one we

ever received.

H: The whole time you were there?

C: The whole time I was prisoner that was the only one. A lot of these guys would keep it and eat a little at a time. There were two American boys there, and I do not know where they went, they walked out of the compound and stole the stuff that they had from this parcel. A British officer came over and they were investigating who did the stealing and they were pretty strict. "What you got is yours and do not take it from anyone else because one guy does not get anymore than the other guy." Well, they investigated it and they found out these two American soldiers had stole the parcel from these two British fellows. They had a court there and decided to strip the two guys naked and everybody got their belt and they would march them through the line and everybody take a swap at them. I did not believe in it at all and I did not take any part in that. You know, you get a lot of guys when they are mad, fanatic, and starving, you do not know what the heck they are going to do. So most of them were pretty sensitive, good guys. But I will tell you, by the time those two guys got through the line, they were pretty black and blue and had cuts on them from the buckle. I imagine the German prison guards got a big kick out of it because they liked it when you fought between yourselves. Then they took these two guys out there, it was below zero, snow on the ground, naked, and marched them to one compound barrack to another to show an example. I think those two guys got sick. They got pneumonia and after about three days I did not see them anymore. They took them out of there but what they did with them, I do not know.

H: What were the barracks like that you lived in? You have mentioned the barracks a couple of times. What kind of shelter did they provide?

C: They were long. You have seen the barracks we had, the wooden barracks. They were not as good as that. They were old. I guess at one time they must have housed their soldiers in that. They had two by fours and they made bunks out of that, upper and lower. They had chicken wire on top of there as springs. Each one of us had one blanket.

H: How did you keep warm? This was January, February.

C: Well, you never took your clothes off, you never took a shower.

H: You must have smelled pretty good by the time you left.

C: Oh, you smelled real good. I remember, I do not know whether it was in Dachau or whether it was Buchenwald. Well, I am going to be honest with you, it was full of lice. You were scratching, you know, and they put us through one of these ovens. You know, they put the heat up so high. It is just like over, it is round and you go in and sit. It is like a tunnel. They turn on the heat and I guess the lice grow faster and die. That is how they

did this at one time.

H: The Germans did this?

C: Yes, the Germans. Now it was either in Dachau or Buchenwald. We were all lice, you could see that, because when you are liced up, you get like a little pimple and you are scratching. Infection, see.

H: What were the days ration like when you were with them, other than the stuff you were able to get on the black market? What did they provide for you?

C: Well, they provided soup. It was hot water, probably they had potato peels in it. Then they had these big caw beets. They got like needles on there that are pretty pinchy. They had them chopped up.

H: Is that the same kind of beet we make sugar out of?

C: Over there they call them caw beets and I have seen one. They are big like that, but they have little pinchers on them.

H: As big as a softball?

C: Yes, and they chop them up and do not even clean them. They just throw them in the water and boil them and you scoop it out. The can is round and high.

H: It looks like a beer can or something a little bigger.

C: Yes, something like a beer can. You would get that in the evening maybe about five-thirty, six o'clock. It was always at night. In the mornings you would get a cup of coffee and sometimes it would taste like acorn. They put acorn in it.

H: Did you see any black bread?

C: Bread, once in a great while you would get black bread. I would say maybe once a week, and it was a slice. Maybe it was a slice cut in half. But most of it was either soup with potato skins and caw beets soup.

H: You were not gaining any weight?

C: When I got out of the prison camp, I weighed about ninety-seven pounds.

H: And about what did you weight before?

- C: I weighed, I think, about one hundred thirty-eight pounds.
- H: You dropped off to ninety-seven pounds?
- C: Yes, ninety-seven pounds. Almost forty pounds, boy.
- H: Could we go back a minute to the place where you observed the Russian prisoners? I wanted to ask you, did you know how the Italian prisoners ended up in a prison camp? They had been allies with the Germans. Had they come over and fought?
- C: I think those ones came over and fought with the Americans and were captured.
- H: Then we kind of slipped by these Russian prisoners other than describing them as probably Mongolian. How did the treatment that they received differ from your treatment?
- C: I do not think, the little food that we got, that they got that much. I think they got way less than we did.
- H: It seems as though each of the people that we have talked to have made that distinction, that the Russian prisoners just were not treated well at all.
- C: No. I remember now that, when they were marching us, the reason why they were moving us around a lot is our air force and the British air force. See, the British air force always bombed at night, ours always bombed in the day time, then they would bomb it down. Well, they would pull us out of the prison camp, so many guys they would pull out of the prison camp then they would march them to this town and then you would get stoned. A lot of people would stone you and call you names when you would go through there. These Russian soldiers, if you had something or you ate something and spit it out or threw it down, they would pick it up.
I remember this one town there we went into. We were at this farm house in a barn. This big lamb was there, it was dead, and there were about a half a dozen American soldiers. They fought over that thing like it was a hunk of gold and they were skinning it and eating it raw.
- H: You talked about them moving you, sometimes it would take a week to move you. What would they do with you at night?
- C: At night, they would put so many in each town, in a barn. Then they would lock the door and place a guard there.
- H: You were just in there until morning?

C: Until morning, yes. And then the next morning we would get up and go on. I remember in one town, we were there and they had the German truck right along side of us in the same barn. There was a partition between there, and that was their kitchen. That was where they had their food for the guards. So that night, everybody was always looking for something to eat. They found a way to get in there and the guards were sleeping up on the top, you know, where the hay is. We were down at the bottom and they found a way to get that. There was a stone that was loose, most of the barns were made of stone. They moved it out and got down in there and stole a lot of that food. Then they started spreading it all over there. Instead of hiding the evidence, a lot of them kept it.

The next morning when the Germans went in there to get some of the food to take over to the kitchen, it was gone. They came busting in there and lined us all outside. Finally, they found something upstairs and they wanted to know who went in and stole that. Nobody would talk, so they lined us all up and said, "Count every other one off and shoot them." They started from the beginning. Well, they missed me and my buddy from New Haven, Connecticut had to step out. They took these guys over and lined them up. They got the firing squad and were ready to shoot them. One of the guys said to the two guys that went out and stole all the food, "Why don't you say something so they do not shoot the rest of the guys. You know they might let you go." Things got a little big disorganized and they counted again, and it came to so I had to step out. Well, this officer came over and wanted to know what was wrong. They said, "Well somebody stole all of the food." He blamed some of the guards. He said, "Where were the guards? There were to have been guards in there. Put them all back and get the one group that was in the barn. Put them off on the side and for the next ten days, do not give them anything to eat. No water, no coffee, or anything, to make up for that ration they stole."

That is what they did. As they moved us out from that town to another town, as we were walking down the highway one at a time, we would move out and get mixed up with the other bunch and then they could not find us. In fifty-seven days we covered six hundred and twenty six kilometers.

H: That would be over three hundred and fifty miles.

C: Yes.

H: Okay. I know it was difficult for you to talk about it when you mentioned it the first time, but I would like to, if you could, go back to Buchenwald. How long were you there?

C: We were there overnight and one night. That is when they were getting ready to move them out because the Americans were getting close. The Americans were pretty close. When we got there, it was a shame to see the way these people were, you know, skin and bones and they were just dropping like flies. There was nothing they could do. Before, when they would die, we were talking to some of the people in there, they would put them in these ovens and cremate them. I think they would send them to Auschwitz, or in

Buchenwald. They had ovens there, too. The biggest thing that really got me is when they had all these dead people piled up like logs. They had a trench built there and this bulldozer was coming up and, just kids and adults and old people, just pushed them right into this trench. Then they would sprinkle something on it and they would cover it up and bulldoze it. A lot of them were just laying around on the ground dead with flies on them and rotting away. It would smell and stink in there. That stayed a long time with me, that smell.

H: Yes, it would. Now, this was in March or April?

C: This was the first week of April.

H: And it was later in April that we finally got in there.

C: It was later in April when the Americans came in. I am pretty sure it was the Americans that took Buchenwald over. The reason why I know the Russians took Auschwitz over was because we had heard that they were close to us and that they already had took that prison camp over.

H: Now all three of these camps where they had Jews, you were near them or right in them.

C: We were near them, yes.

H: All three of them. You were near Auschwitz?

C: That was right below us.

H: Could you actually see it or was it several miles away?

C: Oh, it was several miles away, but we had stopped over there when they were marching us.

H: You stopped there?

C: Yes. Now that is where Buchenwald is, where I had seen Eichmann. He was standing at the gate. Oh, they were running around like crazy over there. You know you knew there was something wrong, the way they were running around. That is why we did not stay there. We would have had to stay there longer. This is when I was recaptured, because I escaped around the middle of March.

H: Do you ever have any idea what happened to your Polish friend that took you out on work detail?

- C: They left him go. He kept walking down the street, but then they put us over on the side, that is when they came over. He said, "Where were you going to?" I said, "Well, he was taking us to work." He said, "No, you guys escaped. We will find out, we will wire in." Because they had the dog tag, they knew what camp he was from.
- H: So after he go separated from you, you never got joined back up.
- C: Never got joined up, no. The only one we joined up with after was the young girl from Brooklyn, New York.
- H: When you came out of France, did you come out through Lucky strike?
- C: No, it was Reem, France where our intelligents were at. Right after they got through with us they sent us to the hospital. From Reem, France, they sent us to a hospital in Paris. I remember it, an ordered dean was right in back of us. We stayed there for a while, then from there, they sent us down to a hospital in the lower part of France, the southern part of France. They shipped me back up to the hospital in Paris and from there they had to put me on a plane and they sent me to a hospital over in New York. What is that air base there.
- H: Did they send you to Saint Olivans in New York?
- C: No. It was near Brooklyn somewhere. There was an air base there. From there they said, "Where do you live?" I said, "They are going to send me to a hospital close to home." The only hospital I knew that was close to home was the one up in Michigan and the guy said, "Well, you are from Youngstown. How far are you from Cleveland?" I said, "Oh, about sixty-five miles." He said, "Well, they got a new hospital there, Krowells hospital." That is where I went and I stayed there, well, I came back to the United States in June, until September. The last part of September is when I got discharged out of Krowells hospital.
- H: I would like to go back there. You said you had had opportunities to talk with some of these Jewish people that you were moving with. Were they able to speak English?
- C: No, some of them could not speak real good English. But the ones that could came to you and they would talk to us about how they sometimes tried to get away from going to the oven or something like that. One said something about, just before they had left, they took some children and women and men and burned them in the oven. Now usually the ones that were dying in the prison camp they would cremate.
- H: Had they been used as labor in the factories or had they just been locked up and kept locked up?

C: None that I know, none that I talked to. The ones I know they used for labor, I know they used a lot of Italian labor.

H: But they were kept as prisoners and they used them as labor during the day. Is there anything else that you can remember that you can tell us about?

C: You know, I can remember better if you ask me a question.

H: I was wondering about Eichman. Had you seen pictures of him before?

C: No, I had never seen a picture of him before. In fact, I never even had heard of him until we got in there and he was giving orders. He was standing there and I remember he was pointing at us, what were we doing with the Jews because we had American uniforms on? The Jews have a striped uniform just like the ones, you know, like the chain gangs down in Georgia, and their heads all shaved. Most of them had their heads shaved. He pointed and I asked, "Who is that?" They said, "That is Eichman." That did not mean anything to me at that time. I thought he was another officer, but as we got back to this country, then when I started reading about the trial. His name came up and that struck the bell, but at that time, his name did not mean anything to me, I thought he was another German officer. As I understand, he was the one in charge of all those camps. He was the one giving all the orders. The only one that I knew about was the one in charge of the tanks, what was his name in Africa?

H: Rommell.

C: Rommell and then Goehring. Those names always came up during combat.

H: That was Rumstat that hit you fellows.

C: He was the one, yes. That is the name I was trying to think of. He was sort of a young fellow.

H: Thank you.

End of Interview