

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Veterans Project

World War II Experience

O. H. 598

CHARLES ATKINSON

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

October 10, 1978

CHARLES F. ATKINSON

Charles F. Atkinson was born to G. Fred and Mayme W. Atkinson on July 24, 1924, in Warren, Ohio. His father G. Fred Atkinson owned and operated a successful printing company located on Vine Street. Unlike most small businessmen during the Depression, Atkinson was able to keep his business thriving. In 1937, Atkinson's father sold his company to work for a printing company in Grand Rapids, Michigan, then later relocating to Cincinnati in 1940. Charles Atkinson graduated from Withrow High School in Cincinnati in 1942. Due to the intervention of World War II, he delayed his college ambitions and attempted to enlist in the Naval Air Corps or Merchant Marines. He was rejected however due to the medical finding of a cystolic heart murmur. Atkinson, in the meantime, moved up to Warren, Ohio in 1942 to work for the Packard Electric Company until he received his notice in May of 1943 that he had been drafted in the U. S. Army.

During his training period in the U. S. Army, Atkinson had qualified to serve in a special intelligence unit, however, it was unfortunately disbanded, so Atkinson was allotted to serve in the infantry. Prior to his departure for Europe in May 1944, Atkinson was married to his wife Beverly. From June of 1944 until December 1944, Atkinson was a part of the Army's general surge northward from southern France. In late December 1944 Atkinson was captured by German troops near Strasbourg in Alsace-Lorraine. For nearly six months, Atkinson laboured in German POW stalags near Leipzig until his liberation in June of 1945.

Upon his return to the U. S., Atkinson enrolled at George Washington University and graduated in 1950 with an L.L.B. Today, Atkinson and his wife reside in Warren, Ohio and he is a practicing corporate attorney. He and his wife, Beverly, are the parents of two children Thomas T. and Amy A. Atkinson. Atkinson is involved in various service projects in the Warren area which include the American Cancer Society, the Boy Scouts of America, the American Heart Association, and numerous others. He and his family belong to the First Baptist Church of Warren, Ohio.

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INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES ATKINSON

INTERVIEWER: Mark Dittmer

SUBJECT: Capture, stallogs, France, Digou, Strasbourg,
Army training period

DATE: October 10, 1978

D: This is an interview with Charles F. Atkinson by Mark Dittmer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. This interview is taking place in Warren, Ohio, on October 10, 1978, at 7:30 p.m. The subject for discussion tonight is World War II combat veterans and POW's.

The first thing I would like you to do is, more or less, give me your background into your family history.

A: I was born in Warren, Ohio, on July 11, 1924, and I grew up here until I was thirteen years old. My mother died when I was six. My father owned a printing plant here in Warren and in 1937 he sold the printing plant.

D: What was the name?

A: It was the Atkinson Printing Company on Vine Street. He sold the printing company, and we moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he had a job as superintendent of the Jake-well Printing Company. Then I went to school in Grand Rapids. I went to the high school that Gerald Ford went to. Then I went one year to the Halle School for Boys in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Then my father moved to Cincinnati, Ohio and Mount Vernon, Ohio. I went with him and went to school in those two places. I finally graduated from high school, Withrow High School in Cincinnati in 1942.

I then attempted to join the Naval Air Corps, but they found in the medical examination--after about eight hours of arduous examination and exercising--that I had a cystolic heart murmur, and therefore I was rejected from the Naval Air Corps. I then attempted to join the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps and they

accepted me but then learned later of my heart murmur so they rejected me for service.

I got a job in Warren, Ohio with the Packard Electric Company. I came up here to live with my aunt, and later in May of 1943, I was drafted into the U. S. Army Infantry.

My impression of Germany prior to the time that I went into the service was very little. I had not really thought about Germany as such. Of course, we were all concerned about Hitler and what was happening in Europe, but I had never really thought much about Germany as such. I never read much about its history except what I got in high school about the Kaiser and some of those things. I didn't really have much of an impression about Germany before I joined the service.

D: Can you remember the day you were drafted and what happened?

A: Yes. I think you think in terms of the day you were inducted, when you got your medical and so forth. I went to Akron for that on orders from the draft board. I wasn't in bad physical shape but I had been working eleven hours a day at Packard, seven days a week on defense orders; I was just a young fellow at the time, eighteen years old. I was working eleven hours a day and obviously making pretty good money for that time. I was going out every night trying to spend the money, so I was really worn out more than anything. I remember the doctor at the induction center telling me that if I would not try to burn the candle at both ends--go out on dates and work seven days a week--that he would give me a six week deferment because he felt that I was in, not poor shape, but that I was just practically exhausted. I told him that if they wanted me, they better take me now because six weeks later I might not be around. I might be dead if I kept doing what I was doing. So he agreed that I probably wouldn't stop running around and couldn't stop working. They took me in and then I was shipped to Fort Hayes in Columbus and from there to California.

D: Now what was your training period like?

A: I had a funny thing. I went to Fort Hayes as an inductee, which was just a center for inductees, for distribution of inductees. They assigned me to the 143rd Ordnance group in California, Camp Roberts, California. Now this was an ordnance median. They called it a median maintenance ordnance company which was normally in the Army, charged with repairing machine guns, small arms, motorcycles, and small field artillery pieces. I took basic training in this ordnance company, the 143rd Median Maintenance Ordnance Company. Then about that time they were apparently looking for some sort of specialist. I took about thirteen weeks basic training there

which was a little similar to infantry basic although more emphasis on learning to repair things and put them back together and how they were made than on marching and so forth. Fundamentally, it was a type of infantry basic. Camp Roberts was an infantry basic training camp.

About the time we finished basic training, we heard about a program called ASTP, which was the Army Specialized Training Program. They were apparently looking for guys who had a little bit more than the average IQ. They were going to put them in some of the universities around the country and teach them to be engineers or other professional types of jobs because, apparently, they were short of engineers and scientific people anyway. I took the test and passed the qualifying test and had an IQ of 145 or 148 or 150, whatever qualified me. Then I was sent first to Ontario College in California, which was a small community college near Los Angeles. That was the staging area. Then I was sent to the University of Kansas at Lawrence, Kansas. I was there for about twelve weeks. Apparently this was about the time that they were getting ready for the invasion of Europe, so they disbanded this whole program. There were a lot of men in it at that time, but the place they needed us most apparently was the infantry.

At the University of Kansas, there were about four hundred men in the program and they all were sent to Oklahoma to join the 42nd Infantry Division. A lot of these boys that were there were out of the Air Corps and never had any infantry at all. Some of them were engineers; a few of them had been infantrymen, but very few. Most of us were ordnance and Air Corps and stuff like that. They took them out of there and put them in the infantry. From that school most of us went to Oklahoma to join the 42nd Rainbow Division and we were again given basic training. Then I took infantry basic training and from that point on we went overseas. After we finished that, we were shipped overseas.

D: Did they mentally prepare you for what you thought would happen in Europe?

A: No, not really. All they do, in my judgement, is to physically make you able to withstand it, to build up your bodies. Of course, they teach you to shoot; they teach you some tactics. They teach you how to protect yourself; teach you how to fight hand-to-hand combat; teach you a little karate and jujitsu--things that would help you in battle.

Mainly, I think it's a discipline thing to teach you that as a soldier you're part of a unit and you work together, that no one man in this type of war or in any type of war for that matter is going to go out and win everything. You're part of a unit. Your buddy depends on you and you depend on him

and if you stick together as a unit you've got a better chance. And, of course, they teach you the fundamental skills of firing machine guns and rifles and bazookas.

In the 42nd Rainbow Division, I happened to be in the 242nd Anti-tank Battalion Company, which primarily, although we were infantrymen, trained us as infantrymen. Primarily, our job was to defend against enemy tanks. We used and trained on a gun called a .57 millimeter anti-tank gun, although we got all the other training, machine gun, and everything else along with it. They can prepare you in a sense that they teach you the skills to use to kill others if you have to and that's primarily your job. But I don't think any of them can really prepare you for what battle's really like because every one of them is going to be different. Your situation can be different and you really don't know what it's like until you've been in.

D: When you first went to Europe and you got your orders--I don't know where you went to exactly--could you describe a couple of your first missions?

A: We went to North Africa. We shipped out of Camp Kilmer, New Jersey, which was what we call a POE, a port of embarkation, and from there we went on liberty boats. They were small freighters outfitted to carry personnel to North Africa. We staged in North Africa; by that I mean we got our equipment and so forth. Then we went from North Africa across the Mediterranean in LST's, Landing Ship Tanks they're called, and went into Marseille, France, which was the southern part of France on the Mediterranean. We didn't know what to expect. We went in as though we were on an invasion, but obviously it wasn't going to be the kind that they had at Normandy Beach in Dunkirk; it wasn't that big.

There were three divisions that went in. Fortunately for us, when we landed on the beach, the Germans had withdrawn. This was in September, following D-Day, which was in June. The Germans were being driven back in the continent on France and, of course, presumably they had ordered their men to pull back on the south so that they wouldn't be but off down in the southern part of France between Spain and Italy. The Germans for the most part--there were a few snipers around--had left, or they pulled out. We went into Marseille. There were a few German snipers, really not members of the German Army but people who identified with the Germans and were compatible with the Germans. They were the Frenchmen and they were still firing once in awhile from houses, et cetera.

We went through Marseille and went on the heights about Marseille, from the cliffs above, and we camped there. The Germans were all, this time, pulling back. We were in the Ninth Army when we went in and we then joined Patton's Third

Army and took out after the Germans who were pulling back. We caught up with them at a place in France called Dijon. We had our first baptism of fire there. As anti-tank men, we were more or less defenders. We set up and if they counterattacked the tanks and so forth, we were to slow them down, or damage them, or do whatever we could to slow them down. We did not have offensive weapons because the tanks are really the offense force. Then if our tanks could not take care of them and they broke through our tanks or broke through our lines then the anti-tank company was supposed to stop them or slow them down, to keep them from getting in our rear.

Our first battle I ran into was around Dijon where the Germans were backed up against Dijon. They turned around and came at us. We were on line and in position; we had a little fire fight at that time. There were some half tracks, some personnel carriers, et cetera. We knocked a couple of them out and then they turned around and withdrew and we didn't go after them because we were just protecting the lower flanks there. We were ordered to stay there and just keep anybody from coming through. So that was the first action we took.

D: What were your impressions, at least in France, by then?

A: I didn't know much about it, as a GI, although we ran into people who were Vichy collaborators in Marseille. In fact, some of them probably were the ones that were sniping at us, although we never really knew who they were. They would shoot out of the window and then run like hell. They were probably Vichy. I never met too many of them or ran into them. I think that they got scared and went into hiding, obviously, because a lot of Frenchmen hated the Vichy government and the so-called Vichy collaborators. They hated them as much as the Germans. So you never knew who was one. They would profess to have not been Vichy if you met them or ran into them. But then somebody else would say that, yes, they were collaborators, so they were Vichy. We saw some of them that had their heads skinned. They had all their hair cut off, women who had all their hair cut off. That was the penalty for their having collaborated with the Germans or going to bed with the Germans or whatever. They were so-called Vichy women who collaborated. So they would be known by everybody. Some of them were shot of course, but others who were just prostitutes or whores or women who had gone to bed with German soldiers, had a trick. They would cut off all their hair and make them go bald. Then you could tell who they were. That was supposed to be their shame. They not only identified them as Vichy people but as collaborators with the Germans.

There were a lot of times I wondered if they had any alternative. Sometimes either they collaborated, particularly a woman, or the

German soldier might have hit them over the head with a rifle barrel and killed them. So maybe they were scared too, I don't know. But I never really met any Vichy official at all. The ones that were in when we went through some of the towns in France, those who had been Vichy representatives had long since gone. They had fled with the Germans or had gone into hiding. What we saw were the ordinary French who were not Vichy. They had taken over the town and they were picking up the string. We never really got to see anybody. I never ran into any official . . .

D: What were your impressions of General Patton at the time?

A: Well, he was a showboat. We got into a situation where they were passing our division back and forth between the Third Army which Patton commanded and the Ninth Army which General Patch commanded. For instance, Patton wanted everything spic-and-span. You had to wear a tie. If you didn't wear a tie, you wore a scarf. He wanted you to wear your Eisenhower jackets, and sometimes it was very cold. He wanted the patches on your arm showing what division you were with. General Patton in the Ninth Division, didn't want the Jerry's to know--if they captured you or shot you or whatever--what division you belonged to. General Patton was an ordinary, good commander. Patton was a good commander, but Patton was a showboat. He wanted everybody to shine up, polish up, everything spic-and-span. The idea was that that made you proud of the outfit you were in.

Back to the story. We were switched, in a period of six weeks, maybe three or four times between one Army and the other. Why, I don't know. That was some general decision. But one week we would have to sew our patches on and do things one way and the other week we would be taking them off. We never knew what the hell we were supposed to do. The word would come down that we were supposed to do this or do that. When we were in Patch's Army he used our division as a defense division just to hold MLR and he was using other divisions as spearheads.

Patton used anything. He would tell an infantry company to go up against a division if he thought it was necessary, and never give any grounds, never back up to consolidate your position. Stay there and fight like hell. They called him "Blood and Guts". We used to say it was his guts and our blood. That's what he was known as. Of course, a lot of them, we never knew why they decided these things. Remember, we're just GI's. After the war we read about them and I studied them and all that stuff, but I never really knew then. Although I know now some of the reasons for the stuff, we never knew why we were doing this; we just bitched about it.

D: So you weren't really that well-informed of the mission?

A: No. Oh, no, not as GI's. You're just like a herd of cattle. When you're an infantryman or corporal the only thing you know about is what your squad is supposed to do, what your lieutenant, your platoon lieutenant, would tell you and that comes down from the captain. A lot of times you do things that you have no idea what the hell they would be for or why you would be doing it. But that's part of the discipline of the Army--you go and you do it. If somebody said, "Go out to the farmhouse four miles up the road and if there's any Germans there, clean them out and set up a lookout or a command post at that house," you didn't know why or anything else. That was all part of the standard. We assumed, but we didn't know why. You did that one particular thing. Then they would tell us, "Well, we're going to use this as a company headquarters and your job is to see if there are any Germans around and get it free of booby traps, et cetera, so that we can use it as a command post."

Other times they would tell us, "Just sit there and see if you see any activity from the Germans." Other times it would be a springboard; if we got up there they might send the whole regiment through that area. We were a probe. We just went out to see if there was anything going on. Of course, they would find out if they started shooting at us or if they had a defense position.

The Germans were smart. We did that one time and we got no response. Nobody shot at us; the area was clear. We reported that as far as we knew it was clear; we saw nothing. They did send a company of engineers up to rebuild a bridge over a small creek so they could run trucks and anti-tank weapons, and so forth over. They got up near the bridge and all hell broke loose. That was a time where the Germans just laid back and waited. They didn't bother us; they waited for bigger stuff to come along, which is a normal military tactic. You let the point come on through and then you get the big body.

We did that in anti-tank warfare. We would let the lead tank come through, not bother it. When the next echelon came through with four or five tanks, or half tracks, or whatever they were running, then we would all fire at them. One tank running along at thirty-five miles an hour, you can miss it, but you can't hardly miss five or six tanks. They're too big a target. You want to get as many of them as you can. That was an illustration of what we did, the kind of thing where we didn't know the tactic or who the hell we were half the time.

D: Did you ever get involved with any of the other European commands?

- A: Only in prison camp. We ran into English prisoners and had English commanders in a couple of camps where the Englishmen happened to be the senior commanding officer. But we were never involved with any foreign command. We were always under U.S. command.
- D: Did you know at all what was going on in the eastern front?
- A: No, not at all. Later on we heard scuttlebutt; that was in prison camp. We probably got more news about what was going on in prison camp than we ever did while we were in the Army.
- D: I would like to turn now to your POW experience. Could you possibly give an account of the day that you were captured and what happened?
- A: We were at a town in the area called Alsace-Lorraine. It was in front of the French marginal line, which was their big defense line. Just before you got to the so-called German defensive line, which was the Siegfried line . . . This area was north of Strasbourg, which is a pretty big city in Alsace-Lorraine or Southern France, Southern Germany. Anyhow we were one line, maintaining the line.

Early on morning, there was an ice fog. The night before they had come through our lines--our own lines from the west going east--an outfit called the 14th Army Task Force, which had some half tracks, a couple of Shermans, and some small armored vehicles. They were going up through our lines on orders to probe the position of the Germans to see what they had out front of us. We let them through our lines. Then the next morning there was a heavy fog. You get this in Germany and particularly in this area. We heard motors of tanks and clanking and so forth out in front of us as though they were coming at us. So we got our gun crew ready. The first tanks that we saw coming through this fog--now visibility was about maybe fifty yards, maybe less--were a couple of Sherman tanks, American Sherman tanks, and a couple of American half tracks. My sergeant said when he saw that, "Don't track those. There's probably somebody chasing them. Wait until they're Sherman." We could hear all sorts of motors and everything out there but we couldn't see anything. We let these Sherman tanks actually come up to our line. We didn't fire on them; we were waiting to see what was in back of them.

We didn't know it but the Shermans were full of Germans who had captured the tanks the night before, and this was just a decoy. They came up, got through our lines and then turned the tank around and started firing at our gunner places. That's when a shell from one of our own tanks, seventy-five millimeter hit in front of my gun.

I was the corporal gunner. I was in charge of aiming the gun and seeing it was loaded. There was a crew of five guys that ran these guns, loaders, and so forth. A shell hit in front of the tank and some of the shrapnel came under the apron or screen of the gun and got in my leg. Then about that time the next shell hit the barrel of our gun and exploded. I was behind about a half inch of tempered steel, otherwise I would have been killed. But, I got a good concussion and was knocked out. The next thing I knew, I don't know how long later, maybe a half a day later. . . . it was later in the day; it was almost toward evening, so maybe four or five, six hours later; I woke up and a German was leaning over me saying, "Are you hurt?" I had a shrapnel wound in my left leg, and a hell of a headache, and was confused from this concussion, but other than that I guess I wasn't hurt.

They had captured most of my company as well as several other companies. They broke through our lines and sort of captured the whole group that was at that point. Our foxholes--we called them main line resistance--were about fifty yards apart. We were really stretched out and we couldn't stop anything if they had any force. They had thrown a couple of panzer divisions at us. They were trying to see what kind of defenses we had, how many people we had up there. Obviously, we didn't have very many; we were thin. We were all stretched out along the line. So they hit us, went through us, picked up six or eight hundred prisoners, and then withdrew. All they were trying to do was find out what we had.

We didn't know it at the time but this was a forerunner, or a practice run you might call it for the Battle of the Bulge, when Hitler tried the last encirclement. They were testing our area to see which was the best place maybe to go through and make this big sweep behind our lines up toward Belgium. As I say, we didn't know it at the time but we were preparing for history and so forth, later in the campaign. We know that he just tested our line and apparently he found a fair amount of resistance because they didn't come through our line later on. They went through the 106th Division in the forest.

But that's how I got captured. They gathered us up. They get you all in a big field and then start marching you back toward their lines. They pick up everybody that can walk. The ones that are wounded, sometimes they leave them. If they have anybody to pick them up in the ambulance or anything, they pick them up.

The regular German Army were decent soldiers. The SS and the stormtroopers, they didn't care about anything. They would just as soon shoot you lying on the ground as looking at you. But the Wehrmacht, the regular Army, they practiced the rules of the Geneva Convention and so forth.

D: Where did they take you?

A: First, they walked us on foot back maybe thirty miles and put us on a train. The first place they took us was a town called Frankfort. There were a lot of other guys then coming in from the Battle of the Bulge, where the Germans had run over them. Then by that time there were several thousand of us that they had just captured. At Frankfort they put us on another train and they took some of us to Leipzig and put us in prisoner-of-war camps. There were little camps all over, little camps outside of each town.

They used the prisoners-of-war to do manual labor. There were three or four camps in Leipzig. We had to work on the railroad. We helped to repair the railroad. We weren't supposed to do this, according to the Geneva Convention, but they claimed that it was passenger service. Well, we knew that if they got a railroad they used them for anything. But you can't do much about it; you go ahead and work because they'll shoot you if you don't work. We worked on repairing railroads.

Then they moved us from there up to a place called Halle. We didn't know at the time, but that was where they were making the buzz bombs that they were sending to Britain. They had us working there in a salt mine and a chemical factory. Now we weren't working; we were just doing repair work. That's all we were doing. Like at the chemical factory, they didn't have us working around the chemicals or anything. It had been bombed out, parts of it, so they had us cleaning the brick so they could use it again and build other buildings because the brick had been blown apart. We cleaned up the brick and did all sorts of menial tasks--whatever they asked us to do.

Then we went to another little town. From there they took us outside of Berlin. One day we were filling in bomb craters. We wondered what in the hell we were filling in bomb holes for. They gave us shovels and we were just told to dig dirt and carry it in wheelbarrows, or whatever they would give us to carry it in, and fill up these bomb holes. It looked to me like it was outside of . . . Well, it was in the suburbs of Berlin, not really a country area but certainly a suburban area.

We think from reading later that the reason for this was that this is where Hitler's underground control post was. The only reason we could figure they wanted us to fill in bomb craters there was so that the next one wouldn't hit going through. Of course, presumably, our Air Corps didn't know what was there either. We were up there for about a week or ten days just filling in holes.

D: What did a normal day at the prison camp consist of?

A: They got you up at six o'clock and you had what they called a breakfast which was ersatz coffee. They called it ersatz, but it was a substitute coffee. The grounds were like sawdust and had some chemical coloring in it, but it had no taste and it had no caffeine. It really was nothing but water.

Then we went out and we worked. At seven o'clock you went out and they told you what to do. You worked at some job. They marched you to the factory or to the railroad, wherever you were working. Then you came back about noon and you got your lunch, which consisted of a small bowl of potato soup; they used forty gallons of water to one peck of potatoes. So there wasn't much nourishment in the soup unless you got to the end of the line where the potatoes were, down in the bottom.

Most of us were starving because we weren't getting any food. Then you would go out again about an hour later, back to the job or wherever you were working. They would bring you back at about dark, or about six o'clock I guess. This was winter-time. They would bring you back to your compound. It was a building, usually wood with steel bars, et cetera. Then they would put you in that for the night and then you got your evening meal which was a piece of bread. Actually, it was a loaf of bread split between fourteen guys--what they called a three kilo load which was a brown bread about so long. Then you sliced it up so it was evenly divided between fourteen guys.

They locked you in the compound, in the cabin, or whatever you want to call it, and you could do anything you wanted to at night there, but most of us were tired.

Some guys had colds or the flu. You weren't getting any nourishment so if you got a cold in prison camp, you might likely die of it; not of the cold, but it would eventually become flu and then pneumonia. They didn't have any medicine. I don't think they had any themselves. We didn't have any. When I was captured, they took our sulfa away from us, so there wasn't anything to combat the normal cold. If it got too bad and you didn't get over it, it would turn into pneumonia and then you would die. It would get bad enough to kill you. All of us had diarrhea and dysentery all the time. We would just go weak. I weighed . . . Well, I'm not heavy by any means now. I'm rather a skinny frame, you might say, but I weigh 165 pounds now. In those days, after I was in prison for two or three months, I only weighed 95 pounds. All of us were just practically half-starved, maybe three-fourths starved. It's just because we didn't have any food.

D: Did you have any type of inner-prison government?

A: Oh, yes. We lived by the rules. I was a corporal. The Germans did not make sergeants work, but they didn't recognize the corporal rank as a noncommissioned officer. Well, they did, but they sent them out with work parties. I was sent out with a work party, but then I was treated as though I was the commander of the work party. So he recognized the noncommissioned status. But they would let me, for instance, if one of the men in my party got sick, which they did sometimes, just too weak or sick to work, I could take their place and go out and work for them. I would rather work than sit in the compound all day because if you had something to do you didn't think about being hungry all the time. You were doing something else.

D: Do you remember any specific events that happened at the camp that stick out in your mind?

A: Oh, yes. There were some scary things. We were always afraid of a night bombing by the British. They would pick out a target and they would stretch their planes out and then they would just drop bombs for five miles right down. They didn't care what was there. They called it saturation bombing. If you happened to be caught in that, you were liable to get killed. And, of course, we were locked up in these compounds, which were small metal and wooden huts you might call them, like our Three C's Camp, like our own camps. If a five hundred pound bomb hit anywhere near it, it would just blow it to bits. If you're inside, if you didn't burn up, you would probably be killed from the shock, or the shrapnel or whatever. We had a couple of those that just missed us and hit a couple other huts and killed a lot of boys. But they missed us. Of course, you couldn't do anything but sit there and wait for it to hit; there was no place to run. Normally, in the Army, if there was air attack or something like that, you always had your foxhole or a slit trench or something you dived into to get some protection. But here you were just sitting in a wooden building waiting for one to hit . . .

I remember we had a South African in our camp, not in my compound, not in my hut. He had been a policeman in South Africa and he could do anything. He built a little crystal set out of wires and so forth.

D: Do you remember his name?

A: It was Brown; his name was Sergeant Brown. He could make anything. Anyhow, he had built a crystal set so we actually knew that he could get the BBC Radio Broadcast at night. Of course, he had to keep this hidden. But he would tell us the news. We knew, for instance, before we were told by the Germans, that Roosevelt had died because Brownie had gotten this on the radio the night before and then it spread through the camp. But we always had to act surprised when they would tell us some development like

that. Otherwise, it would give away the fact that we had heard about is someplace else and then they would start a search for radios or whatever.

D: Do you know how he got the materials for the set?

A: Yes, around the railroad yards. He apparently got wires and so forth--some copper wires that had wrapped around the wheels of the railroad car--and then apparently had snuck into or got access in the railroad yard. They were bombed and maybe he found things in the radio section of the train yard, little pieces so he could build a crystal set. They could be made from almost anything, a real fundamental crystal set. And somehow or other--I don't know how he got them, maybe from an air pilot or something like that--he got some earphones that somebody had. You need earphones with a crystal set. He put them all together.

He was a guy that could make anything. He was really good, really a fascinating individual, and knew a lot of things. He could speak five languages. Of course, down in South Africa, they had to learn to speak Dutch and English, and what they call Greour, which is a combination of English and Dutch. Apparently, he had a French mother, so he learned French from her. With that basic background, he picked up Italian very easy, and of course, he could speak very fluent English. Somehow or another, he had been in prison from Tobruk, which was early in the war, in the African campaign before we ever went to the continent. This guy had been in prison about three years when I first ran into him. In that time because they put Russians and Polish and everything together, he had been able to learn to speak and converse in Russian and Polish. He could talk to all these people. This helped him get the things he wanted to make these things because he could talk to all of them and tell them what he wanted. He could speak their language.

He was used around the camp as an interpreter. If we had trouble with the Russian segment or whatever, some sort of difficulty, he would be the guy that would mediate the thing because he could speak Russian. He could tell us what they were saying, and so forth. And, of course, he could speak very good German because Dutch is almost the same as German. So he was quite a guy.

I remember after Roosevelt was killed, the war was almost over. This was in April. Apparently, there was a general order from the German high command to take all prisoners-of-war and march them--all the American prisoners-of-war and English, et cetera--toward the Russian line, toward the east. So they took all of us and put us out on the road, thousands of us walking on the road. We didn't know where we were going, but we were out. We would walk in the daytime and at night we would just sleep in the field, whatever we had, anything. Guys were running

away at that time, prisoners, and going through the woods, trying to get back to our own lines because it was obvious the thing was over. Sometimes we could hear out guns in the background from the west and some days or nights we could hear guns from the east. We could tell there was a battle going on up there and they were the Russians.

We were just walking without any real purpose, except we had been ordered. I think the reason for this was that their idea was to walk us toward the Russians--it would take us longer to get home--and walk the Russian prisoners and those that were European prisoners toward the Americans. What they expected to do with us, I don't know. About that time we were camped one night at a Hitler Youth Camp, which was something similar to our Boy Scout camps. It was a camp in the hills or in the woods which Hitler's youth had used in their day.

We woke up one morning and all the guards were gone; the German guards were gone. So our whole camp, that is the Americans, all started taking off one by one or two by two and heading back toward the American line.

That's how my buddy and I, Marvin Posey, got back to our lines, just by walking toward the west, toward our own line. We got into a town one night called Wurzen and saw an American jeep there. It seemed like there was nobody in town. I guess they were all inside. We ran up to this jeep that had a sergeant in it, an American sergeant, screaming and yelling. He told us to shut up, that the town was still in German hands and that he had brought the colonel over to negotiate with the mayor of the town, to surrender the town. Our force, the 69th Division, was on the other side of the river just outside of town waiting to see if they were going to surrender the town or if they would have to shell it, or fight for it. Anyhow, he told us to shut up, get in the jeep, get down, lay down in the back seat. They took us back across the river on a pontoon bridge, and that's how we got back to our own forces. We just simply walked away from the camp because the guards all disappeared.

The last guards we had were what they call the home guard. The last draft call in Germany was for men seventy years old and boys of fourteen. So they were scraping the bottom of the barrel. Of course, the thing about it, we walked about four days after we got out of the camp. We walked at night because in the daytime they had these young Germans, German boys, playing all over in the woods, in the fields, and if they saw you--they dug their own foxhole--they would just shoot at you with these rifles. They had old rifles.

D: Did you guys have specific uniforms that they had then or did they . . .

A: No, we still had the rudiments of our own uniform. You had to

keep your own uniform. Well, at least I didn't have one. I had what they called a battle or a so-called fatigue jacket, which was a green, heavy jacket. I didn't have an Eisenhower jacket or anything like that. Then the OD uniform, the winter uniform, I think I picked up a coat from a dead soldier, a long, winter coat from one of our boys that had died of pneumonia. Anything that you had, really--well, we still had what we had left of our uniforms. We were never issued any uniforms or anything like that, or clothing, or anything by the Germans. You had your own and sometimes you inherited other stuff from guys who died. To keep warm you used anything.

D: When you were in prison camp, did you learn from the other prisoners of the happenings that were going on in Auschwitz?

A: No. We heard rumors of it but we really never knew. Well, we didn't know what to think. We heard that the last days, before our guards took off, we heard a rumor that Hitler had ordered all the prisoners-of-war killed, you know, just lined up and shot. Of course, we had heard stories before that about Malmedy about the SS troopers, where they didn't take any prisoners, they just shot them, lined them up in a field--the Malmedy Massacre.

There's always that fear. You don't know anything. You're in a prison camp, and then it just depends. Sometimes you would have a guard or a couple of guards in your particular sector and they look like they are mean or maybe their family was blown up by one of the bombings the night before, and hell, they just might kill anybody. You never knew. But you got rumors like that. We didn't really know and we were so hungry and so tired and so weak, we couldn't do much of anything. We would have probably tried to get away but we couldn't have gotten very far because we were in too bad of shape. We didn't have any endurance. We were just half starved and so there wasn't a hell of a lot we could do. We couldn't overcome anybody because we didn't have any strength to do it. But you heard about those things and you wondered, and they scared you. You didn't want to die. But you didn't know what the hell to do about it. You didn't really know where you were half the time. All you could go in one direction. You knew which was east or west by the sun. And at night we could be guided by the stars, as to which way you were going. But you really couldn't do a hell of a lot about it because you were so weak and hungry. We just hadn't had any food for three or four or six months.

D: Were you ever able to receive mail or just packages?

A: We never got any mail. They let us send mail. My wife said she got a couple of postcards from me which she got after I was released. They were sent like in January or December or

something and she didn't get them until June.

D: She didn't know what had happened to you?

A: Well, she knew that I was freed. I got out of prison camp before she got these cards. All this time, from the time that we were captured in December until we were let loose in May or returned to our own lines--got back to our own line--I was listed as missing-in-action. The government didn't know. You must realize this was toward the end of the war. They didn't have any way to tell anybody anything. It was going fast. They were going down fast and so it was just sort of a chaos really. But they did get through a couple of our cards. They would let us write one card a week. I only knew that two of them ever got through. While I was in prison camp for six months, we got two packages, not from home but from the Red Cross.

D: Were they much of an asset at all?

A: Oh, yes. That was all we lived on. We got one English package and that had tea in it and stuff and we traded that to the British troops. Some of them had been in prison a long time and they knew the ropes. They knew how to get cigarettes and socks and food from the Germans. So we traded our tea, for instance, which none of us wanted for food from them. They could get bread. They knew how to get bread because they had been in there three years. We were relatively new. We didn't know all the tricks. They had been there and they had their German sweethearts. They would let them go out of camp at night, the Germans would, because they had taken an oath that they wouldn't try to escape. They could go out of camp within three kilometers of the camp. They would let them go into town and, of course, they bartered with the Germans and so forth. They were able to get a lot of stuff. So we used some of the stuff, like in that British package which had condensed milk and tea. Some things like that we traded for bread and things like that.

We did get one American Red Cross package. I think there was one package for two guys--the way it finally came out--in my group. They had some canned food, Spam, and stuff like that. If it was a better package, if it had some cigarettes in it, we bartered the cigarettes to the Englishmen and the Frenchmen. They would trade bread, which was what we wanted, food. So we traded some of our stuff for bread and whatever they had so we could get something to eat. American Red Cross packages were more to our liking because they had more stuff in it that we could trade. We could get more for the stuff in our Red Cross package, American Red Cross package, than we could get out of the British. The Russians, the Frenchmen, and the others, who had the stuff to trade, didn't want the stuff in the British package. They preferred the stuff in the American package. But we only got one in the six months that I was in there.

D: Were you able to collaborate at all with the German officers in charge of the camp?

A: No, you didn't. We didn't. Americans didn't. Some of the French and some of the English and the Russians would promise that they wouldn't run away. So they gave them their freedom. But we never would do that. They knew that if we got outside the damn compound we would be on our way. We would try to get away. So we never cooperated with them. Although, obviously, you're under armed guards and you couldn't just tell them to go to hell either. You had to do something because if you took that attitude, you would end up getting shot. There was no point in that--us getting shot in the end. You wanted to try to get home if you could. You were in a bad predicament so you just told them to go get lost. You tried to do as little as you could. If they worked you, you worked as slow as you possibly could, just enough so that they wouldn't hit you with a rifle butt or something. If they thought you were faking, they would come along and hit you with a rifle butt, kick you or knock the wind out of you, or do something because they were the captors and they knew they owned us at that point. We weren't afraid of them, except we were always afraid of the guy that might be trigger-happy or something like that. Maybe his wife and children were killed in an air raid and so he was out to kill anybody. He was just mad at the world. We were defenseless. If he wanted to come in and take a gun or something and blow all of us down, he could do it. He could do it very easily and did in some camps. He would just go out of his head.

D: Did you ever have any turmoil at all in camp?

A: Oh, yes. We had mix-ups and confrontations with the other prisoners, the other nationalities--fights between the French and the English, fights between the Russians. We didn't understand each other and so obviously a lot of times it was brought on by the group. They would go in and try to steal something from the other company, steal some food or something like that. Even in our own group--when you're so hungry and your whole life is dependent upon a piece of bread--you're always suspicious of whether the other guy's getting more than you are. I used to have the job of cutting up this bread once a day. There was one loaf for fourteen guys and I tried to cut it real even. But when you're so hungry you're always suspicious that maybe this guy's getting more than you or I'm favoring this guy because he's my buddy so I'm giving him more. To forego that--and this was true even when we dished up the soup or anything--I would put my piece of bread out and anybody that wanted to trade could have my piece of bread. In other words, if they thought my piece of bread was bigger than theirs, they could take my piece of bread. But that's the way that I got it. Once in a while some guy would trade with me, but generally they knew I was trying to be as

honest and fair about it as I could be. The same with my bowl of soup. If you think you got gypped, as far as I'm concerned, put your piece of bread down and take mine. When you did that you sort of foreclosed any of them thinking that you were getting a bigger piece.

D: Well, this is all the questions I had. Do you have any additional comments that you want to make?

A: No. It was an interesting experience, just getting through it. It made me appreciate the value of a thing as common as a piece of bread. When you get so hungry and down in the pits like that, half starved, you really appreciate food. For years after that I was almost ashamed if I would see anybody leave food on their plate because you think back to the time when that meant the difference between some guy dying of pneumonia, for instance. So it gave you a freer sense of value. Youngsters today have never gone through a period and you have never gone through a period of real want. I went through a period. I wasn't on a bread line or anything fortunately, but I was a kid in the Depression and I knew a lot of people that were very hungry. You've seen them or heard about us standing in bread lines in our country during the Depression. All you've done is read about it, but I saw it. My parents went through it. My father happened to be a printer and he was always lucky; we never were that hungry or had to go in the bread lines, and we made it through all right. But there were a lot of people in our country who just stood in line for a bowl of soup just like we did in prison camp. And that's why the older people today, you know, they may have quite a bit, but they don't want any of it to get away; they're afraid to spend it because they're always afraid. They think back; they remember the Depression and they worry that they can lose everything. I think that was the chief value, as far as I'm concerned, of having gotten through it was that you learn a set of values.

One thing I've learned as I have grown up, going along and raising a family and in business, you have your ups and downs like in anything else, but I can always sit down no matter how low I feel or how bad I feel . . . For something that's happening to me or something I lost or I don't accomplish that I want to accomplish and I feel bad. I always think back to those days and I say to myself, "Well, that was the pits, that was the bottom." I was half starved; I had diarrhea, scurvy, whatever you want to call it, and questioned whether I would come out alive. I was dirty; I had lice. We didn't get a bath one time for over three months, and wore the same uniform. Sometimes we didn't take it off for two weeks at a time. And that was the pits. That's as low as you get. I was probably as dirty, and lice-infested, diarrhea, crap on my pants, you know, it was just about as low as . . . So when I think back to that, that makes anything, any little turmoil that I have nowadays seem relatively simple.

I think it does anybody good to go through that. It's like going through a terrible sickness. And then if you get a cold, you think, well, gee, this isn't as bad as when I almost died. That's the type of evaluation you get. As long as you come out all right naturally, it was fine. It wasn't so good for the guys that died there, but for me, I came out of it and as far as I know, it didn't affect my health. I've lived another thirty years or so, so I'm one of the lucky ones. Knowing these things has helped me, I think, through the rest of my life. That's about all, Mark.

END OF INTERVIEW