

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Veterans Project

World War II Experience

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Alvin W. Skardon

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

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ALVIN WILSON SKARDON

Alvin W. Skardon was born to Alvin W. and Genevieve Hooper Skardon on December 4, 1912 in St. Francisville, Louisiana. Skardon was raised in Walterboro, South Carolina and completed his secondary education at Walterboro High School in 1929. Prior to finishing high school, Skardon worked at the Lafayette Hotel in Walterboro and took an active interest in hotel management. While working for the hotel, he attended the College of Charleston and graduated in 1933 with an A.B. Then from 1933 until June, 1941 Skardon worked diligently with the Lafayette Hotel. During the summer of 1941 Skardon was drafted into the U. S. Army.

Skardon served in three branches of the U. S. Army- the infantry, chemical warfare, and field artillery. In November, 1944, Skardon was sent to Europe and served in the 106th Army Division. On December 19, 1944 Skardon and the rest of his division were captured by German troops near Shönberg. Skardon remained in German stalags in Furstenburg and Luckenwalde until his liberation by the Russian troops in May, 1945.

After the war, Skardon continued his education and received an M.A. in History at the University of Chicago. While working as a professor at the University of Chicago, and later Youngstown State University, Skardon

completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1960.

Dr. Skardon presently resides in Youngstown, Ohio with his wife, Ruth, and still teaches history at Youngstown State University. He belongs to the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Southern Historical Association; is a member of the Urban History Group and the Guild of Scholars.

Mark Dittmer

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INTERVIEWEE: ALVIN WILSON SKARDON
INTERVIEWER: Mark Dittmer
SUBJECT: World War II Combat and P.O.W. Experience
DATE: October 14, 1978

D: This is an interview with Dr. Alvin Skardon for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, Veterans Project by Mark Dittmer. This interview is taking place in Dr. Skardon's home at 225 Outlook Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio on October 14, 1978 at 1:00 p.m. The topic is World War II Combat Veterans and P.O.W.s.

The first question I'd like to ask you, Dr. Skardon is what you were doing preceding World War II and then up to going in the military.

S: I was a hotel manager at the time I was drafted into the Army. I ran a motel in South Carolina during the winter months and I worked as a reservation clerk in hotels in New England during the summer, specifically, Maine and Vermont. And that is what I was doing when I was drafted in the Army.

D: What did you think of the war in Germany and the war in Europe prior to the United States' entry into the war?

S: I was raised to be an old-fashioned Wilsonian Democrat by my father, which meant a great devotion to the idea of the League of Nations and American participation in international affairs. And like my father, I deplored the isolationist policies that we had at that time. I particularly felt that the sooner we got in the war, the better, and

that the only way of stopping Hitler was by armed force. This is one striking difference between that time and present international affairs where I believe that we have options. Nearly every problem in international affairs now is negotiable. I was very early convinced that we could not negotiate with Adolf Hitler.

D: So you took more of a perspective that was different from most Americans at that time.

S: At that time we were definitely the minority. The average American took the stand that we should stay on our side of the Atlantic and the Pacific and leave the rest of the world alone. This was true, I think, even of Franklin D. Roosevelt when he first came into office. I particularly remember that Roosevelt made the promise that he would never send the son of an American mother to fight on foreign soil. Then later on, I believe, Roosevelt's defenders said that he had said he would not willingly do so but as I recall his first pronouncement on that subject, it was categorical, he would not send the son of an American mother to fight on foreign soil. And here is one son of an American mother that he did, eventually, send to fight on foreign soil.

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

S: Yes. Of course, it was still during time of peace. We first had to register and then we were all given a number. Then the numbers were called by lots and my lot was a high number, so I knew that I was going to be drafted soon. The draft board called those of us who were to be drafted to meet at a certain date and be prepared to leave for army camp.

I was made leader of the group and I was the leader of the group from Walterboro, South Carolina to Fort Jackson near Columbia, South Carolina.

D: What did your training period consist of?

S: My training period consisted of three months of basic training in infantry at Camp Wheeler near Macon, Georgia. Then it was decided that the Army had too many men in it and those of us who were over 28 years of age were released. So I was.

They didn't say discharged but they said returned to civilian life or they used some other phrase-- I don't recall right offhand--which meant that we were simply listed as being in the enlisted reserve.

So I went back to the hotel and worked some months longer until Pearl Harbor and at the time Pearl Harbor finally took place, all of the enlisted reserves were recalled but I managed to get an exemption at the time for personal reasons. Later on I volunteered for military service and went in as a volunteer.

- D: Did you have a different sort of training period after the bombing there?
- S: Yes. The next time I went into the officer training school for the chemical warfare service. This was after Pearl Harbor, of course, and I was there for about eleven weeks.

I at least had eleven weeks training but I was expelled at the end of eleven weeks for lack of a good military bearing. I did very well in my academic work.

Now at this time it was regarded as a great disgrace and I didn't discuss it for years. But now it seems to be a matter of something to be proud of, to have been expelled from an officer training school. There has been a change in public opinion, I believe.

- D: What happened during the time of that eleven-week training period?
- S: We were trained with the officers in the chemical warfare service and the background I had in infantry made it possible for me to go right into the officer training. And I did very well in the academic work. I made high grades but at the end of that period, they stated I did not have a good military bearing, which was quite true and that was why, at least, the alleged reason why I was dropped.
- D: From that point you went straight into the regular infantry?
- S: Then I was sent back to the regular Army and then I was assigned to the field artillery, so that I have been in three branches of service--infantry, chemical warfare, and field artillery.

Now I might say that my training in chemical warfare did very well. As soon as I was assigned to the field artillery outfit I was made the gas N.C.O. [noncommissioned officer] and they found out I knew that field very well, so I eventually got promoted to the battalion N.C.O. At that time I was just a corporal but it is a custom of the Army to have only sergeants as chemical N.C.O.s at the battalion level. So when the supply sergeant position in our outfit fell vacant, I got that. So I had really two jobs--that of being the supply sergeant of our battery and the chemical N.C.O. of the whole battalion.

D: When did you first go to Europe?

S: I went to Europe in roughly, November 1944. The outfit to which I was assigned was sort of a training battalion. The Army would send in officers to be trained and for practical experience and then privates, but the noncommissioned officers were kept for the next group.

We were in doubt as to whether we would go over but finally we were sent over in November 1944. The whole division was sent over and we were assigned a position on the front line that was supposed to be a quiet sector.

There was no anticipation of any fighting there and we were supposed to complete our training there. We lacked equipment and many of the soldiers were new to the outfit. It was the 106th Division and it turned out that that was the first division the Germans attacked.

D: Now where in Europe were you at the time?

S: At this time we were on the border between Belgium and Germany. In front of us was the Ardennes Forest. It was regarded as highly improbable that Hitler would make an attack through a forest in the dead of winter so that's exactly what he did.

Our rear echelon, that is, supplies and so forth, were located in a little town in Belgium known as St. Vith. So that is the situation we were in when the Germans attacked us through the Ardennes Forest. This was the beginning of what is called the Battle of the Bulge. It was really Hitler's last attempt. He wanted to try to break through

and afflict a severe defeat on the Allies that might prolong the war.

D: Could you describe some of your first missions when you were there?

S: Our first missions were largely at night. I was a sergeant in charge of two other soldiers and we would go out each night and take up a dugout position overlooking the valley where the Germans were. These dugouts were scattered roughly half a mile apart and they were designed to guard against a surprise attack.

The thing I very definitely remember so well was that there was a dead silence at night and you were quite isolated. You were connected with the battery headquarters by telephone. We had to run a wire out each night and connect up a telephone. Each of us took a turn standing guard one-third of the night and the other two fellows slept and every half hour we had to call into the battery headquarters to let them know we were still awake.

D: During this time, did you always know what you were getting into? Were you always well-informed?

S: No, we were not. The Army, of course, had to be very careful about giving out any news to the troops. So we were cautioned. We were not only not given any information but we were cautioned against repeating rumors or in any way passing on news that might be picked up by the Germans.

D: How did the natives of the land first react to you?

S: It was according to the country we were in. We were in England and the English, I think, were just overwhelmed by the large number of American soldiers there. They did do their best to be nice to us but you would have hundreds of soldiers in a U.S.O. and only a few people there to run the U.S.O., so you practically never got a chance to meet an Englishman.

We hardly met any Frenchmen because we were making a motor march through France. In Belgium, we found the people very helpful. Our truck, for example, broke down and some Belgians came out and helped us fix it.

In Germany, we did not get much of a chance to see Germans until after we were captured. Our outfit was stationed in a small village but the inhabitants had all left, so it was not until after the Battle of the Bulge that we had a chance to see any of the Germans that lived in the area.

D: Could you possibly get in now to the Battle of the Bulge and what happened to you?

S: Yes. I have been reading about the Battle of the Bulge, of course, ever since because I'm interested in what happened to us. We simply assumed that we would be on a quiet sector until spring and by then we would be well-organized and have all the supplies we needed and be fairly well-trained.

I think it takes about six months really to get an outfit in combat condition. Then we were taken by surprise one afternoon--I think it was December 19th. The Germans began to lay down a heavy artillery barrage on our area and this, of course, was a very frightening experience, to have shells coming over all the time. The next news we got was that the Germans were in our rear, that we were surrounded.

So we began to fall back and we were told that the Ninth Army Division was coming up to rescue us as well as the 101st Airborne Division. But we attacked at a German town--I think its name was Schönberg--where we were supposed to meet these two divisions and we were successful.

We captured the town but they never showed up. In a few days or so we found out after we were prisoners that many of the prisoners were from the Ninth Army Division. They had been nearly wiped out, too, and so had the 101st Airborne Division. So we held out for three days, then we gave out of heavy ammunition and our commanding general ordered us to surrender.

Now there has been a good deal of debate about that. He has been severely criticized--General Alan Jones--because he has the unpleasant honor of having surrendered more American soldiers than any other American general in history. He ordered the whole division to surrender. Both the American commentators on this battle as well as the Germans state he could have held out somewhat longer, but

that would have meant that the Germans would probably have wiped out the whole division. So I, myself, am glad that he surrendered, otherwise I probably wouldn't be here now, although, it did create the wide joke that at least our officers saved our lives. They knew when to surrender.

So it was after we were being marched to the rear that we ran into prisoners from the 101st Airborne and the Ninth Army. Now the 101st Airborne was not entirely wiped out when it was driven back to the Bastogne where it made its famous stand. When they were called on to surrender, the general replied, "Nuts!" to the Germans. I don't know whether you're familiar with that story or not. Now there is a big monument to the 101st Airborne in Bastogne today with the word "Nuts" on it. So the 101st has been glamorized by the movies and on television. They never say that it failed in its mission of rescuing us and nearly got wiped out itself.

The reason why we were surprised that our intelligence had been warning Eisenhower that the Germans were building up back of the Ardennes Forest, but that intelligence was disregarded. It was something very much like Pearl Harbor, where intelligence reports did come in but they were disregarded.

When Eisenhower first heard that we were under attack and surrounded, he radioed back to hold our ground with what we had. It was not until our division was lost that they realized this was a full-scale attack and not a local battle. By that time we were prisoners of war. I did not find out much about this until later.

- D: Were your commanders ever under Patton's guidance at all?
- S: No, we were not. We were under General Hodge's, the Second Army.
- D: Now what I would like to do is to turn to your P.O.W. experience. Can you recall the day of your capture?
- S: Very well. We had more or less taken refuge on a wooded hill and the battery commander and I were together. The Germans were shelling our position so we went to work and dug slit trenches

very rapidly. I kidded him later that he was one of the best diggers of slit trenches I've ever seen. We were in the slit trenches when we got the order to surrender and the German's shelling ceased. I think that somebody had gone down with a white flag and contacted the Germans that we were ready to surrender and the whole battalion surrendered at one time.

We were then separated between officers and enlisted men and we were marched to the rear for two days. And on that march, the only food or drink we had was the snow we picked up off the ground. At the end of the second day, though, the Germans did give us each a piece of bread with some molasses on it. That's a kind of syrup they put on it. So that's the first thing we had to eat for two days.

Then at the first prison camp we were loaded in boxcars, where we did not have enough room for all of us to sit down, so we had to alternate standing up and sitting down. The boxcars had formerly been used to transport horses and the floor was practically covered with horse droppings. And we were in those boxcars for about eleven days.

Then one night our train had stopped at a station and we had looked in through the cracks and noticed that the stations were always bombed, even if the rest of the town wasn't attacked. And we heard our bombers coming over. We thought that they were coming for the station so we broke out of the boxcar. In one boxcar the prisoners managed to get it open and they went and opened up the other boxcars. We ran away from the station believing that the station was the target.

It turned out, however, that the target was a mill and we were running into the bombed area instead of running out of it. That was the night when quite a number of our men were killed. I barely missed an explosion. One shell exploded near me, just covered me with dirt but I wasn't injured.

It was also the night I escaped. I decided that everything seemed to be in confusion. I didn't see the guards anywhere so I took off and went up to the top of the hill where I met another American prisoner. We looked around. We didn't

know where to go. We were pretty badly scared so we just went back and we hadn't even been missed. We just got in the boxcar again. We decided the safest place was the boxcar.

Then we were taken to a prison camp near Muelberg, Germany. This was a prison camp that had mostly English prisoners in it. We found that the English prisoners had the camp very well-organized and while our rations were sparse, we were at least getting some rations.

After we were there for about two weeks, we were transferred to a camp near Furstenburg-Oder. That's Furstenburg on the Oder River, and there were mostly Americans in that camp. Conditions there were not too bad but then when the Russians began advancing, the Swiss Red Cross, which were our protectors, demanded that we be taken to a safe area, so we marched across Germany from Furstenburg-Oder to Potsdam near Berlin, in the dead of winter, incidentally.

There we were put in a camp where conditions were rather terrible. We had to sleep on the ground, just straw on the ground. We had thin blankets. We got minimal rations. The Swiss Red Cross complained again that we were not being fed enough for an average person to live on. And that is where we were when the Russians liberated us in roughly, May, I think it was, 1945.

D: Now during the experience what was your initial treatment by the Germans like?

S: We were not personally maltreated by the Germans but we practically never got enough to eat. Many times we had to sleep on the ground in the dead of winter. We found that the conditions at prisoner-of-war camps had deteriorated.

Now earlier very favorable reports came through about prisoner-of-war camps but by the time we were captured, Germany was obviously losing the war. I think it was because of that. I think the German Wehrmacht, the regular German Army, did try to treat the prisoners of war, at least the English and Americans fairly well. But this was toward the end of the war and that's why our experience was so much worse than that of prisoners who were captured in the earlier part

of the war. Now I did run into some English prisoners who had been prisoners of war for five years and they said in the early part of the war English prisoners, as well as Americans, were well treated.

D: What was a typical day like in prison camp? What did they have you do?

S: You first got up in the morning and there was what you called Appell, German for roll-call, and they tried to count us but we arranged to confuse them every morning. Some fellows would be counted and then they would slip around the bunch that were being counted and go down to the other end and were counted again, so that some mornings the German guard had to report that there were more men in the camp than there were supposed to be.

Then the next day some would slip around from the other end to the group that were already counted and he'd have to report that there were less than there were supposed to be. So he never got an accurate count. Now that meant that fellows who managed to escape, that you really wouldn't know that they had escaped.

After Appell at Luckenwalde where we stayed the longest, we got what the Germans call coffee but it was definitely Ersatz, that is, artificial coffee, and it tasted terrible and did not have the bracing effect that coffee usually gives. That was breakfast. For lunch we had usually a piece of bread with some butter and for dinner we had usually six small potatoes and a cup of soup.

Now then if American Red Cross parcels arrived there was supposed to be enough food in those for one man per week with his German rations but some weeks our Red Cross parcels didn't arrive at all. Other weeks not enough arrived so you had to split the parcel with another prisoner. So I would say that if you got a whole Red Cross parcel a week with your German rations, you wouldn't have a lot to eat but you would have enough to get by on. But that very rarely happened.

D: What did the German officers have you do while you were in prison?

S: As noncommissioned officers under the rules of war we were not required to work. We did have to do the work around the camp, that is, clean up the camp, dig latrines and any work in the camp, itself. But only privates were required to go out on what they call commandos and do work in German farms or German cities.

First of all, we had to clean up our camp and then in the spare time that I had--the one good thing about the camp was that it had a library that had been donated by a Swiss Roman Catholic Society and it had a very good selection of books in English--I managed to borrow books almost every day and read them. But when you were reading you had to walk around. You couldn't remain seated, it was too cold. You would freeze if you remained seated. The only way to get warm was to walk around or else to get under blankets and the blankets weren't too good. I did manage to get a good deal of reading done at that time.

D: Now I'd like to get into something about the government that went on within the camp. How was this run?

S: There were really two governments within the camp. One was the highest ranking noncom in the barracks or the tent, and he was appointed by the Germans to run the whole thing. And usually about four hundred men are in a tent or in a barracks. He had charge of keeping the barracks clean and seeing that the food was distributed equitably each day and maintaining discipline among the prisoners. But in every camp that I was in there was also an underground, a man who had charge of organizing so if we were going to rebel we would be organized.

There was a great fear then that Hitler, knowing that the war was lost, would order all prisoners of war to be shot. Now one day the warning came through that that order had been issued but we found out later that the officers of the Wehrmacht disregarded it. They were very conscious of the fact that they were going to be held responsible after the war for what they did.

But the underground was remarkably well-organized and we had plans by which if the order came through that we would simultaneously in each tent jump

the guard and get his rifle and those who got the rifle would start shooting at the machine gunners in the tower. And while this was going on some fellows who were good at climbing would climb up into the tower and get the machine guns.

So in a matter of a few minutes, if this plan went through we would have both, rifles and machine guns. And we were planning that. Well, the word just never came that we were to carry out that revolt.

Now another thing that was of interest there is that the fellows, the prisoners who had been in the signal corps had built a small radio, and this was true in every camp: There was a small underground radio. They would have a squad and each fellow had a different part of the radio and every afternoon at four o'clock when the British Broadcasting Systems broadcasted its news of the war, they would come together, put the radio together, and these fellows who could do short-hand would take down the British broadcast.

Then each would go around to a different tent and he would go in and yell, "Let's play Ping-Pong." That was a signal for you to look around to see if one of the guards were there or for any reason it shouldn't be done. And if you saw a guard anywhere near you would say, "No, I don't want to play Ping-Pong." That was his signal that there was a guard around. But if no one objected then he would read the news.

The Germans had the official news read each day, too, and we laughed at the official news because it would always show the Germans winning. The Germans knew that we had this underground radio but they could never find it because, after all, it was scattered in pieces all over the camp.

Prisoners showed remarkable ingenuity in making a radio. They got most of the pieces with barbed wire and some way or other they managed to steal a battery and the tubes that were needed. But most of it was just made from odds and ends of metal that we had around the camp.

D: So it was just more or less a crystal set.

S: Yes. So we knew what was going on and we were taking bets on who would rescue us. We, of course, assumed that the British and American Armies were going to come right on through but the agreement with the Russians was that they would stop at the Elbe River so it was the Russians who liberated us.

D: Are there any specific incidents that happened at camp that stick out in your mind?

S: Yes. I think one thing that sticks out was the German guards. They were old men, too old for military service and many of them were veterans of World War I. They knew that Hitler had lost the war, therefore, they treated us fairly well. They were always helpful and they would warn us when the officers were coming around on an inspection.

As a matter of fact, we got quite chummy with the guards which was something that people in the U.S. can't understand. But these old fellows weren't a bad type. Some of them claimed that they had sons fighting in the American Army and when we questioned them, we'd say, "Where is your son?" They'd say, "He was living in Detroit when the war broke out." We'd question him about Detroit; he would know all about Detroit. Obviously he had a special sort of knowledge of Detroit. Quite probably his story was true.

There was one prison camp where the prisoners, when they got back to the United States, formed an alumni association of the camp. Several years ago they had a big convention in Dayton and they raised funds and brought the guards over to join in the fun.

D: In what ways did you collaborate with those guards?

S: You never collaborate with the guards. You never gave them any information. After all, you had one guard for four hundred prisoners. Now that guard obviously was scared. So naturally he was going to be nice to us. You might have a gun that was loaded, but anyhow, just a bunch of prisoners could easily jump you and get the gun. So they collaborated with us, I'd say. Let's put it that way.

The one bad thing that I did when I was a prisoner of war, for which I might have been court-martialled was that we were under orders if captured only to give our name, our rank, and our serial number and that was all. Under no circumstances were we ever to give any more information.

At the second prison camp we went to, the Germans put us in a big basement that we called the "cooler" that was so cold that we had to walk around all the time to keep from freezing. Then when we got too tired, about twelve fellows would just sleep in a bundle with our overcoats over us.

They took us out one by one and then we were asked a number of questions. And, of course, that was forbidden by our own orders so I, as well as the other prisoners, answered the questions. We were told we were going to be put back in the cooler if we didn't and so we answered those questions.

Now I think if they had gotten a bunch of us out and ordered us to, we would have defied them. I even felt that if they threatened to shoot us, I think we would have defied them. But being all alone and being threatened to be put back in the cooler was what really got us to talk.

D: Now these questions, were they addressed to you in English or in German?

S: The person addressing the questions was actually an English prisoner of war and he asked in English but he wrote it in German. He took down the information and we were told later by the English prisoners the Germans were looking for men who were skilled mechanics. They needed them desperately in the war industry and that's what they were looking for.

The English prisoner said they put you down simply as a "Kaufmann"--salesman--so that you wouldn't get caught up. All of the other Englishmen who were working there did the same thing. They put some other occupation than anything that implied mechanical skills. However, I was very uneasy about that, so when the Russians liberated us, I went over to the headquarters and got my file out of their files and I have it with me still. I made sure that no court-martial would have that evidence.

- D: At the prison camp, did you get along very well with the other Allies that were captured, like the English?
- S: No, we didn't. The average American got very belligerent, I found. Now remember, at that time most Americans were still isolationists who felt that all foreigners were out to gyp us and they didn't like the English or the French or the Russians any more than they liked the Germans. So that was an unpleasant experience.

I tried to make friends with the English and the French, principally, because I knew a little French and I could speak English. The Russians, at one of the prison camps that I was, brought in another bunch and I got left in sort of a cell in the night. That's when we hadn't had anything to eat except snow for two days. There was a Russian prisoner working outside and when the guard left, he went away and came back with a bowl of hot soup, the best meal I've ever had. I became quite pro-Russian at that time.

Later on when the Russians liberated our camp, they just lined up all the men who were Russian prisoners and asked who had collaborated with the Germans, and if you were accused of collaborating with the Germans, they just stood you up against the wall and they shot the whole bunch down with machine guns.

In other words, all I would have to do was say, "He collaborated." They'd take you. You could say, "Well, he collaborated, too." They'd take me. It was all done very quickly, before we knew what was going on. So this is, I think, two views of the Russians.

One prisoner actually risked his life to get me something to eat. The other time was when the Russians just shot all these men down without any trial or investigation at all.

- D: Were there any other incidents between the Allies and the Americans that you could recall that bothered you?
- S: For some reason the Americans particularly dislike the French. They were sort of neutral toward the British and maybe neutral toward the Norwegians

who were right across the barbed wire from us. There were seven thousand American prisoners in this one compound and then there were other compounds where there were thousands of prisoners, too. So there were quite a number of incidents like that which were very interesting. But the most interesting of all was our relationship with the guards.

Now when the officers came into the camp, the guards all stood at attention and started barking orders. Then there were some humorous incidents. For example, in one camp--but not the one that I was in--the prisoners were very much irritated because every night the guard was posted at the gate and the key was chained to the guard. And he was warned to let that key get away from him only over his dead body.

The prisoners knew that the gate was almost falling down, so one night they got the guard into the little hut where he went in to get warm and traded some cigarettes for food. While he was in there some of the others went out, took the gate off its hinges and threw it in the latrine. Later that night you heard the officer of the guard come around and was cussing out the guard. But the guard was showing him the key. He still had the key, although, the gate was gone.

So the next day, the guards went through the camp. They found the gate so they made the American prisoners get it out of the latrine, wash it off and put it back up.

Now this leads to the subject of escapes. Many of the prisoners did escape but they were all caught and forced back. It was very easy to escape from the camp. But you couldn't go north because there you'd run into the Baltic Sea. To the east you would run into fighting and you stood a good chance of getting shot by the Russians. In the west, our own troops were advancing. So most of the escapees tried to make it to the Swiss border. But there the Germans had it heavily guarded and that's where they were caught. And they were just shipped back to the camp from which they had escaped.

It was easy to escape and easy to get through Germany. There were so many different nationalities in Germany and so many different uniforms that one

more uniform made no great difference. In most cases you were not stopped until you got to the Swiss border which was almost impossible to get through.

D: How was it so easy to escape?

S: When the German guard went inside to warm himself you could just wiggle under the gate and in other cases, I believe, the German guards were bribed. Now currency in the prison camp was American cigarettes and if you got together some American cigarettes, you could bribe the guard. And they could never get a correct count. They probably didn't even know the prisoner had escaped.

Now earlier, there were all kinds of jokes about prisoners digging tunnels out and so forth, but that didn't happen when we were prisoners. We came to the conclusion the safest thing for us to do was just to stay there until we were liberated by the American Army.

D: How did your group feel toward the Kommandant?

S: We never came in contact with him. Our contact with the Germans was almost exclusively through the one guard, an old man who had charge of four hundred prisoners. And he just walked around during the day with his rifle slung over his shoulder and, incidentally, we never found out whether the rifle was actually loaded or whether he had bullets or not.

It would have been senseless for him--we didn't know any reason why he should carry the rifle if it wasn't loaded. At the same time, if it was loaded we could very easily jump him and get the rifle. So that was one thing we never found out.

D: Were you ever visited by the SS at all?

S: No. There was nothing of that. Of course, this was a regular prisoner of war camp under control of the Wehrmacht. Now some prisoners who were captured by storm troopers were shot down at a town called Malmédy. This is one of the famous atrocities committed during the war and there was an attempt to bring those men to trial. But there were no actual atrocities in our camp.

One time I tried to get some water from a spigot when we were told not to and the guard knocked me down. That's the only time I could say there was any personal mistreatment.

But it was, of course, having to sleep on the ground in cold weather and not having enough blankets and not enough to eat and all that sort of thing, that really got you down.

D: Now as far as receiving news, you got most of your information from those crystal sets?

S: Oh, yes.

D: But did you ever hear from other prisoners of war about what was going down in Luckenwalde and Auschwitz?

S: We knew about these camps and heard about them but we had no contact with them. The camp at Luckenwalde, I think, started off as a concentration camp because they did have ovens there and we walked over and looked at the ovens after we were liberated; also saw the gas chambers and all that sort of thing.

We found the bodies of people who looked like they had been starved to death. We buried them. We could see the outline of a skeleton that was on the body--just skin and bones. Obviously, they had been starved.

We looked that way, too. When I first was liberated I don't know how much I weighed, but I had the outline of my skeleton on my body.

Strangely enough, there were quite a number of amusing incidents at the camp which some people seem to think are quite comical. I can't recall that they seemed comical at the time but they do sound funny today. Incidentally, I had a brother who was a prisoner of the Japs and my experience as a prisoner of war seems comical compared to what he went through.

The general rule was that the guard came up and spoke to you. Even if he spoke English or you knew German, you would always call for an interpreter. In other words, there would always be somebody else beside you and the guard talking.

You would always start yelling the German word for interpreter, which I've forgotten now. The guard would tell you in English, "I speak English. You don't need an interpreter." But we would still call for the interpreter.

Then if you saw the guard come in, the first person who saw him was supposed to shout, "Air raid! Whoooooo!" and go like that. The guards always seemed to think that that was some way of showing them honor, because one day, the guard came in and no one said that because they didn't see him, and he yelled out, "Ja, Ja. It's me! Air raid! Whoooooo!" Apparently he thought that was something that should be done. So that's another one of the amusing things that happened in the prison camp.

D: At any time, did you ever get scared that you were going to be bombed by your own Allies?

S: That was the chief fear that we had, and our camp was bombed by the Allies. One night, at least, it was machine-gunned. Of course, there was nowhere to run or to take cover so that all you had to do was just to lie still and hope for the best.

But we could see the American bombers going over at Berlin every afternoon and with hundreds of planes overhead it would be easy for one of them just to lose a bomb by mistake. After awhile, it didn't happen so we used to get out and watch the bombers coming over.

Then we had a sort of language in the camp that we called the kriegie language. The German word for prisoner of war is Kriegsgefangene, and it was a combination of English, French, and German. But you could make yourself understood in it in almost any language there. When the American bombers came over and you could hear the bombs falling on Berlin, at night you could see the flares of big fires had been started. We used to walk up and down in front of the guards and say, "Tout est kaput in der Deutschland." Tout means all, and kaput--finished, over, for Germany--der Deutschland. But the guards were good-natured fellows and didn't take offense at that.

D: Were you ever able to receive mail or could you send letters out?

S: We could send letters out. We were handed out letters, paper. We had a special prisoner-of-war letter and one that I wrote, just after we were captured, we were given these, and one reached my parents and that was the first evidence that they had that I was alive. They received a missing-in-action notice, but the first evidence that they had that I was alive was this letter. But that was the only one that got through. And many of my friends wrote me but the war was over before these letters or anything had reached me.

D: Did anybody else in the group ever receive letters?

S: Yes. Prisoners of war who had been there for some time received letters off and on from their families.

D: Turning to the American Red Cross, were they really much help?

S: The American Red Cross didn't handle it. It was the Swiss Red Cross. But I think that they did a great deal. They got the food parcels for us. We found out that the reason we didn't get food parcels was that the Germans stopped them. When the Russians liberated us, we found a warehouse full of food parcels right by the camp.

Now our theory is that the Germans kept us on sparse rations so that we wouldn't be revolting. Because if we were well-fed we might revolt, and then if you were being starved you might revolt; but if you were just kept on these sparse rations you'd be so anxious each day to get these rations that you wouldn't revolt. That's just our theory as to why the Germans did not feed us better. They did have the food. We found warehouses of food as well as Red Cross parcels right near the camp.

D: Now turning to your liberation, could you talk about this a little bit. How long did it take?

S: It was really very simple. The German commandant simply called in the ranking Allied prisoner who was an officer of the British Air Corps and turned the control of the camp over to him one day. And he and his troops marched out the next day. The following day, the Russians arrived and they simply said, "You go ahead and run the camp."

But we were able then to send out foraging parties to pick up food. And usually we managed to get some potatoes or something like that so we did have fairly good rations then. But the Russians told us that they got credit on lend-lease for every American prisoner that they liberated and they wanted to make a record of us. Some of the prisoners decided not to wait. They just took off but the Russians made them come back. Then we were marched in. Of course, by that time the camp was completely in control of the prisoners themselves. We were marched down to a hut and there were two lines: one, English prisoners, and one, American prisoners. And there were Russians inside registering us. We heard the English prisoners were furious. It turned out we were being registered by Russian WACs [Women's Army Corps] while they were being registered by Russian men soldiers. They were saying, "The bloody Yanks, they always get the women and the liquor."

So I did get a chance to see a Russian WAC and also, to see how my name looked in Russian. They had an American prisoner there who spoke Russian and you'd give him your name; he would give it to the WAC in Russian and spell it in Russian for you. She would write it in Russian.

Finally, we managed to escape. There was an Auto-bahn--that's a German super highway near the camp--and we knew that American convoys were going through to Berlin so we flagged down a convoy one day and the officer in charge said, "I'm going into Berlin so there's no use your going in there." But, he said, "I will make it my point to be here at a certain time and on a certain day, and if you leave the camp and jump aboard the trucks, once you're aboard the trucks the Russians can't touch you." And that's what we did. We made a mass break and we all jumped aboard the trucks.

Now I heard later that the Russians had managed to stop about a third of the fellows but the rest of us got aboard the trucks and we were carried out to an American collecting camp and from there we were put aboard another convoy which took us to Rouen. And then we were put aboard a hospital train that took us to Le Havre. At Le Havre, we were put in a big collecting camp that had thousands of American prisoners of war. We were called

RAMPs--Recovered Allied Military Personnel--and we stayed at Camp Lucky Strike an awfully long time. It was a very long and boring experience; nothing to do, minimum amount of food and so forth.

- D: Are there any additional comments that you want to make about the war at all, experiences that stick out in your mind?
- S: The one thing that sticks out in my mind today is: Contrary to so many people, I don't think we're as bad off today in international affairs as we were then because then it just seemed there was no way of avoiding the war. We had no option. While since World War II we've had options. We could go into the Korea or not. We could go into Vietnam or not. We got in Vietnam and we pulled out. You can call two men together like Begin and Sadat and pressure them into reaching an agreement. That sort of thing was impossible. In other words, today you can use diplomacy to meet men. At that time there was no option. That's the thing that stands out in my mind.

END OF INTERVIEW