Lyle C. Pearson was born on 5 February 1921 in Montevideo, Chippewa County, Minnesota, the oldest of three boys. At age two the Pearson family moved to St. Peter, Minnesota, and it was here that Lyle grew up and attended school, graduating from high school in 1938. He spent time at a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp (1938-39), and worked at St. Peter Hospital (1939-42) and Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego, California, (1942-43) before volunteering in February 1943 for the US Army Air Corps.

Lyle was stationed at a number of bases for Basic and flight training, finally earning his wings at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, in December 1943. Further training followed as Lyle was assigned to B-17 Flying Fortress heavy bombers. Along with the rest of the B-17’s ten-man crew, Lyle arrived in Italy in July 1944 and joined the 419th Squadron, 301st Bomb Group, 15th Air Force. He flew his first mission on 31 July 1944, over Ploesti, Romania.

On 29 December 1944 Lyle was flying his fiftieth and final combat mission when his plane was shot down over northern Italy; six crew members survived the crash. After a brief stay in Dulag-Luft, a German interrogation and processing facility, Lyle was sent to a German POW camp for air force personnel (Kriegsgefangener Lager der Luftwaffe 1) in Barth, northern Germany; he remained here until the camp was liberated in May 1945 by advancing Soviet troops. Lyle spent several months recovering from his ordeal in the camp, and was finally discharged in December 1945 with the rank of captain.

Again a civilian, Lyle moved to Mankato and used the GI Bill for training as a journeyman electrician; he later changed professions and worked many years as a probation officer for several southern Minnesota counties, retiring in 1983. He and his wife Katherine Fuller (married 1942 in San Diego) raised a family of seven.
Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor
L = Lyle C. Pearson
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today is 16 November 2002, and this is an interview with Lyle Pearson of Mankato, Minnesota. First, Mr. Pearson, on the record, thanks very much for taking time today to speak with me.

L: My pleasure.

T: We’ve been talking for some minutes and here’s a little bit of what I’ve learned from you. You were born on 5 February, 1921 in Montevideo, Minnesota, but at about age two you moved to St. Peter and that’s where you grew up and went to high school. You went to St. Peter High School, class of ’38?

L: Yes.

T: Following high school you were in a CC Camp for about a year?

L: About a year.

T: Was that in Minnesota?

L: Yes. That was up on the border. North of Ely, Minnesota. Way up there.

T: After that you worked at the St. Peter Hospital [in St. Peter, Minnesota] for it looks like about three years before going to San Diego. You worked some months for Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego. Got married in San Diego. Your wife’s name Katherine Fuller. And in February of 1943 you were inducted into military service.

L: Right.

T: You were a pilot on B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft in Europe, flying out of Italy. On your fiftieth mission, which was 29 December 1944, your plane was shot down over by Bolton in Tyrol, north Italy. By the way, for the record, you flew for the 15th Air Force, 301st Bomb Group, 419th Squadron. Once a POW of the Germans you spent some days at Dulag Luft before being transferred to Kriegsgefangenen Lager der Luftwaffe Nummer Eins, Camp Number One of the German Luftwaffe, in Barth, which is in Pomerania [in far northern Germany]. You were liberated by Soviet troops. What was the date of the liberation?
L: The Germans left the towers I think about May first or second or third and it was two, three or four days before the Russians really came in, in force. Then they came in. They were quite a scourge. They just looted and plundered and raped the countryside viciously.

T: Did you in a sense wait in the camp after the Germans left? Sort of waiting for someone to come?

L: Right. We were waiting, hoping the Allies would come but obviously they let the Russians have it because of some diplomatic maneuvers I guess. But anyhow, when they came, our colonel didn’t really want us to get out and mix with the Russians. This was a wild group. They’d been fighting ever since Stalingrad. This was the Third White Russian Army, I think, they called them. Anyway, when they take a town they would give them free reign of the town and then they’d go on to the next battle. These were kind of wild people.

Our colonel says, “We’ll stay behind the barbed wire until the Americans come.” It worked. About the third day though, a Russian major drove up in his tank and demanded to know why the wire was still up because the great Russian Army had liberated these people. Let them out. Our colonel said, “No, I don’t think we will.” He vetoed that quick by jumping in his tank and driving up and down the barbed wire and knocked it down. Then a lot of guys did leave. Obviously.

Once that barbed wire fence was down you want to get beyond the borders of it. A lot of guys went down and mingled with the Russians and some of them... we had some of them ending up dead. I don’t know from overeating or maybe they tried to drink what the Russians... Obviously we were in very, very bad shape physically. We had not had food for, you know, much food for two months.

I tried to stay behind the barbed wire. One day I walked out on a little peninsula. I didn’t want to go into town with them. I and a friend walked out on a peninsula and there were some Germans there and a Russian, and the Germans were interpreting for them. They said, “This Russian officer says you owe him a salute.” And I said, “Well, what’s his rank?” “He’s a second lieutenant.” I said, “I’m a first lieutenant. I don’t have to salute him,” and I started to walk away. And I heard kind of a guttural snarl. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew I didn’t like the sound of it and I turned around and this Russian officer had his pistol up right between my eyes. So I decided right then and there I owed him a salute. No argument about that.

We said, “We’re starving. Give us some food.” They opened up the gate one time and shoved some cows in and said, “Here you are. Help yourself.” Self-serve. We’re right on the Baltic Sea there, so the Germans have all these fish traps. “How about giving us the fish?” Well, they emptied the traps but they kept the fish, and gave us the eels that were in there. We learned how to eat eels.

T: Eels are popular in that area, but not for American tastes I suppose. Let me back up a bit to when the US entered the war. The seventh of December 1941, the attack
on Pearl Harbor. I’m wondering, Lyle, if you remember what you were doing when you first heard that news?

L: Gosh, I’m sorry. I really don’t. But it dawned on me right away when hearing the news that I’m at the age that they’re going to draft me, and I’m going to have to go in and fight this war.

T: You were twenty years old. Right?

L: I was twenty years old, right. I had always wanted to fly. Didn’t have the means whereby I could fly and I thought, “Well, if I’m going to fight this war I’d like to fight it in the air.” So that’s why within six months I was down to the recruiting station. At first I was going to join the Navy Air Corps. I and a friend of mine. Came back out and he said he didn’t pass the test. I said, “Well, Dan, we’ll go over to the Army Air Corps then.” The next day we went to the Army Air Corps and came out and he said, “I didn’t pass the tests.” I said, “Good bye, Dan. I’m going.”

T: Really?

L: Yes.

T: Were you living at home at this time, Lyle, with your parents?

L: I was living in St. Peter. I lived with an aunt and uncle.

T: Were you parents in the area still?

L: Yes. They were within twenty or thirty miles.

T: How did your parents respond when you told them you were going to enlist?

L: My father was gone. I had no relationship with my father. He deserted our family years ago. And my mother of course, she knew I was going to have to go. But would hate to see me go but agreed that if you’re going in and you want to fly, you would probably be better off fighting an air war than on the ground.

T: Right. Did you have brothers or sisters?

L: Yes. I had two younger brothers.

T: Any sisters?

L: No. No sisters.

T: And are you the oldest?
L: I was the oldest. Right. Yes.

T: Were you the first of your brothers to go into service?

L: Yes.

T: Were you the only one?

L: One brother went in the Navy. Went after I did. He was younger than me.

T: What prompted you to volunteer?

L: Well, as I said, I knew I had to fight the war and I wanted to do it in the sky rather than on the ground. So that’s one of the main reasons. And, of course, everybody was going then. There was no argument about if I’m going to Canada or nothing. Everybody was going in to fight a war. And in my class of 1938 most everybody did go into the service.

T: So rather than wait to be drafted and not have maybe any choice of what you were going to do, you decided to jump the gun and enlist and get what you wanted.

L: Yes.

T: How about the Aviation Cadet Program? What was most difficult about that for you?

L: The most difficult of course was the ground school. They had a very accelerated course in ground school. When I went to the Aviation Cadet Center in Santa Anna, California, we went to ground school for about two and a half months. I guess I felt I’m going to start flying right away. But they said no, no, no. Ground school first. And we learned, into the Army, how to march. There were about ten thousand cadets in that camp. We were very fortunate, the cadets, the squadron that won the … we paraded every Sunday. Four hour parade.

T: Every Sunday?

L: Every Sunday. Oh, yes. In class A uniforms. In California where it was warm. Coming into the summer. There was kind of an unwritten rule, this squadron that wins the parade the last Sunday gets their choice of preflight Primary Training. That would be the next step. There was only one choice. The nice place to go for Primary Training was the Cantalero Flight Academy, which was run by Major Moseley, and it was taken over by the Air Force and it was much nicer living, of course, than any barracks. Our group won the parade and we went to Cantalero Flight Academy.

T: So the choice was made by who had the best digs, the best quarters?
L: No. Whoever won the parade.

(1, A, 157)

T: But the decision that your group made was based on where the best quarters were.

L: Oh, sure. Sure. And there was no argument there because every place else was just regular GI barracks. But this had little houses where you could have eight men to a house. It was just a nicer place to be. So we went to Cantalero Flight Academy for my primary training. The only bad part about that from primary you go to basic, then you go back to the barracks type. I ended up in the San Joachin Valley for my basic flying training. At Taft, California.

T: Did all your training in California then?

L: Not all of it, no. Out of Taft, then they asked you what to, what kind of plane do you want to fly. Of course the big glamorous plane then was the P-38 Lightning [twin engine fighter]. Everybody wanted to fly the Lightning. I said, I’ll fly fighters. They said, “No, big guys fly bombers,” and I was big enough I guess. I didn’t have any choice. I said, “All right, I’ll take that twin engine B-25.” They said, “No, you’ll take a B-17” [Flying Fortress four engine heavy bomber]. You didn’t argue at all. You did what they said.

T: I wonder why they ask you actually.

L: That’s right. That’s right (laughs). You kind of wonder why. That’s right. So then I went to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, which was a twin engine flying school and finished up my flying training. That’s where I got my wings and my commission. Fort Sumner. S-U-M-N-E-R. It was a little cow town. There wasn’t much there. And we didn’t get the chance to go off the base much anyway. They kept up busy.

T: When did you earn your wings?

L: I think it was December 10, 1943. Class of [1943-K].

T: Did you leave to go overseas right away?

L: Oh, no. No. Then I was a pilot. I had my wings but there were a lot of things about flying that I didn’t know. So I had to go train in a B-17. How to fly the B-17. And of course, the first time I saw that great big thing sitting there I said, oh, my God, I’ll never master this! I went to Hobbs, New Mexico, and learned how to fly the B-17, and spent about two and a half months there. Then after I learned to fly the B-17, then there’s the matter of getting a crew together and doing combat training. Then I went up to Salt Lake City, where all these crews, pilots and copilots, bombardiers
and navigators and gunners are gathered, and they assigned me the nine men in my crew.

I picked up my crew and then we went down to Delhart, Texas, and began our combat crew training, which was a lot of formation flying. Learn how to fly close formation. The gunnery targets. High altitude. Half way through my course there they sent a bunch of guys to Gulfport, Mississippi, and I was one of those. I was happy to leave Delhart, because that’s deep in the Texas Panhandle and that’s a place where you could be in final approach and a dust storm would come and you’d have to pull up your wheels and go around. So much sand. So I finished up at Gulfport, and my wife was able to join me for a while down there. Then I finished my combat crew training, they gave me a leave of absence, ten days to come home, and then we headed for overseas.

T: When did you arrive in Europe?

L: I had a long way around. We picked up a new plane in Georgia. Went to Gander Field, in Newfoundland. Then they said, fly out on a certain heading for an hour and then open your sealed orders, and it will tell you where to go. I assumed I was going to England. I didn’t have any doubt. All of a sudden it said, no, you go via the Azores to Tunis, Tunisia, headquarters 15th Air Force. I told my navigator, “You better head for the Azores Islands.” That’s just a little island way out in the boondocks. I remember the navigator was kind of new, because he gave me a heading, and I’m flying it.

In front of me down on the nose I said to the bombardier, “Now in case the navigator here misses the Azores Islands and we have to crash land at sea, you know what you have to do first.” He said, “I have to take my .45 [caliber pistol]—(we had the .45s in our shoulder holster)—and shoot the bombsite so the enemy won’t get it.” I said, “That’s right, Fergy, and the second thing you do, you shoot the navigator.” And I walked out. The navigator was kind of looking around. “What kind of a crew am I on?” Hit [the Azores] right on the head, and we stayed there overnight.

Next day we took off and as I got up to altitude, number two oil tank was leaking. Somebody hadn’t put the cap on. Went back and landed, taxied over and got the oil tank filled, went to take off again, and something happened. My airplane wouldn’t take off. Wouldn’t fly. I don’t know what happened, but we had our control cables go back through the bomb-bays, and when we were flying overseas we had our B-4 bags, which were our personal bags, and then our parachute bags. We’d just throw them in the bomb-bays. And I think one of them got wedged over or under the aileron cable, because the copilot calls out the airspeed. I shoved the throttle forward. He keeps saying eighty, eighty-five, ninety, and she should start flying. I chopped the power. She’s not going to fly. I told the copilot drop full flaps to slow up, open up the cowl flaps.

I believe we had used over half the runway then, and doubted I we could stop. I said to my co-pilot, “Harry, when I get to the end of the runway I’m going to
ground it.” You get to the end and hit the rudder pedal and spin around. Hit the brake. The wing will dig in and she’ll stop. Well, as we got the end of the runway Portuguese workers were putting in runway lights. We would have mowed them down like ten pins. I said, “I’m coming in on the brakes.” But you have to be careful, because she’ll tip over. We’re still going at a pretty good clip. I said, “I see a wall up there, and I think it looks about right to hit the landing gear and shear it off. Maybe that’s what it was there for, I don’t know.” And sure enough—we hit the wall and sheared our landing gear off. We slid around in the nose. I gave the signal—get out of here. Everybody got out. I’m the last one out. I start out and I went through the bomb-bays. I looked, and number two engine was starting to burn. I could smell the gas. I got caught on the bomb-bay racks, hanging there with my feet spinning. Finally broke myself loose and got outside. Then all my crew said, “We got the fire out already, Skipper. That’s okay.”

(1, A, 249)

T: Some anxious moments for you there though.

L: Very anxious moment, that’s right. Yes. So then I divided the crew in half. I took four men and gave the copilot four men, and we hitchhiked across on the Air Transport Command. Begged rides, and we finally got to Tunis, Tunisia. Here my orders say, you go to Tunis, Tunisia. There they tell me, “Oh, no. They’re no longer headquartered here. They’re up in Bari, Italy.” So I had a terrible time getting a flight up to Bari, Italy. I think finally the British took us up. We went into Bari, and then they said, they’re sending somebody to get you from the 301st Bomb Group. I wasn’t so popular coming over without an airplane.

T: Sure. Was that airplane salvaged?

L: I don’t know. I talked to some guys that came through the Azores months later and they said, no, it’s still sitting there on the end of the runway.

T: So a brand new airplane, wrecked. How many hours in it, maybe thirty?

L: Oh, not that many even. I just picked it up from Hunter Field, Georgia. But anyhow, so then we went to the 301st Bomb Group. I got there sometime in July [1944]. I flew my first mission. I’ve got my mission list somewhere.

T: Lyle, think about the B-17 as an airplane. From a pilot’s perspective, what made it a good airplane to fly?

L: So stable. Responded to the controls so well. It would take a terrible beating. In combat that was something. I’ve got some pictures of some of these airplanes that are all shot to pieces, and they were still flying. I came back once with fifty holes in my airplane. There’s a copy of my missions in here somewhere... (looks through personal papers, on table). Here it is. I flew my first mission on July 31, 1944, and
lucky me—I got to fly it to the Ploesti Oil Fields, in Romania, which was the most heavily defended target in Europe, I guess.

T: Yes, it was heavily defended. That was your first mission?

L: That was my first mission. My introduction to combat flying and boy, I tell you in a hurry, I figured out, this is no fun. This is pretty serious business.

T: Can you talk about that mission? This is your first combat mission. What went through your mind as you were on this mission, over the target?

L: You're the pilot and you're flying the airplane. Your attentions are almost focused on that, and when you get up on the bomb run then you have to fly very close formation. You turn on the Initial Point, and then the bomb run. You fly straight and level, and [on the bomb run] that's when they can shoot the hell out of you. I've often thought, wondered about that myself. It seems like you kind of go in a kind of suspended animation where nothing seems to matter. You just keep that airplane here, and you know that the flak is busting out then. You know that every one of those bursts is an .88 caliber shell, but you don't think about it. You're just focused on flying that mission until somebody says, “Bombs away!” and then, “Oh, boy! Let's get the heck out of here.” It's stressful. There's no doubt. That's why after about twenty-five missions they let us go to rest camp, because you're getting stressed out.

T: Sure.

T: But I had to fly the first couple missions as copilot to learn how to fly combat. Then of course I went over to first pilot, and I took over my crew again and flew the rest of my missions as first pilot.

(2, A, 291)

T: As you fly more missions, what's one thing that gets easier?

L: I don't think it gets any easier. Really. You're saying, “I'm going to fly the fifty [missions required to complete a tour,”] and as you get closer to fifty, you say, “Boy, the odds are getting worse and worse and worse against me. Maybe I'll get shot down.” You kind of worry about that.

I flew some difficult missions. During the fall of ’44 the weather over Europe was bad. It was socked in. You can't fly close formations. We had a program called the Lone Ship Mission. They picked a pilot and the copilot from each squadron and said, “You will fly up in the soup, bomb in the soup, and come back in the soup.” I got picked from my squadron because I had quite a few missions then, and I did some weather flying. But they took the [bottom] ball turret off and put in a radar dome in the bottom, and gave us a radar navigator.
This was all new to us. We could take off, fly, and he could lead us right to the target and on the bomb run. The only thing is, you’re flying in weather all the time. There’s a lot of things that can go wrong in weather. In fact, I was one of the pilots, I was flying along at about twenty-five thousand feet one time, and hit the outskirts of a thunderstorm. But you can’t see the thunderstorms. You’re in the soup anyway.

And all of a sudden [on one mission I remember] it pulled me up and stalled my plane out and fell off on one wing and did about a three turn spin. B-17s aren’t made for that. Especially with a full bomb and gas load. All I can remember is all the needles going past the redline. And I’m trying to come in, you pop the stick and come in on opposite rudders as spin control to get out of spins. I’m pushing on the rudder and I’m thinking the copilot is fighting me. But I look over and no, he’s pushing the right rudder. And it came out, and then you pull it out. Then you say, are the wings going to hold or aren’t they going to hold? That’s what I’d say about this beautiful baby. The wings just held in there.

The tail gunner was back in his position. He said—[this aircraft has] got a big tail, you know—he said, that tail popped when we came out of the spin and sounded like a cannon going off in his ears. When we first went into the spin my gunners back in the waist popped the door, the waist door, and were going to bail, bail out. But centrifugal force held them in. They couldn’t get out. Lucky for them, because then we pulled it out; then I flew around and checked my controls. Everything was fine. Some of the crew wanted to go back home. I said, “We’re on a mission.”

T: How many of those Lone Ship missions did you fly?

L: I flew about five of them. They’re tough, you’re flying in the soup. Then you come back in the soup. Then you have to find your field, and sometimes that’s hard. We didn’t have all this equipment that they have now for blind landings. All we had was a marker beacon. You get over the field, you’d flash a light on your plane. The radar navigator could do wonders with it. I’d get back. He’d get me back to the field and I’d find my pattern and come in. The one time I came in about a thousand feet [altitude] looking for the field. No field. I flew around and came back in at eight hundred feet and no field. I told him, I’m coming back this time at six hundred feet. You’re getting low, pretty low then. And if we don’t find the field, then we’ll have to go and find someplace else. Boy, at six hundred feet all of a sudden through some clouds I saw the field. I’m chopping my power and landed in the last half of the field, but we got down.

Another time we were going around the bomb run, the navigator’s got me on the bomb run, and all of a sudden we came out of the soup and there it is behind us, airplanes all over the place. I remember seeing a [German] Junkers JU-88 coming right off of our front, and I thought he was probably going to shoot at us, but he was on a run to a plane below us. Another B-17. So we stayed on our bomb run. Dropped our bombs and boy, we headed back into the soup, I’ll tell you. We went in there.

T: For you what represented more stress or more difficulty, German aircraft or German flak?
L: The flak.

T: Why is that?

L: Because we had air cover by that time. The Germans, if they did hit us, they'd come down through the squadron and keep right on going. They didn’t want to tangle with our fighters. But the flak was always there. The flak. *(pauses three seconds)* You knew what it was, and when you're flying on the bomb run you’re straight and level and they were accurate. We tried flying up and dropping [in altitude]—five hundred feet we dropped. And then went on the bomb run. It didn’t make any difference. They were right on you. They were good. They were good. In fact, we used to say, Those German flak gunners are so good down there. They just pick out the fifty mission men and shoot them down.

T: Were you downed by flak? Is that what shot your plane down?

L: That’s what shot us down, right. One time, in one of these Lone Ship Missions, it was at night, and we came out in the clear and they were shooting flak at us and then I could see. Instead of these little puffs of black smoke they were balls of fire exploding. At night. I said, Oh, my God! That looks much worse than just the flak, although it is the same shell exploding.

T: Sure.

L: But yes, flak was much worse.

T: Lyle, on the ground, did you have much of an opportunity to mix with the local population in Italy?

L: No. No. The local population was still kind of to a degree German oriented. They had been under the German rule for quite a while, and they kind of still thought the Germans were pretty good. This country was in ruins. People were living in hovels. The only thing we had is a Red Cross club in town. We could go in and play pool.

T: Those were Americans as opposed to Italians?

L: Right. Other Americans. Very few local people we saw. Some would come through selling things, through our tent camp, and we would buy some vegetables from them. They started selling watermelon. A few COs didn’t buy the watermelon because they didn’t know if they were bad. Of course the guys did anyway. If you see a melon, and you haven’t had a melon for a long time.

T: Where was your base located?

L: It was located right out of Foggia, Italy.
T: What was the name of the base, do you remember?

L: The name of the base? It didn’t have a name. All it has is a code name—Weaver Longskirt.

T: That was outside of Foggia?

L: Yes. When we wanted to call them we’d call them Longskirt and they would answer us.

T: Of the fifty missions that you flew, excluding the last one, if you think about it, which perhaps was the most difficult for you, and why?

L: I suppose it would probably be that first one [over Ploesti], because we’d had combat training and we knew they were going to be shooting at us over there, but didn’t have any conception of how bad it might be until that first mission. When I saw planes getting hit and going down in flames, boy, that really shook me up. And the other one where the flak was so thick, I think it was over [the city of] Linz, Austria. We were bombing an oil refinery. That’s the time I came back and I knew they were on us all the time with the flak. I could hear it hitting the plane. Then the crew chief came to my tent that night and said, “Lieutenant, were you flying [plane number] 360?” or whatever it was. I say, “Yes.” He said, “You got hit pretty good, didn’t you?” I said, “Yes, we did.” He said, “I just patched up your plane. You had fifty holes in it.” And he said, “Did you get hit?” I said, “No.” He said, “Right where the pilot’s compartment is there’s a hole where a piece of flak must have gone through.” It went backward or forward, but it didn’t hit me.

T: You flew a lot of missions in a pretty short period of time, relatively speaking.

L: Yes.

T: How does fatigue affect one?

L: Mental fatigue? It affects you. Yes. Some guys, and this would be very few, but I’ve seen guys that had to give it up, that couldn’t handle it. But by that time you’ve gone through the training, and they’ve pretty well sorted you out if you can’t handle it. Once they start shooting at you and you see your fellows getting killed, then it’s a little bit different. That’s why they sent us to a rest camp.

T: How do you deal with seeing people that you know either getting shot down, literally, or not coming back from missions?

L: You just don’t dwell on it. You just kind of put it out of your mind. “Okay, so seven planes went off today. Now here we count them”—they always count them—“there’s only six coming back. That’s Lieutenant Tillitson’s crew. They didn’t make
it.” But you don’t dwell on it. You can’t do it. There, but for the grace of God, go I. Maybe tomorrow it might be I.

T: Does that impact how your relationship--

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T: And by that I mean, did you find yourself keeping a distance from people?

L: Oh, no. Our crew was a very close knit crew, even on the ground. Even though I was an officer, I was with my enlisted men quite a bit because they were doing the same thing as I was. Except when we took the wheels off the ground, I expected absolute discipline then. But we were close. And all the flying crews were pretty close. We separated us ourselves from the ground crew, from the ground people. I know they had a lot of ground support. Not the mechanics, but support crews. The cooks and adjutants and so on. We just didn’t seem to get together with them, but I don’t think anybody was buddies with anybody except your crew.

T: How closely did you work with your mechanics, the ground crew assigned to your plane?

L: Not very close because once we taxied the plane, got back in our... We went to a briefing of course, always. Then we’d go back to our tents. We wouldn’t see the ground crew. They’d come in and fix up our plane. Unless like the one that came up to see me that night. But otherwise, no, we didn’t have a close contact with them. We had a lot of respect for them because they kept these planes in the air. The engines took a terrible pounding.

I know one time we were on a flight. I lost an engine, so I pulled emergency power on the other three and tried to keep up with the flight. I remember my engineer gunner—we have an engineer gunner who’s supposed to be the expert on engines and he’s also the top turret gunner—I remember him saying, “Skipper, you can only fly that power for five minutes.” I said, “I know, Hicks, I know. I’ve already been doing it for an hour.” And then the ball turret gunner, who’s down below, said, “Skipper, number two engine is red hot. I can see the nacelle right from here.” He was right down there. So I throttled back on it and had to get out of the formation then.

(1, B, 432)

T: The ball turret looks like a claustrophobic little space.

L: It is, it is. I got in it once. I tried to get into every position in my airplane at least once. That ball turret, I wouldn’t go there for the life of me but my ball turret gunner thought it was great.

T: Really?
L: Yes.

T: Why? What was so attractive about it for him?

L: “In the first place,” he said, “when the flak is coming up and busting, I keep the turret going around. It goes around, so the flak will glance off.” I suppose that’s true. But of course, he had to stop it when you have a plane come in, and shoot at a plane. I think he liked the challenge of it. Wouldn’t be for me.

T: Outside of your own job as pilot, what was the most difficult job on the plane?

L: I suppose the navigator. He had to know where you were all the time and keep track of you. We were in formation of course and we followed the formation all the time, but once in a while you’d have to drop out. I had to drop out three or four times when you’d lose an engine. One would malfunction and you’d have to feather it.

I remember one time, we had to feather an engine. I had to drop out of the formation. I started back for Italy, and we were flying along at about twenty-eight thousand feet and all of a sudden half a dozen bursts of flak hit around us. And I said to my navigator, “Good God, where are we?” He was plotting and he said, “We’re over Berchtesgaden, Hitler’s mountain retreat.” I said, “Is that so?” and we hadn’t dropped our bombs. So I did a three hundred sixty [degree turn] and we came back and did a bomb run on Berchtesgaden. Obviously we weren’t going to hurt it because he’s down a hundred feet in the ground, but we were going to let them know that we were there.

T: Sure. If you think about the missions, were some missions easier than others?

L: Oh, yes. Yes. It depended upon, quite a bit, upon distance and the number of flak guns that they had protecting their targets. Like I say, because that was their oil supply, Ploesti was the most heavily protected target in Europe. The Germans were really smart, brilliant people. As soon as they lost Ploesti, they had synthetic oil refineries going up in Poland, Bleckhammer, Poland. So we started to hit those, but those were eight and a half hour missions. Bleckhammer. Eight [hours] fifty-five [minutes], eight forty-five.

T: Those were long missions.

L: Long missions. That’s right. About as long as you would dare go with the amount of gas you had. And it’s a long time in the air. A long time with the mask over your face.

T: Your plane was not pressurized?

L: No.
T: So with altitude over ten or twelve thousand feet you needed oxygen?

L: Right. After you hit ten thousand feet you put on a mask, and then you had that on for the whole time until you got back down to ten thousand.

T: What about the cold, because it's cold up there?

L: Yes, it’s bitter cold. Minus seventy degrees it was outside. It was cold. You tried to dress heavy, but I couldn't dress too heavy in the pilot’s compartment because I had to have some freedom of movement. We had some big heavy jackets. They did have an electric suit. I had a heated suit on the day I got shot down. They worked pretty good, I have to say.

T: So you had experience with and without the heated suit?

L: Right.

T: Because this was something that came along later after you arrived?

L: Oh, no. I think we had them all the time, but sometimes you’d use it and sometimes you wouldn’t.

T: Was that your decision to wear it or not wear it?

L: Yes, my decision. So I had it on that day. And we had a heater, a glycol heater, but at seventy degrees below zero it didn’t do a lot for you.

T: Did people all throughout the plane have heat available, or just up front?

L: I think they had a glycol heater in the back, in the waist. But of course that big waist, I’m sure that it was cold back there and those guys—but they could bundle up all they wanted to. And they had flak vests so when we were over the target they had a vest on. Chain mail vest. You could put that over. And the pilots, again, you couldn’t hardly wear one because it was too heavy. I did wear a helmet. I put on a helmet when I’d go over there.

T: Lyle, were you a religious person before you went in the service?

L: Well, yes. I went to the Catholic school but I wasn’t deeply religious. I got religious when I was shot down. I was kind of a hypocrite there saying, Good Lord, spare my life please! I have to admit it. In prison camp they had a priest there, about every other Sunday he would come in and say Mass for us. He was Scottish. Scotsman who got shot down and took care of the whole camp. Well, maybe there were a couple of them. He had a lot of people there. We’d go to Mass. I and a guy from Massachusetts would go to Mass every time he was there. The only bad part
about that, for breakfast we would just have a half of piece of bread, brown bread, black bread, and when I and Matt got back, we always had the smallest pieces there. At that time Catholics didn’t eat before communion.

T: Did your faith or your belief in God change at all in a lasting way because of your war experience?

L: Oh, sure. Sure, there’s no doubt about it. The good Lord spared my life. I should be paying back. I’ve tried to do that with volunteer activities and being the kind of a citizen. I hope to be a good one. Hopefully raising my family properly. Not letting my wife browbeat me too much.

Wife: Oh yes. I haven’t started yet.

L: I volunteer over at church a lot. I’ve been a commentator.

T: So that would be one way that, one of the lasting impacts of your war and your POW experience might be that.

L: I think so. Sure. I think there’s no doubt about it that it changed me for a much better person. Yes. I appreciate the little things in life.

{(1, B, 530)}

T: Good point. Let me ask you about what was your fiftieth mission, and ask you to sort of describe that. What happened on the fiftieth mission? Was it a different mission as far as what you were going to do, or was it pretty similar to other ones?

L: It was similar to the other ones. In fact, it was an easy mission. I got in my plane that day and I said, “Oh, boy, am I happy! Because I’ve got a milk run—what we call an easy mission, a milk run. And going up in the Brenner Pass area, which would probably be about a four or five hour mission. I’d had some seven, eight, nine hour missions. So I remember my regular copilot... I had a new crew that day. Most of my crew had finished their missions.

T: They had fifty before you did?

L: Yes. They would farm out the different crews. If a navigator would get killed in a crew, he’d have to have somebody else fill in. They were short of navigators. So my navigator, when we got over there, began flying missions right away. He flew fast and furious. Most of my crew were done. My copilot, regular copilot, was going to be the assistant operations manager. He was willing to stay over and fly less missions and spend more time over there. I remember he came out in a Jeep and I remember opening up the window and saying, “Got her made today, Harry!” I never said that again, I’ll tell you that. But we took off just like any mission. I remember getting over the target in the target area. There were a few bursts of flak and they
were close. I guess I didn’t realize that they had taken some of the guns from Ploesti and put them up in the mountains. Almost shooting down our throat in some areas.

T: Was the flak denser or more accurate than other missions? You’ve mentioned flak on other missions as well.

L: No. No, it wasn’t any worse than any other mission. Just the fact that one of them had our name on it, I guess. We were on the bomb run, flying straight and level, and all of a sudden there’s this tremendous explosion. A direct hit, right in the bomb-bay. Of course, it blew the plane partially apart. I think the guys in the waist were probably killed right away, by the explosion.

T: There were two men in the waist, right?

L: Two in the waist and the ball turret man...well, there’s three. The radio operator sits in the waist too. He had a radio table. As soon as we got hit, immediately it starts going up. I could feel it. I had lost control of it.

T: You couldn’t control the plane?

L: No. No, couldn’t control the plane. The cable was out, I’m sure. She goes up and starts down in a kind of a flat spin. You’re kind of stunned from that big explosion.

T: You were not injured at all from the explosion?

L: No, not by the hit. No. And I said, well, time to bail out of this thing if I can get out. We had a parachute harness on and chest packs. And so I reached down and I snapped it on, and I stepped around and looked right under the pilot’s seat. I was a little forward of that, where we'd ordinarily bail out. An escape hatch. Well, that was burning very bad. You don’t dive through flame. That silk would catch fire. So then I said, how about the bomb-bays? I can jump out the bomb-bays. That was just like blowtorches back in the bomb-bays. Everything was burning. I remember turning back, and I’m standing there kind of behind my seat and the Alps Mountains are coming up and I said, that’s about where we’re going to hit, right there I guess.

And suddenly then, another big explosion. I assumed, I’m fairly certain, that’s the gas tanks exploding. You burn enough gas out you get the right fuel to air ratio in there, and it will blow. Boom!! Just a grand explosion. I’m unconscious, and finally I come to and I’m floating through space and all of a sudden it dawns on me—I’m alive. My God! And then it’s, oh, well, better grab that ripcord. I remember grabbing the ripcord and giving it a yank. Out comes the white chute. Starts out, and I passed out again. I don’t know from injuries or lack of oxygen or what it might have been.

T: How did you get out of the plane?
L: Don’t have any idea. Just a big explosion, and the next thing I know I’m floating in space. The plane must have just blown apart. When I came to again, then I’m floating. Floating down in my parachute. I look around and try to take stock. The first thing I see is my wing. The one wing of my airplane, coming down on top of me like this. So I grabbed my shroud lines and swung myself on the parachute and it missed me. Then I started to take stock of myself. How am I? Well, this arm was numb. I didn’t have any feeling. I looked down. Blood was dripping off of my fingers so I reached through my flying suit in the side pocket and pulled the hand inside and stuck it the pocket of my pants. I had a pair of pants on.

Then I kind of thought, well, now what’s going to happen? I started floating down a little further and I’m getting close to the ground, and then I saw a bunch of yellow blobs around me. I didn’t understand what those were at first. They were shooting at me from the ground, and those were tracer bullets. I grabbed my shroud lines and swung myself back and forth, back and forth. Well, all of a sudden I’m coming down. They didn’t hit me. In one instant I’m at the top of the pine trees and the next instant, I hit. These let you down pretty hard. There’s an eighteen foot canopy on this [parachute]. It will save your life, but it will let you hit hard. And I hit hard in the snow up in the Alps. Immediately when I hit I could feel something in my knee and back, and I knew I was injured. Then I tried to get my parachute harness off and it was pretty hard, because this one hand didn’t hardly even move. No feeling in it. Finally got it off. Got up and fell down right away. Took another couple steps and fell down.

(1, B, 620)

T: Was this from your knee and your back?

L: Knee and my back.

T: Were these the injuries you mentioned had bothered you in 1951? Here in the VA Hospital?

L: Yes.

T: So these were things that stuck with you.

L: So then I started hobbling and limping down. I knew I needed help. And all of a sudden I heard a shot. I’m looking around and I look up, and there’s an old man standing there. I expected to see a German soldier. There’s an old man standing there, and a young kid beside him. And he had that big Mauser rifle. Over the limb of the tree. And I’m thinking, well, maybe he’s a partisan. Maybe he’s an Italian partisan. I said, “Italiano?” He said, “Ah! Tedesci,” I think. German.

T: German, right.
L: I thought that’s what he said. I’m not going to fight anybody. Of course the funny part, as I look back on it now, the blood had congealed in my pocket and I couldn’t get this hand out, so here I am and you know that’s the typical American gangster pose that they used to talk about.

T: Hand in pocket.

L: Yes (chuckles). Hand in pocket. And so this old guy cranked off another shot. Zing!! By my ear. I said, this old boy means business. I reached down and grabbed it and ripped it loose and held it up. He didn’t say a thing, and I sensed somebody behind me, and then the German soldier did come up behind me and smash me behind the head with a rifle butt. Down I went again. Unconscious again. But I was face down in the snow and that cold snow kind of revived me and I kind of rolled over. I was having trouble getting up. I kind of got up on my knee, and I’m on my one knee and he reached down and pulled the gun out of my shoulder holster. Of course the only reason I carried the .45, in case of flak maybe it’d hit the hard area and I’d have some protection. I wasn’t going to fight anybody with it.

Then he kind of looked at me. Then he reached down and grabbed me and helped me stand up. And he looked at my knee and says: “Kaputt!” I didn’t know what it meant at that time but I said, “Ja, ja, kaputt. Ja.” Then I had a big long knife in my flying boot, you know, and he pulled that out. I remember he looked at that knife and I thought, oh, my God, is he going to stick it in me? Then all of a sudden I saw him go like that. I guess he must have thrown it up to this old man. We just carried that in case we came down in the Adriatic Sea. Cut the [parachute] shroud lines so you don’t drown.

He kind of helped me down the mountainside, and I suppose we came to the flak battery that shot us down. I don’t know. A little group of houses. Then I went and inside there was a mirror, and I remember looking at myself in the mirror and thinking, oh, my God! The blood had come down my head and congealed on my whiskers. My arm was numb, and I don’t know if the sight of myself or the injuries did it, but here comes that big old white again. I see this big vortex coming down to swallow me [I feel like I am going to pass out]. I came to again and I’m laying on the table, and some German [first aid man] is giving me some tea. Best tea all the time I was a prisoner. I’ll say that.

(1, B, 658)

T: What can you say about fear at this point? You’d been through quite an experience between the trip down in the parachute and now... Were you with other members of your crew?

L: No.

T: You were the only one.
L: You’re scared, yes. There’s no doubt about it. You’d have to be crazy not to be scared. And apprehensive. You don’t know what the future is bringing. You don’t know what they’re going to do.

This guy, this first aid man, was very good. I had my boots on yet, but they took my [insulated flying] boots off. They took them away from me. I just had my shoes. My gloves and cap had blown off. It was brutally cold there [up in the mountains]. So this German first aid man gave me a blanket, and I could put it around over my head and my arms. He saved my ears from freezing, my hands from freezing. They came then and got a sled and took me down to the village, down the hill, to the village of Brixen [Italian: Brissone], Austria [actually on the Italian side of the border]. Threw me in the jail, and the jail had bars but no window in it. No heat. Bitter cold. There I stayed [until the next day, when they took me to Bolzano/Bozen].

The next day they came and rousted me out and said, “Raus!” March. I tried to tell them I can hardly walk. But no, “Get going. Get going.” They made me march. They did take me a little ways in the back of a truck, but we marched towards the south through the Brenner Pass, toward Milano, Italy. On the way they took me up to a big castle up on the hill. So I remember they took me to this big castle and a German major, SS major, comes out, and he’s the spitting image of Erik von Stroheim, who used to play the Nazi general in the movies when I used to see them. With the monocle, the spit and polish boots, the knickers, the fancy coat and the riding crop. I know he said, “Sprechen Sie Deutsch?” I remember saying, “Nein!” Then I thought, oh, my God! He asked me if I spoke German, and I said no in German! I thought for a minute I was going to get that crop across the face and he kind of looked at me, turned, and walked away. They took me back. I suppose he said, “He’s no danger to me.”

Marched us into Bolzano, Italy, where they threw us in the jail. There after about ten or twelve of us were gathered, then they put us on a train and took us up to Dulag Luft.

T: Now these ten or twelve people in Bolzano, were any of those members of your crew?

L: Yes. My tail gunner was there, and one of my waist gunners I think. Charlie Lyons from Iowa. He had almost escaped. He came down higher up in the mountains and he was not hurt. All the rest of us were hurt. He was not hurt except he had one tooth knocked out when the shroud line came up and hit him when the parachute opened. He got way up in the mountains to a German little farmstead, and these people took him in and let him wash up and fed him. He was telling them, I want to go up over the mountains to Switzerland. Switzerland wasn’t far away. On one engine I could have gotten to Switzerland.

T: Really?

L: Yes. He thought they were going to lead him up to Switzerland over the mountain. They put him to bed. Gave him a nice bed. The next morning the German
soldiers were out waiting for him. He was at Bolzano. Then that’s where they split us up. I didn’t see them anymore. And they took me to Dulag Luft. I don’t know if they did or not.

T: Where was Dulag Luft located?

L: It was right out of Frankfurt [Germany]. Little village of Oberursel.

T: By Frankfurt.

L: Yes. By Frankfurt.

T: Quite a difference from where you were shot down.

L: Oh, yes. Yes. We were up in central Germany now. Right. They took us up there and they herded us through the town. We weren’t popular. People were trying to throw things at us. We were the hated Terror-Flieger (German: terror flyers). Air Corps was unpopular. You were lucky, you lived. If they caught you out in the rural area sometimes they killed you.

T: Did you know that about the dangers that might face you if you were shot down?

L: Didn’t know much. They didn’t tell us anything about being shot down.

T: Is that right?

L: Yes. Now I know they have real programs for that. But we didn’t have. We didn’t have any idea what was going to happen. For instance, they said name, rank, serial number is all you can give. Which is all I gave. But at one point this guy said, “What’s your religion?” And I said name, rank and serial number. And he said, “You blinkety-blank-bum Yankee, it’s right on your dogtags!” I thought, yes, there it is. It’s right on my dog tags, and I have to take all this abuse? But that’s the Army. That’s what they said. The little village of Oberursel. From there after eight days and eight nights I guess they assumed I didn’t have anything. I wouldn’t tell them anything.

T: But there was questioning there obviously?

L: Oh, yes.

T: In English?

L: Yes. Yes. In English. The one guy looked like this movie actor. They had different interrogators every day. They spoke excellent English. Would threaten. First they would be nice to me. “You’re a first lieutenant and you know what’s going on, and you know we have to have this information. No use you taking all this abuse. Just
fill it out and we’ll send you right over to your regular camp.” Name, rank and serial number and then you just flinch. You know it’s coming, you know.

T: Was there physical abuse at this military interrogation?

L: No, there wasn’t. Just threats and a gun behind my ear. But otherwise no.

T: Were you scared nonetheless?

L: Oh, sure. Sure. Because they pull the door open and say, “Come!” Where am I going now? What are they going to do? What are they going to say? And when they put the gun barrel up to your ear you kind of get a little scared. Scared, yes. I was scared, sure. I didn’t think they were going to shoot me, but who knows. I’m glad they didn’t know that I was flying the Lone Ship missions. Had they known that, they’d have kept me there and interrogated me more.

T: Why do you think that?

L: Because I talked to a fighter pilot who had been doing some secret flying, and they kept him thirty days because he wouldn’t talk. He was in Dulag Luft thirty days, the poor guy. But then they took us to the little village of Wetzlar, which is a transient camp, for POWs coming out of Dulag Luft, where all prisoners were there. From there we jumped on a little boxcar, like the forty and eight, littler than our boxcars. That took us to Barth. Four days and four nights. We didn’t hardly ever get out of the car.

T: Four days and four nights to get from Frankfurt to Barth?

L: Yes, because they’d stop. If our fighter bombers came over they would stop. They’d run for the air raid shelters. I think at Hannover the [British] Mosquito bombers came quick and bombed the train. They locked us in the boxcars and went for the air raid shelter. We could feel the tracks kind of vibrating, but they hit us about two blocks away. They didn’t hit us.

T: How do you handle that psychologically? Here you’re locked in a boxcar and can’t go anywhere.

L: Yes. There’s nothing you can do. Even if you wanted to scream it wouldn’t do you any good. And you’ve got to put up a front in front of the other guys. You just say, “Let’s hope they don’t hit us.” And then somebody says, “They can’t hit anybody anyway,” trying to make a joke out of it or something.

T: These all Americans in this train?

L: All Americans. We did later pick up a couple of Canadians. I remember them. Tough eggs, too. We stopped in Berlin. About midnight one time. They were going
to open up and let us come out and relieve ourselves, and all of a sudden we were surrounded by Germans who wanted to get at us.

T: Civilians?

L: Yes. Civilians. How they knew we were there at midnight, I don’t know. They were throwing stuff at us. I give the German soldiers credit. They kept them off of us. But they said, “Get back in the boxcar.” We got back in the boxcar.

T: Was that any more or less frightening, these civilian attacks, than actually being controlled by the military?

L: Yes, I think it was because the military you thought was going to treat you halfway decent. They might abuse you, but the civilians you knew wanted to come out and do you harm and kill you if they could. Yes, that scared you. Marching through Frankfurt when they were throwing stuff at us.

T: You were on foot through Frankfurt.

L: Yes. To Oberursel. We were scared. We were really worried. But once we got in the regular prison camp, then they couldn’t get at us at all.

T: Did you arrive there in January of 1945?

L: Yes.

T: You were there until May.

L: Until May. January, February, March, April, May... we didn’t get out until the middle of May.

T: So between four and five months. How large a camp was this at Barth?

L: First they had one camp there for British and American airmen, and then as they were getting shot down they had to put in, build another compound. Then they called the old one the South and the new one was the North. Then they were getting more people, so they built North 2 compound. When we were there they had just built North 3 compound. So it was kind of a makeshift place. The wood they used was still wet. Sometimes if they put their blankets down on a bunk and then it got soaked full of sap right away. There were nearly ten thousand troops there. It was a big camp.

T: This was all Air Force people?

L: All Air Force.
T: Officers and enlisted men?

L: Yes. We had some enlisted men with us but they took them out in the middle of February I think. We protested, but they had bayonets and they took them. I don’t know what they did with them. I never did find out.

T: Can you describe the treatment that you got at the camp, and whether it differed at all from beginning to end?

L: Of course the end was the worst. But when we went in there, the Germans at that time I think pretty much knew they were losing the war.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

L: Their morale was crumbling. As so, they weren’t hardly too nice to us. In fact, when they first came by they would report and “Heil, Hitler!” and pretty soon it was “Heil, Hitler” and pretty soon “Heil, Hitler.”

T: For the record, Lyle’s arm is going up lower and lower with each of these “Heil Hitlers.”

L: You could see their morale was dropping. The worst part was not knowing what’s going on. Wondering what’s going on. The cold. Bitter cold.

T: It was right on the Baltic Sea, right?

L: Right on the Baltic Sea. We had a little stove, and there were twenty-four people in the room. It wouldn’t be much bigger than this.

T: Twelve feet long and five feet wide.

L: Yes. There would be bunks built in the walls three high, and you sleep two to a bunk. There were twenty-four of us in there. We’d get a little, about a half a piece of bread, brown bread. They had this brown bread, partially made with barley. It was probably good for us, I don’t know. Then sometimes we’d get, the food was bad. It was terrible.

T: Was there enough of it?

L: No. No, never enough of it. We’d ration stuff out. We learned to kind of try to make it last for all twenty-four guys. This was a probably a feat that not many people can do, so we would pick a guy that had good eyesight, could ration things out. And in the soup, it was rutabaga soup we’d get. But the rutabagas were usually half rotten, and potatoes too would be half rotten. We didn’t have any meat of course.
The only thing that kept us alive was the Red Cross parcels. They were supposed to bring those in, well at one time I think they were supposed to have a parcel per man per week. We never saw that. The most I ever got in a Red Cross parcel, six of us divided it in a week. Six men to a parcel. But it gave you something. Stuff was in the parcels. Then of course in March and April the Germans said, “If your fighter bombers don’t quit shooting our trains, we won’t bring any Red Cross parcels to your prisoners.” Of course the Army isn’t going to stop the war, so they stopped bringing us parcels. So there for a period of about six weeks we had no parcels and very, very little food. Everybody was losing weight. We looked terrible. Really bad shape.

T: Were there health problems in the camp?

L: Yes, but not a lot. All these guys were in pretty good shape when they were shot down. Pretty healthy group of young men. But there were rashes and there was dysentery and some things like that. I saw the doctor once that bandaged up—I had cuts all across my hands. That’s where that blood was coming from. One bandage. I never saw a doctor after that and finally the bandages were so dirty, they looked like they were getting green in there. I took them off. Very little chance to get washed up. You didn’t get showers. Once a month. Not even that long. And of course when you’re on the road you get nothing. And the cold. We had this little stove in there. You’d get four bricks of coal about like this... They were something like that, a little bigger than our briquettes. We’d get four of those a day. That would be just barely enough to give you some heat for the food. Warm up the coffee. We got ersatz coffee two times a day.

T: What did prisoners do all day? Were you forced to work, or just basically sit around and kill time?

L: Right. I think to a man they said, if we could go out and work somewhere and they give us a little more food to sustain our bodies, everybody would have worked. I’d have been happy to. But that’s one of the things. There’s nothing to do.

T: Was boredom a problem?

(2, A, 78)

L: Oh, yes. Boredom was a problem. You’d sit and we’d talk. Among twenty-four people, we covered every subject known to mankind. And we got along pretty good, I’d say. Towards the end, then it’s the anticipation. What’s going to happen? How are we going to get out of here? The rumor was that there was a battalion of SS troopers, and we were on kind of a peninsula, up on this peninsula, and we were worried that we’d get caught between them and the Russians. And neither of them cared if they killed us. We did at the end, towards the end of the period, we’d go out and dig some foxholes. We had Klim cans, the cans that you put milk in from the Red Cross parcels. And we’d dig with those. The only thing is, we were right on the
Baltic Sea. When you got down about a foot then you had water. And all these things filled up with water. And of course it was a big joke about going into the foxhole. About the first or second of May [1945], I think, the Germans had left.

T: They just disappeared?

L: Yes. We got up that one morning and the Germans were out of the towers. They took off planning to go to the American lines to surrender so they wouldn’t get caught by the Russians. They knew how bad the Russians would treat them. The Germans had put dynamite at the airfield, and I think they had a munitions plant there. They were time delayed fuses so that they were timed to go off at six o’clock, and they were gone by that time. We’re sitting there and everybody wondering, what’s going to go on? What’s going to happen? All of a sudden this tremendous explosion. They all think everything went off. The ground shook. A couple windows broke. Nobody makes a move for about five or six seconds. Then all of a sudden you see them going to the foxholes. Splash! Splash! Splash! Come up looking like a bunch of seals coming out of the hole.

T: Because there was water in there.

L: Yes. There was water in the holes.

T: How would you describe the way the prisoners got along with each other under these stressful conditions?

L: I’d say [prisoners got along with each other] very good. Very good. They supported one another. Of course everybody was in bad straits, nobody any better off than anybody else, except maybe the colonel and his aide. Everybody was looking for survival, and actually it’s kind of a share and share alike. I’d say the Americans, if there was a plate full of whatever it might be, and there were twenty guys, the Americans, they would try to share twenty ways.

I kind of thought the British were kind of a little different than we were. We went in with some British on some occasions, and I thought they were kind of, grab what I can get out of it. I didn’t particularly care for the British, but I give them credit, they were tough characters against the Germans. But I remember there was this one, a couple of Britishers there, because I remember this one Britisher was kind of telling what kind of nuts they [Germans] were. He was standing right by me, and I’m thinking they’re going to get me too if they get you. But nobody came after him.

T: Did prisoners tend to divide up into little groups or cliques almost? By nationality or by other ways?

L: I suppose. On occasion when we had six men to a parcel, then you get a six man combine. But I don’t think it mattered much to me who the other guys were. There were a couple guys you would talk more with. Supposedly they lived in your area.
That would be something. There was a guy from North Dakota. I used to talk quite a bit with him. The fighter pilots would have things to tell us and the bomber pilots would converse with the fighter pilots. We talked most about food of course. This book I got, Red Cross book there, I’ve got a lot of different recipes that everybody’s going to have when they get out. Food was the main topic.

T: Did anybody ever talk about wanting to escape?

L: No. Before we got there [prisoners] had dug a couple of tunnels under the fence. They didn’t work because the Germans caught them. Then there was a camp down around Berlin, I think it’s Luft III, that they did get out of. Seventy-five of them got out of the tunnel, but the Germans caught them all and brought them all back and lined fifty up and shot them. So then the United States government—and we were getting some clandestine radio reports—said, “Do not try to escape. Do not try.”

(2, A, 157)

T: You didn’t even have to worry about trying to escape when you were there.

L: That’s right. They said, no, don’t try to escape. Even if you got outside of the prison camp, through the barbed wire and stuff, you didn’t talk German. What would you do? Pretty hard to do unless you talk German. You’d like to escape. Yes. Nice.

T: But realistically, it wasn’t an option.

L: Yes. That’s right. The German’s weren’t dummies.

T: The location of this camp, it’s far away from everything.

L: Yes. That’s right.

T: Was morale among the people you were with in the camp, was morale a problem?

L: Yes. Guys would get down pretty much, wondering what’s going on and talking about their families back home. But you know, you kind of, I don’t know, you didn’t seek a lot—you didn’t talk to one another about it so much. You sat and thought about it. I met a guy in the camp that I’d been in the old CC Camp with. But we didn’t—I saw him two or three times—and we didn’t even say anything to each other. Until one day we happened to be sitting, and they gave us some water to wash up and we were right beside each other washing up and then I said, “You’re Swanson. You were in camp so and so, and you’re from Minneapolis.” And he said, “Yes, that’s right.” And so then we talked a little bit. But otherwise we just didn’t have the, I suppose, the ambition to go out of our way to do anything. I lost about fifty pounds.
T: In the camp?

L: In the camp. Yes. And when the Russians came in, as they had taken over small groups of prisoners, they took them back into Russia and they went out through the Black Sea and not all of them got out. They were going to do that with us. And they said, “Get ready to march.” Oh, my God! We said, “We are in no condition to march.” Got to march back into Russia. We were within two or three hours of this time to march, when all of a sudden they cancelled it. And I know there must have been some high level discussions going on somewhere.

T: So they were going to literally get you out of Germany by going through the then Soviet Union?

L: Right.

T: As opposed to simply marching you over to American lines.

L: Yes. In fact, the Americans were ready to come and get us out right away. The Russians wouldn’t let them. Said no. They made us stay there, I’d say, about ten days.

T: In the camp, after the end of the war? You were just sitting there?

L: Yes.

T: Who was feeding you?

L: Nobody. But some of the guys did get into town. As I say, some of them went in and somebody brought back some ham or something to our barracks. I remember, they stole it from a farmer or something. I think that’s what a lot of them were doing. And maybe the Russians were giving them some food. Otherwise they didn’t give us... They brought in the cows and said, “Help yourself.”

T: These Russians. Would you describe your feeling toward them as more fear, or anger, or what? What did you feel toward them?

L: I think obviously anger, because they wouldn’t let the Americans come in and fly us out. Some fear, yes. They were fighting the Cold War already. Every Russian soldier, I guess, on the street wouldn’t be so bad, but as you went up the line a little bit then they were suspicious of us. We were very, very angry with them because they came in and acted like oppressors.

I remember our colonel wanted to keep people in the camp. He gave some people some black armbands and said function as MPs and don’t let anybody beyond the perimeter here. Well, the Russians saw them and asked what do these guys have armbands on for? The colonel said it’s our MPs. We’re kind of keeping
the people in the camp. And this Russian crew said, "No. Get out. We see any more guys with MPs on we’re going to shoot them. Get them off."

T: Is that what he said?

L: Yes. That’s right. So they had to take them off.

(2, A, 214)

T: From Barth, how did you finally leave the camp, and where did you go to?

L: Finally they let us, they let the B-17s come in and fly us out.

T: Into this camp?

L: Into the airport. The airport nearby. They flew us out to Camp Lucky Strike which was a relocation center at Le Havre, France, right on the coast. There they had a big tent city. There must have been a hundred thousand prisoners there.

T: Ex-POWs were coming into this place from all over.

L: From all over. This was the replacement depot. We got out of there sometime in the middle of May. I didn't get home until the end of June I think. Back to the US.

T: What were your feelings at Le Havre, at this camp? What was going through your mind?

L: Of course at first you’re absorbing that you’re free and that you’re alive and you’re going back home. But of course you’d like to go right away and they stalled us off quite a bit. We thought as soon as they get us in this camp, they’ll give us some steak and eggs and they wouldn't do that. They were right. They said, “Your stomachs won’t stand it.” So they had us on kind of a special diet. The only thing we could have all we wanted, was eggnog. They had big GI cans of eggnog (laughs). I can’t stand that. That kind of angered us.

T: Were you able to communicate with people back home, with your wife?

L: No. I sent a telegram that I’m free and I’ll be home sometime. My wife knew I was a prisoner. She got this letter that I have here when I was shot down from one of my commanders that said that I was a pilot of a B-17 shot down over Italy, and it says the plane was on fire. It was seen to crash into the mountainside. No chutes were seen leaving the airplane. So she didn't have much of faith that I was alive, I suppose, until about six weeks later, when she learned that I was a prisoner.
T: You got back to the States in June, and were not discharged from the service until, I think you told me, December of 1945. How did you spend that time from June until December?

L: They gave us ninety days leave of absence. Sixty days first, and then they gave us another thirty. I was out to her folks that lived on the farm and she was living with her folks at that time, out south of Mankato. I went out there and mostly eating, I suppose. Ham and eggs was the thing I wanted most. I got that in my book. I would eat six eggs at a crack with some ham. In fact, I finally got to say, I'm getting fat as a hog. Some of the neighbors were threshing, and I went out and helped thresh to get some exercise and get myself built up again.

T: Were you ever scheduled to go to the Pacific or did you know when you got out of the camp, the POW camp, that your war was over?

L: Yes. We thought pretty much it was for us. That's right. Ordinarily when I was flying missions, I figured once I finished my fifty and go back home that they'd stick me in B-29 training and then send me to the Pacific. I thought there was a good chance of that.

T: But once you came back, then the war ended against Japan in August.

L: Right. By the time we got out, the war ended. I think I was still home. Then I went down to San Antonio, Texas, Kelly Field to get discharged, and we were there a couple of months and finally got discharged and came back home. I had an offer to go to work for the border patrol, flying missions up and down the border but—and we liked it down there to a degree. Nice people we were staying with, but all my family was back here. The kids were back here and we would have to relocate.

T: That would have been a big change.

(2, A, 263)

L: It would have been a big change. So we decided not to. I took my CAA test and got to be a multi-engine pilot license, and I was going to go to work for Mid-Continent Airlines which is kind of the forerunner of Republic. We went to Chicago and I thought, oh, what a town this is. This was back a long time ago. And Chicago wasn't very nice. They said, “You can start flying for us any time you want to.” I said, “But I want to fly out of Minneapolis.” Because they came into Minneapolis. And they said, “No, you have to start in Chicago. Maybe later on you can go to Minneapolis.” I thought, do I want to bring my family to Chicago? I finally said, “No, sorry.”

T: When you were discharged from the service were you a person who considered making the service a career?
L: Only in 1952. I stayed in the Reserves for a while. In '52, I think it was during the Berlin Airlift, they called me back for three days of active duty because they needed four engine pilots bad to supply the lift. It was then when I found out how bad I was physically. I couldn't pass the test. They said, "We don't want you going back out." Had I gone in then I probably would have stayed in, sure.

T: What kind of lasting physical injuries did you suffer from the crash or your imprisonment?

L: It's the knees, both knees. But the left knee is much worse. That gives way on me all the time. Gives me a lot of trouble at night. And the back. I've got a ruptured disc. I've got three vertebrae that are almost clanging together. I forget the name for them, too. I took an MRI or something test up at the VA about two years ago, and I remember going in and them showing me all these skeletons of mine. The doctor finally came over and said, "See this little black spot down on the bottom of your spine, Lyle?" I thought, oh, God, he's going to say that's bone cancer. I said, "Yes, I see it doc." He said, "That's arthritis." "Oh!" I said. "It is? Good."

T: Never sounded so good, huh?

L: Yes, that's right. He said, "That will give you some trouble." But I said, "Not like bone cancer." "No, that's right," he said.

T: It's amazing what we can psyche ourselves up for.

(2, A, 290)

L: Yes. Isn't that right? I tell you.

T: Lyle, when you got out of the service and you came back to this area, what was the hardest thing for you readjusting to being a civilian?

L: I don't know. I don't really think I had a lot of trouble readjusting. I suppose probably relating to people again, because we were stifled so much. In the prison camp you didn't say an awful lot to your captors and you couldn't make any decisions on your own. I think that might be [the hardest thing to readjust to], making some decisions and saying, yes, I can speak for myself. Because there, you were told what to do. Every move. No choices. Do it.

T: And suddenly just the opposite. You have to decide everything for yourself.

L: Right.

T: As a person, how much problem did you have with recurrent bad dreams or images from the war that came back?
L: I didn’t really have a lot of those problems, and I’m probably fortunate that I didn’t. I’ve had some, sure. The thing that bothered me a long time is the fact that I lost four young men on my crew. I knew that they wanted to fly with me that day because I was a fifty mission man. Who else is going to bring us back but a fifty mission man? And the fact, I told you, with one engine I probably could have flown into Switzerland. Losing those four kids bothered me and weighed on my conscience for a long time.

T: The way you described the flak attacks, those were either it hit your plane or it didn’t. How is it you feel a sense of personal responsibility in this case?

L: Well, you’re too busy to be personally responsible because you’re flying close formation, and you’re busy and probably the group’s slower or a little faster. Flying close formation is tense and so all during that where we’re going through that flak, you’re flying that formation so you don’t have a chance to think of anything else but that.

T: So in a sense, how much was it your responsibility that those four young men lost their lives?

L: Oh, none. None. I couldn’t have done anything different. I had to fly in the formation and stay there, but like I said, if they would have hit three of my engines and knocked them out and gave me one engine, I could have got that airplane to Switzerland. But it bothered me, yes. Kids got killed.

T: Did you have any contact with the families of those kids after the war?

L: No, I haven’t. Because they weren’t my regular crew. So I didn’t know them. That’s right. (to wife Katherine, in next room) I think you had some contact. Did some of them contact you?

Katherine: Yes, by phone. When I heard from [Lyle].

T: This was when he was still a captive?

Katherine: Yes.

L: The parents were kind of wondering what happened, I’m sure. Three of the guys were picked up by the Italians and taken down to this village of San Andrea. The fourth one was never located. Never found. And I’m sure that weighed heavily on his parents.

T: Yes. Not having some kind of final knowledge of it.

L: Right. Yes. When we were over there [in 1998 at the crash site] I tried to question these people. Some of them said they thought they saw another body way
up there, but it was so bad they couldn't get to it, and then in the spring when they tried to get up there, the thawing just washes everything out and they never did find it. Could have been him.

T: Let me ask you, what was it like to go back in 1998?

L: It was great. I didn't want to go at first. We talked about it and then I talked to Charlie Lyons, my gunner, and he said he would go. So we and our wives went. It was great going back there and kind of get closure to a bad incident in our lives.

T: Why were you reluctant to go, Lyle?

L: It kind of was a health hazard for one thing. Going overseas. My back and knees, and I had bypass surgery. That was part of it. I guess I wondered how I would relate to these people. But they were so nice. It was good. In fact, I remember, we were up in this big building having lunch and somebody said, “Mr. Pearson, there’s a [German World War II] Me-109 pilot out here that would like to talk to you.” That was those fighter planes. So I went out. I said, sure, I would talk to him. I said, “You flew an Me-109?” “Yes.” I said, “You’re the guys that scared me so bad I lost all my hair.” “No, no, no,” he said, “I wasn’t over that section.” I said, “I’m just kidding.” We had a good chat. He was a fighter pilot. They were good pilots.

T: Lyle, did you find what you were looking for over there in 1998?

L: It shook me when I found the pieces of my plane. Boy, that was great, too, to interact with these people. I kind of thought maybe they might be a little resentful of us, but they weren't. They were very good. Took care of us, and didn’t have any gripes or complaints, and they got bombed by some bombers. There was a bridge down there that they bombed two or three times. They were very good to us and this guy that interviewed us, he asked us if we were coming back to occupy the country again (laughs). I remember telling him, “That’s absurd.”

T: Final question. When you think about the war, when you were on active duty, what did the war mean for you personally? In other words, what was it all about?

L: To me it was about keeping the people from coming over here. Protecting our families. If we were going to fight a war, I’d be willing to go overseas and then fight the war over there on somebody else’s land, rather than waiting until they came and endangered my family and friends. That’s basically it.

T: Finally, what’s the most important way that war changed your life?

L: I suppose I’m able to accept things better. Nothing is going to be as bad as being shot down. I’m sure that I’ve become a much, much more religious person. My church means a lot to me now, and I volunteer in church. Before I went to church, but I wasn’t really in empathy with what’s going on in church.
T: So your faith gained meaning?

L: I think so. I think it gained depth, and it gives me solace, especially now when I’m having problems with my heart. The good Lord pulled me back from death’s door fifty-eight years ago. I’m not going to squawk and holler and scream if He says, “Now I’m ready for you.” That gives me a certain good feeling, I guess, about being here.

T: Good way to look at it. That’s the last question I have. And let me at this point thank you very much for the interview today. I’ve enjoyed talking to you very much.

L: Well, thank you. It’s a pleasure having you here.

END OF INTERVIEW