Richard “Dick” Pfaffinger was born in Blue Earth, Minnesota, on 2 November 1920; one of seven children, he was raised on the family farm and graduated from Blue Earth High School in 1939. He then worked several months at an aircraft factory in Buffalo, New York, before volunteering for the US Army Air Corps in November 1943.

Dick was trained as top turret gunner and flight engineer on B-24 Liberator four-engine heavy bombers. He arrived in Italy in April 1944, and while returning from his first mission on 7 April, just two days after arriving, his plane was shot down over the Adriatic Sea.

A German seaplane pulled Dick from the water. He was transported to Venice, then to Verona for interrogation, before being shipped by train to Stalag Luft I Barth, in far northern Germany on the Baltic. He remained at this camp for the remainder of the war.

Stalag Luft I was liberated by the advancing Red Army on 30 April 1945. Dick was evacuated to France, then the United States. He was discharged in November 1945.

Again a civilian, Dick returned to Blue Earth and worked as a turkey farmer, retiring in 1987. He was married in 1973 (wife Agnes) and helped to raise four adopted children.

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is the 25 June 2004. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today we’re interviewing Mr. Dick Pfaffinger of Blue Earth, Minnesota. First, on the record, Mr. Pfaffinger thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

      For the record, you were born in Blue Earth, Minnesota on 2 November 1920.

R: Right.

T: You were born on and you worked on the family farm there near Blue Earth. In 1943 you volunteered for military service, the Army Air Corps. On the other end of that, you were finally discharged November 1945. You arrived in Italy in April of 1944 and from an earlier conversation I know that you were in Italy for a total of two days before your plane was shot down on your first mission. So I guess we say you didn’t get much of a chance to know Italy before you were out of Italy.

R: That’s right. I think it’s a record.

T: I tell you, of all the people I’ve talked to, it’s the shortest time in country and you’re the first person I’ve talked to that was shot down on their first and only mission.

R: Yes.

T: Well, let’s go to that first mission and what was the date of that mission, Mr. Pfaffinger?

R: I’ve got it here somewhere.

T: Correct me if I’m wrong. Was it the 7 April?

R: 7 April. Yes.

T: Now you were the top turret gunner on a B-24 Liberator aircraft.

R: Engineer and top turret gunner.

T: What do you remember about that first and only mission?
R: I tell you, it’s kind of a long story, but we flew a new airplane we picked up in San Francisco and flew it across the United States and down through Africa and Italy and that. When this mission came up, the engineers would go out and start up the airplanes and get them all checked out and everything, and it was up to the rest of the crew to get the final briefing. But I went out and checked—our plane was named Madame Shoo Shoo. We put the name on it and painted the picture on it. I went out and started Madame Shoo Shoo up and checked it all out and it was just perfect. They told me all the time I was traveling, coming across the United States and the ocean and Africa, that I, as the engineer, had to keep that plane, keep the condition good because I was going to either live or die in it according to how I took care of it. And I was proud of that airplane.

When the thing was signed, I went out and checked the airplane and it checked out okay. Pretty soon here comes a captain and he said, “You aren’t going to fly that plane today.” And I said, “Yes, I was in at the briefing when they said they were.” Well,” he said, “that’s been changed. You’re going to fly that one sitting over by the fence.” Shot full of holes and full of clay. They didn’t have any...just battered runways and they were bad and they rolled them up and they landed in the water, in clay. But anyway...and that was a Ford built. The only thing I’d ever flown was a Consolidated. The Consolidated is all hydraulic. The Ford is electric and a number of other things.

T: So as an engineer, this is a new kind of aircraft for you really.

R: Yes. The fuse boxes were in different places and everything was different. I’d never been in one. I just was arguing with this captain when my pilot and the rest of the crew came along. The pilot said, “No, Dick, it hasn’t been changed.” I said, “I’m not going to fly that thing.” My pilot’s name was Nut. And I said, “I’m not...I just absolutely can’t go.” He said, “Dick, I’ve flown all the missions with you as far as training and we’ve always been together. I need you.” Well, I said I’d go over. I tried to check that plane out. There were two generators out right off the bat. We called the tower. And you go into altitude and in the Ford built, it’s all electric and I said no way. “Call the tower and tell them we can’t go.” He did and he said they told him he had to go regardless. So it was a one-way trip that was made up ahead of time. With no return.

(1, A, 41)

T: It sounds like that the cards weren’t very good for this mission from the very beginning.

R: No. I know they weren’t. Nothing ever made me so bitter. After all that training, and I was proud of what we could do. Aerial gunnery. I was the sharpest one in the whole class. I just couldn’t wait to use it but that didn’t work out.

T: Did you carry that sense of bitterness with you after the war too?
R: Oh, I certainly did.

T: How have you dealt with that over the years? I mean, that’s a long time ago, but you can still talk about it pretty clearly now.

R: Yes, (slight catch in his voice) I sure can.

T: So it’s something that hasn’t gone away with the years.

R: No. No.

T: Where did your plane take off from in Italy? Where you flying from?

R: Manduria.

T: And what was the target for that day?

R: Maastricht [Netherlands]. A German 2nd Air Force base up near the German border. It was a German 2nd Air Force base.

T: How many hours flying time should that mission have been? Each way.

R: Each way? Probably about four hours.

T: And how many, of the four hours each way, how far were you before your plane went down?

R: We hit the target. We had managed to barely do that. Then we lost another engine. So we decided we couldn’t…the German Air Force would pick on cripples. They saw a cripple drop away, why they’d go after it. But there were clouds out that day, and when we had so much trouble we decided to drop down through the clouds hoping the fighters wouldn’t see us go. Luckily they didn’t. Then we threw out our waist guns and we threw out anything we could get a hold of that would lighten the load.

T: How many engines were working by this time?

R: There was three of them working, but we lost all our generators and had no instruments. You couldn’t operate any of your turrets or anything like that. That’s why we threw the guns out. It was just an absolutely chaos. Then I went...on a B-24 there’s a flight deck. Under that flight deck is an emergency gasoline engine with a generator, so if you have trouble you can start that up and utilize that for the time being. I went down there to start it up, and there was no rope there to wrap it and pull it. My ball turret gunner came out and came by there. He was wearing his heavy suit, heat-lined suit with heating cord. He walked by me and I saw that
electric cord and I grabbed it. There was a lot of noise there and I just gave it a jerk and I jerked it right out his suit. I used that cord and wrapped it and I still couldn’t get it started.

T: So you had no generator power.

R: No. Then I couldn’t talk—we couldn’t use our intercom. I had to go through the catwalks and inform the rest of the crew in the back what was happening. It was in a rush rush deal, and I didn’t know it until I bailed out and hit the water and bubbles started coming up.

T: Who made the decision to bail out of the plane? Whose decision is that?

R: The pilot, with my discussion with him on it. But he was the one that said what we were going to do.

(1, A, 73)

T: Did he ask you questions about whether you thought the plane could make it back?

R: Yes. He certainly did. We figured it was impossible to go that far. In Yugoslavia the partisans were getting a number of people back, but that didn’t happen to me, of course, because we went down in the water and we were helpless until the Germans picked us up.

T: How high, what was the altitude of the plane? Can you estimate? When you actually bailed out.

R: I’d say about two thousand feet.

T: Two thousand feet?!

R: Yes.

T: Wow! That’s not very high. Was that your first parachute jump?

R: Yes.

T: And your last?

R: Yes.

T: So you have a grand total of one jump. What do you remember about bailing out of the plane, Dick? What was that experience like?
R: I stood on the catwalk. I had the bomb bay doors open. The pilot told me to inform the crew in back that they were to watch me. If I bailed, that was the signal they were going to get and nothing else. I stood out there on the catwalk looking down at the whitecaps below, and I knew it was cold that time of the year, 7 April. The Adriatic Sea. I waited there, and my navigator was relaying the messages from the pilot to me. He was kind of white. There were only two married guys on the crew and he was one of them. He had three children. So it was kind of tough on him right there. I had so many things to do, trying to do it, it was actually easier on me because I was busy all the time. So when I went and I hit the water, I counted. I got out and watched the rest of them get out as I was floating down in the parachute. They all made it.

T: Everyone got out of the plane?

R: Yes.

T: How far from the shore were you? Can you estimate?

R: Oh, I don’t know. Probably four, five miles.

T: That’s a tough swim on a good day.

R: You bet.

T: That far out, when you came down, did you all come down pretty close to each other?

R: No. We were spread...I tell you, hesitation of the rest of the crew a little bit. They didn’t...we didn’t like to jump in back. It took them a while to come out.

T: It took a while for everyone to get out?

R: Yes. They just made it. But when they hit, I couldn’t see or hear anybody because of the curvature of the earth. That’s how far we were spread. I never knew how anybody was, or what happened, or anything at that time.

T: You know, one thing I’m thinking about is when you left the base earlier that day you were a top turret gunner engineer on a B-24. As you’re coming down in the water, coming down in your parachute and in the water did you begin to think of what was going to happen to you now?

R: I didn’t think...there was one in a million chances of ever getting out of it. We didn’t get no radio messages, nothing off. Nobody knew where we were at. I just absolutely couldn’t...didn’t figure it would happen. The only thing I think now that saved our lives is the plane hit the water and blew up and burned. Smoke went up five thousand feet or more, and I think the Germans saw that. But they didn’t want
to come out earlier because the American fighters coming...that raid, they came
down and they would drop down and work anything up they could find. Blowing up
a road or a bridge or...half the fighters would drop down and work over targets like
that. I thought, absolutely no way of doing it.

(1, A, 112)

T: So what I hear you saying is that you thought when you hit the water there, that
that was the end of you?

R: Oh, absolutely. I even took and wanted to hook my seatbelt, my Mae West...when
I hit the water, bubbles started coming up. And then I realized I must have tore my
Mae West going back and forth through that catwalk. There’s a lot of things hanging
out. Bomb rack deals. I kind of found with my hand where it was at and I tried to
hold the bubbles as much as I could. Well, that lasted probably ten to twenty
seconds. All the while I had a half of a Mae West. All I had.

T: Was that enough to keep you afloat or not?

R: No. I’d have to paddle my hands and get my head up and breathe, and then let go
and I’d go down again and I’d paddle again. I kept doing that all the time. I didn’t
know there would be any chance of saving us.

T: You and I are talking today, a number of years later. So you were saved. How
long were you in the water before something happened?

R: Oh, I’d say probably three, three and a half hours. I didn’t have a watch, you have
to understand (chuckles).

T: Yes. Sure. Sure. And you were in the water by yourself the whole time.

R: Yes. Didn’t see or hear another person.

T: What did you finally see or hear first?

R: I thought I heard an airplane. I battled my hands down to get my head out so I
could hear. Then I’d go down again and I’d do that. Then I disappeared. I didn’t
hear anything. Finally I did after three times. I swore I heard an airplane engine.
Then it would go on and it would go off again. Finally I saw an airplane taking off
and I thought oh, oh, I’m spread so far they picked up the rest of the crew and they
ain’t never going to find me. Well, I left my parachute on me. You normally are
supposed to take it off. I had nothing. I lost my sea marker going through the
catwalk. So I thought I would take my chances and leave the chute and it caught air
in it. That’s what saved my life actually. A marker for me.

T: So you could be seen.
R: Yes. That's right. When they came up to me, they taxied up alongside. I thought it was British. We were told about the great air-sea rescue the British had along there. When it was coming toward me, I still thought it was American. They swung it sideways and I saw that big black swastika...but anything then. I got a hold of the front of the pontoon and I was hanging on. The Germans wanted me to go around the back, where the pontoon goes into the water. It's easier to get you up there. I was so darn heavy with all that heavy fur, sheep-lined equipment, and the parachute. But they wanted me to go around the back. They grabbed a hold of me. They had to kick my feet off. I wasn't going to let go once I had a hold of something.

T: What was that...I mean, suddenly you realized rather late that these were Germans and not friendlies. What went through your mind, Dick, when suddenly you realized this was the enemy?

R: Well, that didn't bother me a bit. I just so happy to have something solid. I didn't care what it was. I just...I was practically dead. But when I got there then, they were given...the Germans were giving artificial respiration to my navigator. They had him laid out on the floor.

T: How many other members of your crew were in that plane, that seaplane?

R: There was ten of us all together.

(1, A, 153)

T: And they got all of you?

R: Yes. They got all of us there. My armored gunner...I didn't see this, but my tail turret gunner saw them do it. The armored gunner, we lost him. He wasn't there. But my tail turret gunner said that he saw him when the plane blew up. They have these oxygen tanks in there. They use them for pumps for...air pumps and what not. That's where the oxygen supply is. They had about 150 of those in each plane. When it blew up, it blew some of those oxygen tanks pretty close to my armor gunner and he got a hold of two of them and put one under each arm. He was riding high and dry. But he didn't look. The gasoline from that plane was running way out. He realized it too late and he let go and tried to swim away from it but he didn't. He got caught in the fire. Didn't see or hear from him.

T: So that one member of your crew was lost.

R: Yes. Then my navigator, he died of exposure.

T: He was the one they were giving artificial respiration?

R: Yes.
T: He didn’t live either. So of the ten you’re down to eight surviving?

R: Yes.

T: And from what I hear you saying, you were all in that seaplane together.

R: Yes.

T: Can you describe what it was like, as you warmed up inside the plane, to be face to face with the enemy?

R: That was amazing. It was a really nice crew. The Germans. One of the, the German captain said—they were treating us nice and they were trying to give us artificial respiration. He said, “I know before the war is over I’m going to be shot down. This is a dangerous area. And I hope a German pilot sees me and will pick me up.” But he said, “That’s why I’m doing it for you.” When the war was over I tried to find out who that guy was. I wasn’t able to do it. *(speaking very emotionally)* You could pay them up to ten thousand dollars a head for bringing you back, and if they did anything above and beyond the call of duty you could reimburse them.

T: He most likely saved your life it sounds like, pulling you out of the water.

R: *(still very emotional)* No question about it.

T: From being convinced you were not going to make it, you’re in a warm, dry space. Did you go immediately to shore at that time?

R: They flew us up to Trieste. In northern Italy.

T: Right.

R: Put five of the guys in the hospital and three of us, including me, in jail. I don’t know why they did it that way, but they did.

T: What was your rank at this time, by the way?

R: Tech sergeant.

T: So you were enlisted. Did you ever see those five guys again?

R: Yes. Not all of them. I saw four of the other crew. The rest just…I don’t know. Everybody melted into their life when they got here in the States. Things to do and things to catch up with. I still correspond with my radio operator.

T: So all these years later you still are in contact with him.
R: The thing that hurt me the most I guess, my armor gunner was my best friend. I was best man at his wedding and whatnot. What happened to him was gruesome. By burning. His mother...I just couldn’t...writing or calling his mother and she wanted to hear. I just figured I couldn’t look at her and say that he burned to death.

(1, A, 203)

T: So you felt it better to not tell her.

R: I just thought...at least she had hopes all the time that he was going to return. But I don’t know. I should have gone and done that. But at the time there was too many things hanging over you.

T: Yes. It sounds like she wanted the details on what happened to her son, right?

R: Right. She was concerned about the rest of the crew too, but...I don’t know. There’s a lot of things you don’t get a second look at.

T: Maybe it’s best you didn’t tell her. I mean, what would she do with information like that? To know horrible truth like that.

R: Then I got to tell you, they flew us to Trieste and like I told you, got put in jail. A holding place.

T: You were there for several days you said, right?

R: Yes. Then from Trieste they took us to Venice. In Trieste, when they went to take off, they had two big outboard motors we had to load on the plane. I don’t know. Really heavy. There were eight of us and eight rifled German guards. The Germans all had life preservers. These cork ones. But we didn’t have any. So the guys asked me, what are you going to do? I said well, if this plane gets hit and goes down or something, you just pick out one of them Germans and you hang onto him. You can fight with him. Luckily we didn’t get...I thought our own planes, American planes, were going to shoot us down in this painted Stuka. I was real concerned, but we made it.

And when we lit in Venice...on the way, there was a German copilot. A woman. And she wanted to talk to me and kind of shoved me out on the pontoon. She wanted to know if I heard of the incident where this German pilot escaped from a prison camp in Canada and got down to Detroit. He got picked up and she was wondering if they were going to kill him. I said, “Oh, no. They’ll never kill him.” “Oh,” she said, “you sure?” I said, “No. They don’t do things like that.” She slipped a pack of Austrian cigarettes with this book of matches inside to me. Man, that was heaven-sent. We were all smoking at that time.

T: Were you a smoker then too?
R: And when you go through all that pressure, that’s when you need a cigarette. Boy, we lit them up. Our crew. I passed them out and we were just like kings. We pulled up to the dock. There was a German officer there. I don’t know what his rank was or anything. He saw us smoking and he just raised hell. He went around and jerked the cigarettes out of our mouths. He searched me and got mine. Then he wanted to know who gave them to us. Well, I had no idea. They went through the crew and everything and they finally decided this woman. She was up on one of the bridges in Italy...what do you call those high walkways? Anyway, she was up on that deal. And he let out a bellow for her to come down there and did he chew her out. A disgrace for a German person to be giving Terrorflieger cigarettes and on and on. She was good to us too.

T: How well did you understand German at that time?

R: I just knew a little. My folks were German. I could get enough to get by, to find out what somebody was saying.

T: I see. So if you heard somebody speaking German you might understand some of it.

R: Particularly if they were from southeastern part of Germany, Munich area. They talked a little slower, and up north it was a different German. Harder to understand. They spoke faster.

T: Different dialect for sure.

R: Yes.

T: Did you stay at Venice very long before moving to Verona?

R: No. We didn’t even stay one day. They took us down there and got us loaded up in a truck and hauled us up to Verona. On the way up there in the truck, my pilot, who was a pretty hot Texan, said, “Now remember we’re going to get up here and they’re going to put us through a lot of hell. And I don’t care what they do. If they cut off your hand at the wrist, it’s still name, rank, and serial number. They cut your arm off at the elbow, it’s still name, rank, and serial number. I don’t care what else,” he said. So when I was going through interrogation...

(1, A, 261)

T: Now at Verona, was that the first time you were questioned or interrogated?

R: Yes.

T: So up until then you’ve been held and moved around, but not questioned at all.
R: Yes. That’s right.

T: How many of you were moved from Venice to Verona on that truck?

R: Eight of us.

T: All eight of you now.

R: Yes.

T: And no others? Just the members of your crew.

R: Right.

T: Now when you got to Verona, to the facility there, can you describe that facility?

R: It was an old Italian castle with a wall all the way around it, about fifteen feet high, and broken glass in concrete on top. So you couldn’t escape if you did get out of your cell somehow, which you never would do. It was ornate. We had some holding room upstairs, ground level. The first thing they called out was a pilot. He went and he was back there about fifteen minutes, I suppose, and then he came out and they called for the copilot. Then the bombardier. Then they got down to me. I was engineer, and I was next in line. Now I’ll find out.

T: Were you nervous or apprehensive about this questioning or…

R: I was apprehensive, because I didn’t think there was any way in hell of getting out of there, and so I didn’t think they’d let us go. Particularly when the German was questioning me and he really pounded on me. That either I fill out my answers…”The rest of the crew has all filled out their questions and answers and stuff. You’re the only one that hasn’t. If you want to fill them out you’ll go along with the rest of the crew, and if you don’t you’re going to stay down there until you rot. Now what do you want to do?”

T: How many people in the room there when you’re being interrogated? Who was in the room besides you?

R: A captain and a first lieutenant, German. German captain and German first lieutenant.

T: How many of them spoke English to you?

R: They both could speak English.
T: So they were speaking to you in English. What kind of things did they ask you about specifically?

R: They wanted to know everything, even to where I was born and where I came from and what were we doing out there by ourselves. They thought we were helping the partisans. They wanted to know... they know you're out there doing some kind of secret mission. You weren't near anybody else. “I’m sorry. I can’t answer that.” When you fly, you’ve got to respect the enemy’s rank. If it’s an officer you’ve got to call him sir. So I said, “I’m sorry. I can’t answer that, Sir.” The first lieutenant hauled off and hit me alongside the head. He said, “You guys! You’re the sorriest lot I ever saw.” Then he kept on asking questions. I just shut up. I didn’t say any more. Then he rapped me again and said, “When a German officer addresses you, you answer him!” I said, “I did, and you guys bit my head off.” Down we go. We were down three stories in the dungeon. The room I was in was about six by six foot with a fifteen foot high ceiling.

(1, A, 316)

T: How many men were in the room with you?

R: Just me.

T: Just you by yourself?

R: I never saw or heard another guy. You didn’t know if they were all gone or what happened. That’s what made it tough. But it was cold in there. All I had in there was a little round stool. I set that against the wall. Then it was so damp down there I got cold. I had to put my stool in the middle of the room. I went down in salt water. At the time I went down they said I could keep one set of outer clothes. That was a sheep-lined helmet and jacket and everything, and summer and winter underwear. I said I would take the summer underwear because that seaplane was so wet. I just would shake. The only thing I got was bread and water, but I was so cold down there. I used to shake all the time. Then they’d bring me up for interrogation probably about every eight hours. I loved that, because I could get where it was a little warm.

T: Had your stuff, your clothes, have they dried out by now?

R: No. I still had them on when I got into prison camp. Never get to change any clothes or... That was a hazard all the time.

T: By the time you were in Verona in the cell, were your clothes dry?

R: No. No. You’d dry a little bit. The salt water. Then down in the dungeons it was just cold and damp.
T: Sure. How many times did they call you up for interrogation? Can you recall?

R: I’d say probably about eight, nine times.

T: And how did the questioning change with each successive visit?

R: They used many threats. I had no way of knowing whether the threats would be real or not because I knew we didn’t get any radio message out of any kind. The Germans knew that too. Like he said, I was going to stay down there and rot. I just absolutely... name, rank, and serial number. My pilot said, “Don’t ever forget.” And I didn’t forget. I said afterwards... and he said that all the guys had filled out their sheets and I was the only one. If he had said all the guys except the pilot... I didn’t care what they do to the pilot. He just absolutely would not talk. Regardless of what he did.

T: How did your answers change as the interrogation went on?

R: I became a little more abrupt toward them, because they were getting a little tougher all the time, hoping to break me.

T: Was it the same two people or did the interrogators change?

R: The same.

T: The same two guys.

R: The first lieutenant would ask the question and do any rough stuff or hit me alongside the head and stuff, and the captain would say, “Take it easy. This guy’s been through hell,” and try to get on your good side. He’d tell the first lieutenant to just lay off. “This guy’s had a tough go.”

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 378.

R: —you gotta live or die down there according to what you answer. Then he said, “What do you want? What’s your choice?” I said, “I have no choice.” “Oh, you do. Go downstairs again.” Then I went down there, and this time I was down there three, four hours and they come down and said, “We’ve got to take you upstairs. You’re going to have to have a place where you can rest. There’s a long trip ahead of you.”

T: And that was the end of the interrogations?

R: I didn’t know it, but they brought me upstairs and here sits the rest of my crew. They had been through it, and they let them up.

T: You hadn’t seen these guys since your interrogations began.
R: Yes. Since we were upstairs and stood up to them.

T: The way you describe it, ultimately they gave up on the questioning?

R: Yes. They did. I mean, I just don’t know. They just gave up on us. Some of the other crew members might have talked. It was bad when they said you were going to rot down there. But the one thing that held me up was the pilot, because I know he wouldn’t talk. And when he said all the guys had filled it out, then I knew he was pulling a bluff.

T: Were you tempted? Was it tempting to tell them what they wanted to know?

R: It really was. I could call myself GI and there’s nothing they could change me.

T: Now among the interrogations you mentioned that the first lieutenant of the two did hit you from time to time.

R: Yes.

T: Was that typically the same kind of abuse? To the head and face area?

R: Yes.

T: And any time to your body or with any kind of weapon?

R: No. No. Just in the face area. Usually slapped me across the head. Face. And a couple times my ear, you know you affect ear pressure that way?

T: Yes.

R: Bothered me for a while. I had taken flak in, before, when we were in that mission and we were still trying to fly over to make sure and we got close enough to shore one time. They cut loose with aircraft, anti-aircraft guns. That plane took some hits and we had no way of repelling it. There was a big bay there and it was cloudy. Hard to see. When I looked at the maps when I got out of the service and they had a tip there. We kept on going hoping to get away from the flak. That’s where we lost what little power we had.

T: So the mission when you were shot down, do you think your plane was damaged by the flak or not?

R: It was. I had a piece of flak up in my heel. Went right through the floor. I was sitting in the top turret. You could hear it rattle on the side of the plane. Like rattles.
T: So in a sense, it sounds like you were lucky the plane wasn’t damaged worse than that.

R: One of the things that could have happened I guess...

T: From Verona you were moved by train all the way up to Luft Stalag I.

R: Stalag I. We went through Berlin.

T: First of all, on the train, were you in boxcars or passenger cars?

R: Passenger cars.

T: And were all eight surviving crew members with you? All eight of you?

R: No. They sent the three of them down to Austria. Enlisted men. Why, I don’t know. Five of us up to Stalag Luft I.

T: This is the point where your paths separate.

R: Yes. We were separated in Munich. We got off the train and were waiting in a double landing type deal. They came and took three of them and guided us the other way. We went with the officers.

(1, B, 420)

T: So before you even got on the train they made the separation.

R: Yes. Really in the station there.

T: So all eight of you traveled from Verona up through...over the Alps to Munich, and then the separation was made.

R: Yes.

T: Were other POWs traveling with the eight of you from Verona, or was it just you eight?

R: Just us eight. I never saw another POW anywhere then until we got up to Stalag Luft I.

T: So you really were a group on your own.

R: We were. There’s no question about it. One incident that happened: at the border, just like anywhere when you cross the border—this was from Germany into Italy—the train stops and they do a little inspection. One of the...we had eight rifle
guards along, or five rifles rather. One guard for every person, and an interpreter. They got off at the rail of the train and the people were selling bars, chocolate bars and things. And the one young guard, I don’t think he was over seventeen, we looked at him just like some hungry dogs when he was trying to eat this candy bar. He didn’t see it. He’d turn his back. Finally (clock chiming) he took and broke of a square for each one of us. Half his candy bar. That really amazed me.

T: So he gave you some of it. Had you been fed up until now, Dick?

R: No. Bread and water. Then when we left there...

T: Did you get back onto a passenger train again at Munich then?

R: Yes.

T: And just the five of you now.

R: Yes. They gave us two loaves of bread. My flight coveralls had zippers on their knees. We stuck one away and somebody else, I don’t know who it was, carried his bread and they tore it up or kind of cut it up so we could eat it. That had to last us all the way to Stalag Luft I.

T: When you were on the passenger train from Verona there, were you able to talk among yourselves? You eight? You guys. The crew? Were you able to talk at all or...

R: Yes. We were. But they had two different seats and a guard in each seat. They had two guards and two of us. We’d sit right next to one another in the car. So it wasn’t too rigid there. We got to Berlin and there was an air raid. The British Mosquitos. This was at night.

T: In Berlin. Was the trip essentially uneventful, traveling along on this passenger car.

R: Not exactly. There wasn’t anything exactly except those Mosquitos. The British Mosquitos bombing it.

T: Talk, yes, describe that air raid that you went through in Berlin.

R: It was the Mosquitos. They hit. They had three of them. Somebody told me that was there. It was supposed to be a morale builder, really, for the British. We had to go downstairs in the air raid shelters. What do you call them?

T: A bunker.

R: Yes.
T: So you were taken off the train.

R: Yes. Had to go down in the subway, was what it was. The air raid shelter. It was loaded with Germans, of course. We were supposed to try to escape. That was the rules we had when you were flying. You were supposed to...if you're out in the country, you're supposed to try to escape. Tie up more Germans. But if you ended up in a big town best give yourself up to the military or police. When we went down there everybody was trying to hang onto a German. The German populace was pretty mad at us. They were shaking their fists and cussing in German and we were Terrorflieger. Blowing up kids and buildings. Oh! They were mad. We were glad to be able to hang onto a German.

T: So ironically, it sounds like the guard was your protector in many ways.

R: It was. No question.

T: Did the civilians, when you came close to civilians like that, did they hit you or throw anything at you?

R: No. They didn't do that. The guards wouldn't let them. The guards tried to keep us apart. But when they got to shoving...when they got filled up, then they shoved back and forth a little.

T: Really. The guards and the civilians?

R: Yes.

T: What kind of feelings did you have at that time? I mean, trying to imagine the situation. What was going through your mind?

R: I don't know. Again I just, I was glad we could get out of there without being hit with a bomb or something. There was quite a bit of pressure all the time. When we went down in the sea and things that happened along the route.

T: With the air raid, with respect to the air raid, can you, from sitting in the train, can you kind of walk through events from hearing an air raid siren or whatever to sort of describe that sequence of events?

R: It was just a matter of, you're concerned what was going to happen. Boy, you get hit by the Americans, the bombers coming over, and here we were. We were kind of a sitting duck. We were very concerned about that.
T: Did you hear an air raid siren go off while you were sitting in the train? Is that what happened?

R: Yes. That's for sure.

T: And what happened then? Once the air raid siren went off.

R: To the cellar we went.

T: So the Germans hustled you off the train, as it were? And then into the basement?

R: Yes. Into the subway down there. Then we just stood there for about a half hour, and the all clear given to us. Then we went upstairs and got in the train again.

T: Could you hear the bombs going off outside?

R: No. I didn't. We were down far enough where I guess you didn't. I don't know what size bombs they had. The Mosquito was a fast flying plane. You could carry two, three hundred pounds and that was it.

T: So it was a matter of waiting until the all clear sounded and then being taken back upstairs.

R: That's right.

T: At Berlin did you change trains or get back on the same train?

(1, B, 488)

R: We got back on the same train.

T: So you've been in this train since Munich now.

R: Yes.

T: Munich. Berlin. Did this train take the five of you then all the way up to Barth?

R: To Barth. Yes.

T: When you got up to the camp there, to the station, did you walk from the station to the camp?

R: Yes.

T: Is it still just the five of you?
R: Yes.

T: You didn’t see another POW until you got into camp, did you?

R: Until I got into camp.

T: When you got into the camp at Luft I, can you describe kind of what impression the camp made on you? What did you see when you got in there?

R: I just was glad to see an American situation and know that there was somebody around there that...you’d have a little protection. They wouldn’t start killing if there was twenty, thirty of you. One off to the side, I figured it could happen. No, I was just glad to get up there. If there was any chance of escape we sure would have tried it, but if there wasn’t any chance we didn’t. I worked on tunnels for many hours.

T: Did you feel, for your personal safety, did you feel safer once you were inside the camp itself?

R: It was. I figured we’re [Air Corps] bombing and whatnot, so we would be safer there. The Germans had a sugar factory, which was about three-quarters of a mile from the prison camp. There were three P-51s went right over the edge of our camp and wiggled their wings. They hit the sugar factory. We were just cheering and yelling and the people in the little town of Barth could hear us and were really mad. So then they put a stop to it. Air raid sirens went off and we had to get in the barracks.

T: Right.

R: I tell you. It was tough. I darned near got killed there.

T: The first barracks you were in, you said in our earlier conversation, was in the South Compound.

R: Yes.

T: Then you were moved to North One.

R: Yes.

T: Now in North One, can you describe the barracks that you were housed in?

R: Wooden buildings with shutters on the doors. You could see out just about everywhere. Cracks. But it was cold. We didn’t have much for blankets. The little fuel we’d get didn’t amount to much. One of the worst things was the food, then the fuel. The Americans bombed Germany so heavily they couldn’t get it. They used horse and wagons in a lot of cases. It was a tough situation there.

T: Talking about the food, what was the regular daily ration that you received?

R: I don’t know if you could call it a daily ration. It didn’t stay the same all the time. They’d say they got bombed out and didn’t get in their [supply delivery]…it normally was barley. Like oatmeal. Then horsemeat once in a while. If horses got killed on the front. Then scabby potatoes and anything else... (***)

T: Was there a regular meal? Were you regularly served a morning meal like a breakfast?

(1, B, 527)

R: Oatmeal.

T: So two meals a day that you remember.

R: Yes. It wasn’t very much. I lost a lot of weight there.

T: What do you remember getting for breakfast typically?

R: Most of time if you got to eat, it was barley. It had worms in it. The guys, when they first came there, they’d kind of push the worms aside. But after a while they found out the worms were protein and they ate them. Very much.

T: So you learned to like worms, or eat them anyway.

R: That’s for sure.

T: Any kind of hot beverage? Ersatz coffee or tea?

R: We had some ersatz coffee.

T: Were there two meals a day that you recall or three?

R: Two.

T: And when was the second one typically served?

R: Oh, five o’clock.

T: Evening. Actually about supper time. And what do you recall getting for supper?

R: There again we had scabby potatoes, and we’d get some beet jam. They had sugar beets. We would get some bread. Real heavy bread. I went on a detail outside the camp getting in supplies. Five of us.
T: Did you do that regularly?

R: Yes. Every Wednesday. Our compound went. There were five of us pulling a little wooden wagon. We’d stack the bread on there, and it was just like it was cardboard or something. We’d pull this wagon about three-quarter of a mile out to the Baltic. There was a supply depot there. Then we’d load it. Whether it was bread, or lots of times the brooms and brushes and stick brooms and stuff like that we’d haul out there.

T: So a variety of different things.

R: Right.

T: Was that a good deal, in a sense, to get on the supply detail, to get outside of camp?

R: I loved it. I was really glad. I don’t remember exactly how I got onto it, but I was kind of an interpreter for the Americans to make sure we got it. We brought 2500 mattress covers. We’d have to get twenty-five [2500] back or else somebody would be sleeping on wood-shaving mattresses. There were boards across, about a six inch wide board across. So you’d be laying on the boards. So we really had to push to make sure...that was my job, to see that we got whatever it was supposed to be.

T: Were there any perks or advantages associated with being on that work detail?

R: Yes. It was. We got to see things that other people didn’t. Just being out there was wonderful I thought.

T: Just being outside the camp you mean?

R: Yes.

T: So you got a chance to go into town on a regular basis.

(1, B, 562)

R: Yes. Now this is out of the supply depot here. Right on the Baltic.

T: So was that in town, or not really?

R: No. It was out in the country.

T: Did you go through town to get there or not?
R: No. We didn’t. We didn’t. It was probably about a mile. It was through a kind of wooded area.

T: You say you brought the bread back from there as well?

R: Yes.

T: So was the bread baked out at the supply depot?

R: I think so. They had ovens there I think. It smelled good. I was pushing that wagon. Had it loaded with our bread and one loaf fell off and the wagon went right over it. Didn’t smash it down. That’s how tight...

T: I see. Sounds like it was sturdy. It was sturdy bread.

R: It was.

T: Was that a chance for you to get any extra food or supplies for yourself, being outside camp like that?

R: Not really. That had been done too, but I just absolutely couldn’t see it. There were fourteen of us in this room I was in. They had me in charge. We were the officers—what they call batmen. We had to take care of stuff like that. But officers didn’t have to. We didn’t have to work outside the camp. We had to work to take care of our own men in there.

But in running that work deal, we started to try to haul a guy out, to escape. Earlier the Germans had thought we’d go through the main headquarters and then out the road to the supply depot. The Germans, to get through their compound, they’d get long irons about four foot long and they’d jab it in there [the cart] and make sure there wasn’t anybody laying in there. We did that, and then we started helping out the Germans, giving them a cigarette. We got a few cigarettes through the Red Cross. That was like gold. And the guard would have a sidearm, and was the interpreter for the Germans. He’d be sitting in one of our rooms and let us load [the cart] by ourselves. We worked at that for quite a long time.

We finally got it done and we were going to haul it out. I don’t know where they got linens, but they had a guy dressed in dark suit coat and we put him underneath these rolls of...

T: Linen?

R: Linen. And we started across the compound, and he started coughing down there. This load was getting hot. And we started singing and hollering. Just at the top of our voice. And they didn’t realize anything was wrong and we got out there. We got it fixed up. We were going to rap on the bottom of the wagon.

We had convinced the guard to take us down to the Baltic and let us go swimming, because we never had a bath. And we convinced him. He finally left and
he’d go down and let us go. We told the guy that was buried in there we’re going to knock on the bottom like that *(makes knocking noise)*, and then gave him about fifteen, twenty seconds he’d get out of there. We got out there and I couldn’t believe it. Here was another wagon from another compound. That never happened before. They came out there. The man asked what happened. They saw that we had somebody in there, and they got the guard inside the supply depot and the guy didn’t wait anyway. We got back that night and when we saw the guys we asked them what happened. We found out. We got back, and when the one guy was missing they came around and counted the second time. We had counting every morning and evening. If a guy was missing they counted twice. If that didn’t happen they brought the dogs in and they’d send the dogs around.

And here about eight o’clock or something, Hans was the interpreter to the Germans, he came into my barracks and called and said I want to talk to you. I had to go out there in the hallway and then I got a little worried that some of the guys would think I was fraternizing with the Germans. But that wasn’t the case at all. Anyway, Hans came around. He wanted to know if we hauled anybody out in the linen. I said, “No. I don’t know anything about it.” He said, “You sure you don’t?” I said, “No. I don’t know what you’re talking about.” “Well, you damn well better not,” he said. “You’re going to be in real trouble if we find out. I want you to keep your mouth shut.” That German guard was so concerned if he goofed up it was either a firing squad or the Russian Front. And I think they’d just as soon take the firing squad as the Russian Front.

*(1, B, 628)*

T: And what happened to that guy that you hauled out in the linen? He never got away?

R: He got away. He was gone twelve days. But they caught him. But it tied up a bunch of Germans while they were looking for him.

T: It’s tempting to say that escape was on peoples’ minds.

R: It was. Different guys...every guy had a role to escape.

T: It makes me wonder though, how realistic is it to try to escape? Unless you have the clothing and an excellent command of German, what are you going to do?

R: I know. They just go and lay in ditches and stuff. They tell them to use them there, helping out the war cause. My pilot was going to get over to the airport and get a Messerschmitt. He said he hoped it was full of fuel. He was going to take that and fly to England. That didn’t materialize either because the Germans discovered our tunnel. So that was the way he was going to get out.

T: It sounds like people talked about escaping an awful lot, didn’t they?
R: Oh, yes. We had an escape committee. Another time we put a man right through one of these tangled barbed wire fences, the fence around the compound. Got in barbed wire about four inches, and then they had entangled barbed wire in the ground [between the two fences]. This guy took a mattress cover, and he had a cutting pliers. I don’t know where he got that. Cut his way through.

We went and practiced for a long time doing handstands and muscle deals, and I had to swing a guy up on my shoulders and stand straight up to get the attention of the guards in the towers. They were so long sitting and nothing else, and they sit there glaring at those guys doing that. In the meantime, this guy cut his way through. Got out.

There was a new barracks there. Building. They were on stilts. He thought he’d have a safe place to go down to the other end and [then go] went into the woods. But when he came out down there where he went, he ran into a bunch of German workers that were working on that barracks, and they got him right there. That’s all the further he got.

T: How about yourself? Were you ever really tempted to try to escape?

R: I did [I was tempted to try to escape] in the tunnel. I feel that’s something that really was task one. You’d go down about five foot and dig through this, and you’ve got to transfer all the dirt and you’ve got to hide the dirt. Then you would realize that you’re in something that...there’s nothing holding it up. Instead of clay, it’s sand. It could cave in. You made it [tunnel] as small as possible so you didn’t have so much stuff to get rid of.

But our barracks was in the center of the compound. All the rest were on the outside. They figured, the Germans figured there was absolutely no way anybody could tunnel out that far. But we were going with it. Didn’t know for sure where we were at. We hit the guard tower post. Big cedar post. So then we knew where we were at. We were all set. We were going to take it...two more days, we were going to be out. We decided to work nights. We never worked nights before. They talked about it and I said, God, I didn’t like to do it because they had sounding detectors. They said in the daytime there was so much noise, everybody hollering and shooting and hooting. At night it was quiet. They went and worked, and the night before we were going to [go], bring the whole barracks...in the morning roll call, in came all the guards and the dogs and sounded it, and that was the end of our months, the six weeks of work. Anyway, it kept us busy I guess.

I worked on it. I didn’t like it. You were just in there so tight. Impossible to get...

T: It sounds claustrophobic, is what it sounds like.

R: That’s what it was.

T: Was keeping yourself busy as a prisoner difficult?
R: I don’t know. I didn’t have as much trouble with that as some people would. I could get by.

T: How did you pass your time every day? You were there almost a year.

(1, B, 691)

R: Just talking, and we had some cards we got from the YMCA or something. I don’t know where we got them from. Played some cards. Just starvation. This guy flew over in Japan or somewhere prior to when he came here. He’d come around the barracks and tell the story of what happened. Lt. Greene. Had flown in the, oh, shoot...

T: Fighter planes? Bombers?

R: Yes. He flew it over in the Japanese area. He went up the central...what was that flyway over there? Anyway, he was on that and he got back out and got down and went in the service to fly out of Italy. He came around and talked to us and told us how the whole thing went.

T: So you passed your time playing cards when you could. Talking a lot, it sounds like.

R: Yes. An awful lot of talking. Everybody had a story to tell.

T: Now you arrived there with members of your crew. Did they end up being your closest friends there at camp or were other men your closest friends?

R: There were other ones that were probably closer. I don’t know. We were close, but I had one guy from Connecticut, a first lieutenant, I was really close with.

T: Who was not from your crew.

R: No. In fact he was a lieutenant and I went out, after I got out of service...Bridgeport, Connecticut. He wanted me to go into the turkey business with him. And I did. Went in the turkey business with him for a year.

T: Yes?

R: And made some good money.

T: Out in Connecticut.

R: Connecticut. It was a lot of work.

T: Yes.
R: He came up to Blue Earth several times. He was going into the building business after the wood...the shortage of houses and stuff. Then his brother had a carpenter business. He bid three big turkey farms. Each one he cut up into three houses. And he wanted to take it back. So we could have it for one year. We took it back. Then Bob Cotour was my friend. He wanted me to come out there and go down to Florida and build. I hesitated about that. But I should have. He hit it big there. Then he went out to Cuba and was building out there. The Cubans...what's his name?

T: The revolution came.

R: Castro. He started rattling the chains, and Bob Cotour had to get out of there right ahead of him. They were grabbing Americans. He did real well there in the building business.

T: So you kept in touch with some people after the war.

R: Yes.

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

T: How were friends important to you as a POW?

R: You needed somebody to be...you could use as a friend and get things done and discuss things. A lot of things. Worth a lot.

T: Are there ways you could help each other as friends in specific ways?

R: Well, yes. Once in a while, I suppose. If they had a problem or something like that and you want some information. I could give it to him or find somebody that could give it to him.

T: Could you help each other when it came to food?

R: The food. My room, there were fourteen guys in there. We had a mess hall. Every compound had a mess hall except ours, and that burned down. So we would get whatever food it would be. It would be Red Cross parcels. We’d get some from the Red Cross and we had a little shelf built there that we kept our food in. Then we’d make our own decision what we were going to have for breakfast, what we were going to have for supper.

T: Did you have to cook it or prepare it in your own barracks there?

R: I got hooked to the job, and had to take care of it [the food on the shelf]. The food started disappearing. I was watching all the time. I was up in the top bunk. And all at once I saw a shadow, and I dove off that top bunk and I hit this guy and down we
went. Of course, that woke everybody else up. Here he was just, “I’m so hungry,” he said, “I can’t stand it. I know you’ve got some food in there.” I said, “What about the rest of us?”

T: Was this a guy from your own barracks?

R: Yes.

T: So in a sense, he was stealing from the group.

R: Yes.

T: How was that problem or that situation handled in your barracks, Dick?

R: He got roughed up a little. Everybody knew that I was in charge, so it was my duty to try to save the food. That it didn’t get away. That was the only guy we had any trouble with. After we got done with him we didn’t have any more trouble either.

T: Did he stay in the barracks then?

R: Yes. The Germans wouldn’t let you move around just because you wanted to move.

T: So you were assigned to a barracks.

R: Yes.

T: Was that a rare incidence of theft or was theft something that you noticed other than that one example?

R: I think it was kind of rare. Everybody realized it was tough on them and tough on somebody else. Most cases I didn’t hear that too often. This guy really bothered me, to go out and catch him and know who he was.

T: How about your own personal stuff? The few things that you had that were your own. If you got Red Cross parcels, you had stuff. Did you have to worry about that being stolen by other people?

R: Yes. We had a cupboard to put it in, but you just had to trust other people that they wouldn’t take it. It wasn’t a big problem. The hardest two things were food and keeping warm. A couple months in particular. You just couldn’t handle it.

T: Did the food supply, did that get worse as time went on, as the war got closer to an end?
R: It sure did. It got way worse because the Americans took complete control of the air. They'd block off like a county, and then they'd assign three, four fighters to watch that. No rails, no roads or anything. Nothing was supposed to move in there. They just had a heck of a time getting supplies. So the Red Cross officials came through and they told the Germans that they had to let us go and take them over to Sweden and neutralize them. They'd be done with the war. But they said either that or because we were getting starvation rations.

T: You noticed your food lessening in amount as the war went on.

R: It was terrible. They couldn’t hardly...great amount of Red Cross parcels came in. I don’t know how. They stacked them up in this old sack factory. The Russians were coming. They were hitting way ahead and blowing up everything. They blew up that building and our Red Cross parcels all rolled out. So they paroled us. I was one of them. They paroled us outside. We had to give our word we would never try to escape. We carried the Red Cross parcels into the camp.

(2, A, 42)

T: When did that happen, Dick?

R: Oh, I’d say probably four weeks before the war ended.

T: How often did you see Red Cross parcels there at Barth?

R: Well, it varied a lot. But one in three, four people probably. It would take fifteen days to get a Red Cross parcel or maybe more sometimes.

T: So it sounds like you saw them every couple weeks or every month?

R: Every month I’d say.

T: And when you got them, was it one to a guy or did you split them?

R: We split them.

T: From your memory, how many guys did you split your packages with?

R: When you’re talking about...I would divide it up to the guys. Everybody would get so much. That was another job. I hated it, but I had to do it.

T: What’s that? Dividing stuff up?

R: Yes. Dividing it up, and make sure everybody got what they had coming to them.

T: Did you say you were cooking or preparing the food too in your barracks?
R: Yes.

T: What kind of tools did you have to work with to prepare food?

R: We had tin cans. Cans were trimmed. The powdered milk we got in the Red Cross parcels, we'd take those cans and make pots out of them and put them on the stove and bake with it or whatever you had to do. We just didn't have any real utensils. Nothing. Just anything from tin cans to your hands.

T: So when you prepared food, it doesn't sound like you had much to work with.

R: No. We didn't [have much to work with]. But we'd make do. It's amazing what you could...when I finally got out of service I said to my mother—I helped her cook—and I said, “I'll help you cook because I like cooking here.” It's unbelievable.

T: Like night and day, I suppose. Did you also have to divide up the loaves of bread?

R: Yes.

T: And how did you do that?

R: I don't remember how we got the knife that we used to be cutting it up. Everybody would get one slice or two slices or whatever it would be. Depending on how much was coming. What the Germans gave us. That varied. You never knew if it was going to get through the camp, or the Red Cross, or stolen, or whatever.

T: So did the bread come to your barracks?

R: Yes.

T: Sliced or not sliced?

R: Not sliced.

T: So you had to slice it.

R: Yes. I don't remember where we got...you made like a knife that we could do it with. We got the job done.

T: You mentioned food being one of the most difficult aspects. What was the other most difficult aspect?

R: Trying to keep warm. Just shake at night. We'd take a bed board. Everybody would have to donate a bed board. The board was about six inches wide and three and a half foot. Six inches wide, and three and a half foot long.
T: Like a flat.

R: That would fit in and on top of that you would put the mattress, cover with wood shavings in it. But then the wood shavings would go between the boards, and you were sleeping on the boards. The barracks...getting through a winter—I was there for a winter [1944-45]. There was snow blowing outside, and you're sleeping and you can see out the side of the barracks. It wasn’t good.

T: What kind of heat was provided for the barracks?

R: I don’t know. It was a little kind of square stove.

T: And it was in your room for the sixteen guys.

R: Yes.

T: Did you have coal or wood for that stove?

R: We had coal. And it was brick stuff. We had to watch that coal supply. It would just disappear.

T: So something else that disappeared.

R: Yes. The officers were a little better off than us enlisted men. The Germans respected rank quite a bit and took care of the rank guys a little better than the enlisted men. Yet as far as working, the Germans couldn’t make us work outside the camp. But the enlisted men that were there, we were there, like I said, as batmen. We took care of things when we did have...

T: When there was work to do that was assigned to you guys?

R: Yes. Anything within the camp. Getting things out. Cleaning things up and doing something like that.

T: On a different subject. How did you, as prisoners, get any kind of news how the war was going?

R: I tell you, it’s unbelievable, but somebody had bribed the Germans. Got enough to build a radio.

T: In your barracks or in another barracks?

R: In another barracks. But the news would come on at a certain time, and they’d write it up and then they’d go from barracks to barracks and tell the guys what was happening. Big news or something. Get it from the BBC.
T: So you were getting, it sounds like, some kind of regular updates or dependable news.

R: Yes. It’s unbelievable how they got it through. But you never asked questions. You kept it quiet as much as possible.

T: Do you ever recall getting those news updates daily, weekly?

R: We’d get them weekly. And once in a while when something happened we’d get it a little bit oftener maybe. That was just our joy to hear that news all the time.

T: Now with getting hard news were there also rumors making their way around camp?

R: Oh, sure. A lot of rumors.

T: A lot of rumors?

R: Yes.

T: How did you know what to believe and what not to believe?

R: That’s where your judgment came in there. You could find out how things were going. I’d even get some news from the German guy that went out with us on the detail. He’d come out and we could ask him. His version of what was going on was a little different than ours.

(2, A, 106)

T: Sure.

R: We did get some information from him. He wasn’t too bad either. There was...unbelievable. You heard so much in June where they killed the people and burned the bodies and all that. They weren’t that bad. The Germans were really misled or something I should say. The Japanese are the ones that pulled a lot of bad things. The Germans had a certain deal, but they weren’t near as brutal. The ones they had...was somebody else. The Germans, a different branch of people...I forget what they called them. But they did the deed trying to give artificial respiration and trying to get you some food.

T: So the Germans...the German guards that you came into contact with at your camp, you’re not saying much bad about them.

R: No. Not really. I could say sometimes what happened when they would do things—lock our barracks for early lock up if you did something wrong. And
wouldn't let you out until a few hours later because somebody raised heck. That first barracks I was in, that first compound, the boards were kind of cracked on the floor. Cracked space. And the goons—we called them goons—would crawl underneath there and they'd crawl the cracks. If they crawled down a straight line some guy with hot water in their bucket, washing clothes, they'd go along and throw hot water on the German guards there.

T: They were down there to sort of snoop?

R: Yes. Listen to us talk. Then they'd pour hot water down and oh, man, that guy would really get mad. Then the German officer wouldn't let him...he grabbed the captain's Lugar ...

T: Did you ever observe German guards abusing prisoners?

R: No. But I'm sure they did. They had built a new barracks next to ours. In ours we had a toilet. It wasn't very much. You had to wait in line. And a wash sink. But all the new ones they put up, they were on stilts.

T: Right.

R: What they had was, on the outside, so at night when they locked them up you couldn't get into the cans. In ours you could get into the toilet. But they couldn't get in there. Colonel Spicer, handle bar mustache, he was in that barracks. It was his duty. He just raised hell with it and he'd throw the locks off the barracks, off the door. He went down and opened the shithouse. They court-martialed him and took him down there and he was going to get the death sentence. He refused to do anything the Americans told him. The war ended right before he was supposed to get sentenced.

T: We've talked about, as a POW we've talked about what you found most difficult. Talked about the conditions, the Germans. Let's move on to the end of your POW experience. How did you experience the end of the Germans at your camp?

R: The end of the Germans? You mean talk about guards?

T: Yes. Because the Russians were getting closer and closer to your camp location.

R: Yes.

T: What happened there? I mean you were a POW and then suddenly things changed.

R: We could hear the shelling. We knew that they [Soviet troops] were coming quite close, but not for sure. One morning we woke up and there was no noise, no roll call,
and looked out the cracks of the barracks. There was nobody in the guard towers. So we broke the shutters down and got out.

Went up to Barth, the little town of Barth. It was a half mile away. Got in there in a... Actually they keep hair tonic and stuff like that. The Russians would drink that stuff. Because of the alcohol. We were down there and we found some pretty decent stuff, but when the Russians got there they just went through and took everything. We weren’t supposed to be out there. The second day we did that, the American in charge, a captain or whatever it was at the time, a general...they weren’t going to let anybody get off the peninsula. We were out there on the peninsula. They were afraid we would get in fights with the Russians and be shooting and this and that.

(2, A, 159)

T: So you were instructed as a group to stay in the camp?

R: That’s what they were trying to do, but I and my friend had too much...we wanted to see something. We took off. He was a first lieutenant, and he could get by and get things. There was this Jeep that they had. It was a German one. They took off in that and they picked guys up and haul you back. There were guys run to beat heck into the woods.

We kept going, and the first night I suppose we were out twenty-five, thirty miles and we got to the Russian roadblock and those Russians were all armed to the teeth and drinking vodka. They had a picnic table. They were drinking vodka. I said to Bob, “This looks bad. We better get out of here.” They started arguments amongst themselves and all that. So before we went they said you guys gotta have a drink first. It comes in a water glass. I mean a big water glass. Filled with vodka. Straight. Started drinking and took it away from your lips and no, no. You've got to drink it all at once. Hit me in the back and I said, “Bob, you gotta drink it all at once. Just hold it up to your lips and take a breather once in a while.” We did, and I tell you, we took off from there. We started walking, higher and higher. We were both loaded.

Then it was night. So I asked the one Russian that could speak English if he knew where we could get a bed. He said, “Come with me.” We were about a half mile from a little town. I don’t what kind of town it was. He took us down there and there was a woman and she had three kids. And he told them to go out in the barn and sleep. We’re going to sleep in the house. There was two rooms in there. Bob and I slept in one bed, and the Russian slept in this room. He had his machine gun wrapped over his clothes. He was a little bit older Russian. I’m guessing about twenty-eight.

T: A little older than you.

R: Yes. He told them to get us something to eat. They didn’t have much to eat. They just had a little soup of some kind. Well, get it anyway. We didn’t want to do that.
We had to do what he says. We did this, and while we were waiting in the living room, a young Russian came in there. He was going to take this lady to molest her...

T: There was a lot of rape of civilians.

R: I know. But these little kids were just hanging on their mother. I couldn’t stand it. I said to the older Russian, “I can’t believe this! I can’t stand it! Why don’t you tell him she belongs to us?” He did, and he talked the guy out. Those things happened all the time.

T: Yes. They did. They really did.

R: Unbelievable what went on when the Russians came through.

T: How long did you stay outside the camp?

R: Two days. We were going to walk all the way back but we didn’t have any regular supplies. We had stuff back in the barracks that belonged to us. I had a plaque I had made. We decided finally to stay [in camp].

I got put on a work detail because I was (**). The Russians rounded up the cattle. This is cattle country up here. All Holstein cattle. The Russians rounded up a bunch of them and push them into our camp. Gave us guns to shoot them, and we’d milk them first and then shoot them. Grind them up for meatballs. It’s a wonder more guys didn’t get sick because they ate so much.

T: Was that, from your observation, was that a problem with guys, trying to eat too much?

R: I think it was. Some guys got sick and a few other things. They weren’t kept in the refrigerator.

T: How about you? Did you get sick at all at that time?

R: No. I didn’t. I was tougher than nails then.

(2, A, 213)

T: You kind of needed to be.

R: Living out in the country, I was raised and born in the Depression. Three miles out in the country. We sawed wood and made cord wood and just worked all the time. Got me through. The two guys that didn’t make it [when they bailed out into the Adriatic] were city guys. Didn’t have quite the build. Things it took.

T: It sounds like you’re saying that you think growing up in the country kind of toughened you up and made it easier to survive what you went through?
R: That’s absolutely it. I could tell that for a number of different guys. How they made it through it. I was the toughest of all. I was the first guy to bail out. Then the last guy to be picked up.

T: You were in the water the longest.

R: Half a Mae West [life vest] was all I had. Maybe my Texas pilot might have it with me on that, but I don’t think the rest of the crew would have.

T: Now your story moves forward and you were eventually, with the other POWs from Luft I, flown out. You were at Camp Lucky Strike and you were on a ship back to the US.

R: Right.

T: When you got back to the US, how soon was it before you saw your folks and your family?

R: Oh, about three months I think, or something like that. Maybe not quite that long. I went with Bob Cotour, we stole an airplane in Camp Lucky Strike. A one star general with a B-17 to pick up this one star general. Bob Cotour was stationed...

T: Go back to when you got back to the States here and saw your...now your folks were both still alive at this time?

R: Yes.

T: When you saw your folks for the first time...and how many brothers and sisters did you have?

R: Five brothers and one sister.

T: When you saw your family back at home, how much did they want to know about your POW experience?

R: Oh, a lot. Yes. They all were very curious how things went and things we did.

T: How much did you decide to tell them?

R: I didn’t tell them some of the stuff. I didn’t tell them about... I did call home from Camp Lucky Strike. That was before I knew I’d get there. I talked to them on the phone. So they knew I was safe and back in the country.

T: But when you saw them again, how much did you tell them about your POW experience?
R: Not everything. Just some things you try to forget and a little bitter. There were four of us in service. Brothers. I had another brother that was flying for Northwest Airlines in the late ‘30s and early ‘40s. So my mother had a lot to be worried about.

T: Was he a pilot during the war as well?

R: He was a pilot. He was flying around in smaller airplanes giving rides and what not, and then moved up and eventually did it all on his own. He has a high school education but he worked his way right up to the big planes and did well and he got killed in 1952.

(2, A, 263)

T: Were any of your other brothers prisoners of war?

R: (inaudible)

T: When your folks or your brothers and sister asked you questions about your POW experience did you give them honest answers?

R: Honest answers?

T: Yes.

R: Most of the time. Some things I didn’t want to talk about.

T: Has that changed over the years? Things, parts of it that you don’t want to talk about?

R: Yes. It’s not near as bad now as it was then. Like the guy that took our airplane away. I was so bitter. It caused my aerial gunner—I was best man at his wedding—get killed. And the navigator. I can see him laying there yet. To think this captain took our plane. About four years after I was out of service I was going to a national convention down in Phoenix, and I was going to take a pistol along and I was going to shoot him. It was a POW convention and I knew this guy would be there. And I was going to shoot him. I was so mad. But I changed my mind later on and I was happy I did, but that’s how bitter I was.

T: You were full of anger for that guy.

R: Oh! Absolutely. All they ever told me all the time, you’re going to live and die in that airplane. You just take care of it and do this and change the oil and change this. I just lived right up to it. Did everything. Everything was going so good.
T: Then they threw all that out the window, it sounds like, and sent you up in the wrong, in kind of a not-airworthy plane.

R: Yes. A no-return plane. That’s all it was. And my whole life just went before me. I was really happy the way things were going. I did real well in the gunnery school, mechanics school. Everything else. Here everything’s down the tube.

T: Did you, in a way, hold that captain personally responsible for the death of those two guys?

R: I certainly did. No question about it.

T: Have you had any contact with him since the war?

R: No. I didn’t. I lost track of him and I should have but…that’s a long story.

T: Have you in a way, all these years later, have you let bygones be bygones or are you still bitter about it?

R: *(sounding emotional)* Impossible to let go.

T: Boy! Really stuck with you. Now, let me see. What year were you married, Dick? And you weren’t married prior to that?

R: No.

T: When you got married, did your wife Agnes know that you had been a POW?

R: Yes.

T: And is that something that you’ve been able to talk about with her since you’ve been married?

R: Oh, yes.

T: And your four adopted children? Do they know pretty much about your experience?

*(2, A, 312)*

R: Yes.

T: Is that something you’ve ever had difficulty talking about with them or not?

R: I don’t know. Some things were, but they were pretty good about accepting it and realizing what had happened.
T: How about the American ex-POWs? How long have you been a part of that organization?

R: Oh, golly sakes. That goes back a long way. I think probably eight, seven, eight years after the war ended.

T: So you’ve been a member of the ex-POWs for decades.

R: Yes.

T: How would you identify ways that that organization has been helpful to you?

R: In finding out names of people, or places, or things to do, or get some help. They were always there. They did a good job.

T: The same question about the Veterans Administration. How has the Veterans Administration been helpful to you since the end of the war?

R: I’d have to say no. That’s kind of one that made me feel bad too. They didn’t do much, and you didn’t get much, and they didn’t pay much attention to you. Now, in the last five, six, seven, eight years, now when you’ve got one foot in the grave, then they come out and they do things for you. Things you can do and take care of you and give you...I’m one hundred percent disabled.

T: How long have you had one hundred percent?

R: About four years.

T: Did you have any percent before that?

R: Yes. I had seventy. But it took me a long time for that. They just didn’t give us anything to start with. All those problems and they just ignored you. After we’ve got one foot in the grave, then they’d do anything for you.

T: So it sounds like one could be a little resentful of the Veterans Administration.

R: Yes.

T: So the help they’ve provided, you’re saying, has come only in the last few years now.

R: That’s correct.

T: So for many years did you, those decades after the war, did you use the Veterans Administration at all?
R: I was in the hospital a couple different times. A few other things. They just didn’t do enough for me. Couldn’t get it done.

T: Have they ever offered you any kind of counseling service as an ex-POW?

R: I guess somewhat. I didn’t use it. Counseling service. I don’t know.

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 378.**

T: …if your VA were to offer you some kind of POW support group, is that something you could see yourself joining or maybe not?

R: I don’t think so. The POW group—great people there. They’ll give you more help than the VA and they always get things done.

*(tape difficult to hear on this portion)*

T: Dick Carroll. Right.

R: Yes. Did you talk to him?

T: Yes. He and I know each other real well.

R: He’s really good to get the information. If you can’t get it from anyplace else, you can get it from Dick Carroll.

T: Yes. He’s a good guy. That’s for sure.

R: Yes. He is.

T: Since you’ve been an ex-POW, really since May 1945, have you had any kind of dreams or even nightmares about your POW experience?

R: Oh, yes. I have.

T: Have those stayed with you over time? I mean, do you still have them?

R: Once in a while. In fact, I did last night. Some. Because I was thinking about this.

T: The interview today.

R: Yes. Brought me back.

T: When you have those kind of dreams, are there specific dreams that you have had more than once?
R: Yes. When I was in that airplane, hitting the water and going down twelve feet.

T: So that's a specific thing that comes back for you.

R: Right.

T: Other incidents of your POW experience, from Verona to Barth, the train, anything, come back more than once?

R: A bunch of stuff here. Just can't think right now.

T: But you do specifically remember the parachute jump and hitting the water and stuff?

R: You bet. That taking the airplane. That was the worst of all. I actually wouldn't believe they would do that.

T: Yes.

R: And they put us in this junk heap. I was an engineer and I thought you could (***) follow the rules and regulations and...

T: When you got out of service, did you use GI Bill benefits at all for any kind of job training?

R: No. I didn't.

T: You came back to the farm, didn't you?

R: Yes. Yes. I did take some farm school for one year or something. But very little.

T: The last question is just to ask you, when you think of your POW experience, more than a year there, how would you identify the most important way that that changed you as a person?

R: I was changed to become more bitter. I was so proud of the job I was doing and just couldn’t wait to do it knowing it was very dangerous, but just... That's the most terrible thing I could think of.

T: When you got back and let's say your folks or your brothers and sister saw you, did they, would they have noticed you being different as a person than the person that left?

R: Yes. I think so. It was a lot of bitter times. I hit the bottle more than I ever did before. Just trying to forget the (voice fades away)
T: For you, how long did that period of, as you call hitting the bottle, how long did that last for you?

(2, B, 420)

R: I suppose ten, fifteen years.

T: How did you finally move along, in a sense? I mean, right now you’re able to talk about this stuff and it still bothers you, but how did you move from being really bitter and hitting the bottle to getting past that?

R: It was tough and I just took a long time. I never did get completely past it. Instead of being that great deal that I was so proud of what I was doing, it just went the opposite way. It was just...crashed.

T: Yes. You’d gone through a lot of training up to that point hadn’t you, to do a job, and you weren’t in Italy two days you said, and suddenly your military career was really over. When you were back on the farm there in Blue Earth, that’s not a big town. Did people in town know that you had been a POW?

R: Yes. Most of them.

T: Was that something that came up in conversation when you saw people at all?

R: Yes. It usually would. People would ask about how things were going and what happened.

T: And those are people that you knew from before service, right?

R: Yes.

T: Was that comfortable or uncomfortable talking to them about that kind of stuff?

R: It was a little uncomfortable. I could have had twenty, thirty missions (*** in *Madame Shoo Shoo*. Flew up to fifty missions. They ditched it along the coast of Italy. Right on the sand beaches. Two or three guys that finished missions in that thing. I could have just as well.

T: Boy, that could really...it sounds like that really ate at you over the years, didn’t it?

R: Hard to talk about.

T: Yes. Well, that’s the last question I had and I’ll thank you for talking about it today. You were very forthcoming, Mr. Pfaffinger, about not only what happened to
you but how you felt about what happened to you, and I thank you very much for that.

R: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW