William Schleppegrell was born 3 September 1923 in Minneapolis; from age seven, he grew up in the small town of Littlefork, in far northern Minnesota. Bill graduated from Littlefork High School in 1940, and in December 1942 enlisted in the US Army Air Corps. He completed training as a fighter pilot.

By November 1944 Bill was in eastern France with the 405th Squadron, 371st Fighter Group, part of the 9th Air Force, flying ground attack missions in P-47 Thunderbolt aircraft. He completed sixteen missions during November and December 1944.

While flying a mission on 1 January 1945, Bill’s plane was hit by ground fire and he was forced to parachute out over German-occupied territory. He was taken prisoner after landing, and spent the remainder of the war as a POW.

After initial interrogation at the central Dulag Luft facility, Bill was transported to Stalag Luft I, at Barth in northern Germany. He remained here until the camp was liberated by advancing Red Army troop on 30 April 1945. American forces evacuated US troops from Barth in the first weeks of May 1945. Bill was flown to France, then transported to the United States. He was discharged in November 1945.

Again a civilian, Bill used GI Bill benefits and graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1948. He was married in 1948 (wife Norma), and helped to raise a family of eight children. Bill taught German for more than thirty years at Hibbing High School, retiring in 1984. While a teacher, Bill for many years ran a student exchange program to Germany, helping to build cultural bridges.
Republic P-47 Thunderbolts of the 61st Fighter Squadron, 56th Fighter Group, 1943
Source: official US Army Air Corps photograph, from National Archives
T: Today is 16 April 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project; my name is Thomas Saylor. This evening I'm speaking with Mr. William Schleppegrell, at his home on Beauty Mountain Road, Hibbing, Minnesota. First, Bill, on the record, thanks very much for taking times this evening to be part of this project.

W: My pleasure.

T: Let me get this information on the record here. You were born in Minneapolis on 3 September 1923, and after about the age of seven you grew up in Little Fork, Minnesota. Way up north.

W: Right.

T: Graduated from Littlefork High School, class of ’40. In December of 1942 you enlisted in the service. Specifically you were in the US Army Air Corps. By the end of 1944, by November of 1944 to be specific, you were in France flying with the 9th Air Force, 371st Fighter Group, 405th Squadron, at airfields in the east of France. Three different ones you mentioned.

W: Yes.

T: You flew your first combat mission as a P-47 Thunderbolt pilot on 27 November 1944. Over the next five weeks completed sixteen missions, I believe you said.

W: Yes.

T: And it was on your seventeenth mission, on January 1, 1945, that your plane went down. I'm wondering if you could go back to January 1 and think about that mission. Was there anything different about that particular mission than the kind of missions you had been flying?

W: The only thing really different was that it was New Year's Day. We'd had a little party the night before. Those of us that knew we were going to be flying had to be very careful what we did at the party.
T: Did you know you were to be flying the next day?

W: Yes. That was posted. So we knew that we were going to be flying.

T: What was the mission for that day, for January 1? You can refer to your logbook if you want.

W: It was to attack marshalling yards at a railroad center north of Saarbrücken, in Germany. So we carried two five hundred pound bombs, and our targets were these buildings and the railroad center.

T: Was your entire squadron sent on this particular mission?

W: There were…no, but there were twelve planes.

T: Twelve planes total.

W: Yes. Three flights of four each.

T: On a mission like that, that specific one, did you have a, you yourself, have a specific thing you were supposed to do at the target or was it basically, in general do the following?

W: Yes. We followed the pattern of the flight commander. He told us what the targets were. We watched him go down on the target and then we all followed.

T: Sort of one after the other.

W: One after the other, yes. And we stayed up at our altitude until we were ready to go down. I was tail end Charlie that day. So I was number twelve.

(1, A, 35)

T: You were number twelve.

W: Yes. They all had a chance to get their guns aimed at me.

T: And did you know ahead of time that being tail end Charlie was not particularly good?

W: I knew it wasn’t the desirable spot. I had been in that position before too.

T: What happened on this particular mission? How was it that your plane was brought down?
W: I went down on my target. I released my two bombs and pulled up, and as I pulled up I felt this big thud and realized that I had been hit. We knew there was a lot of anti-aircraft fire around. Saw the smoke and so on and so forth. We took evasive action, and on the way down to the target you are shooting the whole way. You're shooting your .50 caliber machine guns all the time.

T: This Thunderbolt had four of those in each wing, right?

W: There were eight of them. Right.

T: So you released the bombs on the target and felt yourself get hit on the way out.

W: Yes.

T: Was the plane immediately disabled, or could you tell?

W: No, it wasn't, it wasn't immediately disabled. I immediately told the commander that I had been hit but that my engine, my instruments, seemed to be checking okay. So I pulled up and rejoined the rest of the flight, but at that point I could feel that there was something wrong with the engine. It was stuttering, missing, and my engine instruments were still checking but I knew something was definitely wrong. My oil line was hit. So that started to show some movement. The commander told me to head back for the base and he put a buddy on my wing. So we headed back toward the base.

We had regained altitude. I can't remember exactly what altitude it was. But as my engine started missing I started losing altitude. We weren't that far over the front lines. So I had really hoped that I could make it over the front line before I landed or whatever. But it got to the point where I was losing altitude. My buddy was still up there a ways, but he was still on my...he was watching out for me. I realized that I was going to have to do something. I knew I wasn't over the lines yet, that I was going to have to bail out. I was losing altitude, so I got down to the certain point where I felt it's either now or I'm not going to make it over the line.

T: Is there a certain altitude that you have to—

W: A certain altitude, but I really know what it was. But I knew I couldn’t wait long. It was hilly country, and I didn’t want to land the plane or even try to land it even though...it was forest. There was no place you could really land. But to land the plane like that, where it would be intact for the Germans was not something that was desirable anyway.

T: So you had a couple of tough choices it looks like.

W: Yes. And I had to make them pretty fast. When I finally decided, my radio was evidently acting up at that time too, because the guy on my wing and I had been talking back and forth. He knew I was in trouble. I wanted to be sure that he knew
that I was bailing out, that he would see me actually bail out of the plane. People would know that I made it out of the plane, and had not crashed.

T: Sure.

W: He didn’t understand me when I told him that I was bailing out. I was ready to bail out at the time. I was ready to tear off my helmet with the headset. So I had to repeat it and I wasn’t sure whether he really got it or not. But anyway, I tore off my helmet and pulled the canopy back and—

T: Was this Thunderbolt that you were in, did it have the bubble canopy that slid back?

(1, A, 83)

W: Yes.

T: How would you bail out? By leaving the plane level, or did you have to turn it over?

W: No. No, I didn’t turn it over. No. Level.

T: You could just step out?

W: Yes. You dive out. I had to really dive out, because I stood up on the seat and then went over the side. Then hit my head evidently in the process, either on the canopy or the tail or whatever. I watched the plane crash. It was that sudden, and then I was on the ground. Everything happened in a short time.

T: You’re describing it like it was a, like you had time to make decisions, but the reality was it was going very quickly.

W: It was very fast. Because those things when they, when your oil line gives out and the engine stops, you’re...

T: You’re stuck?

W: Yes.

T: Had the engine seized up before you actually got out of the plane?

W: It had stopped.

T: So you had no forward momentum at all anymore.

W: No.
T: The plane was going down.

W: But I was keeping my nose down to keep the air speed so I wouldn’t spin it.

T: As you’re going down in the parachute there, do you remember what was going through your mind?

W: No. But I watched the plane crash. No, I don’t know what was on my mind. I was just glad that the parachute opened. Because we had had no practice.

T: So your first jump.

W: This was my first jump.

T: Was it your last one too?

W: And my last one. And the last time that I flew a plane.

T: That’s a way to go out, I’ll have to tell you (chuckles).

W: Right (chuckles).

T: Now on the ground, how did you decide what to do?

W: Well, that’s kind of…I knew that I was close to the front lines. I could hear artillery fire. It was an open field. There was snow on the ground.

T: That’s right, it’s January 1.

W: Not much snow. And I landed pretty hard. I could hear saws. There was lumbering going on in the area. I didn’t see anyone. But I could hear the saws going. The woods over there are like gardens; they’ve been replanted and harvested. This was a fairly young forest that was close. My only thought was, I’ve got to get over the front line.

T: You knew you were behind the line, but you didn’t know how far.

W: I knew I had to head southwest. So I kind of...first of all got out of my chute. You were supposed to hide your chute, but there was no place hide the chute in an open field. That much snow. So I started across this field and then I saw a road, a small road. I headed for that. Then took the direction that I felt was closest to southwest (points with hand). That way. And started walking. What I didn’t realize, of course, was that I had bled.

(1, A, 121)
T: What happened to you?

W: I hit my head on something, so I had blood on me. And I had ripped my suit, my flying suit. It was a summer flying suit that I had on, because those planes, they run so hot that you—

T: Even in winter weather you didn’t need to have warm clothing on?

W: Not in the plane, but of course in retrospect, I wished afterwards that I had had my warmer stuff on. But anyway, my suit was ripped from thigh all the way down. So I pulled that off, but I had a bare leg then. Nothing on my head of course.

T: That’s right, because you took your helmet off.

W: Right. Anyway, I started down this road and ahead of me, oh, like from here to the lake—

T: One hundred meters maybe.

W: Around the corner—the road took a bend—came this bicycle, and it kept coming closer and closer. It turned out to be an old man. I guess in my mind I thought, there’s no place to hide. There’s no place to run to. If I just look like I belonged and just kept walking, maybe he would pass me and whatever. So that all ran through my mind. But as he came closer and closer I could see his eyes...that he looked startled, and he went by me. He didn’t say anything or do anything, but he went by me on the bike and I kept going. Then I heard him yelling. I kind of looked back and he was off his bike and just yelling at the top of his voice. I just kept on walking and I kind of got up to the bend that he had come around and at that point a motorcycle came with a sidecar and there were two men, two soldiers. They took me prisoner.

T: Now you’ve been fighting the Germans for a long time. You’ve been flying missions. Before that you were in the service, with the Germans as the enemy. What was it like to have the enemy standing right in front of you? You’ve got these two soldiers there now; the Germans are no longer below you. They’re facing you.

W: Yes. It was scary. I was really afraid. They weren’t mean or anything. They were businesslike and one of them spoke English. It wasn’t very good English. He asked me where my parachute was. He put me in the sidecar and drove back to where I had landed, got the chute, and I had to carry that. But as far as how I felt, it was just scary. I didn’t know what was going to happen. It was the fear of the unknown, and I guess I didn’t know what was going to happen. I thought they could shoot me or they could...I wasn’t worried at the time I guess, about that, because they didn’t even draw a gun on me.

T: You didn’t have a sidearm, did you?
W: I didn’t carry one, no. We were all issued them, but we rarely carried them.

T: Let me ask you how much thought had you given before January 1 about the fact that you might become a POW during the war. Ever occur to you?

W: It never really occurred, no. I never thought it could happen to me. We were told if you are captured, if you have to bail out or whatever, be a prisoner, you just give your name, rank, and serial number, because of all the things that could be...information that could be put together...divulged anything.

(1, A, 179)

T: So you had been prepped a little bit with what to do if.

W: Right. You were to bury your chute or hide your chute so they wouldn’t be able to spot it from the air. I think that was the main thing. Name, rank, and serial number.

T: Those were the instructions anyway.

W: Yes.

T: What did these two Germans do with you?

W: As I said, I went back and they had me hold the chute, the big thing. They took me back to their headquarters. There was a town close by. It was a bombed out little village actually. The headquarters was in the basement of one of the buildings. They brought me into this [building] and down the stairs and into a room and sat me down, and there was an officer in there. A major, I imagine. German major who spoke excellent English and looked very official. But he was friendly and asked me my name, and I told him and my rank. I told him. And my serial number. And he wrote this all down. He said, “Now what were you flying?” And I said, “I’m not going to be able to give you any other information.” He said, “Well, you have to let me know what outfit you were with, because we have to know that you are actually who you say you are and you’re not a spy. And you know what happens to spies,” he said. I said, “Well, I can only give you my name, rank, and serial number.”

T: How hard was it at that time?

W: I was petrified.

T: This was my question. You know what you’re supposed to say. But here’s a guy in the power seat saying I need more than that from you.
W: Right. Yes. And I don’t know why I was so adamant. After that I had occasion to hear interrogations going on and there were others that...I mean, they told everything. Gave their name, rank, and serial number and went on to tell what outfit they were and where they were when they were captured and all that. Anyway, he pressed a button or a buzzer or something on his desk and the door opened. A guy came in and he told me to go with him. He put me into a coal cellar. Another room. An unheated room. It had coal in it. I was the only one in the room. I was cold.

T: Yes. The flight suit that you had on was not very much protection against the weather.

W: No. It wasn’t. In fact, when I sat down it had to be on the coal. I just had that summer flying suit. So I didn’t sit very long. I walked most of the time. I suppose by that time it must have been noon or whatever. I walked and paced and wondered what was going to happen next.

T: I suppose you could have a hundred different scenarios running through your mind.

W: Right. And the windows were painted, but I could tell it was daylight. So I knew when it got dark.

T: Point of clarification: was the mission on the first an early morning mission?

W: Yes.

T: Was it daylight when you bailed out of the plane?

W: Yes. It must have been around nine o’clock [in the morning] maybe.

T: So first light had just come.

W: Yes. So I walked. I mean, I paced all the rest of that day, and sometime during the night they came back in and brought me back into the same room I was in before. The same guy was in there. He said...he asked me my name. I told him. He said, “Oh, that’s a German name.” And I said, “No, it’s not. It’s Danish. My dad’s folks came from Denmark. I’m Danish.” Recently I found out I really was German (laughs).

(1, A, 250)

T: But you believed you were Danish.

W: I really believed I was. Then he quipped on about my German ancestry. He said that’s a German name. He knew better than I did. Then he asked me my rank and my serial number and we went through the same thing. I told him again. Then he
went into what can happen if you aren’t who you say you are. If you’re a spy. They have to know that. They couldn’t take any chances because they were there on the front lines. They had other incidents of people coming that were spies.

T: And yet I haven’t heard you say that he threatened you at all specifically.

W: Not specifically, but he did mention that spies, he said, “You know what happened to spies. They can be shot. We don’t have to keep them.” Inferred at least that could happen. But I was also pretty irritated by this time and I just...probably the German stubbornness (chuckles). I just felt no, no. I’m not telling him. I don’t have to tell him. The Geneva Convention was that we only had to say name, rank, and serial number.

T: How hard was it to keep your wits about you in that situation? The guy in the power seat is sitting over there.

W: I know. Anyway, that’s what happened. So he buzzed and they put me back in the cellar and I walked and sat for a while. All night. Until the next day. The following night they came in and during that next day I could hear them interrogating in the room next. That’s when I heard them ask for name and rank and serial number, and what was their outfit, and where were they, and all that. Most did just give name, rank, and serial number. But a lot of them didn’t.

T: You were almost unwittingly eavesdropping on these kind of interrogations.

W: Right. And I was really irritated when they went on to tell where they were and what outfit they were with and how it happened that they got captured and what they were supposed to be doing.

T: But you were held only by yourself here. There was never anyone else in this room with you. These other ghost interrogations really, you couldn’t see any of these...you could hear them.

W: I couldn’t see, but in the basement of this building, house, I guess...it wasn’t a big building. It hadn’t been a big building, I don’t think, because the rooms were small. But they were all in the basement.

T: Did they question you more than twice, or was that it for you?

W: That was it. Then that night, during the night, they came and got me and put me into the back seat of a Volkswagen, and there was another soldier there who was an officer. American. I’m assuming he was American. I’m sure he was. Or he had a good American accent.

T: He was dressed as an American though.
W: Right. We were transported and there were two soldiers in the front seat. They took us…we could hear artillery fire. Everything was black. No headlights. It was really scary.

T: Were you handcuffed or restrained at all?

W: No. No.

T: Just sitting in the back.

W: Yes. And they were in the front.

(1, A, 319)

T: This would be the third by now, wouldn’t it? January 3.

W: I think so, yes.

T: What was the destination here? Where did they take you?

W: It was the night of the second I think.

T: Going to the third I guess.

W: Right. Then they brought us to a…it wasn’t a long, maybe a half an hour that we were under way. They brought us to a house. There were other prisoners there in this house. There was a big kettle of soup in the kitchen. We could have as much soup as we wanted. I was hungry by that time.

T: I bet you were.

W: Then whoever was in charge said, go find a place to lay down. The front room had bodies all over it, people sleeping. American. I found a place and lay down. Hadn’t more than laid down, I don’t even remember whether I was asleep or not, but I heard someone say “Schleppegrell.” I looked up and they said, come with me. They brought me and this other lieutenant…I think he was, the guy who was in the car with me. We didn’t have a chance to talk much. They brought us to a jail in the town. Since [then] I think the town was Neunkirchen.

T: Neunkirchen’s right down by Saarbrücken, right?

W: Landstuhl too, I think is in that area.

T: That’s right.
W: I just remember those from later...marching through. It was one of these, and they put me into a jail. A civilian jail. Brought me, I think again some kind of brew, a stew or...a thin stew and a piece of bread. I was all by myself in this jail. Had the bars on the windows. Up high. I couldn't look down, but I could kind of see in the distance. I saw P-47s dive bombing in the area. I was there for the day I believe. I don't remember spending a night there. But the whole day. From that point on, it was walking. They put us together with other prisoners and they marched us. At one point even went on a train for a—

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.

T: So you didn't necessarily leave on kind of an easy journey. It was to the jail and...this marching, only Americans in the group?

W: Yes. Only Americans. Enlisted men mostly. We overnighted in barns along the way. Several days anyway. Then they loaded us on a train, and somewhere in the night on this train the train stopped and we were all rushed into an air raid shelter. It was out in the country somewhere. It was a big underground thing, in a hill. There were civilians in there. They were really angry because, of course, because of all the bombing, and their homes were gone. So that was kind of a scary thing too.

T: What was that situation like? Because I was going to ask you about whether you encountered German civilians at all.

W: That was the first encounter really with civilians. But I think the fact that these German soldiers were there made the difference. We were pretty well protected.

T: So in a sense, your German captors are your protectors.

W: Were protectors. Right.

T: Were you afraid of what the civilians might do? Was that a tense situation?

(1, B, 403)

W: I guess afterwards I thought more about it than at the time. It didn't seem to be...you could tell they were angry and they were raising their voices. I couldn't understand German even though I had four quarters at the U[niversity of Minnesota] in German. But nothing oral. So you know how that is. Medical German was one quarter.

T: That's not going to help you much with a bunch of civilians.

W: Anyway, when the air raid was over they loaded us back on the train and brought us, I think, the train let us off at Kaiserslautern and we had to march through Kaiserslautern and eventually get on the train again, and then went on to what I
thought was Frankfurt, but later realized it was either Wetzlar, or it was the Dulag [Luft interrogation facility].

T: Wetzlar was the actual town where the Dulag Luft was. So it could be there.

W: We had to cross the Rhine River, and we had to walk on this bombed bridge. It was still standing but it was...but anyway, in Kaiserslautern too, it was just a devastated city. There was just one vehicle path through the city. Huge piles of rubble on each side. Civilians standing on the top of this rubble throwing rocks and stones. One old man came with a big stick and was hitting one of the... *(trails off)*

We were told to just moving. We were in a single file.

T: That sounds like an unpleasant situation.

W: That was kind of scary, yes. But there again, we had the protection of the German soldiers.

T: You can't escape the irony of that. In a sense, your captors are your protectors.

W: That's right.

T: You got off the train then at Wetzlar, and a number of days have gone by here now, haven't they, since you were actually shot down.

W: Right. Actually I didn't get to the Stalag until the nineteenth [of January 1945].

T: To Stalag Luft I.

W: Yes. In this Dulag place, anyway, they put us...I was in a cell where I couldn't even stand up. It was a short ceiling. I don't think a place to sit, either. I think I had to crouch. They were kind of like cages, only... And I don't remember how long I was there. Not too long. Anyway, then they brought me into another office. Really fancy office. In fact, it must have been a bigger officer than the other one that I had. In fact, I remember there was a woman in there too. It must have been a girlfriend or whatever. In civilian clothes, the girl was.

T: Was this the whole kind of line of questioning from the beginning all over again?

W: Yes. The same thing. I told them I could only give my name, rank, and serial number, and he said, “We'll let you think about that for a while.” So then they took and put me into a cell. Solitary. I was there for eight or nine days.

T: No kidding. Did they call you back in the meantime or just—

W: No.
T: They let you sit and think about it, literally.

W: Yes. And when I wanted to go to the toilet and I pounded on the door, the guard would come and take me to the latrine and stand there until I finished and brought me back. We had coffee, a cup of coffee, and a slice of bread in the morning and at noon they brought usually a soup, a thin soup. Then another slice of bread and usually that had a marmalade or something on it. I think the morning one had just margarine, but the noon one had some kind of marmalade, thin layer. At night it was another slice of bread. And coffee. The ersatz coffee.

(T, B, 452)

T: The ersatz stuff. Didn't taste like coffee at all, really, did it?

W: No. I wasn't into coffee anyway.

T: What was going through your mind during those days you were there? I mean, no one to talk to but yourself I guess.

W: Right. I didn’t...it was just a nightmare. There was a radiator in the room that came on in the morning for a little while. If I sat on it, it was warm, but then it didn’t last long. At night it came on for a little while. There was one window that was painted. I could hear a clock (sings the clock chimes). I knew pretty much what time it was and I could tell when it was light and dark.

T: So you could chart the passing of hours and days almost.

W: Yes. And there were discouraging things on the wall. I could see that there were marks where they evidently had marked days that they were there. I didn’t know if that was ever for real. But there were some like twenty-some days.

T: So plenty to think about and no one to talk to about it.

W: And then the cot. There was a cot there. You had one army blanket. That was it. Once I thought, maybe if I pretended I was sick or something they might take me to the infirmary or whatever. So I rapped on the door one of those days and (making motions for stomach pain).

T: Made the motions so they would understand, too.

W: And he went and I thought, is he going to do anything? He came back with a couple aspirin.

T: So you weren’t leaving the cell because of that.

W: No.
T: How was this situation finally resolved? I mean, they've questioned you a number of times, it's going nowhere. What did they finally do?

W: I was laying on the cot one night and they came and brought me back to that same place again, the same guy. I stood at the desk, was seated at the desk. He had three folders on his desk and in big numbers on the front of one was 404th, 405th, 406th. He said, “We need to know information.” I said, “You’ve got it.” I said name, rank, and serial number. He said, “You’re going to be interested to know that I know a little bit more than that about you. You are in the 371st Fighter Group and the 405th Squadron.” He opened the thing and he said, “Your commanding officer is Major Leonard.” I thought right away, well, their information isn’t that up to date, because just after we got to the new base at Nancy, he got promoted to lieutenant colonel. So he was really a colonel. “Oh,” he said, “I see he got a promotion. He’s a lieutenant colonel.” And he went on and told me planes that I flew, the P-47, and that we came to Tantonville, Nancy, just before Christmas from Dole. He said, “I suppose you’re wondering how we knew you were with this group.” And I said yes. He rang a bell or whatever and the door opened, and he said, “I’ve got someone here that you’re going to be really interested in seeing.” And it was a member of my group that had been shot down after. After me. Just a day or two before at this point. I said to him, “How do they know all these things?” “Well,” he said, “they know all of that stuff anyway. I told them what they wanted to know.”

(1, B, 507)

T: Did you know this guy, this American?

W: Yes. Oh, yes. After all I had gone through I wasn’t really at all happy with that.

T: So you’re really being confronted with someone who had broken the guidelines and told them what they wanted to know.

W: Yes. Because he said, they knew all this stuff anyway.

T: How did that make you feel after sitting in solitary for eight days?

W: Not good at all. That was really...

T: What was the purpose of bringing that guy out there? Were they hoping you would then talk?

W: Evidently he had just been brought in and had told them all this stuff.

T: I’m wondering why they showed him to you. So you would perhaps say some stuff too, is that what...
W: I don’t think so, at that point, no. I think they knew all they wanted to know. And I don’t really think that I, maybe by that time, if I had told them some of these things it wouldn’t have been any new information for them.

T: Were there any repercussions that you know about for the guy who did tell them more than he was supposed to?

W: No.

T: I wondered about that. For you, the questioning the charade is over then.

W: Yes. Right. So we were put on a train and went through, I think we went through Berlin on the way.

T: You might have, yes.

W: Got to the little town of Barth.

T: Boxcars or passenger cars?

W: It was a passenger car.

T: And were you traveling with other Americans too?

W: Yes. Most of them were enlisted men. (pauses three seconds) Wait a minute now. No, I don’t think that’s true. I think almost all were officers. Going to Luft I. Right. Before we got to the Dulag it was almost all enlisted men that I was with.

T: Then they were taken off the train or...

W: Yes.

T: They didn’t tell you where you were going, I take it.

W: No. We never knew.

T: Was the train bombed or strafed along the way? Any kind of...or was this pretty much a...

W: No we didn’t. Other than that one incident where...before I got to the Dulag where we went out. I don’t remember any kind of bombing or anything.

T: Let me move to the next topic, and ask you about Luft I. You were in the North Compound, from your recollection. Let me ask you to, when you go through the gates of the camp, describe the panorama. What did the camp look like?
W: It was barbed wire all around. There were watchtowers. There was an area between the watchtower—there were two sets of barbed wire, with an area in between that. And there were dogs patrolling. Guards in the watchtowers. There were barracks. I think, from what this George Simmons told me, that there were about two thousand in each of the compounds, so there were about eight thousand in the camp. I don’t know how many rooms there were in the barracks, but our room, there were twenty-four of us in one room. There were eight three-tiered bunks.

T: One man to a bunk.

W: Yes. Well, but we were right next to the other person. So there were, let’s see, there were six along one wall. Six beds I mean, right next to one another. These ticks, straw ticks or whatever. The guy that was next to me that I met there sketched the room, and after he got home he sent me a copy of the sketch of the room. He had everything down really.

T: When you look at it, it’s the way you remember it.

W: Yes. And I’ve got that in town [at my residence in Hibbing]. I should have brought that stuff out here. Anyway, there were six men on the bottom, six men in the middle, six men on top. Right next to one another. That made up one wall. Then there the other two sets of three each [that] were over in the far corner. That’s the way the room was set up.

T: So there’s a lot of guys in this room.

W: Twenty-four of us. Yes.

T: Let me ask about when you got in there. Did you know anybody in your barracks?

W: No.

T: Was it easy to make acquaintances or make friends in a situation like this?

W: Yes [it was easy to make acquaintances or make friends]. But everyone is different, and so there were some that you kind of buddied with and others that you wondered what they were doing. How they could possibly be...some of them were...I mean, they would tell stories of things that they did that were... (trails off) I mean, we hear atrocities of what others have done to us, but when you realize that... (trails off) I guess this spirit exists in every set of people.

T: So gritty war stories we can call them.
W: Yes. Like people strafing cattle and that kind of thing.

T: So there were some people that you might want to be friends with and others that—

W: You wouldn’t want to be with.

T: Who did you gravitate to? I mean, you’ve got a smorgasbord of people.

W: Right. The guy that sketched was right next to me, and he was a really nice guy. We played cards. There were cards. There was evidently chess. I don’t remember playing chess.

T: Simmons was his name, right?

W: Simmons. Yes. Said we played chess. I don’t remember a chess set at all, or anything like that.

T: You had time to pass during the day.

W: Oh! Oh, lots of time.

(1, B, 595)

T: Was boredom a problem for you?

W: It [boredom] was a problem, yes. It was a problem. There was a library of sorts, but the books were all really old books, and a lot of English writers. Like I read *David Copperfield* there. Some of those.

T: Things you might not have picked up in civilian life.

W: Never. Probably. So you could read there. But you were inside all the time. In the barracks.

T: Were you allowed to go outside?

W: Yes. A couple times a day we went out for roll call. They counted us off. We did some physical exercise at the time.

T: What’s been done with your clothing? Are you still wearing the same stuff?

W: No. We were issued clothing when we got there.

T: So you’ve got something new on.
W: Yes. Yes. We had an issue of clothing.

T: So more appropriate for the weather maybe too than what you had before, which was summer stuff you said?

W: Right. Yes. Although we were inside a lot. I had a jacket. The food was...you know, it was really bad at that time [Spring 1945].

T: Yes. This is early 1945. Things weren’t going well for the Germans either.

W: Right.

T: What kind of food do you remember the Germans supplying on a daily basis there?

W: [The Germans supplied] Pretty regularly turnips, rutabagas, potatoes. Rarely did we get meat. It would be horse meat, I think. I’m sure it was, because whoever brought it...there was a place we would send one person to get the food for the day. The commissary or whatever. He came back with a great big bone. Leg, with meat on it. We had to carve off. It was cooked. But we knew it was a horse.

T: So the food was fetched from a central facility and brought back to your particular barrack or to your room.

W: Yes. It was bread that was rationed out by the slice, and that was a regular thing. Bread. Then we had these Red Cross parcels that were supposed to be one a week.

T: Yes. I was going to ask if you got them and if so, how often.

W: We got very few of them, and when I got to camp it was like we had to divide it among four, I think.

T: So instead of being for one guy they were divided four ways.

W: Four. Yes. Then they ran out of them.

T: You remember getting them, but they were sporadic and split up.

W: Yes. We looked forward to getting them because they were really...they had a chocolate bar and they had cigarettes and Klim [powdered milk]. There was some kind of pate or spread. Margarine. But the chocolate bar was the best.

(1, B, 643)

T: Now were you a cigarette smoker at the time?
W: No, I wasn’t.

T: So if you had cigarettes...

W: I traded them for chocolate.

T: What could one expect to get for cigarettes? Was there an exchange rate almost?

W: No. I don’t think so. I think we just traded.

T: A barter system really.

W: Yes.

T: I’ve got this, you’ve got that.

W: Right.

T: And the bread, I wanted to ask you too, did the bread come sliced or was it sliced in the room?

W: It [the bread] was sliced in the room.

T: Who did the slicing?

W: Whoever was in charge [did the slicing]. The cook (chuckles). Didn’t have much to cook. But there was a little kitchen area with a stove. Somehow we fashioned...not utensils, but pans out of some of the containers. Tin. Made little containers.

T: So you could cook if you had stuff from these parcels. It could be cooked in the room there.

W: I don’t think there was anything to cook in those [Red Cross] parcels. It was all...D bars is what the chocolate was. I don’t think there was anything to cook.

T: From your perspective, a little bit of soup, some bread. Ersatz coffee in the morning. That about right?

W: Yes.

T: How much was hunger a problem there at Luft I for you?

W: Oh, [hunger was] a big one [problem]. For everybody. We were hungry all the time. That’s all we talked about.
T: You’d think with twenty-one year old guys the subject might be something else, but it was food.

W: No. No. It was food.

T: In what capacity? Was it what you wish you had, or what you would have in the future?

W: [We talked about] What we would have in the future, and we made cakes. When I say about cooking...we’d pool some of the stuff and made what they called Kriegie [German slang for POW] cakes or Kriegie bars or Kriegie cakes, and that was a real treat.

T: You had to pool your stuff to do that.

W: Yes.

T: How was your mood here? I mean, in a sense, I can imagine being pretty depressed here, but how were you handling this?

(1, B, 682)

W: I guess I was handling it fine. I don’t...I mean, I wasn’t scared anymore. I felt fairly secure.

T: So that was past, that fear about what might happen to you.

W: Yes. Really. Yes. We knew the war was going to end. We did have, there was a system of communication from—someone had a radio. Clandestine radio. BBC. Every night we got a report from the BBC, after the planes came.

T: So not from a radio that you had or saw, but somebody had it and the news came around.

W: And the news came around.

T: That’s one thing I wanted to ask you really, how aware you were of what was going on outside the camp.

W: Yes. We were pretty aware. The Germans also gave us the up to date...

T: The Germans gave you?

W: Oh, yes. We had news from the Germans. But it was always way behind what was actually happening.
T: So you could chuckle to yourself that you were better informed than they were.

W: When they’d say things like, the British were, there was heavy fighting around Hamburg or whatever, we already knew that Hamburg was taken by the British. We knew the Russians were coming from the East. So when they said the Russians were at the Oder River, we already knew they were across the river and into the environs of Berlin.

T: This talk of the Russians, what were the rumors around your barracks, the people you knew, about the Russians coming? Was that seen as a good thing or maybe not a good thing?

W: No. It was seen as a good thing. In fact, when we did our exercises and the roll call when we got outside, we called the Germans goons because at that time, the Popeye cartoon.

T: Popeye and Olive Oil, that one?

W: Right. There were goons involved with that thing. They were kind of ugly characters. I don’t remember how…it think it was Popeye.

T: Could be. You’ve got me there.

W: Anyway, we’d call the Germans goons until they realized and we were forbidden to say that. Then exercises we were saying things like—we’re doing our bend ups and things. “Come on, Joe! Come on, Joe!” Joe Stalin. But then they put the kibosh on that too.

T: Was there kind of exercise on a regular basis?

W: Yes. When we were outside for the roll call. After roll call we could mill around for a certain period of time. We couldn’t get out of the compound, but we could talk to others. But I don’t remember talking to people.

T: Were you a person who kind of kept to himself?

W: I think more so, yes. I tended to be.

T: You were kind of a late arrival at the camp too, weren’t you? That camp had been there quite a while.

W: Oh, yes! Oh, yes. There were British that had been shot down the opening of the war, in ’39.

T: Five years or more.
W: I think they had been repatriated, some of them. But a lot of people had spent a lot of time.

T: Was there a pecking order among the prisoners? I mean, not based on rank necessarily, but how did prisoners kind of sort each other out?

W: No. We were all officers. There was a captain in our room. He was one of the ones that I didn't associate with. At the very end of the war I think there were more enlisted men that were brought in. At the very end. They started bringing more in. But it was for officers.

T: Yes. The camp was set up for that. That's right.

W: Yes.

T: There were a number of camps emptied and men marched out. I've heard references to guys stopping at Luft I, so that's an indication since you remember that.

W: Yes.

T: The German guards here at Luft 1 –

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

T: —and now you're twenty-one years old. When you say real old, is that forty or sixty or...

W: Yes. These seemed to be old men.

T: Gray haired grandfather types?

W: Right. That were just too old to be in the active service.

T: Yes. Were they guys you had to worry about or were they pretty harmless?

W: Pretty harmless. We didn't have much interaction. Of course, the ones on the watchtowers, we never had any interaction with.

T: You could see them, but that was all.

W: Yes.
T: So these are guards that...did they come around to the barracks, into your rooms at all?

W: Oh, yes. Every once in a while there would be a surprise inspection. They were looking for...I don’t know. Anything, I suppose. Whatever they could look for.

T: What were your personal possessions by this time?

W: Nothing. I really had nothing much. Everything had been taken from me.

T: That’s right. I’m thinking you’re walking down the road after your plane was shot down. You had nothing with you.

W: Yes. I had nothing. I think I had a watch, but that was taken from me somewhere along the line.

(2, A, 14)

T: Did the Germans provide, or did you have a mess kit or a knife, fork and spoon, that kind of stuff?

W: I think we pooled all that stuff.

T: So you didn’t have your own individual knife, fork and spoon.

W: No. No. And we took turns doing the dishes.

T: So you really had meager, if any, possessions you really had to take care of.

W: Yes. I didn’t....

T: From your perspective, how well did other prisoners get along with each other? You’ve mentioned different personality types already. How did that go?

W: Yes. We didn’t have any fights or anything like that in our room. Differences of opinion, I guess maybe, but I think everyone got along pretty well. We all had that common hunger.

T: That’s a couple times that’s come up now, so that was really a focus. I guess if you don’t get enough food that’s...

W: Yes. And we talked about what we were going to have afterwards when we got out.

T: What did you envision yourself wanting when you got out?
W: Cake and pastry and ice cream. Mostly sweets.

T: Were those things that you liked before? Sometimes I’ve heard people talk about how they ended up, they thought they wanted things that they didn’t really even like before they were in prison camp.

W: No. No. I didn’t really think about that. But I guess one of the things that was a plus for me afterwards is that I never had any problem with any food. I liked all food.

T: Did you before as well?

W: No.

T: So this is something that’s changed.

W: Yes. I always eat what’s there. One of my big problems, in fact, was eating everything on my plate.

T: When you got out of the service, you mean.

W: Yes. Eating everything on my plate and then...I think back raising my kids too. The clean plate club syndrome.

(2, A, 35)

T: I was going to ask you later, but let me ask you now, sort of jump ahead. Thinking about ways that you sense that you were changed by your POW experience, and here it was with food.

W: In a lot of ways. The food was one thing. I had a weight problem when I got out because I just ate everything and put on a lot of weight.

T: After the service.

W: Yes. Put on a lot of weight. In fact, by the time I got home it didn’t look like I’d been starved at all.

T: So you ate and put on weight pretty quickly.

W: Yes. The first thing that we were given when we were flown out...we went to this Camp Lucky Strike.

T: In Le Havre, France.

W: We could have as much ice cream, and malted, as we wanted. It was...
T: High calorie stuff.

W: Yes.

T: How did that, when you got back from the service, how did that finally...how did you stabilize that?

W: Actually I joined TOPS, Take Off Pounds Sensibly. My wife belonged for years, and I had this problem all the time. I was getting close to two hundred pounds.

T: And you’re not a tall guy.

W: No. And so she said, “Why don’t you come to TOPS.” I thought, it’s all women. There were all women. I was the only guy to start with.

T: When was it that you finally really confronted that and decided to do something about it? How long did it take you?

W: About six years ago.

T: So for decades you battled that.

W: Right.

T: Was it something that you thought about, that you linked to your POW experience or was it just part of your life? I mean kind of this...the food.

W: Oh, yes. I think it had a lot to do with the POW experience. Oh, yes. Definitely. You had the food fixation.

T: You remember...you’ve talked about it in the camp. So it’s something...it really did follow you home again.

W: It really did. Yes.

T: How else do you feel your experience as a POW may have changed you as a person?

(2, A, 61)

W: I used to think that as an American that we were always right, that we could do no wrong, that if we were in a war that it was justified, that the other side was the meanies. I think I still had that feeling when I got out of the service, but I think because I went into German then and teaching German and getting to know the Germans, the culture. I wound up taking groups of kids over there...
T: Did you really? That's very interesting.

W: Then I was also the dean of the German language village for Concordia College at Moorhead.

T: Oh, yes. Up in Bemidji.

W: I was the German dean for ten years, in the '70s. But getting back to the...I've been a really anti-war person ever since. I think it reached its peak in the Vietnam era. I had...the boy, my son that was killed, was the first conscientious objector from Hibbing. He had to go through an awful lot to convince them. My oldest son went to Vietnam and after he was over there decided he couldn't bear arms. Refused to. And he almost got court martialed and we went through a lot in Washington to get him back home. So I've been really anti-war, and especially this last one. I just... (trails off)

T: I find it interesting, in a way, that after your experience as a POW of the Germans that you end up as a language teacher of German.

W: It was just a chance thing, I think, to start with, because I was in pre-med. I told you that. Before I went in the service. But I was not happy with that. I knew I wasn't going to go through with that. That impelled me more than anything to join the service, to enlist. Then when I got out, then I went back to school under the GI Bill and I didn't know what I was in or what I actually wanted to do, so I...but I did want to take some German. That was one thing that...I was really fascinated with foreign language. So I got into the College of Education and took some German courses and just by chance met Dr. Emma Birkmeyer. She was a professor of education and decided I'm going to go into that. I enjoyed the idea of teaching. I enjoyed kids. She really inspired me, and so I took my practice teaching there and as I said, I lucked out. They hired me. So I mean I was good enough for that.

T: You've mentioned earlier you've taken student groups back to Germany.

W: Yes.

T: How was that for you as an ex-POW, let's say for the first time, going back to Germany? Was that strange at all?

W: I went back the first time under the NDEA, National Defense Education Act. I got a fellowship thing. First of all I went to Grand Forks, North Dakota, one summer and took courses in language. Then the following year got another deal where I went to Bad Boll in Germany and was there for six weeks. So that was my first time back to Germany, 1962, since I'd left it in 1945. Then I was teaching at Hibbing at the time, and that was summer stuff. I really got enthused about the new way of teaching using the spoken language, realized how important that was. To me too. Was
instrumental in getting our language laboratory here and got really involved that way.

Then the German club, I had a really active German club here, and in 1966...when I was over there in '62 and went around to different spots in Germany I realized that I really enjoyed different things over there and I thought, I've got to get group together and bring them over here and show them these things. So in 1966 I put together a program and took twenty-five students by myself. I was the only adult. We spent eight weeks in Germany. We'd stay in youth hostels. We traveled by train. We stayed in places like, on the Rhine in Sankt Goar. We stayed there like four days in the youth hostel and I had the kids go out and really get involved with the communities.

(2, A, 133)

T: Very good. Very good.

W: Eight weeks we spent in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

T: When you took students back there was that...did your students know you were an ex-POW?

W: Yes. I drew on that some in class.

T: In what ways?

W: By telling them something about my experience. Because I always had...at that time, you know, right after the war, I really had their attention.

T: Sure. So they knew.

W: Anyway, that was my first group that I took over in 1966. Then I started with Concordia...called me in '69 and interviewed me. I became the German language dean there. So in college there were college groups that I took over. Then there was a group that operated out of the cities at Waseca that took...they had home experiences where the kids stayed in the homes.

T: With families.

W: Yes. I got involved with that program for a number of years.

T: A number of things there linking up with Germany again.

W: Yes. Right.

T: I wanted to go back, because we kind of interrupted the story. I wanted to ask you about the liberation from Stalag Luft I. That’s its own story. You knew from
your news updates, I guess, that the Russians were coming. I wonder if you can, from your own perspective, talk about their arrival. From your eyes, what did that look like?

W: The way it happened...I think it was 29 April [1945]. The watchtowers were empty. There were no guards up there.

T: So literally from one day to the next, they were gone.

W: Yes. We got up in the morning, and they [watchtowers] were empty. Of course, word got around real fast that the Russians were approaching. Then we had to go out and we took our cans that we had and then we dug trenches. There was an American commander [Col. Zemke] in charge of the group that took over. We had to make trenches in case they came over and strafed or whatever and bombed. On May 1 a Jeep came with Russians in it. That was the front runner. Roosevelt had died...I think on the twelfth.

T: 12 April, right.

W: The Russians were really irritated that we weren’t wearing black bands. They couldn’t understand why...that’s the way the word came out, so we all had to get a hold of black bands to put on.

The other thing was when we arrived in Barth, this little town that the camp was close to, it was really a quaint, really pretty little town. Spotless. I mean it was winter of course and the snow, everything was clean. We marched down the street and out to the camp. When the Russians came then, and we had a chance to get into the town...

T: So you could leave on your own...

W: No. No. We weren’t supposed to leave the camp at all. But there was...evidently there was...because at one point I got back into the town and it was just utter devastation. Everything had been...the Russians had gone through and...you’d see pianos on the street that had been pushed out of balconies. Windows, everything was broken. It was just a mess. It was like the place had been bombed. There was no industry there, so it wasn’t bombed.

(2, A, 189)

T: The Russians had gone through there. Did you see any German civilians when you went in there?

W: No. No, I didn’t.

T: Any Russians? Or was it pretty much a ghost town?
W: It was [pretty much a ghost town]...there must have been Germans there if they didn’t leave, but I think they were a frightened group that... The front line troops, the Russians, we heard at least, were really rough. They were raping and pillaging and all that. Actually understandable, knowing what they had gone through from the Germans.

T: Tit for tat, I think.

W: Yes. I guess.

T: After the Russians got there, how many days was it before you actually left the camp?

W: I think we left on the thirteenth. So it was about two weeks.

T: What were the rumors during those two weeks about what was going on?

W: Oh! Lots of rumors as far as the way the war was going. Of course we knew when the war was over. The eighth or ninth, there.

T: The Russians continued to be seen as liberators even though you couldn’t leave the camp?

W: Yes. Right. Yes.

T: How did you finally leave the camp?

W: Finally the British flew planes in to the airfield. I think it was close by. We had to walk to the airfield wherever it was. It wasn’t in Barth. And be flown out. They were big bombers. I think they were B-17s. But I don’t remember that. I just remember they were big planes.

T: Planes that you were grouped into or something. Groups and flown to...

W: Flown to Le Havre.

T: Were you, at that point in Le Havre, were you debriefed at all about your POW experience? Where you’d been, what you’d been through?

W: You know it wasn’t until forty years later that I had my first debriefing. They finally decided, the Veterans Administration, to debrief us after, forty years I think it was.

T: That’s a little too late; but better late than never, I suppose.

W: Yes.
T: Let me move forward. You were shipped or flown back to the States?

(2, A, 225)

W: Shipped.

T: And when you got back stateside, how soon was it before you were able to get back to Minnesota to see your family?

W: I think it was right away. We had orders to be mustered out, I guess they called it, in Santa Monica, California. But we had time to go home first.

T: A delay en route or something.

W: Yes.

T: Now were your folks still in Littlefork?

W: No. My dad had been transferred to, by that time to Milaca.

T: So after you finished high school he was now somewhere else.

W: He was sent to Cass Lake first and then to Milaca. See, there was a period of time there. They knew that I was...they got the word that I was a prisoner of war—or they got the word that I was missing in action. But it was a long time before they got the word that I was a prisoner of war. The first indication they had was, we had an opportunity in camp to write a letter. It could only be a short one and whatever. Those letters were evidently broadcast and picked up by ham operators on the East Coast. Somehow my folks got phone calls. They got letters from ham [radio] operators that they had picked up my...and the folks knew that I had written them because of things that I said in the letter, and I purposely had written things in the letter that I knew my folks would realize I was writing it.

T: It was for sure you.

W: Yes.

T: Did your folks ever talk about how tough that period of not knowing was for them?

W: Yes. That was very hard for them. Very hard. Because it took a long time before they found out I was a POW, and then I never got any letters from them. In camp.

T: Of course, they wouldn't know where you were.
W: So that was a traumatic experience for them.

T: When you first got back, when you first saw them again, how much did they ask you about your POW experience, Bill?

W: Nothing. I didn't want to talk about it.

T: Would you say it was more that they didn't ask you or you didn't tell?

W: My mother was always after me to to write down while I remembered. But it took me a long time before I finally sat down and actually wrote out some stuff.

T: Did your folks ask you at all about your flying combat missions?

W: No.

T: So there were two pieces of your military experience, and they didn't really ask about either one of them.

W: No, they didn’t. I don’t remember them asking. I think they felt, and probably rightly so, that I just didn’t want to talk about it.

(2, A, 282)

T: It's interesting that you, in that sense, you've been gone from home for at least a year by this time, and there's a period around which everyone seems to be dancing almost. A year of experiences and no one's talking about, they're not asking and you're not either.

W: Yes. Right. And so, I guess I didn’t think that much about the debriefing either. Until they called me in.

T: Forty years later.

W: Yes.

T: Now your folks lived to be, I think you said ninety-four and eighty-seven?

W: Yes.

T: Did that change over time? Was there a point where they did ask or you told them?

W: I don’t think I ever told them. (pauses three seconds) I don’t think I ever told them. And I didn’t write things down that...they were both gone by the time I made the tape and had written anything.
T: I’m looking here, for the tape here, you’ve got your flight log here on the table.

W: Yes.

T: Your folks had that.

W: I had that with me, right, so that was sent back. But I don’t think that got back until after I was back home.

T: So it came and you got it.

W: I was already back. Yes.

T: Is that something that was packed away for years or something that you looked at over time or not?

W: Yes. Yes, I’ve had it out and looked at it for dates. I keep thinking, when was I on Long Island on Suffolk Field, and all that.

T: All your missions. Every time you flew. Stateside as well.

W: Every time. Yes. From the very first flight.

T: Pages and pages. Bill, after your release from Barth and anytime forward, how often did you dream about any part of your POW experience?

W: *(sighs)*

T: Not about your combat experience, but just about your POW experience. Did those things come back in dreams at all? Parts of that.

W: Yes. The solitary bit [at the Dulag Luft]. For a long time at least. *(speaking slowly and carefully)* That was the worst period of my life. That was far worse than being in camp.

T: You mentioned already too, that by the time you got to camp you felt that sense of uncertainty, what was going to happen, was kind of gone.

W: Yes.

T: So the solitary is something that did stick with you.

W: It did. Yes.

*(2, A, 334)*
T: Now you were married in 1948.

W: ’48, yes.

T: When you were married, did Norma know that you had been a POW?

W: I don’t think she knew. I don’t think so. She knew I was a veteran. She knew I was a flier. I don’t think she...you’d have to ask her, I guess. I don’t think she knew.

T: How did she find out?

W: I must have mentioned it to her.

T: But it was later.

W: I went to...you know what the Newman Club is? It’s a Catholic organization at a secular...

T: Yes. They have Newman Center, at the University of Minnesota they have one.

W: Right. And that’s where Norma and I met. Right after the war. When I went back to school. There were a lot of us veterans around, and so I guess it came out that way. But it wasn’t anything that I really talked about. But then she came to the U. She graduated in ’45. (thinking) Is that right? She graduated in ’45, I think, and started at the U about the same time or maybe a year after I came back. So I think by that time everyone kind of knew that I was, had been, a pilot.

T: When you worked in Hibbing here at the high school, did your fellow teachers know that you’d been a POW?

W: I don’t think so, no. It wasn’t anything that I talked about. No. Until later. But I was never very close with my fellow teachers.

T: Oh, really?

W: Not really. No. Norma was active in –

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.**

W: — and so I just...I didn’t feel like I had anything in common with most of my fellow teachers.

T: I see.
W: There were a few. I got more involved with her associates in the mental health area.

T: Did Norma work in Hibbing too?

W: Yes. And Virginia.

T: You mentioned the debriefing by the military, by the VA it was, in the mid-1980s. How was that for you? Because I’ve heard you say you kind of didn’t talk about it, didn’t think about it. Here suddenly you’re being asked, okay, talk about it. How was that for you?

W: It was really hard. Really difficult. I mean, then I really had clammy hands (chuckles). Yes. And I don’t remember particularly that I felt better afterwards, either.

(2, B, 394)

T: That’s interesting. The old notion about the talking cure wasn’t...

W: I don’t think so. But afterwards is when I started talking about it more.

T: So the interview we’re having now might not have been possible before that VA debriefing.

W: Yes. I think not.

T: When you think about your POW experience, what would you say was the most interesting part of it? You talked about the most difficult part, being in solitary there at the Dulag. But when you sort of view that whole thing as a film, what was the most interesting part of it for you?

W: As a POW? (long pause) I guess I don’t really know. It’s been an experience that I’m glad I had.

T: Why do you say that?

W: Well, it’s just been such a big part of my life. I guess I learned a lot. I feel like I learned a lot. I grew a lot. Grew up a lot. I was pretty naïve and innocent before I went in the service. I was always the youngest in my class in school.

T: You were born, that’s right, September 3.

W: So I was sixteen when I graduated [from high school].

T: That’s right, you were. Class of ’40.
W: So I started the U. Then I was seventeen that fall.

T: And a year makes a difference at that age.

W: Yes. Yes. Going from a little place like Littlefork, with a population of five hundred to the big campus. At that time there were thousands... But I guess I’m really glad I had that experience.

T: As far as making you the person that you are today.

W: Yes. I think it had a lot to do with...I wouldn’t choose to go through that again, but I’m just glad it’s part of my history. And I also feel a certain sense of accomplishment when I can talk to a group of students and invariably it comes out before I get to say how anti-war I am. I really enjoy doing that because it always surprises...it seems like it surprises the young people.

T: They might expect, given what they’re talking about, the opposite, right? That’s the last question I had and again Bill, on the record, I’ll thank you very much for taking time this evening. I found this a very interesting conversation.

W: I’m glad you did. I’m glad I had the chance to talk to you too.

END OF INTERVIEW
T: This is still 16 April 2005, and this is a conversation with Norma Schleppegrell. Thanks very much. The question I asked Bill earlier was when you married, and it was 1948, right?

N: Yes.

T: How much did you know about Bill’s past as a fighter pilot and as a POW?

N: Very little. Very little. It was not something that he wanted to talk about in great detail at all. Of course, I was in high school during the war and so my perceptions of the war were from the newspapers and...I didn’t know Bill then.

T: Right. You met only after he came back from service.

N: After he came back. I remember that he invited me to go with him out to the VA hospital and he was really very anxious. It was going to be his last checkup out there. He didn’t go into detail about what that was or anything. He was just anxious to be done with them. I remember him saying that.

T: Were you married by this time?

N: No. No. This was just a date. A date to the VA. On the streetcar. We were both at the university and we were both active in Newman Club and I was sitting around and we were good friends and he said, “Do you want to ride out?” And I said sure. And I remember on the way out him saying now this is my last time that I have to go out there. I don’t remember a lot. When I got out there I waited for him and I have no idea...he wasn’t there very long. He came out and, whew! That’s done. It was just not something he wanted to talk about. I knew he’d been in the war but...

W: Did you know I was a POW?

N: Yes. I knew you’d been a prisoner of war.

T: When did you learn that? Do you remember?

N: It was in conversation. Kind of general conversation and it was made very light of and, very honestly, I didn’t understand the full impact of what that meant because I was what, twenty, nineteen?

T: What year were you born?
N: I was born in 1927. Child bride.

T: So you learned only, really in, very gradual sense about his POW experience.

N: Yes. Well, and I became much more aware. It was interesting. When I walked through here earlier and I heard him saying that he discussed it with his students. Actually he shared very little with his students, because they talked about that after. About they wished he would have told them more. He kept it very...and with our children too...very...it was not a scary story at all. It was a thing that happened, and it was only in coming to know him over the years that I realized what a terrible impact that had been.

T: But it took a while for you to learn that really.

N: To learn that. Yes, it did. Because it was something...and it was something that it took our children...in fact, our children were the ones really, as they got older, really pushed him. “Dad, really tell us what happened.” I’ll tell you very honestly, the full impact of it hit me when in 1990...was it 1994 or ’92 that that act—the Federal Government passed an act. You’ve probably talked about this. That, because of the hostages that were held...

(2, B, 469)

T: In Iran.

N: In Iran. The Federal Government passed a law that said that as they do all prisoners of war...must be interrogated after and fill out these forms and when the powers that be in the VA read the law, ooh, they had to go back to World War II and find all these guys and ask them. He had never been debriefed. I’m sure he told you that. That’s when I really understood everything that he went through because that was what, four or five...it was a many page, very detailed questionnaire that he had to fill out. When I sat and read that I can remember being just stunned at a lot of the details that I had never heard before. That none of us had ever heard before. And that’s when the children started saying, “Dad, you really should get all of that.”

T: That was nearly forty years after you were married.

N: Yes. And it was almost forty years after the event too, which was terrible because it was like you flunked war. That was the way, the impression they were left with at the end of the Second World War. If you got...it’s like playing a kids’ game. Na na na na na. You got caught. You flunked what you were supposed to do.

You didn’t. It’s only in learning about that and then going back and recognizing the decisions that he made throughout our life because of that experience that I could begin to put the two things together and recognize that there
were lots of places where he was very careful not to push something or do something because he dealt internally with what happened to him.

T: So it really gave you a chance to kind of read the decades backwards and see that there had been times in the past that were...

N: Oh, absolutely!

T: It took you decades to get to that point.

N: Well, it did because he didn’t talk about it and he also did not have negative feelings about—or he didn’t share them. I was really aware of what he managed to do out of that experience when we went to an ex-POW convention in New Ulm. When was that? In 1990. I was just stunned because Bill’s attitude was 180 degrees different from the majority of the men that were at that place at that time. They were still fighting World War II. They were still fighting. And I’m sure you’ve seen that in your interviews.

T: Yes.

N: And bitter. Carried terrible bitterness. That’s when I realized how lucky we were.

T: You hadn’t seen that over the years.

N: Not at all. In fact, almost the opposite. The idea that...he really worked hard and has been honored. I don’t know if he told you that the German Government gave him a very wonderful honor.

T: No. I didn’t hear that.

N: Yes. Well, they did. He was the director of the [Concordia College, Moorhead] language camps, up in Bemidji. The German Government and the American Association of German Teachers honored him in Atlanta for the work that he had done with young people over the years to help them understand, kind of a people-to-people thing. Actually what war does to people that are good people but in the circumstances are put into situations that...and what he had done with young people and received a very, very nice...it was very nice occasion. A very great honor. He also was the only...when the American Association of German Teachers decided to revise the curriculum in how German was taught, he was the only non-native and the only high school teacher in the United States that was put on this national committee to redevelop how you teach a foreign language and the parts of it that speak to culture and that speak to the idea of how people get along with people. So over the years, because that was his philosophy, we didn’t...I didn’t recognize at first what that other...and I was naïve. I didn’t have any experience about that.
T: Yes. That’s right. No hook to hang that information on.

N: I was in high school and you look at high school students and...I mean, I thought I was very patriotic and we saved tin foil and did all those kind of things that you were supposed to do, and I had cousins that fought in the South Pacific. I had a cousin that was killed in the South Pacific. So the war kind of touched us in those ways, but it seemed like it was just a relief that they were home and we were starting a new life. He wasn’t telling me anything bad. Wasn’t that nice? In 1990 I found out how much he really kept to himself and what that did to him positively and negatively professionally. Because there were people that knew him that really wanted him to go into administration, really wanted him to move up the ladder in terms of his profession, and he would talk about that and say I don’t need that pressure. I don’t need that pressure. In looking back, I recognize that really what he was saying is I don’t need, I can’t, I don’t want that pressure—I can’t. We’re both very active and I follow his lead in that. In the peace movement. We both have such strong, strong feelings about that because we recognize what...he still has bad dreams. He still has...it’s something you never get over. I’m really happy that there is someone who’s taking the time to listen, because I think everybody needs to tell their story. Maybe the men that are bitter need to tell it even more than the men who’ve been able...

T: Deal with it in a sense?

N: In a sense. Yes. That stunned me. That episode at New Ulm just stunned me. That they could be so angry that we had treated people humanely.

T: It’s bizarre, isn’t it?

N: Isn’t it?

T: Yes. Forty-some years later.

N: That they could be just...one man told a story. He said as we were getting off the boat they were putting the German prisoners on the boat and one of the men with me took a knife and tried to stab the man as he was getting on the boat. And you paid them money! You paid them eight cents to harvest beets or whatever they did. I mean they were just enraged.

T: And kept that rage with them all those years.

N: And that’s all that many years later that they...that’s all that group could talk about when they got out to that prison camp at New Ulm was, Look at! They had a bed to sleep in. Or, Look at! They had walls.
T: It must make it sort of difficult to be with the organization at all. I mean, we kind of talked about that one too.

N: Yes.

T: Thanks for sharing that. That’s a very good perspective.

N: Yes. I think it’s really an important perspective on the whole...

T: A perspective that you’ve only gained, really after the fact, and then put together backwards almost.

N: Backwards. Yes. Really. Because, well, Bill isn’t a complainer. He really is a very positive person. In fact, he’s been honored for the fact that he was so positive in terms of how he taught and worked with children. That kind of stands out. *Immer positiv.* [German: always positive]

T: *Immer positiv. Sehr gut.* Thank you very much, Norma.

END OF INTERVIEW