Les Schrenk was born on a farm in Long Prairie, Minnesota, on 16 November 1923. One of three children, he grew up on the farm.

Les enlisted in the US Army Air Corps in November 1942. After completing Basic Training, Les was trained as a ball turret gunner on B-17 Flying Fortress four-engine heavy bombers. By early 1944, Les was flying missions from England with the 327th Bomb Squadron, 92nd Bomb Group, part of the 8th Air Force.

On 22 February 1944, during a mission to Germany, Les’s B-17 was shot down over German-occupied Denmark, and he was captured. After interrogation at the central Dulag Luft facility, Les spent time in Stalag Luft VI Heydekrug and Stalag Luft IV Gross Tychow. When the Germans evacuated Luft IV on 6 February 1945, more than eight thousand POWs were marched out in groups, towards Germany. For Les, this meant eighty-six days on the road before being liberated by advancing British troops on 2 May 1945.

With other liberated men, Les was evacuated to France, then to the United States. He spent some time recovering from his POW ordeal before being discharged later in 1945. Again a civilian, Les returned to Minnesota, was married in 1948 (wife Bernice), and remained a resident of Long Prairie.
T: Today is Friday, 18 February 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I’m interviewing Mr. Lester Schrenk in the living room of his home in Edina, Minnesota. First, on the record, Mr. Schrenk, thanks very much for taking time to participate in this project.

L: Thank you very much.

T: For the record, I have that you were born on a farm, Long Prairie, Minnesota, on 16 November 1923. You grew up on the farm with one brother, one sister. You enlisted in the service. Enlisted, or were you inducted?

L: No, I enlisted.

T: You enlisted. On your birthday [known from pre-interview information].

L: On my birthday, nineteenth birthday.

T: In 1942. So a young man of nineteen leaving the farm and joining the service. I think you said before we started taping, that was really your first time off the farm.

L: That was the first time off the farm. The only other time I had been away was one night spending with my grandmother who lived in town, in Long Prairie.

T: So your world up to that point was pretty small.

L: About a pinpoint (chuckles).

T: You joined the service. You were going to be gone far away for a long time. How did that feel to a young man?

L: I was actually excited, looking forward to it. Looking forward to getting away from home. Making new friends.

T: So for you it was an adventure, it sounds like.

L: That’s right. An adventure. Right.
T: Now how did you decide to pick the Army or the Air Corps over the Navy?

L: Because my brother was already in the Air Force, and he was taking his training at that time at Biloxi, Mississippi. Big brother…I imagine little brother wanted to follow him.

T: So you thought, if it’s good enough for my big brother, good enough for me?

L: Exactly.

T: You’re the last boy at home. Did your folks try to talk you out of it in any way?

L: Oh, you bet they did.

T: Did they?

L: Yes. Oh, yes.

T: What kind of arguments did your mom or dad use?

L: I can’t remember the arguments, but I’m sure that their concerns were having both of us in the service and possibly getting killed. They never said that, but I’m sure that that was in back of their mind.

(1, A, 24)

T: And you’re also...you were the last hired hand, as it were, to leave the house.

L: Exactly. That was one of the arguments that they used. That my father was getting older and work was getting harder for him.

T: So left to do the work on the farm was mom, dad, and your sister.

L: No. My sister had already gone. She was older than both of us. She was working in a defense plant in Detroit, Michigan.

T: So that was it. When you left your folks were by themselves.

L: My parents were by themselves.

T: So it was a big deal you leaving home.

L: Yes, it was.

T: By early 1944 you were a ball turret gunner on B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft [American four engine bomber], and you were flying with the 8th Air Force, 92nd
Bomb Group, 327th Bomb Squadron. I want to go back to 22 February 1944 which was to be your tenth mission.

L: It was my tenth mission.

T: Was that mission in any way to be different from other missions you had already flown?

L: Actually, I was happy that it was diversionary raid to Aalborg [Denmark], because I considered it an easy mission.

T: Why would that be easier than other missions?

L: For one thing, it wasn’t an air raid on Germany proper. Germany defended their home territory much more than what they did the occupied countries.

T: And you knew this.

L: Oh, yes. I knew that.

T: So for you, when you found out it was a diversionary mission to Denmark, that was good news.

L: To me it was good news.

T: Now how many planes were part of that mission, do you remember?

L: No, I really don’t. It wasn’t that great a number. I would say it would be possibly less than one hundred.

T: So relatively speaking, a smaller group.

L: A smaller group.

T: And did you carry bombs on the mission?

L: Oh, yes. Yes, we did. That was the only mission that we carried fragmentation bombs.

T: The target was Aalborg?

L: Aalborg airport. It was a German military airfield.

T: Now was your plane brought down by ground fire or aircraft?

L: No. It was brought down by a German Ju-88 fighter [Junkers twin engine aircraft].
T: So it was aircraft [that brought down your plane].

L: It was aircraft.

T: Before or after the bombs were dropped?

\[(1, A, 46)\]

L: After.

T: So you were on the way back.

L: We were on the way back. We were already well on our way home.

T: Aalborg is there in the north of Denmark.

L: The very tip of Denmark. The northern tip.

T: What happened from your perspective in the ball turret there? What happened to bring that plane down? What did you see?

L: I heard a very loud explosion. I looked out of my ball turret window and I saw number four engine on fire. Every once in a while there would be another explosion. In fact, every few seconds there was another big explosion and about that time I heard our pilot call out to the navigator, “Where’s the nearest land?” The navigator came back and said due east. That tipped me off right there that we were doomed.

T: Now had you seen the German aircraft?

L: Yes. Oh! We were being attacked by a huge number of them. Both Me-109s [Messerschmitt single engine fighter] and Ju-88s.

T: Now this was or wasn’t the first time you had been attacked by aircraft.

L: Oh, never.

T: Other missions too, or not?

L: Oh, yes. Every mission. At that time the Germans had air superiority. We didn’t have the long range fighters, so every time you went on a mission you could be expected to be attacked a number of times.

T: And as far as fighter cover, you were on your own.
L: We were on our own. We were out of range for our fighter aircraft at the time.

T: Over Denmark you would be, yes. Now were you part of any kind of exchange of gunfire? Were you firing your own guns at this time?

L: Oh, certainly. I had two .50 caliber machine guns that I was firing.

T: I’ve actually seen the ball turret on a B-17. It looks like a claustrophobic space.

L: Actually it is. Believe it or not, it measures exactly three feet across. Inside that three feet you’ve got two massive .50 caliber machine guns. You also have two large ammunition boxes that take up about a third of the turret. Then you’ve got a massive...it was the forerunner of computerized sights, but it was a massive sight within the turret. So all that, plus you are in that turret.

T: I’m trying to think with all that stuff, where does Lester Schrenk go?

L: You’re completely doubled up. Your knees are up almost to your chin and your hands are up alongside your face with the handles of the machine guns.

T: Now you could also spin this turret, right?

L: You could turn that turret completely in any direction as far as 180 degrees up, vertical.

T: Did it take some practice to learn to spin and shoot at the same time?

L: We had quite a bit of training. I didn’t find it hard at all.

T: Now did you have to spend the whole mission inside that turret, or did you have to just get into it when you were over enemy airspace?

(1, A, 79)

L: You got into it quite a while before enemy airspace, because a lot of times the enemy would come out across the English Channel to meet you. So you had better be in that turret in plenty of time. A lot of times a person would be in that turret for a good ten, sometimes even twelve hours. And you did not dare leave the turret for any reason at all.

T: Now on the day that your plane was shot down, you had to get out of the turret to get out of the plane, right?

L: Right.

T: What kind of a process is that?
L: The ball turret is by far the hardest position in the whole airplane to make an escape from. It's got a lot of hazards. The ball turret is powered by hydraulic motors, but the hydraulics are powered by electrical power. So if either one of those two go out, you are stuck in that turret. You are not going to get out.

T: So there's no manual—

L: There is a manual [release] but only from the outside, and if you're shot down nobody's going to come back to...they won't have time to come back and crank you out of that turret.

T: You have to be left out it in other words. You can't get yourself out manually.

L: No. You cannot get yourself out manually. Then there's also a number of gears and everything and if any of those are damaged in any kind of way your turret would jam. There were cases where they had to make a belly landing and couldn't get the ball turret gunner out of his turret and he was crushed underneath the plane.

T: He couldn't exit from the turret out of the plane.

L: You have got no parachute.

T: You've got to go out through the plane itself.

L: You've got to come up through the airplane. You could open the door and drop out, but you would have no parachute.

T: Because you don't have your chute on.

L: No. Then to make matters worse, I was actually much too large for the ball turret.

T: I was going to say, the other ball turret guy I interviewed was smaller than you.

L: Guys are usually very small petite-type of people. Being I was so large, I couldn’t wear my heavy flying suit. I couldn’t wear a helmet. I couldn’t wear what we call a flak jacket, which protects your body against shrapnel. That was the only way I could fit in the turret.

T: Almost amazing that you ended up in the ball turret as opposed to some other position.

L: It was a funny situation. I was the last one to join the crew. The rest of the positions had already been taken and the pilot came to me and wanted me to fly with the crew. Of course, I was real elated because he was one of the nicest pilots
I’ve ever known. So I wanted to get on his crew. I could have maybe talked somebody else into taking the ball turret, but once I flew in it I liked it.

T: Did you really?

L: I liked it.

T: On this day, the twenty-second, once the plane was hit and you heard that they were looking for land, what happened then from your perspective, because you had to get up out of there.

(1, A, 110)

L: That saved my life. If the plane would have exploded, I would have exploded; I would have been gone. There wouldn’t have been a chance of escape. But being that I knew that we had twenty minutes to reach the nearest land, I had ample opportunity to get out of the ball turret, put on my parachute, and be ready to jump.

T: And did you get out pretty much right away when you heard that?

L: Not right away, but fairly soon because the German aircraft were actually following us. They weren’t shooting at us anymore at this time. There was a kind of a code between us and the Germans. If you surrendered and put your landing gear down it was a sign that you were giving up and that you would either land the plane or bail out of it. We did that and the Germans respected it. Most of the time they didn’t, but this particular time they did and that gave me the clue that it was all right to get out of the turret.

T: In that unspoken truce, they didn’t shoot at you and you didn’t shoot at them.

L: Correct.

T: So the landing gear was down.

L: The landing gear was down.

T: So in a sense, they were escorting you, in a way…

L: They were escorting us. Exactly.

T: In the plane there, what was going through your mind when you realized that you weren’t going to be going back to the base?

L: I’m sure I was scared as heck, but to this day I can’t really remember it. What I do remember is being concerned for my mother and dad. Especially my mother. I knew what hell they were going to be going through.
T: So even then you remember thinking about your folks and how this was going to impact them.

L: Yes. Yes. That was my main concern. I’m sure I was scared. I’m not going to say I wasn’t. But I really can’t remember it.

T: In the plane there, you were there out of your ball turret with your chute on ready to go, waiting until you hit land, I guess.

L: Yes.

T: What happened then, did you have to leave the plane? Did the plane break up or...

L: Every few seconds the plane would...another loud boom. The fuel tank itself was exploding, and as the fuel got less in the tank it gave more room for explosions, so the explosions kept on getting more severe. We were trailing fire for about a good thirty feet behind the wing. And with the explosions getting more and more frequent, we barely hit land and the wing blew completely off with one last loud boom.

T: This was number three and number four engines?

L: Number four engine. The wingtip from number four engine blew off.

T: At that point you had to get out right away.

L: Oh, yes.

T: How many men from your crew got out of the plane?

L: All ten of us jumped, but the pilot was killed.

T: Now as you exit the plane, where do you exactly exit the plane?

L: The right side just behind the waist guns is the door where the people in the back of the plane, which was where I was at, would exit. In fact, that’s the only exit.

(1, A, 148)

T: So tail gunner, two waist gunners, and you are going to go out there.

L: Right. And the radio.
And the radioman. So five of you will exit there. Now is this your first parachute jump?

L: This is my one and only. Nobody ever practiced parachute jumps. For one thing, it was very, very dangerous. We didn’t have a conventional parachute. We had a very, very small parachute called a chest pack. It was made real small deliberately, because from past experience they found that the Germans were shooting airmen as they descended. So they wanted to make the parachute just big enough where you wouldn’t get killed when you hit. Even in training they told us it was the equivalent of jumping off a three story building. I found they didn’t exaggerate that one bit.

T: So you were coming down fairly quickly.

L: Very quickly.

T: Talk about your parachute jump, your one and only jump. I mean, here you are a young man, you’re exiting a burning plane, what’s going through your mind?

L: (chuckles) I’m sure that there were many things going through my mind. Fortunately, I don’t recall most of them. But I do remember pulling the ripcord and the parachute did not come out. There’s a drogue chute that comes out first. That had stuck. It didn’t take much...I grabbed a hold of it and pulled it out and it popped right away, but I do remember that. Of course, I remember coming down and hitting. It was a frozen plowed ground.

T: It was February.

L: February. Right. And I hit like a ton of brick. And the Germans were in a semi-circle right around me already. They were within one hundred feet of me when I hit. So there was no chance at all of making an escape.

T: At what altitude was the plane when you got out of it? Can you estimate?

L: When we were on our bombing run we were at twenty-five thousand feet. But I remember the pilot saying that he put the plane in a shallow dive trying to gain speed, trying to get to the coast before the wing blew off or before the plane blew up. So I’m not really sure what altitude, but I would say it was maybe about two thousand feet when I bailed out.

T: So you could see the ground below you there easy.

L: Oh, yes. Unless it’s cloudy, you can always see the ground.

T: Yes, but it was up close, I mean.

L: It was up close.
T: Before this particular day, February 22, how much thought had you ever given to what would happen if I ever become a POW?

L: (laughs) We were all young and invincible. You were supposed to finish twenty-five missions. Like I said before, Germany had air superiority. We didn’t have the fighter planes. There wasn’t a single crew in my outfit that even got anywhere near the twenty-five missions. The most I know is twenty-one, and the next mission they were all killed. So you were young and invincible. It would never happen to me. I’m going to make it. That was about the attitude.

T: So there was a sense of, you know that the chances...intellectually, you know the chances are not good, but it wasn’t going to be you.

L: It wasn’t going to be me.

(1, A, 186)

T: So you didn’t think about being a POW at all.

L: Not really. Then, of course, even the briefing officers would...they had all kinds of propaganda that, if you’re shot down there’s so many partisans and everybody. They’ll get you out of Germany. Don’t even worry about it. That wasn’t true at all.

T: Is that something that you kind of believed when you heard it, or you kind of knew it was bull?

L: You believed it.

T: Did you really?

L: I believed it.

T: So if you were shot down...

L: You had a good chance of escape.

T: Right. You weren’t going to be killed in the plane and you were going to get out.

L: If you survived. When you were shot down, a good fifty percent were killed. That was about the ratio, fifty percent were killed and fifty percent would get out. It depended upon what this plane and that plane...one plane all of them would get killed, the next plane all of them might get out.

T: Like yours.
L: Yes. We were fortunate. The way we went down saved our lives. Being that we had twenty minutes time. But why the plane didn’t explode immediately, we never figured out. Because most of the planes when they were hit in the fuel tank blew up immediately. There would be a spray of gasoline. You’d see a WHAM!! A great big flash in the sky and there would be pieces littering...there wouldn’t even be a big piece of the plane left.

T: And situations like that, they’re all dead.

L: Yes. And so many times they were your buddies. Right in your barracks.

T: So on other missions you could see this happening, couldn’t you?

L: Oh, yes. Certainly.

T: How do you keep that sense of invincibility then, when you see that kind of stuff happening? How do you keep the sense that, it won’t be me?

L: I don’t know, but our morale was all high and believe it or not, nobody ever feigned being sick or anything like that. You wouldn’t want to leave the rest of your crew down. Your crew is such a tight knit bunch that you didn’t want to leave your buddies down. If you had a cold or something like that, you could have gone and called in sick and been excused from that flight, but you didn’t want to leave your fellow crewmen down. So I can remember having a cold and still flying.

T: The whole thing about the group was a powerful thing.

L: Exactly. That was the most, you were closer to them than what you were to your parents or your sisters and brothers. I mean, you saved each other’s life.

T: So you wouldn’t leave them in the lurch by staying back.

L: That’s right. Exactly right.

T: When you hit the ground, to go back to the direct story, you hit the ground, the Germans are there. All the imaginings of what might happen are coming true in a way. You’ve got the Germans literally right in front of you now. What was that like for you?

L: Scary as the devil. But outside of that...I mean, what can you do? You threw your hands up. You let them pat you down to see if you had any weapons or anything like that. They took you into this—it was a schoolhouse they took us to, and locked us in a room.

(1, A, 229)
T: Now, did they pick up other members of your crew at the same time?

L: Practically every one of our crew were captured at the same time, with the exception of the navigator. He managed to hide out for a day or two. I mentioned before, the pilot was killed. I have to tell you how he was killed. He successfully bailed out of the plane. He was the last one out trying to keep the plane as steady as he could, giving the rest of us a chance to get out. He had the misfortune of landing in a lake, a big lake. It was frozen over with thin ice. He broke through the ice. He was hollering for help. According to my Danish friend—I didn’t find this out until about a year ago—he was calling out for help. The Danish people wanted to go out and rescue him. The Germans kept on shooting at them and wouldn’t let them go out until he was...he was out there for almost an hour calling out for help. After he was dead, then the Germans allowed the Danes to go out and get him.

T: That’s something. Boy, you’d think they would want to actually have him alive.

L: They would rather have you dead.

T: Once they had you in the schoolhouse, were you questioned or interrogated at all initially?

L: Not at that point. Just briefly, but I mean, not really what I would call an interrogation. They asked questions that we refused to answer. Like for one thing, they brought my pilot’s wristwatch, crash bracelet with his name on it, and a couple other things and wanted me to identify it. I told them I didn’t know who he was. We had been told that unless somebody was, that you knew for certain they were dead never to identify anybody. They grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, pushed me out the door to a wagon. Here was the body covered with a blanket. They rolled the blanket back just so I could see his face and they said, “Maybe this will bring back your memory.” And of course I recognized him. I tried to touch him to see what his condition was, but instead they gave me a great big boot in the rear and made me go back into the schoolhouse.

T: So you could, for yourself anyway, you could identify him.

L: I knew he was dead.

T: You didn’t stay in Denmark very long though.

L: Only overnight. Then they took us and put us on a train the next morning. It was a two day ride to Frankfurt, where the interrogation center was. The first night we spent in Hamburg. Hamburg had just been firebombed. There wasn’t hardly a building that was standing there.

T: So you had kind of a view of what was left of the city.
L: Oh, yes. They locked us...they took us way down in the dungeon. It was all lined with great big stone blocks. Took us down several flights of stairs. There was a little tiny room that I’m sure they used to keep prisoners in. Slammed the door shut. It was absolutely pitch black, and water on the floor.

T: All nine of you now?

L: I think it was all nine of us. (pauses three seconds) No, eight of us. The navigator wasn’t with us. The pilot was dead.

T: So eight of you. Officers and enlisted together.

L: Yes.

T: And just your crew. You weren’t with any other...

L: Just our crew.

T: Coming in on the train, you could see Hamburg then. The city of Hamburg.

L: It was absolutely, totally devastated.

(T, A, 281)

T: In a sense, you knew that these cities were being bombed. You’d been on missions to some of them.

L: Yes. I hadn’t bombed Hamburg, but I bombed many other ones.

T: Did what you saw that day still surprise you for the extent of the damage?

L: Yes and no, because I was in the ball turret. I could see what damage the bombs were doing when we dropped them. I knew that there was a lot of devastation down there. I just didn’t realize that it was almost total.

T: When you got to the train station there in Hamburg, did you encounter German civilians at all, getting from there to where they kept you?

L: Oh, yes. The Germans were constantly giving you all kinds of...they would shake their fist at you. They’d spit at you. They would holler names at you. Curse at you. Everything they could. I mean, you knew you were not in friendly hands.

T: At that point in Hamburg, did you ever fear for your life or for your person, or was it just more of hearing them in the background?
L: You feared for your life. At the train station in Frankfurt [Main], one woman dashed out, pushed one of the guys in front of the speeding train and he was killed.

T: From your people?

L: Not from our people, but from another crew.

T: So you were with other Americans by that time?

L: By that time, we were with other Americans. Up to the time we got to Frankfurt we were alone. I’ll take that back. At one point, I think it was Hamburg, they did bring another crew in with us. I’m mistaken there—they did bring another crew in with us.

T: And then transported you from there to Frankfurt.

L: To Frankfurt. To the interrogation.

T: To the Dulag Luft facility.

L: Dulag Luft.

T: At Frankfurt, was the reception or the experience with German civilians the same as Hamburg or was it worse?

L: I don’t remember too much about the...well, I do remember coming into Frankfurt and for some reason every time you’d come—I could speak and understand some German. Not very well, but some. I could hear on the radio, I mean on the PA system. They would always say that Terrorflieger [German: literally, terror flyers] were coming in.

T: They announced your arrival.

L: They would alert the whole population that we were coming in. Again, you were met with the same gestures, hollering. Every kind of imaginable way of showing you that you were not very welcome.

T: So this having your arrival announced, no wonder people knew who you were and to come and attack you really in a way.

L: Yes. Oh, yes. They would kick at you, spit at you, throw water at you.

T: So in a sense, the German guards that you had may—

L: The guards were actually our friends at that point.
T: They protected you, it sounds like.

L: Yes.

T: How ironic that in a sense your captors become your protectors.

(1, A, 329)

L: Exactly. They were. Even though they didn’t treat you very well either.

T: Your experience at Dulag Luft by Frankfurt there [in Wetzlar]. How long did you stay there, do you recall?

L: I wasn’t there too long, but I’d like to make a few comments about it. When we first got there, there was the most horrible sight that you can about imagine. There was any number of both British and American airmen in this one group. They were all the injured ones. Some of them had broken bones, shrapnel. Others had their faces, their features were so badly burned you could hardly—if you would have known them you wouldn’t have recognized them—and they were given absolutely no medical help at all. They were crying out in pain, asking for water, asking for help, and you couldn’t do a thing. They marched us right past that group and locked us into another room.

T: How did you internalize that, because you remember it very specifically?

L: I remember it like it was yesterday.

T: Here you’ve got the Germans, on the one hand they’ve kind of protected you from their own civilians at a train station. Now you see a quite different side of them.

L: Exactly. And the interrogation was even much worse.

T: I was going to ask you, how often were you interrogated there?

L: Well, first I’m going to back up just a little bit. They locked us in that room for the night. That night there was...Dulag Luft, the Germans had deliberately built it right alongside of this chemical plant called I.G. Farben. The English had an air raid that night. Bombs started falling. We’re alone in this room. Unprotected. You couldn’t do a thing except cower in a corner somewhere. Bombs started dropping. I can’t remember. I think it was six or eight of us killed that night.

T: So the bombs were falling, really, right around you.

L: Yes. We were there for that night. Then the next morning was our turn for interrogation. Here is the most scary part that you can about imagine.
T: I want to stop you here, because this is the first time that you are on the receiving end of bombs.

L: Yes. In fact, I had dropped bombs there on two different occasions myself. Never realizing that there was a prisoner of war camp right there.

T: What kind of an experience is that, being on that end of the bombs?

L: It's the most terrifying experience you can imagine. If we could have gone into our air raid shelter or something like that, but you were locked in that room, and that's it.

T: You had to just wait it out.

L: Just wait it out. It was the most terrifying feeling you can about imagine.

T: What a way to prepare for the interrogation the next day.

L: Yes.

_end of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 385._

T: So you're sitting in this room with—

L: Several hundred. The numbers are not that important. Anyway, you can hear screaming, cursing, crying out in pain, gunshots. Any kind of an imaginable sound. You're sitting there. The Germans come and take one person out at a time. You never see them again. When they're done, they take them to another room. But you're just sitting there hearing all these sounds in the background, just wondering what to expect. That is the most terrifying feeling that you can possibly have.

T: Because your mind is working about what—

L: What is going to happen?

    The German guard that took me out, I can see him just as plain today. He was a real short, squatty guy. But the first thing you notice, half his face was blown away and was healed again. Even his left eye was gone. Just a great big scar. His right arm was amputated at the elbow. He had what we call, he had a burp gun under his arm. He would take you and poke you with the barrel of the gun which direction to go. He was the most...I mean, if Hollywood would have cast him for a role they couldn't have done a better job.

T: So this guy, it looks like he'd seen service somewhere else.

L: I'm sure he came from the Eastern Front. That's where most of them were wounded.
T: So this guy nudges you along.

L: Nudges you along into the room he wants you to go to. You get there and here’s a German officer. He acts like he’s your best friend. “Oh, hello, Mr. Schrenk. You look like you’re one of the lucky ones that haven’t been hurt. We’ve been expecting you. Where have you been?” He went back to a cabinet, started through a file, came back with a stack of papers. “Ah, yes, we know all about you. You were born such and such a date. You grew up on a dairy farm in Long Prairie. Your parents are such and such. You have a brother and sister. Yes, we know all about you.”

T: They knew all about you?

L: Yes. They must have had spies all over the place. Some of the guys they would tell them, “Your mess hall clock is five minutes slow. How come nobody ever takes the time to set it?” They would bring out things of not only recent, but right down to maybe a few days ago.

T: How did that make you feel when you realized what they knew about you?

L: You really were wondering. Then of course, like you were saying, “You seem to be one of the lucky ones. You don’t seem to be hurt. There’s a mother and father back there in Long Prairie. You want them to know that you weren’t hurt, wouldn’t you?” And of course you say, “Yes.” “Well, we do that through the Red Cross,” and he brings out some papers. “Here, you fill out your name, rank, and serial number on here.” So name, rank, and serial number. You fill it out. Then you look at the next line. What type of aircraft were you flying? What altitude were you flying? What was your intended target? You read down. You look at him and you hand it back to him. “Vat? You don’t think that we know that you were flying in a B-17? Write that down!” And of course you give your name, rank, and serial number. WHACK! You get hit across the head. Really hard! You see stars. Then, “You don’t think we know the B-17s? The name of the target? You don’t think we know what target you were at? What do you think you are? Write it down!” He kept on like that. That kept on for the longest time. “If you don’t answer the next question, we’ll send you to somebody that will get you to talk.”

T: So they threatened you. If you don’t talk here, you’ll go somewhere else.

L: Oh, yes. “We’re going to turn you over to the Gestapo.” This guy behind you would poke you with a gun. This German officer hit you a couple times. Finally they...I think what saved me from more interrogation were the vast number of airmen that had been shot down. That was one of the biggest raids of that day. There were seventy-eight bombers shot down that day. US bombers. I don’t know how many English the night before.

T: So there were tons of guys to process.
L: There were tons of guys, and when they found out that I wouldn’t cooperate, they gave me a boot and I was out. Oh, is that ever a load off of your mind!

(1, B, 429)

T: Here you are, twenty years old. That had to have been a scary thing, just you alone in the room with them. You knew the rules, what you were supposed to say. But wasn’t it tempting to tell them what they wanted to know, to get that information away?

L: We had been warned before that if you give them even the least bit of information you would be beaten to a pulp, because they figured that you were easy. They would beat you to a pulp to get the last bit of information out of you.

T: So in a sense, it was, if you start to talk they’re going to get you.

L: Exactly. We were prepped before. What to do and what not to do. But I can see where if you were tortured long enough, I can see where you would admit to anything. Like some of these guys in Vietnam. Do you remember some of them? They broke down and when they came back they were ridiculed for breaking down. (heavy sigh) I think those guys did an excellent job. There’s only so much a body can stand.

T: And that POW experience was, again, vastly different from yours. There were threats [from the Germans], but ultimately they put you out of the room.

L: Right. Ultimately we were out.

T: Did they question you more than once at Dulag Luft, Mr. Schrenk, or just that one time.

L: Just that one time.

T: And after that were you pretty quickly processed out of that facility?

L: Yes. I think we were fortunate, because again there were so many airmen. They got together a trainload of POWs and I was only there about one day. Maybe a little bit longer. Some of the guys had been there for better than a week.

T: So for you it was fortunate you were in and out.

L: I was fortunate. I was lucky.

T: You went from there to Stalag Luft VI.
L: Luft VI, which is Heydekrug, in East Prussia.

T: That’s about as far as you can go in Germany in those days. Now did you go by passenger train or boxcars?

L: Boxcar. You never went by passenger train (*laughing*). You must be kidding.

T: I heard one or two guys say they did.

L: They did?

T: I don’t know why. They were by themselves. Can you estimate how long you were in the boxcars?

L: At that time I would say about five, possibly six, days.

T: So it made a long trip even longer.

L: It was a long trip. Even longer. And a lot of times you’d be pulled off onto a siding. POW train didn’t have much priority. You were pulled off to the side so other trains could use the track.

(1, B, 455)

T: Were you with any members of your crew anymore?

L: Except for the officers. I was with all the enlisted men. They separated the officers from the enlisted men at Dulag Luft.

T: Was your radioman an enlisted guy?

L: Yes.

T: So him, the tail gunner, two side gunners and yourself. Five of you.

L: Right. And the top turret gunner.

T: The top turret gunner too. There was a crew of ten, right?

L: Yes. There were six [of the enlisted crew together].

T: In the boxcars, talk about that experience. What was that like for you?

L: They took away our shoes and stockings to keep us from escaping. Actually that ride wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t *comfortable* by any means. We had hardly anything
to eat. I can’t really say that the guards were brutal. On that trip we could sit down. You couldn’t lay down, but you could sit down.

T: You weren’t packed in to the point where you couldn’t even move.

L: Right. But some of the other train rides...not so good. It’s going to get worse. As the war goes on it gets worse.

T: Was that particular train strafed or bombed by Allied aircraft?

L: No. It was not.

T: Any indication from the Germans where you were going, or how long you’d be in there?

L: None. None whatsoever.

T: So it was the unknown.

L: The unknown.

T: How were you handling the situation by now? I mean, you've been shot down, transported, interrogated, and kind of moved along.

L: I think I just went along with the flow. It didn’t bother me that much.

T: It seems like it could bother a guy.

L: Oh, you bet it could. I didn’t let it bother me.

T: How did you do that?

L: I don’t know. One thing, I believe in prayer a lot. And I think prayer does help.

T: This is one of the themes of the interview, so let’s move to that. Would you consider yourself at that time a religious person?

L: Yes.

T: So when you were growing up religion and going to church was part of your life?

L: Exactly.

T: How do you feel that being a man of faith helped you through your POW experience?
L: I think it helped a great deal. I feel sorry for somebody that doesn’t use prayer. I don’t think there’s a single guy that, when things really get tough, doesn’t revert in some way to religion.

(1, B, 481)

T: And for you it was already there, so it was something easy to fall back on.

L: Easy to fall back on.

T: The old saying that there’s no atheists in foxholes. From your perspective is that true?

L: Exactly. One hundred percent. That includes boxcars.

T: So it sounds like, from your description, this was a rather uneventful trip.

L: The train ride really was kind of uneventful. Except for the starving.

T: Was there food provided at all?

L: They did pull out a couple times and they took hot water out of the locomotive and mixed it with, I think it was ground up peas. It tasted like peas. It was kind of a soupy, watery mess but it did fill up the stomach a little bit. You didn’t get much.

T: But it was warm and something.

L: Yes. And it was cold. It was February, and those boxcars were not heated.

T: And you’re heading up to the northeast part of Germany.

L: Right. So it was very cold. No shoes or stockings. Bare feet.

T: Now did you get your shoes and socks back when you got off?

L: When we got off they did, but they’re not shoes and socks like you think. They were flying boots. They’re not shoes. They’re made out of sheepskin. They’re not meant for walking at all.

T: Right. Leather on the outside, is that what they were?

L: Yes. Sheepskin fleece.

T: So they’re meant for keeping warm at altitude.
L: Right. But they're not meant for walking. They're very uncomfortable for walking.

T: But that's what you got back when you got off.

L: Not your own. You just got a pair back.

T: And they may or may not have fit.

L: That's right.

T: When you got off the train, was it a long journey from there to the camp?

L: No. They walked us. They marched us.

T: How far was that from your memory?

L: I don't think it was that far. Maybe a mile or so.

T: So it was a pretty easy journey then as far not being walked for days.

L: Yes. We had no problems really, outside of the shoes not being meant for walking.

(1, B, 505)

T: What size shoes did you wear at that time?

L: Eleven.

T: Did you get something that fit?

L: I think they did, because those shoes really weren't mean for sizes or anything. They were just meant to cover your foot.

T: But walking, sounds like they'd be worn out pretty quickly.

L: They would have been if...the Germans confiscated them when we got to Luft VI. They gave us regular shoes. The pair of shoes I got were made for British troops, British land troops. I can get into that later. It was the wrong type of footwear entirely.

T: How soon after getting to the camp did you get those shoes?

L: I think immediately.
T: Talk about them then, because you were at the camp here. So let’s move to that. Talk about the shoes you got.

L: The shoes, for the time I got them, were okay. But later on, on the Death March, they were entirely wrong. For one thing they had cleats, little hobnails driven into the sole of the shoe. When we were on the Death March you were on secondary roads, and secondary roads are made out of four to six inch stones.

T: The big cobblestones.

L: Cobblestones. Every time your foot came down on those cleats, you would shift your foot one way or another. By the end of the day your ankles and your knees were just absolutely sore. Then the other bad thing about them was the hobnails were driven into the sole of the shoe. They literally conducted the cold right into your foot.

T: Because it’s metal, right. So being around the camp, they were fine.

L: For being around the camp they weren’t really fine, but they really didn’t bother as much until later on.

T: Which is something you couldn’t know until later.

L: Exactly.

T: When you got inside of Luft VI, as you come through the gate there, what greeted your eyes? In a panorama sense? What did that camp look like to you?

L: A whole bunch of guys that were already there hollering all kinds of greetings. Can I describe the camp?

T: Yes. Please do.

L: The first thing I want to describe is the latrine. It was a long, long ways from the barracks and really, all it was, really just a great big outhouse with a pump in it. It didn’t have flushing toilets, anything like that. To get water your buddy would have to pump water. It was cold. You never got to take a shower. [jump to page 39 for more on shower description]

The worst problem was when you got to the barracks. It was so crowded. There weren’t any tables or chairs or anything like that. All there were, the entire floor was taken up with bunks. Three tiers high.

The mattress was just a great big burlap bag, almost like a gunnysack. Real coarse woven. It had about an inch or two of wood shavings in it. That wasn’t the bad part. The bad part was the bed. It had a wooden frame and had four slats, six inches wide. One for your feet, one for your hips, one for your shoulder, one for your head. So the mattress just went up and down, like that.
It was the most uncomfortable thing you could imagine. If you were unfortunate enough [that you] didn’t have the top bunk but either the second or the bottom bunk, every time the guy rolled upstairs a little chaff would fall, filter down on them. And we had no pillow at all. One blanket. You were cold. Sanitation...

(1, B, 550)

T: How big was the barracks? I’m trying to imagine. Was it rooms, or was it one huge room?

L: It was one huge room with about fifty people in it. I shouldn’t say huge. You could barely squeeze between the bunks. It was very crowded.

T: All Americans in there?

L: All Americans in that, yes. They separated the Americans from the Brits. They put them in a different compound.

You had to put shutters on the doors and the windows at three o’clock in the afternoon. You didn’t dare take them off until nine o’clock in the morning. You didn’t dare leave the barracks. One time somebody didn’t have a watch, because the Germans had taken away all the watches. Went out about five minutes early and was shot dead on the spot.

For sanitation [at night] all you had is a bucket in one corner of the room. It was way too small. About half way through the night it was already overflowing. The next morning, when you could, you took the bucket down to the latrine and emptied. The overflowing bucket, you pick it up and it was slopping over the sides. The whole corner was just reeking with urine. You had no way of cleaning it up at all.

T: So the Germans are supplying what they need to supply, but it’s—on all number of points—there’s too many people in the room, there’s—

L: Oh, yes.

T: So all these things make it rather uncomfortable.

L: Not only that, but the food was the most uncomfortable.

T: Talk about what you got to eat, or what you didn’t.

L: You got one meal a day. A lot of people think you’ve got a lot of potatoes and kohlrabi and rutabagas. A lot of times it was only boiled dover. But the thing that I couldn’t stand...this came in metal cans and I think it came from a place that maybe processed fish of some type, either cod liver oil or something like that. Every piece of that fish was in that can, the head, the eyeballs, the fins, the scales. Everything. That wasn’t the bad part. The Germans would run their bayonets through it, let it
rot for about four or five days. When you got it there was just ooze coming out of every bayonet puncture. It was just a gray froth. When you opened it up it absolutely looked rotten. It smelled rotten. It tasted rotten. But that’s all the food you had. I can remember taking a little bit of a bite, holding my nose, swallowing just as quick as I could.

T: Growing up on a farm in Long Prairie, how much was fish part of your diet?

L: Almost nil (laughs).

T: So there’s another adjustment.

L: Yes. The only time we had fish to eat is if, like in the summertime, or the wintertime sometimes we’d go ice spearing. We’d get maybe one or two fish. It was almost nil as far as our diet was concerned. We had a dairy farm, and all the beef and the pork that we could eat.

T: And that’s gone from your diet now.

L: It’s gone from our diet.

T: How about bread? Was bread supplied?

L: Usually your ration—and this wasn’t always true, you a lot of times didn’t even get any. But one loaf of bread was divided by seven. That was your one week’s ration.

T: So it had to be sliced then, right?

L: But the bread is not like what you and I think of. For one thing, the minute you picked up the bread loaf it maybe weighed almost ten pounds. It consisted of—I read it one time—sixty percent sawdust, thirty percent rutabaga, ten percent rye and I can’t remember what the other ingredient was. It was heavy stuff, but a lot of guys couldn’t stand it. To me, it would give me something in my stomach.

T: So having something to eat, it might not have been what you wanted, but you learned to eat it.

L: From the minute you were shot down to the time of your liberation there wasn’t a single minute that your stomach wasn’t rumbling from hunger. And that was even after your meal.

T: So at this camp and others, food was something that was on people’s mind.

{(1, B, 604)
L: Oh, yes. One hundred percent. Now, at the beginning we did get Red Cross parcels, but Red Cross parcels you were supposed to get one parcel per week per man. (emphatically) Never did we get that. The most I ever got was one parcel shared by four people, sometimes up to nine people, and sometimes there were weeks and even a month on end that you got none. There again, it varied from camp to camp. Most of the parcels, I’m sure, were consumed by the German guards. It depended upon your guards how many parcels you got.

T: So those were not something you could depend on getting regularly.

L: No. Absolutely not. And that was one of the reasons we liked the bread. Bread was one thing that you could kind of horde. I think you could have kept that loaf of bread for a month and it wouldn’t have spoiled (chuckles).

T: You mentioned the Germans a moment ago. What kind of men did you have as guards?

L: Various. Most of them were on leave from the Eastern Front. That was their R and R. You either had them, the permanent ones were wounded so badly that they were unfit for military use. Some of them had one arm. Some of them had one eye. Some of them had one leg.

T: So they were using not front line soldiers here.

L: Not frontline soldiers. Then we also had one that I talked to. He was from Poland. It was strictly forbidden to talk to any German. But if you’d get one off to the side, sometimes you could talk to them. And I asked him, “You’re Polish, aren’t you?” And he said yes. I said, “What are you doing in the German army?” He said, “You must remember, I’ve got family back home.” So that said it all.

T: So it was possible for them to get not just Germans but others, too.

L: They conscripted anybody they could. They even tried to get Americans to join their army or air force.

T: Did they come to you personally?

L: Oh, yes.

T: What do you remember about that?

L: I can remember we laughed at them.

T: How did they make the pitch? I mean, in a sense, they had to sort of ask you somehow, right?
L: Yes. A lot of Germans could speak very good English. They would say, if you want to join our army you will have much better treatment. They didn’t come to you personally. They kind of...in a crowd.

T: It sounds like it could be interesting for some people but not...

(1, B, 641)

L: I don’t think...not a single guy was even tempted. I can see if it would get tough enough, because I was reading just the other night a documentary about the Revolutionary War where England so mistreated so many of the guys that they finally got some of them to come over to their side. Reluctantly. But they had no other choice. Either that or get killed.

T: For the record, what rank were you at this time?

L: I was a buck sergeant. I was supposed to be a staff sergeant. A non-commissioned officer.

T: That means you weren’t to have any work details.

L: That’s right.

T: Now for those months you spent at Luft VI, how did you pass your time during the day?

L: Most of the time you spent your time in the bunk, because you were so weak from lack of food that you just got out just for roll call and maybe just a walk around the compound just to... (trails off) Most of the time you spent in the bunk.

T: Now was there roll call regularly?

L: Twice a day. And it wasn’t the roll call. It was sheep count. They’d get you out there in rank, and of course, we didn’t cooperate too well with them. There was always shuffling back and forth. We deliberately made them get the wrong count.

T: Didn’t roll call take longer though, by doing that?

L: Oh, yes. Sometimes it took from two to four hours.

T: It was cold. Why do you want to be out there?

L: You wanted to make it just as miserable for them as what they were making miserable for you.

T: So tit for tat?
L: That’s exactly it.

T: What was this roll call like? Did you have to fall out in formation?

L: You fell out in formation, and if they didn’t get the count right, two Germans would stand and two by two of you went in between them and they counted.

T: So they counted you several times a day to make sure—

L: Twice a day. Without fail.

T: And the Germans, those guards that were counting and the others, what kind of treatment did they dole out? Were these people you needed to be scared of or were they...

L: Some of them, yes. There was one we called “Ham Hands.” He stood almost six foot seven. His hands were so big. That’s where we gave him…his hands were unusually large, even for his height. That’s the reason we called him “Ham Hands.” If you got anywhere near him you got slapped. You got kicked. You always were cursed.

T: So here’s a person that you knew to avoid, in a sense, if you could.

L: Exactly. You tried to avoid him. You couldn’t always.

T: Was he more the exception or the rule?

L: He was pretty much the exception. Most of the guards were not bad.

T: So they were not people you had to worry about.

(1, B, 682)

L: Most of them not.

T: So to generalize, more of the guards were decent than weren’t decent.

L: At that time. At VI.

T: And this changed over time?

L: At the Death March it kept on getting worse.

T: So as Germany’s fortunes went downhill, so did their treatment of you guys.
L: So did the treatment, so did the food, so did the living conditions. Everything went downhill.

T: So for you, was Luft VI really the best conditions you had?

L: Yes.

T: While you were at Luft VI there, and you were there for six months, until you left in the fall, was it possible to get any kind of news about how the war was going outside your little world?

L: You would get rumors that you weren't really sure if they were legitimate or not legitimate. There was always a rumor that there was a radio somewhere in camp, but you weren't really sure if it was just a rumor.

To spend the time you were bored, and I can remember myself making up rumors, harmless ones. Did you ever play the game in school, telephone, where you would tell somebody something and it goes through a bunch of people and at the end the story is completely different? That's kind of the way this worked. You'd make up some story about some Allied victory or something, spread it, and wait until it came back to you and just see how distorted it was. It was kind of a game.

T: Just something to do?

L: Something to do.

T: Now, did you, at the same time, ever hear rumors that you kind of believed or wanted to believe?

L: Oh, yes. In fact, it wasn't only rumors. Towards the last, you could see the flash of the fire in the eastern sky and hear the rumble of cannon.

T: So you could hear the war getting closer.

L: Oh, yes. At Luft VI. I mean, in all of them, but I'm talking about VI now.

T: Now at that point, when you heard the war, and it was the Russians you could hear getting closer, were you concerned individually or as a group what the Germans might do to you if the Russians got too close?

L: You never really gave it that much thought. We should have, but we were just elated thinking that that was going to be our liberation. We were just absolutely elated.

T: So what you heard, or what you thought, was that the Russians getting closer meant the war was about over for you.
L: Yes. We were going to be liberated. We never dreamed that we’d be evacuated.

T: So that came as a surprise to you and everyone. The evacuation.

(1, B, 725)

L: Yes. I don’t know if everyone, but to me, yes.

T: Lots of people talk about escape, and we read stories of escape. Now, from that camp or from Luft IV, where you were later, is that something that ever crossed your mind specifically?

L: In both Luft VI and Luft IV there were a few escape attempts. But to dig a tunnel wasn’t possible. For one thing, like I said, you had to put the shutters, you weren’t allowed out at night. During that time the Germans would run vicious dogs all over the compound. You could hear them snarling at the windows, pawing at the doors and everything. But the barracks was set up off the ground. About three feet off the ground. So the dogs were under the barracks. You couldn’t possibly have gotten between the floor of the barracks and not be sniffed out by a dog. And that was true both in VI and in IV. There were a couple escape attempts where somebody wanted to cut through the wire. They were shot.

T: So it wasn’t worth the attempt, it sounds like.

L: It wasn’t worth the attempt. Not at that point at least.

T: I guess it was safer to stay in the camp than try to get out of it.

L: Exactly.

T: New topic. At VI or at IV, did you have a person or persons that you became close friends with?

L: You had to. If you didn’t have a buddy, you were done.

T: How come?

L: You helped each other. You shared food with each other. Especially on the Death March. You had one blanket. Can you imagine being out in twenty below, and one blanket? You had the buddy system. You huddled as close together as you could. You would put a bunch of, like three blankets down. Five of you would huddle together, two blankets on top. You could understand, if you had just been alone you would have been frozen stiff.

T: Yes, you would have been on the ground, nothing underneath, one blanket on top.
L: Yes.

T: So you had to depend on each other.

L: You had to depend on each other. Sure.

(*brief pause in interview*)

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

T: Let's go back to the discussion about friends. Before we broke briefly, you mentioned that having friends was of vital importance.

L: It was almost life saving. If you didn’t have a group of friends, I don't think you would have survived. For one thing, you had one blanket. You were sleeping out in below zero weather. Don't ask me how cold it was, because we never got to see a thermometer, but it's listed as one of the coldest German winters in one hundred years. So I’m sure it was well, well below zero. Besides that, we were in northern Germany right along the Baltic, so not only was it cold but it was very, very humid. Like I said, we had one blanket. Many times the Germans would have you sleep right out in the snow. If you didn’t have a buddy and one blanket you would have frozen to death. The more buddies you had, each one had a blanket and you would spread the blankets out on the ground and then cover up with the remaining blankets. So at least you had more than one layer of blanket.

T: And body warmth too.

L: You slept right against each other. When one of you rolled, you all rolled.

T: To get up close to each other.

L: Yes. And not only that, but during the night—you had dysentery—so I mean during the night you were disturbed many times. You would always rotate so the same two weren’t always on the outside, because the outside ones would get colder than the guys huddled in the middle.

(*2, A, 15*)

T: Were friends important while you were in VI and IV as well?

L: They were very important. I mean, keeping up your morale, having somebody to talk to. We wrote quite a number of poems and no single person...well, I guess I did write a poem or two, but in most cases a single person did not write the poems that I have. For pastime we wrote a number of poems. You didn’t dare know let the Germans you were doing it, because anything you wrote or anything would have
been confiscated and would have been destroyed. They always accused you of trying to make escape maps.

T: Because you had lots of time on your hands, you mentioned.

L: You had ample time on your hands. Outside of the two different roll calls you had nothing else to do.

T: What kind of people became your friends? Were they people from your crew or people you met there?

L: All the members of my crew were my friends, but we also had several other ones. Especially from some crew where all of them were killed except one person. There was a couple of those guys joined our group as well. Actually, the more close knit friends you had, the easier it really was to survive.

T: Was it the case that as a POW in two different camps, do you feel you could trust the men who were in your barracks?

L: Yes. I can remember no case at all of stealing food. Food was always evenly divided. If you got a Red Cross parcel, somebody would try to divide it. They would divide it as evenly as they could. Things that couldn’t be divided equally, like say a can of jelly or something like that, they would… If a parcel was being divided, let’s say by six, he would take and as even as he could, he would make six piles of food. Dividing what he could. Otherwise substituting maybe sugar for jelly or who knows what. Then they would take six sticks and divide them that none of them were equal length. You put on stick on each one and you would take equal lengths of sticks and have somebody hold it behind their back. They would draw out one stick, match it to the pile and that was theirs. I never heard of any quibbling, anybody claiming that something was dishonest or anything like that.

T: So there was great care taken really to divide things evenly and make sure there weren’t arguments.

L: To the nth degree.

T: Does that mean that even in difficult circumstances, people didn’t disagree about stuff or get in arguments?

L: I can never remember getting in an argument of any kind. We were taunting each other all the time. There were some B-25 [Mitchell two engine medium bomber] crews too, but there were mostly B-24 [Liberator four engine heavy bomber] crews, B-17 crews. We were always arguing between us which plane was better. In a good natured way. Another thing was the Civil War. The North against the South.

T: The 1860s? About that?
L: Yes. Oh, some of the southerners were still quite adamant about the Civil War. But again, they took it very good naturedly. We were constantly taunting each other, but I can never ever remember any argument, any unkind words, anything like that.

T: The people that you knew in VI and at IV, were there any blacks or Mexican-Americans, people like that you came across?

L: There was never any blacks. Some of them were Mexican descent, but I mean they were one hundred percent American. You could tell that they were Mexican. There were a few Jews, but none of the Jewish were ever really ferreted out by the Germans. Most of them hid their religion, and to us it made no difference.

(2, A, 56)

T: So in a sense, it was a large body of white airmen that you were in prison with.

L: Exactly. And religion really made no difference.

T: Were there services at all at the camps you were at?

L: There was an English padre [chaplain], but most of the time the Germans wouldn’t allow him in the camp. I happen to be Catholic. So a group of us Catholics would get together and hold our own services.

T: You could do that without any problem?

L: You had to do it on the sly when there wasn’t a German around.

T: So it was not something that was permitted by the Germans.

L: No. If the padre was there, there would be a German right there listening to the services, but you were not allowed to gather in a group on your own.

T: So that had to be done on the QT.

L: On the QT. Many things were done on the QT.

T: Really? So there was the official rules and then what really happened.

L: Yes.

T: What other things were on the QT, as it were?
L: Like I said, putting anything down on paper. You weren’t allowed to do that. You weren’t allowed to horde any food, and by hoarding you never had enough to really horde, but like I said before, that loaf of bread was one of the things that you did kind of try to horde, sometimes four and five days you got absolutely no food at all, and that’s when this little piece of bread came out and you’d be surprised. Even cutting about the thickness of a razor blade, to get even that little food in your stomach, you’d get just a little bit of relief for a while.

T: When you saved something over a couple days, did you have to worry that someone else would try to take it from you or could you leave it on your bunk?

L: You never left it on your bunk, because if the Germans would have seen it, it would have been gone. You didn’t have to worry about any of your friends taking it. It was the Germans that you worried about.

T: Did they come through the barracks occasionally?

L: Especially in Stalag Luft VI, and somewhat at Stalag Luft IV. There were constant Germans roaming through the barracks. We always called them ferrets.

T: So they were in there looking for stuff.

L: Looking for stuff, and I think, trying to listen in on your conversation. They would never talk to you and never admit that they could speak English, but I’m sure that they could. I think they were trying to eavesdrop on whatever the conversation was.

T: Did you worry that they were trying to slip a spy among the barracks posing as an American?

L: Oh, yes. New arrivals would come, and you’d ask them a bunch of questions.

T: Trying to figure out if they were legit.

L: Yes. Exactly.

T: What kind of things could you ask someone to sort of figure out whether they were real?

(2, A, 84)

L: Oh, ask them about ballgames or something like that. Or movies, or what part of the country they came from, and ask them a few general questions. I can’t recall any time ever finding a German, but who knows?

T: So there was that rumor that they might be.
L: And I'm sure in some cases there were.

T: So you asked guys questions. Did you get the questions asked of you too when you got there?

L: Oh, yes. I don’t remember what they asked me. You were kind of scrutinized, yes.

T: They had to be sure you were for real, I guess.

L: Exactly.

T: You heard the war you mentioned, at Luft VI, and it was the Russians coming. You thought this might be the end of the war.

L: Not the end of the war, but we thought we’d be liberated. It didn’t work out that way.

T: What happened, because from there you’re transported out? Did the Germans make any kind of general announcement, or was this kind of an ad hoc last minute thing?

L: Just all of a sudden, “We’re evacuating. Out of the barracks!”

T: So you’re told to get your stuff. Let’s go.

L: Yes.

T: How much advance warning do you remember having?

L: None. Just get your stuff and move. There’s conflicting stories about...our group did not get a Red Cross parcel. I think we were maybe some of the first ones out. Some of the later ones, the Germans actually gave them a Red Cross parcel, because they had so much in storage they didn’t want the Russians to capture anything. But we were unfortunate. We did not get anything when we left. Some of the guys even got extra clothing. I got none. I don’t know if I was the first one out, or just unfortunate, or if it was our guards.

T: You end up going by ship. How far from your camp to where that ship was?

L: First of all, I’m going to explain how we got to the ship. When they evacuated us from Stalag Luft VI, they marched us to the nearest railroad station, which wasn’t that far. It was several miles, but it wasn’t that far. When we got to the railroad station they had a long line of what they call forty and eight boxcars. Meant to hold forty men or eight horses. They started loading us into the boxcar. When the boxcar could hold no more, the Germans would jab the guys in the doorway with bayonets,
keep on loading, loading, loading. Keep jabbing. Loading, loading, loading until there was just...the boxcar was absolutely solid with guys.

All of a sudden they'd slam the door shut. It was a July day. The sun was out bright. Here we are in this boxcar. The only light you could see was just a couple cracks around the doors, and if I remember right, there was a crack or two around the top of the boxcar where it was slightly damaged. Here you are, you've all got dysentery. All you can do is remain standing. You couldn't even sit down. It was that crowded. You had no food and the worst part, no water. You can about imagine with that many guys in a boxcar, the temperature just shot skyward. We were just absolutely miserable.

(2, A, 120)

T: How long were you in that boxcar before it moved?

L: When they put us in the boxcar, if I remember right, it was about ten, ten thirty in the morning. It didn’t move until well after dark. Luckily it was just overnight to the seaport of Memel, Lithuania.

T: Thankfully, a relatively short journey.

L: Right.

T: You mentioned having dysentery. Let me pick up the health and bugs thread here. How was your health by the time you evacuated?

L: My particular health was good, but I did have fleas and lice and I did have severe dysentery, but outside of that I was very healthy. I mean I had lost a lot of weight.

T: How much did you weigh when you were in service? Before you got shot down.

L: One hundred eighty-five.

T: And there was a steady decline in your weight.

L: Steady decline all the way through.

T: You also mentioned dysentery. How much was that a problem for you during your whole POW experience?

L: Very, very severe. You had dysentery to the point where a lot of times you couldn’t remove your clothing in time. When we were on the Death March it was so bad it didn’t make any difference if there were people around or not. You couldn’t control anything. All during the time I was a POW we had absolutely no toilet paper or anything that could be used as toilet paper, so you can about imagine what our
clothing looked like. The only place that you can wash clothing—on the Death March you couldn’t wash your clothing at all.

Like when we were at VI and IV you could go down to the latrine and wash your clothing in cold water, but like especially at VI all during the time, most of the time we were there it was in the wintertime. You were out on roll call twice a day. If you washed your pants, you either went without them or you put them on wet. You didn’t have much choice.

T: And roll call was every day.

L: Twice a day. And of course, being cold—the barracks had almost no heat. So it took forever for anything to dry.

T: So in theory you could wash your clothes, but in reality...

L: In the summertime I did a couple times. And believe it or not, I was out there in my under shorts.

T: In the summer that’s one thing, but in the winter...

L: Wintertime you can’t. The only time we ever got a shower was twice at Luft VI. Like I said, one of your buddies had to pump the pump. Two different times we were allowed to take a shower. But if you can imagine taking a shower in the middle of the winter with cold water in an unheated building...but it felt good. Just to have some water.

At Luft IV there were no provisions at all for taking a shower, and you had no washcloth, no towel, anything like that. If you wanted to wash your body, you had to take one sock off and use that as a washcloth and wash your body. On the Death March you couldn’t do it at all.

T: So conditions did get progressively worse, didn’t they?

L: Throughout the war as things got worse, they got progressively worse. The food got more scarce, the living quarters got more crowded, the guards became more brutal.

(2, A, 159)

T: On the subject of illness and bugs, you mentioned before we were taping, that lice and fleas were a problem. Which was worse for you?

L: That is a hard question to answer. For anybody that hasn’t ever had fleas, they can be absolutely miserable. You can’t get a full night’s sleep. All during the day and especially at night you can feel them crawling on your body. They’ve got real strong back legs where they kick trying to get through different crevasses of your body and
they drive you just literally nuts. If you go to look for a flea, about all you get is just a real quick glimpse of it. They hop.

The lice were of the more disgusting type. They were body lice, and they would affix to any hair, like under your arms or your private parts, and you would feel like a lump. When you looked, here would be a louse that had attached himself and sucking blood. They would be about the size of a good size pea and gray and very, very disgusting. When you'd squash them you'd have a pile of blood.

T: This is something that you had consistently.

L: We had it almost from the time we were POWs until the time we were released. We also had a few bedbugs. Bedbugs didn't pose that much of a problem. If you have a bedbug you'll notice them, but you don't feel them crawling over your body and they don't seem to fill themselves with blood like a louse does.

T: You learned all about tics, lice, and bedbugs, the difference between all three of them.

L: Oh, yes.

T: And you can still describe them pretty specifically.

L: Oh, yes (chuckles). Of course, one of the main things with any of them, they carried all kinds of diseases. That is really the bad part. Not only the discomfort, but also the consequences. And they go from one person to another, so they're spreading any kind of disease. One of the main causes of Bubonic Plague [in the Middle Ages].

T: That's right. Fleas and lice. Let me move to the ship journey. You said it was a rather brief train trip to Memel, and that's where the ship was. Or ships.

L: Two ships.

T: From your perspective, as you got off the train, describe from your perspective what happened next.

L: They marched us just a real short distance to two ships. One was the Insterburg, the other was the Masurian. They were both used for hauling coal. I was put on the Masurian. They loaded about five thousand of us into the ship's hold. To get in the ship's hold, there was just a tiny wooden ladder leading down, and it was a long way down. The first thing, you were being cursed and jabbed and everything by the Germans all during that time. They acted like they couldn't get everybody down in the hold quick enough. They were making people crawl down, almost stepping on the other person's fingers as they went down.

The first thing they did, each guy had a makeshift pack where he kept his meager belongings. Your knife, fork and spoon, and we had tin cans hanging around
our neck that we had improvised for eating utensils. If you didn't have a cup or a dish for any of the food they handed out, you wouldn't have gotten either one. They threw everything down in the hold and made you crawl down.

Like I said, it was a little bit nasty going down. They kept on loading us into that hold of the ship, and again it was so crowded that all you could do is remain standing. The air was real foul. The only fresh air you got was looking up at that little tiny hatch cover. It looked about like a postage stamp way up above. Where you had come from.

For sanitation they lowered a bucket. There were so many people the bucket never got around. Most of the guys had to relieve themselves right where they stood. When the bucket was full, they would hoist it up, dump it across the side. When the bucket was lowered, it had our drinking water in it. Same bucket. Most of the guys, like I said, that bucket never got around to most of the guys. I'm sure that most of the guys didn't even get a drink of water. I was lucky. I got one little sip for the entire trip.

(2, A, 219)

T: Did you get your personal belongings back after you dropped them?

L: Yes. Yes, I did [get my personal belongings back after I dropped them]. There again, everybody took care of each other. I don't care if you were a POW, everybody took care of everybody. You didn't even have to know the guy.

T: So your stuff was waiting for you like the next guy's was waiting for him.


T: Did that ship sit there for a while before it moved out?

L: No. If I remember right, the minute they had us loaded, it started on its journey. But all during the time in that ship we got no food, no water. Of course, we didn't have any food or water on that train trip either, so it was starting to mount.

T: Now this is a different danger in a sense. I asked you earlier about if there was strafing danger with the trains. Being on the water, you're subject to submarines.

L: [We had to worry] Not only submarines, but mines. There were some Brits on board that ship and they were telling us they had laid mines in the Baltic in the area that we were going through.

T: That's good news to hear, isn't it?

L: Yes. So it was not only submarines. It was also the danger of hitting a mine.
T: Is this something that you knew when you were down in the hold of the ship then?

L: Yes.

T: How do you protect yourself, how do you sort of process that possibility?

L: You tried to ignore it, the best you can.

T: Is that pretty hard to do though?

L: (chuckles) Yes. It's not easy, but what are you going to do? You're completely powerless. I mean, just like sitting in that air raid [at Dulag Luft]. What do you do to protect yourself? You cower in a corner. That's all you can do.

T: That's more than one time now we've come across in our conversation where you describe being completely powerless. That could work on your psyche, I think, after a while.

L: [As a POW] You were completely powerless from the minute you were captured until the minute you were released. I mean, you were completely...you were in the hands of the enemy that would just as soon have you dead. Rather have you dead. Because look at it this way, to be a POW takes somebody to put a guard over you, right? To be a POW takes away, even though you didn't get much food, takes away some food from somebody else at the front. The Germans would have been better off if we would have been dead. In fact, several different times Hitler ordered all the POWs to be shot so that he could use the...the German guards would be better used at the front, is the way he put it. Of course, we didn't know that he had given that order. We found that out later on [after the war].

(2, A, 255)

T: The ship journey lasted how many days, from your memory?

L: About four.

T: How do you remember those four days at sea?

L: I don't remember them [the days at sea] too well. I think it's one of the things...if things get horrible enough, you try to shut them out of your mind. Most of the things I can remember like it was yesterday. There are some things that are very fuzzy. I think it's your mind trying to block out whatever happened. I can remember some of the things on board the ship...I remember the Germans shooting a couple guys.

T: On board the ship?
L: Yes. A couple guys went berserk and climbed the ladder when the German wasn’t watching. There were no Germans down in the hold with us. They climbed the ladder when the Germans weren’t looking and tried to jump across, overboard, and swim to shore. I can remember a couple of the German guards laughing and saying what nice target practice it was.

T: So the Germans didn’t have to really watch you down in that hold, did they?

L: There was no way out except that little bitty ladder. Oh, I forgot to mention how filthy dirty it was down in that hold. The ships had been used for hauling coal. There was six inches of coal dust on the floor. With dysentery, and vomit, and foul air, and that many people breathing the same air. The only ventilation you got is that one little bitty tiny hatch.

T: It’s no wonder some guys kind of went berserk.

L: [Some guys kind of] Went berserk. There’s another thing yet. If you had buddies, your chances of going berserk were lessened.

T: Why is that?

L: You helped each other. You could talk to somebody. You could cheer him up.

T: So having friends was important all the way along.

L: (emphatically) [Having friends in this situation was] Absolutely important.

T: I forgot about the seasick part. You mentioned the vomiting. Of course, the ship is on open sea.

L: Oh, yes. A lot of them. A lot of guys got sick.

T: That’s just one more thing. Was that the worst part of your POW experience? Or was the march?

L: No. It was just one of them. I think the Death March had many more bleak days than the ship ride. We haven’t gotten to the Heydekrug run yet, but that was also a little bit... I’d been a POW for six months so far.

T: You’ve gone through being shot down, interrogated at Dulag Luft, being transported to Luft VI, and the bombing raid at Dulag Luft. You’ve endured six months at Luft VI and now a ship journey to Stettin [now Szczecin, in Poland] is where it ended up.

(2, A, 300)
L: But all during that time, the worst part was the starvation. You can't imagine how miserable it is be literally starved for six months. You're down to skin and bones already. And then going for days on end with no food at all. Or water.

T: You'd think with a bunch of men in their late teens or early twenties, that the subject on peoples' minds would be women and yet...

L: I don't think anybody ever thought of women. It was food. Food became an obsession. Every time you'd dream of food it was always something real rich. Chocolate, sugar, butter. I mean, it was never potatoes or something like that. It was always something real rich. You would dream of the concoctions you were going to make after you were free again.

T: So you dreamt about food.

L: Not only dreamt about it, but thought of it all during the day.

T: No wonder it was on your mind at night then.

L: Yes.

T: So when you had all that time to kill, being bored, you thought or talked about food.

L: Yes.

T: Get off the ship here. The ship docks, and you've got all these guys and you're among them in this hold. Take the next step here.

L: They unloaded the ship onto another train. This train was guarded by the Hitler Youth. They looked so young, and I could speak some German. I'm sure that they knew that they shouldn't have been talking to me, but I think they were as curious about us as we were about them. I got to talking to one of these and asking him how old they were. They were all German what they call Marine; [German: navy] I think that's sailor. They were thirteen or fourteen years old. They're kids. Really, I think they were just as scared of us as we were scared of them. Because somebody that age could be real impulsive.

T: You bet. And have a weapon too?

L: They had a weapon with bayonet on.

T: Were they on the train with you?
L: On this particular train, and this is the only one I ever saw, they had it divided in half. There was a number of them in one end of the car. We were on the other end. That night I was able to get my first night of sleep, and I had a gun barrel about that far from my head all night. But it was such a relief to be off that ship.

T: So being off the ship you kind of let down and relaxed in a way.

L: That was the first chance I had to even begin to relax. But that train, number one, it was a hot July day, but yet they made me put my overcoat on. I don’t know if they made everybody put their overcoat on, but for some reason they made me put my overcoat on. Then they shackled us in twos, so there was no chance of getting the overcoat off again.

(2, A, 348)

T: How were you shackled?

L: Arm in arm. Two guys shackled together.

T: So your right arm to my left arm, so to speak. And feet too, or just arms?

L: No. Just arms.

T: So you’ve got a partner in a way now.

L: Yes. A partner.

T: That was a shorter trip?

L: That was just overnight, the train ride.

T: Did that take you right to the camp or just close?

L: No. It took us to a town called Kiefheide, which was about three, three and half miles from the camp [located in the then-German region of Pomerania; today northwest Poland].

T: The train station was there. Now, was everybody moved en masse from the ship, so you had a large group?

L: Yes. [We were] A large group. That was early morning. The first thing I remember was a red-headed German Hauptmann [German: captain], captain, speak almost perfect English. He was strutting back and forth telling us what a lucky day it was going to be for us. He says, “Today is your lucky day. You will not get only one Red Cross parcel, you are going to get two Red Cross parcels.” Good heavens! I had never had a full Red Cross parcel all during the time I was there. I could hardly
believe my ears. But sure enough, they gave us each two Red Cross parcels. Then the next thing I heard was, “Fix bayonets.” In German. They all put the bayonet on. Then they released a whole bunch of vicious dogs and started chasing us down the road. Shackled.

T: The whole group of you?

L: Shackled. With overcoat on. July, hot July day. We hadn’t had water for—

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 384.

T: I’m trying to recreate this in my mind. You’ve got an overcoat on a July day, shackled to a guy on your other arm with a Red Cross package under each arm, no food and water for several days, and here come the dogs?

L: Here come the dogs and bayonets. They’re running us down the road, and this German Hauptmann is in a vehicle. It was the German equivalent of our Jeep. We called them Peeps. I don’t know if that was—I think that was just a nickname we gave it. He was shouting out orders, telling them that we were Luftgangsters [German; literally, air gangsters] That we murdered their women and children, and to shoot us. He kept on exciting them, telling them to shoot. I don’t know why the order wasn’t carried out, but if anybody tripped or fell they were jabbed with bayonets, and kicked, and every other thing until their partner either got them back up on their feet—in a good many cases they carried them. They carried their buddy.

T: So he’s stirring up these...

L: He’s stirring up...he had red hair, and I can still remember it. His face was just brilliant red being so excited.

T: What a welcome when you got off there. You’re already weak.

L: And you could see...they ran us through a woods, and if you glanced on either side you could see machine gun nests pointed at us all the way along. So if we would have done anything wrong we would have all been shot right there.

(2, B, 399)

T: Kind of running the gauntlet here, aren’t you?

L: Yes. And that lasted for about three and a half miles.

T: All the way to camp?

L: Yes.
T: I’m thinking you must have been just near collapse with the...

L: A lot of them did collapse.

T: Did you hold onto both your...

L: I was so desperate for food, I don’t know how I ever did it. Most of the guys dropped both of their parcels. Just a few had one. I don’t know, maybe I’m stubborn. But I managed to hang onto both of mine. I don’t know how. My arm where I was shackled to my partner—he dropped both of his—the arm where I was shackled to my partner was just absolutely raw from, you can imagine, going down and you’re swinging your arms for three and a half miles and you’re not in sync with your partner. That was just eating into your flesh. And yet you were hanging onto a parcel.

T: Under the same arm.

L: Yes.

T: What a way to be introduced to this camp. Talk about things going downhill for you. The conditions at Luft IV when you got inside, how would you compare or contrast them to the camp you had been in?

L: I’m going to answer a couple other things first. We got to Luft IV, and this is in the morning. They still didn’t give us anything to eat or drink. There was a pump right in the vicinity. I believe it was right across the fence from us. The German guards would go over there and pump water and dump it on the ground. They kept on doing that. Pretty quick they would start throwing water at us and just taunting us. Knowing how desperate for water we were. Pretty quick we started to taunt them back. Somebody started singing “God Bless America.” We all joined in. The Germans were just absolutely infuriated to see how miserable we were and yet we had the courage to come right back and taunt them.

They had us lay down in a meadow just outside the compound. Still with our overcoats on, but at least we had a place to lay down during the time they were pumping the water and not giving us any. One by one the Germans would come and they took our shackles off. Then they took us into what we called the strip search. You literally had to take everything off. A German would go through everything. It was up to him. Most of guys came through with nothing.

I came in and here was this great big brutal guard called “Ham Hands.” I knew I was up against it. He was the most brutal guard that I ever met. The first thing he did was he grabbed both my Red Cross parcels. I was so desperate. I could speak German, and I hollered out to him that they were Red Cross parcels and they were mine! He took out his Luger [pistol] and WHAM! across my head. I regained myself. He grabbed the parcels and I again repeated, “They’re mine!” Again he hit me across the head. The second time was so hard I kind of slumped to the floor, regained myself. Five different times I insisted they were mine, and five different
times he clubbed me across my head. I've still got scars on my head from the butt of his German Luger.

At last I could see that there was no use. If I would have kept on he would have just killed me. Blood was just streaming down my head. So the last time I didn’t say anything and he went to put the parcels away. I still had all my clothes on. So I grabbed my belongings. I knew I was doing wrong. Bolted out the door through the guys that had already gone through the strip search, quick laid down in a group of men and put the overcoat across my head pretending I was asleep. The first thing I knew, out of the corner of my eye I could see him coming out with the pistol in his hand looking for me. If he would have found me he would have shot me. I had hid myself. He spent quite a bit of time running back and forth just cursing in German like you wouldn’t believe, and he finally gave up and went back into the building.

T: Your Red Cross parcels are gone.

L: Oh, yes. But at least I’m alive.

T: All that running and hanging onto them and it didn’t matter anyway.

(2, B, 444)

L: The whole reason that they gave us Red Cross parcels, they knew that we would drop them. That was their way of saying we didn’t want the Red Cross parcels. We threw them away. That was the whole intent.

T: They could say they gave them to you.

L: Yes.

T: So if the Swedish Red Cross asked, “Did you give them parcels,” they can say yes.

L: Yes. The Swedes and the Swiss are the ones that are supposed to visit the camps to make sure that they were living up to the Geneva Convention. I think both of them were bought off, because they would come to the camp but never would they talk to any POW and how could they think that they were living up to the Geneva Convention when they looked at a person? They were all living skeletons.

T: So it seems like they were coming. They weren’t talking to you, and you think they had kind of a blind eye to things.

L: I think they were bought off. Both of them.

T: Did you see them come to camp sometimes?

L: A few times. Not very often. But I remember them coming. The one thing that would happen when they would come, the Germans would give you a few extra
rations just before they would come. The minute they were gone we were back to nothing again.

T: So they were getting ready for the visit.

L: They were getting ready for the visit, but even so, I think they didn’t want them to know really how horrible the conditions really were. Even though they were bought off.

T: As you compared this camp with VI, better, worse or about the same?

L: Worse. Less food. The other camp at least I got two showers. This camp I got none. Another thing that the Germans did at this camp, they would call everybody out like for roll call, then they would decide to have target practice and they would shoot right above your head.

T: While you’re standing there?

L: You would get down on the ground. They wouldn’t keep you from crouching down on the ground. But they shot just above your head. Just to impress you with their firepower. They did that quite a number of times.

T: Not just an isolated incident then?

L: No, no.

T: Were the roll calls pretty similar? Twice a day?

L: Yes. It didn’t make any difference if it was rain or shine or blizzard or twenty or thirty below. You went out for roll call until they excused you to go back into the barracks.

T: Was this a place too where you had to sort of fill up the time during the day with finding something to do?

L: Yes. We wrote poems. I was with the same group at VI and at IV, and we continued writing our poems.

T: So you found people that you either were with them or you found them again once you got to Luft IV.

L: You kind of tried to stay in a group. Some of my crew stayed with me. We did lose a couple of them. But most of my crew stayed with at Luft IV.

T: So here you've got people that at least you're coming to a new place, but you know the people you're coming with.
L: Right. We had some new ones. Naturally I made—we were even more crowded in the barracks than in Luft VI. I had known just about all of them from Luft VI, but they weren’t in my particular barracks at VI but they were in IV.

T: So there were people that were known to you.

L: Yes. All very nice guys. Very nice.

T: The barracks were similar in size?

L: The rooms were smaller, but much more crowded. The room was meant to hold twelve people. They had twenty-four.

T: So you were doubled up in space. That makes pretty cramped surroundings.

L: Very cramped.

T: And were the meals served there? Was there a central supply?

L: There was a central kitchen, but if I remember right, we got much less food there and some days you were skipped entirely.

T: Now here you’ve got a situation from, you arrive in July and this camp is evacuated in February [1945].

L: Right. February 6 [1945].

T: Again, the war continues to go badly for the Germans.

L: Yes.

T: How aware were you of what was happening outside the camp here at Luft IV? I mean, you know the war is going on, but did you know anything about how it was going?

L: You heard a lot of rumors, and I think at IV there were maybe a couple radios. I didn’t know exactly where they were, but you did get a few more reports that seemed legit. Some of them you didn’t believe and some of them you believed. Most of them at IV you could believe.

T: So you had to filter what you heard for whether it sounded plausible or not?

L: Legit or not. Right.
T: As things continued to go poorly, could you also hear the war getting closer?

L: Oh, yes. Again, we had shutters and everything, but the shutters had some cracks in them. The first thing you could see was flashes of light. You knew it was artillery. Then a few days later you could hear the distant roar of cannon and of course see even more flashes of light. So you knew the Russians were coming.

T: Now in a sense it’s like déjà vu. You’ve been through this before. The fact that you hear the Russians coming, and things get ready. Did you feel yourself to be better prepared for that second...what was going to happen again or...

L: Again, you thought that the war was so close to the end that they would not evacuate the camp. We never thought that they would evacuate.

T: So even though you had been evacuated before, you didn’t think it would happen again.

L: Didn’t think it would happen again.

T: Let me ask when you left IV in February, how had your health gone? Were you fairly stable as far as your own health?

(2, B, 506)

L: As far as the health, I think the dysentery was even more severe than what it had been in Luft VI. Outside of that and losing a lot more weight, I think I was about the same but minus the weight, with more severe dysentery. I was very, very healthy when I went in. Normally I never catch a cold, and I don’t remember ever even having a cold in either one of the camps.

T: So being healthy when you went in and being accustomed to cold weather maybe...

L: Oh, that [being healthy] helped tremendously. But what helped even more was the fact that I never smoked in my life. The poor guys that did were really at a disadvantage. Cigarettes were like gold. You could buy practically anything with cigarettes. Even from some of the Germans. If you caught a German by themselves and offered them enough cigarettes you could maybe buy a loaf of bread or something like that.

T: And where would the cigarettes come from?

L: Red Cross parcel.
T: So in the Red Cross parcels were cigarettes which, sounds like it was currency, really.

L: It was. A cigarette was worth its weight in gold.

T: So you could trade that even to the Germans, you mentioned.

L: Yes.

T: So you observed that? The Germans would actually trade cigarettes for stuff.

L: It was hard to do, but it was possible.

T: It sounds like it must have been against their rules too.

L: Oh, you bet it was. I think they could have been in great big trouble.

T: But it happened, you say. I want to spend some time talking about the march here. We’ve kind of short-shrifted Camp IV, but a lot of the themes we’ve talked about, whether it’s friends or health or rumors, etc. February 6 [1945] was the date, right?

L: February 6 was the day, and it was in the middle of a snow storm. Beastly cold.

T: What kind of advance warning did you have this time?

L: None.

T: So the same deal. Kind of, “Get your stuff.”

L: Same deal. They called you out for roll call and told you, “We’re evacuating immediately.” You went back in the barracks and picked up your tin cans or whatever, and out the door.

T: Last time you left a camp it was summer, which is one thing. Now it’s winter.

L: Now it’s winter. They told us to be prepared for the march for, I think it was two days. I was on it for eighty-six.

T: They misjudged a little bit (sarcastically).

L: I don’t know if they misjudged, or what their intent was.

T: This camp has got thousands of guys in it, Luft IV.
L: About ten thousand. But before the Death March they had taken some and sent them to other camps. The lucky ones got to go to [Stalag Luft I at Barth, Germany]. That was really the lucky camp to go to.

T: Yes. Comparatively speaking, that was a good camp.

L: Some of them went to [Stalag III. I think some of them even went to [Stalag XI-B] Fallingbostel, but I'm not sure.

(2, B, 540)

T: Some of them ended up at VII-A Moosburg, too. Now for yourself, since you weren't one of the lucky ones, when you left there was no indication you were going to be marching endlessly.

L: No.

T: There was the indication of a couple days.

L: A couple days.

T: So it wasn't all the guys that left. It was a group.

L: I think it was about six thousand.

T: So a large group had gone.

L: A large group, but you didn't march six thousand in a group. They broke us up, two, three, maybe even four hundred in a group.

T: A manageable size, in other words.

L: Yes. I keep on using the word march. March is not the way to describe it. To me a march, you're walking. We were so far gone it was more like staggering. You could barely put one foot ahead of the other. You were that weak.

T: So at that pace, it would be hard to cover a lot of territory in one day too.

L: Hard to cover the territory, but sometimes they marched you...I remember one time, to get to our destination they marched us until eleven o'clock at night.

T: What kind of destinations were you marching to? I mean, are you staying in cities and towns, or sleeping in the countryside?

L: Just depends upon wherever you happened to be. I don't know if the Germans had a certain place where they wanted you to be that night, or if they just called it...
the end of the day. Sometimes you would be out in the middle of nowhere. No barn. No nothing. Just the middle of the countryside. They’d say, “Here’s where we’re going to be tonight.” Other times they tried to hunt up some type of a shelter. Most of the time it was a barn.

T: So sometimes you slept inside. Sometimes you slept outside. And it was by chance, it sounds like.

L: By chance. Now sleeping—we all preferred to sleep in a barn, but it also had its drawbacks. Like I mentioned, you’ve all got dysentery. So you have to get up a number of times during the night. The Germans march you into this great big barn. Wham! goes the door shut. It’s pitch black. There’s more people in that barn than what the barn should hold. A lot of them can’t even find a place to stay. They have to go outside the barn. Say that you march in this barn and you’re either in the middle or the far end or even either one of the sides. You have to get up during the night. You’re literally crawling across one hundred people to get out. Now you come back in and it’s completely black. How do you find your place?

T: You’d never find it.

L: Right. So we all preferred to be in the barn because one thing, if it rained or sleeted or anything you at least had a roof over your head. You never had any heat. All during the time I was on that march I was never in a building that had heat, any kind of heat at all.

T: And how often would you estimate you slept in a building anyway?

L: I would say more than half the time. But not all the time.

T: So sometimes you were protected from the elements and other times you were not.

L: Sometimes you were. Sometimes you weren’t.

T: As you march, were you on a lot of back roads?

(2, B, 579)

L: They mostly took back roads, sometimes even cutting across fields, muddy fields. The secondary road, the Germans have several different types of roads. The primary roads were all paved with square pieces of rock set in like brick. The secondary roads, it was field rock about four to six inches in diameter alongside of each other. So it was a very rough surface. Every time your foot came down, especially if there was any ice or snow, your foot slipped either right, left, forward or backward. When you walked very far, your feet were just absolutely killing you. Your feet, your ankles, your knees, the calves of your legs. It was horrible.
T: As far as the marching along, you also mentioned earlier with the weather, that your hands and feet suffered.

L: Oh, yes. You were out in below zero weather, and I don’t think there was a single person that didn’t have frozen hands or feet.

T: Did you have any kind of gloves?

L: I had none.

T: The weather sounds like it would take a situation like this and make it an entirely new experience.

L: The worst was, I remember one day, the Germans got us up real early that morning and started us out on the so-called march. Usually in the morning the Germans would heat up water in whatever the farmer cooked his hog slop in and you’d get a cup of hot water. Sometimes you had to wait for an hour or two in line to get that water, but it was almost a godsend to even get anything in your stomach. But that particular morning they got us up and started us marching immediately, before it was even light. It started sleet. First rain, then turned to sleet. Then to snow. Of course, we had absolutely no protective clothing at all. We were wet right down to our skin, and talk about misery!

And then going to bed that way. That night we slept outside. When we woke up in the morning the blankets were frozen just solid. We couldn’t even get the blankets off the ground. We had to take our table knives and kind of pry it to try to get the blankets off the ground. They were frozen that...

T: They were frozen to the ground?

L: Yes.

T: It’s amazing more guys didn’t die on a march like this.

L: It is. I read the other day they figure that about 1300 died. But nobody knows the exact figure.

T: Record keeping wasn’t something that was being done.

L: I don’t know...you’d think the United States would have kept track of this many guys went down. This many guys are accounted for dead. This many have to be a POW. But apparently they didn’t.

T: So you’re walking along there not knowing whether your folks knew anything about where you were?
L: That’s right. I had mentioned about filling out that Red Cross thing during interrogation?

T: Yes.

L: My parents did not find out I was a POW until late May [1944].

T: Three months later?

L: Yes.

(2, B, 624)

T: Did you ever get any mail from them overseas?

L: Yes. I did get some letters, and I still have them to this day. Remember I mentioned about the strip search? That is the reason I got by with having my poems and the letters and I have both of them to this day.

T: Because that guard didn’t search you.

L: Didn’t search me, and the surprising thing is, all during this Death March getting as wet as we did, they’re in relatively good shape even today.

T: So you had personal things that you kept, that you were able to keep, hang onto during the whole time.

L: I had personal things. In Luft VI I had made friends with some of the Russian slave laborers. I’ve got in my possession a little wooden puzzle that a Russian friend of mind made for me. It was also strictly forbidden to talk to any of the Russians, and the Russians didn’t trust anybody, but if you got them off by themselves, away from the Germans... I did make friends with one of them. He couldn’t speak English. I couldn’t speak Russian. Our conversation was in German.

T: Do you figure your German got better while you were in camp?

L: When I first was shot down I just knew a little bit of German. I learned a little bit more all the time. Like I said, they broke us up in little groups and they even forced me into being a German interpreter. My German wasn’t that good. It was good from the standpoint that the Germans had no trouble understanding me whatsoever. I could pick enough words to make my feelings known. My problem was trying to understand what they were saying, because in their vocabulary they had so many words that were absolutely foreign to me. My German was learned from my grandparents. My grandparents could speak both German and English. The German I learned was from them, but the problem is, if they didn’t know a German word they just substituted the English word. There were so many words at that time that...
weren’t even in their vocabulary like airplane or radio or anything like that. It was not in their vocabulary.

T: They came before those things were invented.

L: Exactly. But knowing German also…and of course, my German name got me in all kinds of trouble. Like I was told so many times, “The only thing worse than a Jew is somebody that’s a traitor to the Fatherland, and you’re a traitor.”

T: Sure. With a name like Schrenk, they would say that. And you spoke German too. Were your grandparents immigrants from Germany?

L: No. They were both born in the United States. My great-grandparents were immigrants from Bavaria [a southern German state].

T: That goes back pretty far.

L: In fact it was 1850.

T: That was the early part of the German immigration to this country. So you, being able to speak German, it helped you it sounds like. At least keep an understanding...

L: It helped, but it was also a hindrance because I was dubbed a traitor.

T: Was there any suggestion by your own people, that because you spoke German that you were some kind of a traitor?

L: No. They used to tease me to no end. About what my fellow countrymen were doing to them. It was all in fun.

T: Was having a sense of humor something that you were able to do?

L: It was of the utmost importance to have a sense of humor.

T: How do you do it in conditions like this? What you’ve talked about is not funny.

(2, B, 678)

L: Well, I don’t know. But to me it was very important. I can remember we were on this march and we were just absolutely miserable. I think we were wet as a skunk and every other thing, and this guy was again teasing me about what my fellow countrymen were doing to him and I can remember telling him, “You’ve got nothing to gripe about. Good heavens! You’re getting two dollars and twenty-five cents a day, your food and your lodging and your clothing allowance and your health is all included in that. What have you got to gripe about?” It’s having humor to mask your misery.
T: I tend to think that the people who were able to do that were probably in...

L: Much better shape than ones that couldn't find the humor.

T: It seems like you could...guys, if you really started to get yourself down, that you could...that's a bottomless pit. You'd never get back up again.

L: Exactly. The important thing was to keep a sense of humor, keep your morale high, and never give up hope. As miserable as things became, and as many times as I was almost shot, I never gave up hope. Never once.

T: How do you do that? I mean, you don’t know when the end is coming.

L: You don’t know when the end is coming, but believe me, you can psyche yourself to believing.

T: How did you do it? What things did you keep in front of your eyes that kept you going?

L: I think prayer for one thing supported. Having friends.

T: Did you think of your folks that often when you were overseas?

L: Oh, yes. Constantly. Wondering if they knew that I was okay and a number of things. Wondering how they were managing.

T: Yes, because you don’t know how they were taking the news.

L: No. Although, like I said, I was one of the lucky ones. I think I got more mail than anybody else. And you can’t imagine what a morale lifter it is to just get a letter from somebody from the outside. The first letter I got was—I had an English girlfriend—and the first letter I got was from her. I think that letter went all over camp. Everybody reading it.

T: Just getting something to look at.

L: Getting something from the outside was the biggest morale booster—outside of getting food—was the biggest morale booster that you can about imagine.

T: So it didn’t even really matter what the letter said.

L: No. Even though it was a letter from my girlfriend, I had no qualms about letting everybody read it. I can remember it yet. It had a great big lip imprint on the outside.
T: Normally not something you would want to share, but here in this case it’s okay.


T: Did you have a chance to write to your folks at all?

L: Germans allowed us to write two letters. They were on a prescribed piece of paper. Real coarse lines. I think the letter had twenty-one lines. We had four postcards that had four lines. You could write them, but if you even said anything negative you know it didn’t go through. Most of it, even if you did everything right, never got through. You had to write in block letters. You couldn’t use any numbers or anything like that and you had to write in big block letters. They were all censored. Some of them did get through.

(2, B, 741)

T: As you found out later, did your folks ever get anything from you?

L: Yes. That is something that got lost somewhere, but when I got home they showed me some of my letters. I don’t know what happened to them, but in the shuffle somewhere they didn’t get saved. I’ve got all the letters that I got in POW camp.

T: So just your folks getting something, they knew you were still alive.

L: Yes. That boosted their morale as well. But like I said, first it was three months with nothing. Then all during the Death March, of course, we could write nothing. Just all of a sudden the letters just stopped, and I’m sure something must have been going through their mind, there: what happened?

T: I can really feel for them as a parent. And your other brother was in the Pacific, so your folks had two guys to worry about.

L: Yes.

T: He was not a POW.

L: No. No, he was not a POW. But one of the reasons I got more mail than anybody, I think all my friends back home…I had so many more people writing to me.

T: You got things regularly that gave you a connection to the outside.

L: Not regularly, but more than other people. Some poor guys never got a single letter.
End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: The march lasts for eighty-six days.

L: It depends on...some of the guys were fortunate enough to be put in other POW camps, but in all cases when we’d get there the camp would be overflowing already and we’d be turned away. So our particular group went for eighty-six days. A lot of the other POWs got to stay in other camps and their march wasn’t quite as long.

T: So the group that you started out marching with didn’t stay together the whole way.

L: The group I started out with, some of them, right, some of them got peeled out. But again, we were divided into smaller groups. Our particular group that was not divided. We stayed together. Some of the other divided groups...

T: So this large body gets divided into groups, and those smaller groups, one here, one there, yours stays together though.

L: Yes. Ours stayed together.

T: Here’s a couple specific questions. The first is, even though you went on back roads, did you sometimes go through villages, cities and towns?

L: Yes. A lot of times we went through—they never marched us through major cities, but they did march us through smaller villages. Depending upon where you marched in Poland, of course, you didn’t have all the riffraff hounding you and everything, but the minute you got into Germany they were right back out there again making it miserable for you. Calling you all kinds of names at the beginning of the march. As the war progressed, I think a lot of the German people realized that the war was lost. The further you got towards the end of the march, the more mellow they became.

(3, A, 18)

T: So you noticed a change in how the Germans treated you, even the civilians on the street.

L: Yes.

T: And it got better.

L: Right at the very end. It was right at the very end. Because, I think, they were...they had so much propaganda that I think a lot of them almost right to the very end thought that Germany was still winning the war.
T: Was it basically just taunts, or did you have stuff thrown at you sometimes?

L: Sometimes water, sticks. I don’t remember anybody really get hurt by it, but I mean, it was just the fact that you knew that they weren’t your friends.

T: That’s unnerving that kind of treatment.

L: It got so commonplace that it didn’t really bother you.

T: On the other side of that, did you find civilians that you could expect to be nice to you? To give you food or ask for food?

L: One time we were marching by, and all of a sudden some woman broke into the crowd and shoved some German money in my hand and disappeared just as quick. I don’t think she was German. I have an idea she was maybe a slave laborer. I never did figure it out. German money to me was worthless. I’ve got it in my collection now. But I think she thought that she was being good to us, that possibly we could buy something with it. I think she felt sorry for us. But I do not think that she was a German. Because this took place right in the heart of Germany.

T: What a puzzling thing to have happen.

L: Yes. I just never could explain it. Why just me in particular? And she did it so quick. I’m sure that if I remember right, the guards were hollering at her.

T: That’s very interesting. The same safety thing. Was your column ever bombed or strafed by aircraft?

L: Yes, it was. It was strafed a couple different times, but I can’t really tell you the details of it because, here again, I think your mind blocks out some of the things that were too horrible. I remember getting strafed. We were strafed by our own planes. Mistakenly. I remember laying in the ditch. I cannot recall how many were killed. I can remember another time. We had been strafed a couple times. This time we all stood up and waved. It was a P-47 [Thunderbolt, US single engine fighter plane] and he hadn’t started strafing yet, and all of a sudden he started (hands motion, rocking back and forth).

T: Wiggling his wings.

L: Yes.

T: So he recognized you.

L: Yes.

T: And that strafing it’s just, what can you do?
L: Oh! It is horrible.

T: And of course, they don't know who you are. They don't know if you’re friend or foe.

L: That’s right. We were just a long column, and there were a lot of long columns at that time, of Germans as well as...you can’t imagine how many people were out on the roads. Civilians, people that had been displaced from their homes. It was just...Russians, every nationality you can think of. Some of them were in much worse shape than we were. I can remember meeting a column of Russians. They were walking barefooted in the snow.

(3, A, 55)

T: POWs as well?

L: I’m sure that they were. You would see them, but you would never get in contact with them.

T: So you saw all kinds of people on the roads.

L: Every kind that you can imagine.

T: German civilians too?

L: German civilians pushing baby carriages, pulling wagons, doing everything.

T: It’s interesting that, in a sense, you’re just part of the anarchy on the roads and in the streets.

L: Right.

T: You’re one group of people among lots of groups of people.

L: Exactly.

T: And you saw those German civilians. It sounds like they were in bad shape too, some of them.

L: I think some of them were. Some of the smaller villages were even destroyed. You’d see people crawling out of just a pile of rubble. How they could survive, I don’t know.

T: It kind of puts things in perspective a little bit, doesn’t it? You’ve described people worse off than yourself.
L: The Russians I thought were much worse than what we were.

T: The way you described yourself, you were in pretty bad shape by this time anyway.

L: The Russians were treated much more harshly than we were. And sometime I’d like to interject about the Russian slaves in our POW camp.

T: Is it at VI or IV?

L: Both. Here at Luft VI a different group of Russians...we had what we called the Poop Machine. It was meant for emptying out the latrines. All of our latrines we just had kind of a slit trench. But there were so many POWs that they had to be pumped just about daily. The Germans had a machine, I don’t know quite how to describe it. It was a great big tank. It had kind of a great big like a manhole cover that could go up, and when it would come down it would seal the opening. There was a big hose coming out of the back end that would go down in the latrine. The thought of it was to pump gas into it. Gasoline. Ignite it. It would make an explosion causing a vacuum and (sucking noises) it would suck all the contents into the tank. It worked like a charm.

It was a great big tank pulled by a team of oxen. The Germans were so short of horses that everything was usually done with oxen. Anyway, this particular day two Russians and one German guard. The Russian started pumping the gasoline and he kept on pumping and pumping and pumping. Far too long. The German finally caught on what he was doing. Orders him to stop. Of course, the Russian just pumped for all he was worth. He was jabbed with bayonets and every other thing. The other one quick lit it. WHAM!! The whole thing just split from one end to the other. We were out in formation being counted at the time. We got just literally covered with sewage. The next day the same two Russians were out there with a hand pump pumping the sewage. But that’s how defiant they were.

T: A whole different relationship with the Germans and the Russians and the Germans and the Americans.

L: Yes. Remember I said we made it just as miserable for them in the count? They would have to count us over and over and over and over again. They weren’t really sure if anyone had escaped or not. The Russians took it even a step further. But I’m sure the Russians must have really suffered terribly.

T: Near the end of the march you ended up at a camp, [Stalag XI-B] Fallingbostel, for a while.

L: Some people were there a little bit longer than us, depending on when you got there. Some people stayed there permanently. If I remember right, I was only there for two, possibly three, days. Kind of a pit stop.
The camp was absolutely horrible. If I remember right, all during the time we were there we got no food at all. But at least we weren’t out on the road marching. When you were out on the road, your feet, your legs, your back, everything was just aching. Even though we were out laying on the ground with only room enough for what a body covered, at least we had a tent over our head. No heat, but at least you weren’t out in the elements. We weren’t marching.

T: But you didn’t stay there.

L: No.

T: Because I know from talking to you before looking at a map, you were actually liberated in the first day or couple days of May?

(3, A, 124)

L: May 2.

T: And British or Americans?

L: The British liberated us.

T: And how many of you were actually marching when the British came upon the group?

L: In our group, about 250 to 300. But other units liberated other groups about the same time. We were almost where the British and the Americans were. Some were liberated by Americans, some were liberated by British.

T: What do you remember about the day of your liberation?

L: Really not that much. I think I was so far gone. It took me a couple days to even realize that I was free.

T: So your health went downhill at the very end there too. More so?

L: No. It just...I wouldn’t say it went down more, but I mean, it went down gradually, down to where I think we were almost all gone. You could hardly put your one foot ahead of the other. When you went to the bathroom you had dysentery so bad that there was just a pool of blood. Blood and slime.

T: Here you are. Suddenly you’re found by the Allies. What did the British do for you right away?

L: It was just a recon [reconnaissance unit] that liberated us. They told us that we had to march to their outpost, which was quite a distance away. If I remember right,
it was about twenty kilometers away. Myself and a couple of my buddies, we all kind of split up. I mean, some of the guys stayed, some started walking. I can remember starting out with my group of buddies, which were maybe five or six of us. We came to where there must have been a battle about a day or two before. There were dead Germans. There were guns on the ground. I don't know why, but I picked up a gun. I don't know if I was going to use it or to protect myself or what.

We started walking and we came past a farmhouse and I finally turned to some of my friends and I said, “I'm going to go in. They've got horses out in the yard. We're going to take the horses.” So I came up to the door and knocked on the door. Here I found out later she was a Russian slave girl came to the door. I'm sure that she was scared as the dickens. I was speaking to her in German. I told her—when I found out she was Russian—I told her she had nothing to fear from us. That I wanted to see the meister [head] of the house.

He came and I pointed the gun at him and I said, “I want your horses.” He looked at me and he says, "No, no, no, no. They're lame. You can't take them." And I said, “Look! I've got a ways to go. I've walked as far as I'm going to. If I don't get the horses, there's going to be hell to pay.” He finally said, “What if I hook up my tractor and take you there? Will that be all right?” Of course, I agreed. I followed right out until he hooked up the tractor and everything. He started down the road and I made him stop and pick up every POW along the way. Of course, when we got to our destination I thanked him and let him go on his way.

T: So you had to threaten him.

L: I had to threaten him.

T: Was that hard for you to threaten someone with a gun like that?

L: Not at all. Not at all. Not after the way we were treated. And I think I was still in a kind of a daze.

T: How many guys ended up in that wagon being pulled along there? More than your little group?

L: More than my little group. The wagon was full to capacity. I would say there might have been twenty, twenty-five guys.

T: All former marching POWs.

L: Yes. That we picked up along the way.

T: Now the place they took you was a British place?
L: A British outpost. There we got our first shower and I could shave, and we got our first meal. I have to laugh at this to this day. We got ready to take our shower. There were two German girls. I’m sure that the British army had made them work for them. One of them had little cakes of Cashmere Bouquet soap, which smelled real nice, like springtime. The other one had Lifebuoy. Lifebuoy at that time had almost an odor to it. It did not smell good at all. But it was also known for body odor. Everybody took a bar of Lifebuoy, and I can remember this one with the Cashmere Bouquet: “I don’t know what’s wrong? This smells so good. That smells so bad and nobody wants mine.” I never did say anything to her. I should have maybe, but I never did say anything to her.

T: This is your first...was it a hot, warm shower?

L: Yes.

T: The first one of those you’ve had.

L: Oh, in a year and a half.

T: Describe the first warm shower you’ve had in a year and a half.

L: All I can remember is like heaven. But I can still remember what a relief it was to get rid of the beard. Then to get out of the clothes that were just absolutely reeking stinky and get deloused with DDT. That was just like heaven.

T: And you have new clothes now.

L: Yes. It was English. The English gave us their uniforms. It was not Air Force uniforms. It was ground troops. But the English shared with us very good. There were far more POWs than what there were English. The English during the war, even the soldiers, could only have two meals a day. They were that rationed. Can you imagine the English trying to share their rations with...we ate them out of house and home.

T: You must have. How long did you stay with them?

L: They kept on telling us, “We’ve told the Americans that you’re here and that you’re liberated and they’re supposed to come and pick you up.” The United States never did come and get us. To this day I don’t know why. We were there for almost a week or better. The poor English, they treated us very, very well, but we literally ate them out of house and home.

T: How did your stomach, your system, react to suddenly getting food and a lot of it?
L: So many of the guys got sick. Just even eating a little bit of anything. You would eat a mouthful or two and you’d have the feeling of being full. Ten minutes later you would be hungry.

T: Because your stomach has to get used to eating again.

L: Yes. And if you ate anything rich at all you got violently sick. They finally called in the Royal Air Force. Flew us to the nearest US base, which was in Brussels. Unloaded us. The army said, “We haven’t got any place for you here. We haven’t got any uniforms.”

T: The British just wanted to dump you.

L: I don’t blame them. The next day they put us on GI trucks and took us to Camp Lucky Strike [at Le Havre, France]. Again, “We haven’t got any room for you here. We haven’t got any uniforms. We don’t know what we’re going to do with you.”

T: What did they do with you?

L: They put us, real crowded, in tents. It was still quite cold. They only had one blanket to give us and there we couldn’t use the buddy system because we were sleeping in canvas cots. And we froze our butts off. Absolutely nothing to do. You were confined to that tent.

(3, A, 220)

T: Did you have any kind of debriefing or anything where people asked you about what you had been through?

L: Absolutely nothing.

T: So they just got you shoveled in this tent, not asking you anything.

L: Not asking us anything. You could receive no mail from home. You could write a letter. I remember writing several letters. But all they had was a garbage can acting as a mailbox and you could put your letter in the trash can. That was the only correspondence or anything. It was almost like being a POW. I did a big no no. I’m not sorry I did it to this day. Here I am in my English uniform yet. One day a single US plane landed. I went back to the tent and I told the guys, I said, “I’m out of here.” And I told them what I was going to do. I went over to the pilot and I said, “You don’t happen to be flying back to England do you, Sir?” He said, “As a matter of fact, I am.” I said, “Could I hitch a ride back home with you?” Here I am in an English uniform. Of course, he looks at me and well, “You’re English and you want to get back home. Are all your papers in order?” I said, “Yes, Sir. They sure are.” I didn’t have a single paper.
He flew me back to England, and I hitchhiked to my old Air Force base, which was Pottington, just about twenty miles outside of Northampton. Got to the old Air Force base, here it was closed. My heart just sank. I wandered around for a while and, here, way down I saw somebody walking. I walked over there. Here it was a US major. He looked at me. He says, “Do I recognize you?” I said, “Yes, Sir. You sure do. When I was flying out of here, a couple times you and I rode the bus to Northampton.” And we struck up a conversation. He said, “Yes, I remember that. What are you doing in that uniform?”

So I told him what happened. He looked at me and he said, “Good heavens! If they kept you in that uniform they’ll charge you with desertion. You’re already AWOL. I don’t know what I’m going to do with you.” And I said, “Well, Sir, here I am.” He said, “Can you come back tomorrow? I don’t know how, but I’m going to try to get a uniform for you.” I said, “That would be just fine.” I came back the next day. He not only had a uniform for me and he said, “I even saw the finance officer. I have a partial payment for you. It isn’t a gift. It’s going to be deducted from your pay. I have two hundred dollars for you. Are you ever lucky that you came when you did. I’m shipping out today.”

T: He was leaving.

L: He was leaving to go back home. I would have been one hundred percent on my own.

T: So many guys ended up at Camp Lucky Strike and taking ships from there. How did you finally get back to the States?

L: When I was at Lucky Strike, like I said, being that we were one of the last ones liberated to begin with and then the United States not coming to get us for another week, all during that time POWs were pouring into Lucky Strike and it was literally bursting. Somebody back in the States wasn’t on the ball. They should have known how many POWs there would have been. But they didn’t. Like I said, we were confined to the tent. They couldn’t tell us what would happen, when we were shipping out or what.

When the rest of the guys found out what I had done, there must have been one hundred or two hundred guys that did exactly the same thing I did and ended up in England. I wish I would have asked them how they got there. We were in England for, I would say, about two weeks. We finally decided we’re going to have to do something. We decided what we’re going to do is just en masse go down to the MPs and tell them what we did and see what happens. Oooo, were they unhappy with us! But there were so many of us they couldn’t do a doggone thing and they would have had to explain why we were treated like we were, so I think they kind of overlooked us. They said, “Tomorrow we’re sending you to Southampton. Maybe we’ll find a ship for you to go home on. You are strictly confined to your barracks.” Heck! The minute we got there we posted one guard and the rest of us would go uptown. This kept on for about two weeks. Finally there was an LST, which is a
very small ship that came and picked us up. That was like heaven to me. Number one, I like ships.

T: You didn’t take that thing all the way across the Atlantic, did you?

L: We hit a great big storm on the way back. The storm was so bad that they had to cut the engines to half speed because the bow of the ship and the intake where they took in the water to cool the engines was out of the water so much that the engines were overheating. I just loved it. The rest of the guys were just absolutely green from being seasick. But I just loved it. And the sailors treated us like gods.

T: When did you actually get back to the States then?

L: About...I think it was July 23 [1945].

T: It took you a long time from when you were released.

L: It took us fifteen days just to cross the Atlantic. And then the time delayed with the British, the time delayed in [Camp] Lucky Strike, the time delayed in England.

T: That does add up to all those days. When you got back to the States, moving to our next theme, how long was it before you were able to see your folks?

L: They sent us there almost immediately, but each of us were kind of on our own. If I remember right, I had to pay my own way. From Norfolk.

T: All the way back to Minneapolis?

L: To Long Prairie. There’s another thing. I got to the nearest town—Long Prairie had no bus service, no train, no nothing. The nearest town was Little Falls, which was twenty-three miles from my parents’ home. My parents didn’t have a telephone or anything, so there was nothing I could do and it was the middle of the night when I got there. I had to hire a cab to take me twenty-three miles.

T: That will use up that cash allowance, cash advance you got.

L: Actually the guy gave me a real good rate. I think he charged me ten cents a mile each way. I mean, to me it was worth it.

T: So your folks didn’t know you were coming.

L: I had written to them and told them that I was on my way.

T: But when you showed up at the door they...
L: They had no idea.

T: Talk about that. Here you are home after...what happens when you get home here?

L: Naturally, I was welcomed back home by my parents, my relatives and everything. Again, my mother found out that I couldn’t stand the rich foods. I would get deathly sick. That I would eat something and five, ten minutes later I would be hungry. I just had to almost completely readjust again. And by the way, up to that very time I had never even been examined by a US doctor.

(3, A, 342)

T: So you really weren’t asked...you weren’t debriefed...

L: I wasn’t debriefed.

T: No medical examination.

L: Outside of being sprayed by DDT, which of course, wasn’t the doctor. It was I would imagine a medic. That was it.

T: For our purposes, how much did your folks ask you about your POW experience?

L: I only briefly told them a little bit. I didn’t tell them about most of the things.

T: Did they ask questions and you didn’t really give them much of an answer, or did they not really ask?

L: They didn’t really ask that much, and I really didn’t volunteer that much.

T: Was it easier for you with your folks at that time to talk about your experiences as a bomber crewman?

L: Yes.

T: So in conversation, those questions were easier to answer than your POW experience?

L: And see, my brother was also Air Force, only he was flying B-24s in the Pacific. He had gotten home about a month or so before I did. Naturally, between the two of us we were talking more about bombing missions and close escapes with fighter planes and things like that. We didn’t really talk that much about being POWs. The whole—not my parents of course—but the other people, they didn’t really understand why anybody became a POW. Several of my friends asked me, “Why did
you give up? What were you, a coward, that you gave up? Why didn’t you shoot it out with them?”

T: How do you answer questions like that?

L: You just kind of ignored it. Another one said to me well—he had been in the war in the Pacific—he said, “Well, if all of us had just thrown up our hands and given up, we would have lost the war.” I mean, so with that kind of attitude, you just didn’t say any more than what you had to, because I’m sure that if you would have mentioned some of the things that had happened to you, you wouldn’t have been believed to begin with.

T: So you think that telling some of the stories about your POW experience people wouldn’t have believed you?

End of Tape 3, Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

L: Until about a year or two ago, most POWs didn’t even talk about their experiences. Just because of people not believing.

T: So for more than fifty years for you?

L: I think with 9/11 [Trade Center attack of 11 September 2001] it has changed everybody’s perspective of what war is all about, what it’s like to be a POW, because now you hear more about it on TV and see more documentaries and things like that. I find that it’s much easier to talk about it now. The way I got started writing my story was the prompting of my daughter. She kept on prompting me. “Well, Dad, if you don’t put it down and you die, I’m not going to have anything to remember you about.” And of course, about that time my wife chimed in as well. I started writing some of the articles and some of my friends got it, and that’s when they started publishing my stories in books.

T: Now you and Bernice were married in May 1948. When you got married, the two of you, did she know you had been a POW?

L: Just my mentioning I was a POW, but we never talked about it.

T: So you made it clear to her that you really preferred not to talk about it?

L: I don’t think I ever mentioned that I preferred not to talk about it. I think it just didn’t really come up that much. I wasn’t willing to talk about it or felt comfortable talking about it, and she didn’t ask.

T: So it kind of worked both ways then.

L: It worked both ways.
T: Your daughter was born in 1950. As she was growing up, junior high, high school, college, did she ask you about it?

L: Just the fact that I had mentioned I was a POW. They knew I was a POW and that was about it. And that I had frozen hands and feet and stomach problems. I had severe stomach problems for years and years. Due to the dysentery, my stomach had burst through my diaphragm and was giving me all kinds of problems. They were treating it as ulcers all the time. The VA kept on insisting that it was work related. One day, when I was such misery, I finally went to the VA and there was an old doctor there and he said, “We should take an x-ray of your stomach and just see what’s going on.” I can still remember the x-ray technician saying, “I took a picture of your stomach but it isn’t there. We have to find out where it is.” It was up above my diaphragm. I don’t think it was there all the time, but I think during the attacks it would go up. In 1993 they finally operated on me. They put my stomach in a bag and tied it to my backbone. That’s where it is today. I still have some stomach problems, but not the attacks or anything that I used to have. I still have to take medication daily for the burning and everything. The VA did a very good job. After so many years.

T: How about with your hands and feet? How have you suffered with them since then?

L: I think it’s more…I don’t think it’s that they were so severely frozen. I think it was more the nerve damage to my hands and feet. Yes, they were frozen, but not solidly or anything like that. I didn’t lose any toes. To this day if the weather is even a little bit cold outside, I’ve got severe cold feet. I just had my knee replaced and I think that also bothered it. For the first couple days that I was home, I was using my wife’s hair dryer to warm my feet and warm up the inside of my shoes. I had to do that about every half hour just to keep my feet comfortable.

T: So you’ve had lasting…the same with your hands? Do they feel cold easily?

L: Oh, yes. Not only cold, but I don’t have the sensitivity, like buttoning a button, picking up like a pin or something like that. I just don’t have the sensitivity to grasp small things or to button buttons and things like that.

T: And you’ve noticed that ever since 1945.

L: Ever since.

T: On the recovery thing, how often after the war, after 1945, did you have dreams or even nightmares specifically about your POW experience?

(3, B, 43)
L: I was very fortunate. I don't really remember any of them.

T: So any dreams you had were not connected with what happened as a POW.

L: A lot of times I would have dreams and wake up thinking about my crew or something like that, but not really anything horrible.

T: So not re-enacting, or seeing Germans, or being on the ship or...

L: No. Not that way. Not that way. I did not have flashbacks. I don't know if it's my attitude all during the time I was a POW, because I never really let it get to me.

T: I've heard you say more than once that you let your mind kind of just shut down and not deal with things.

L: Exactly. You shut your mind down. Not let it come to reality.

T: And that way it didn't get imprinted in your brain?

L: Didn't get imprinted. I think war affects different people in completely different ways. I figure that I was one of the very, very fortunate ones. A lot of POWs, even to this day, will not talk about their experiences. I didn't really want to until I started putting it down in words and writing stories. The more I wrote, the easier I found it was to talk about it. I think it was therapeutic to write my memoirs. To get it down on paper, to have it published in books, to know that my story is going to live on for future generations.

T: So, in a sense, the writing made the talking easier.

L: Exactly. One hundred percent.

T: This conversation today, I've asked you things and you have been forthcoming with every detail.

L: It hasn't bothered me one bit. I mean, there are a few things that I find I kind of choke up on. But it really doesn't bother me that much.

T: So ten years ago we might have had a very different conversation.

L: We wouldn't have had this conversation at all. Or very brief at most.

T: How has your daughter responded to suddenly knowing a lot more about you?

L: She is...everything I write, she wants it.

T: So she's anxious to learn...
L: Oh, is she ever.

T: Do you have grandkids?

L: No, I don’t. She had no children.

T: So she’s anxious to learn a lot though.

L: Yes. She is constantly sending me little clips of POWs, or stories, or what have you. Spending a fortune.

T: Let me ask you this as one of the last questions. When you think about Lester Schrenk, this young man who was shot down on February 22, 1944, and the person who emerged in May 1945 after a POW experience, how do you think that young man was different because of what he went through as a POW?

L: Actually, I think it, perhaps, was for the better. I wouldn’t for any amount of money go through it again, but I’m very proud that it did happen.

T: How do you think it was, when you say it was for the better? How do you think you benefited?

L: I think it made me a lot more tolerant. I think it gave me a much wider perspective of what other people go through. It most certainly made me realize how important food and water is and how fortunate we are to live in the United States. We are really blessed.

T: So it brought into clear focus, I think I hear you saying, the stuff that we take for granted sometimes.

L: Everybody takes it for granted that you’ve got food and water and a place to sleep. That is not so in most of the world. You don’t realize how fortunate you are to be able to go to bed at night and not have hunger pangs. I think it was by far the worst of all the POW experiences. Worse than the Death March. Worse than the Heydekrug run. Worse than being on the ship. Worse than being shot down and captured, was being hungry one hundred percent of the time.

And being so starved of water. To this day when we go to a restaurant or even home here, by the time I’m done eating, without even thinking about it, there isn’t a scrap of food on my plate. It almost looks like it’s been licked clean. If I’ve got a glass of water, you notice right now, it’s completely gone.

T: Nothing is wasted in this house.
L: Nothing...without even thinking about it. There’s nothing left.

T: And you’ve been like that...it’s been sixty years now.

L: Yes.

T: That’s the last question I had. So, on the record, Les, let me again thank you very much for your participation in this project.

L: I appreciate talking with you, and it’s been a very pleasant conversation. I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW