

Interviewee: Samuel Alle

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 16 April 2005

Location: living room, Alle residence, Grand Rapids, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, May 2005

Editing by: Thomas Saylor, June 2005

Samuel Alle was born 26 September 1919 in North St. Paul, Minnesota, and grew up in the area. He volunteered for the US Army in February 1941, and was trained as a dental technician.

By late summer 1944 Sam had joined the fighting in Europe, serving as company aide man (medic) with Company L, 317th Infantry Regiment, 80th Infantry Division. During a skirmish in eastern France on 6 September 1944, a river crossing, Sam was taken prisoner by German forces. Sam had been wounded in the action, so the Germans first sent him to a military hospital in the city of Saarbrücken for treatment.

Subsequently Sam spent time in several POW camps: first XII-A Limburg, then III-C Küstrin. Küstrin, located on the present day German-Polish border, was overrun by advancing Soviet troops on 25 January 1945, and all POWs were released. Unable to reach American lines, which lay several hundred miles to the west, Sam and other liberated POWs were forced to march east, through Poland and the Soviet Union, to the Black Sea port city of Odessa. For some of these men this harrowing journey took weeks. Men were collected together and finally, in early April 1945, transported by an American ship to Italy.

Sam was shipped from Italy to Britain, and then to the United States. He spent time recovering in several Army medical facilities, and was discharged from military service in November 1945. Again a civilian, Sam got married (wife Shirley) and worked many years for the US Postal Service in St. Paul, Minnesota. In retirement, Sam and Shirley relocated to Grand Rapids, Minnesota, where this interview was conducted in April 2005.

Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

S = Samuel Alle

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is Saturday, 16 April 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project; my name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm speaking with Mr. Samuel Alle at his apartment here in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. First, Mr. Alle, on the record this time, thanks very much for taking time to participate in the POW Oral History Project.

S: Yes.

T: For the record we have this information. You were born on 26 September 1919 in North St. Paul. You volunteered to be inducted, as the phrase goes, into the US Army, and that was in February of 1941. So you were actually in before the US was involved in the war.

S: Yes.

T: On the other end of that, you were discharged from service, separated, in November of 1945. So one year turned into almost five, as we said earlier. You were trained as a dental technician, but when you got to France, I think you said, there wasn't much need for dental technicians on the front line and you served as a company aide man, and that with the 80th Infantry Division, 317th Infantry Regiment, Company L.

You were in France in 1944, and for our purposes the story picks up on 6 September 1944, the day that you became a prisoner of war. For the record now, if you could describe, to the best of your memory, how it was that you woke up one morning a US soldier and by the end of the day were a prisoner of war of the Germans. How did that happen?

S: I don't know if you want to use it, but the order came through to attack at 1201 and we were supposed to be preceded by a rolling barrage of artillery. We attacked—September 6 was the date. We attacked at 0001, which was midnight, twelve hours ahead of time. When we hit the other shore we were pinned down in the water.

T: How many boats were there making this crossing? Can you recall?

S: I know there was a whole bunch of them. I don't think they all got across. I was in the second platoon. I think part of the third platoon got across, but the first platoon and the company headquarters never made it across.

T: What happened to them?

S: They turned around and went back, I guess, when the Germans opened fire on them. It was funny. We were on this side of the river—it's like Minneapolis and St. Paul. Only the river was a lot wider than the Mississippi. Our side of the river was—several of the houses were on fire. It was like a big bonfire. We were going from the light into the dark. We couldn't see what was over there, but the Germans could see us coming.

T: Perfectly silhouetted probably.

S: Yes. Like I say, we were supposed to be preceded by a rolling barrage of heavy artillery. That came at 1201 the next day, when we were... About eleven o'clock the next day I looked up, and here I saw all these guys running up with their hands on the back of their heads. They called for me. There was about five of us in that spot. We joined them too. Then I got up and a German officer, he came and put my arms down. He said, "Go look and see if you have any comrades out there."

T: This was in English?

S: Oh, real good English. So I went out there and then there was some young German. He looked about as young as I did. He came and he had an American .45 [caliber pistol]. Where he got it, I don't know. But then he said he, I didn't really understand, but he said he had a buddy that's wounded up there and he asked me to come along. We went and there was this big red barn there and there was—in a foxhole that was covered up, you couldn't see, and went down there and his buddy was dead. There was nothing I could do for him. About that time the Americans—that rolling barrage came in.

(1, A, 45)

T: On schedule.

S: On schedule. But they had marched all the rest of the guys into that barn. They opened fire on that barn. I don't know whether it was the roof or the door fell on top of us and we couldn't get out. I was going deaf and the guy was hollering bloody murder because, I guess, he was scared of the dark. But then by the time I got out, they had evacuated all the wounded Americans and Germans that had been in that barn. So then this officer came again and he said I should go around and look, and he designated some guy with a white sheet, a fellow American. I've got his name too, but I can't remember now. He went along with a white sheet and we went down along the riverbank there and didn't see any Americans, but there was a German

there. I looked at him. Didn't see any life there. So I stood up and about that time is when that other shot came in.

T: An American shell.

S: Yes. American artillery shell. Pieces of shrapnel are still in there [in shoulder]. It's not German. It's American.

T: Is that when you were hit? At that point?

S: Yes. That's when I was hit.

T: Up until then you had miraculously escaped any kind of injury.

S: Yes. Nobody else had been injured until they got in that barn and the Americans opened fire on them. The guy was up there flying around, you know.

T: The observation plane. A spotter.

S: He probably saw all those guys going in the barn. Up there I suppose he couldn't tell who they were. Then this guy that was with me, he took me back to the—

T: For the record, what kind of injuries did you have? You mentioned the shrapnel but how were you injured?

S: The shrapnel went in here (*points to back*) and it's lodged right next to my heart.

T: So it went into your back and didn't come out.

S: No. It's still in there now.

T: So that piece of shrapnel is still in there. Were you still able to walk on your own after that?

S: No. Somehow he got me—this guy, what was his name again? I can't remember his name. (*three second pause*) Robert Winger was the name of the guy. He got me back to the...

T: How were you feeling? Was it something that you were able to remain conscious?

S: No. I don't know how he got me back there. He wrote me a letter after the war and told me the details. They had an aid station. It was like a sunken garden. They had both wounded Americans and Germans in there. I came to once in there. I was all wet. The guy from my outfit was crying. He kept saying, "They got the doc! They got the doc!" I don't know whether it was blood or tears that fell on my face. He had a broken jaw and he was bleeding down on me too. I came to just for a little while

and then I blacked out again and when I came to it was blacker than pitch. It wasn't too late, but it was dark and I was laying in the bottom of a truck.

(1, A, 80)

T: A German truck obviously.

S: A German truck. And a German that could talk perfect English. I couldn't see him. I couldn't tell you what he looked like. I asked him, "Could I have a cigarette?" He said, "I'll give you one, but that better be your last one until they..." When I came to again I was in a Catholic hospital. Not a prison camp hospital, a German Catholic hospital.

T: Civilian hospital.

S: Yes. It was the Church of the Holy Ghost. But they don't say ghost in Germany. I think they say *Geist*.

T: *Geist. Heilige Geist*. That's right. So what it sounds like is, from once you were hit you kind of came in and out of consciousness and you remember kind of waking at certain times.

S: Yes.

T: And then only until you get into this hospital which I think you told me was in the city of Saarbrücken [in Saarland, far western Germany], right?

S: Saarbrücken.

T: What did the Germans, how could they help you in the hospital? What did they do for you?

S: They didn't do anything. It was kind of weird. It must have been just about mealtime. In that room there was two captains and a major. Officers.

T: Germans or Americans?

S: Americans. For some reason they thought I was an officer too. But this nun came up and she was feeding him, and she came to me she took one look at me and she said, "Kaputt," meaning that it wasn't worth feeding me, I guess. I swore at her. At a nun.

T: Did she feed you then?

S: No. I don't know if she knew what I said. I didn't really swear at her. "You're a lying SOB," is what I said. She probably didn't know what that meant. Then I

blacked out again and I came to and there was a little lady standing there. I can remember her name—the name was Hela Lin on a tag on her uniform. She came in and she had a bottle of broth, and she had it down in here and she gave it to me. She didn't say anything.

T: A bottle of, what was it?

S: Broth.

T: Broth. Like chicken broth or...

S: Yes. I don't know what it was, but it tasted good when you hadn't eaten for two days. Then I went back to sleep, and I came to the next day and there was two German interrogators there. They had my billfold out and they were looking at it. The first thing they told me, they had a picture of her [motions to wife, in next room] and her girlfriend that I had had in my billfold.

T: And Shirley was at this time, you weren't married yet.

S: No. When I first knew her she was only fourteen years old. Her sister was married to my cousin is how I knew her. She wrote to me in the Army like a lot of young ladies do. We corresponded for all those years. When I came home and I saw her, the light was lit (*chuckles*).

T: Good story. Now the Germans going through your billfold. Did they ask you any questions laying there? I mean, here you are barely able to stay conscious.

(1, A, 115)

S: Yes. I had a good excuse. "I don't know anything about war. I'm a medic." That was a good way out of everything. They didn't bother to interrogate me anymore.

T: So from your recollection it was pretty quick and over once they found out you were a medic.

S: Yes. I never saw them again. Then when I got to the other camp I got interrogated again.

T: How long did they keep you at the hospital from your memory?

S: Four days, because the Americans bombed the hospital.

T: With you in it?

S: Yes. They didn't hit that part. Whether they bombed it or not I don't know, but the Germans said that they had to move us because the Americans had bombed the

maternity wing of the hospital, and the population was upset. So they thought they better get us out of there. So they put me with another four guys in a boxcar. There was a lot more, but they weren't anyone I knew. Then they put us in the boxcar and they put the Germans in the bottom and the Americans on top.

T: The boxcar had two levels that you remember.

S: Yes. So if they strafed they'd hit us, not the Germans.

T: That's right. Germans on the bottom and you guys on top.

S: I don't know where they left them off, but I came to again in this hospital at Limburg.

T: So for you, the first four or five days have been sort of in and out of consciousness for the majority of the time in the hospital in Saarbrücken. Not getting any real medical care that you remember.

S: No. I didn't.

T: They didn't operate on you to get the shrapnel out or anything like that.

S: No. Still hurts.

T: Did you have any broken bones or any other kind of injuries?

S: No. It went in back here and there might have been a broken bone in the back or something. I don't know.

T: I see. When you got moved on the boxcar then, were you conscious or unconscious most of the time?

S: Semi. I mean, this one, this captain that was in there, he was kind of watching over me. He wound up in that next prison camp too, but he wound up in the officer's section.

T: You were separated there.

S: This prison camp at Limburg was kind of a—everybody went there. Then they separated the prisoners. They had an officer's section there, Air Corps section. They separated them.

T: How long were you kept there at Limburg?

S: Until about 19 October [1944].

T: And were you able to be in a normal barracks, or did they have some kind of a hospital ward that they kept you in?

(1, A, 145)

S: Have I got that picture of that hospital ward?

(interview pause to look for picture of hospital ward)

T: So looking at a picture of the hospital ward there at XII-A Limburg, this picture taken after March 1945, but it shows a rather large room with bunks, some single, some double and looks like guys in very differing types of conditions. Some more seriously injured than others. Did you get medical attention in there or was it just kind of a place to be parked?

S: The first guy I saw was an English doctor. He told me that there was nothing he could do. There was an American doctor in there, Dr. Johnson. He said, "There isn't much we can do. We don't have the equipment to do anything." So he fed me a couple aspirins every day. Then after about ten days I was able to go to the bathroom by myself. [I walked like this,] at this angle you know.

T: With one shoulder lower than the other.

S: He made me carry a bucket of water from one end of the building to the other. Draw water out of one and bring it to the other. I finally straightened out.

T: Was it painful, the shrapnel, at that point?

S: Oh, yes. Yes. Movement. You get used to pain after a while, too.

T: The pain, did it gradually decrease over time?

S: Yes. I'm sure there were a lot of people that were worse off. There was a lot of crying and hollering going on in there. I remember this one guy, he was from my company. He was one of my men. In fact there were two of them. The one that was crying over me before and another one. His name was Pilkington. A little guy. He came up and he had his jaw wired together. He kept on saying, "I can't talk! I can't talk!" He wouldn't shut up, but he kept on saying, "I can't talk!"

T: So some Brits, but more Americans in there it sounds like.

S: Yes. In fact there were a couple of Africans too. They were in the English Army.

T: So really a broad mix of people.

S: Yes. I don't think there were any Negroes in the American Army that were in combat zones at that time. I don't know. But I never saw any. I saw them driving trucks.

T: Let me ask you this. As you slowly are conscious more than unconscious, it's clear that you're a prisoner of war.

S: Yes.

T: How much thought had you given, before 6 September, to the thought that during the war you might become a POW? Ever thought about that?

S: No. I never gave it any thought. All I can remember about that is these guys in my outfit said, "Take no prisoners. Don't take any prisoners." I think they were the first ones that raised their hands. I had never given it any thought. I don't know.

I think I found something in the prison camp. After I got to the regular camp. Just like one day I was just... I used to stutter something awful. When I got excited or something. Not really awful, but that's why I never said much in the Army. Because I stuttered. Then I was sitting there one day in the camp and I looked around, (*pointing*) he's no better off than I am. He's no better off. And it was like a big cloud lifted, and I started feeling like I was king of the hill.

(1, A, 191)

T: So in an interesting sense being in the POW camp was good for you in some ways?

S: Yes. I think so. I think so. In a way. It made me feel that I was no different than anybody else.

T: That's very interesting. That in a sense that you take what on the face of it is a pretty negative situation and you find something good in it.

S: Yes.

T: Do you think that change of feeling stayed with you after the war?

S: Yes. Like I say, I never knew anything about a prisoner of war organization, until 1987. I had never talked about it to anybody. I was just content with what I knew to be with me. I never even told her [wife Shirley] much about it.

T: I'll ask you about that later, too. Now, because you are a POW, in those first weeks there, what was your basic mood? Was this upsetting to you or were you sort of a fairly confident type of person, it's going to work out?

S: I wasn't worried about it. I was just happy that I didn't have a white cross over my head [dead]. I was hurting, but so was everybody else around me in the hospital. I was one of the first ones out of there.

T: Out of the hospital.

S: Yes.

T: We talked earlier on the phone, and you said that you weren't really bitter at the Germans because you feel they saved your life after the shelling.

S: Oh, sure. That guy that took me to the Catholic hospital had to be a German. He talked perfect—I think it was that same officer that told me to put my hands down. He talked perfect English. He talked real nice to me. He didn't have to bring me to a... He could have left me laying there or he could have let me go to the prison camp where I wouldn't have gotten any treatment. But he brought me to a civilian hospital.

T: Yes. He didn't have to do that, did he?

S: No.

T: Did you have an opinion of the Germans before September 6?

S: Not really. I mean, you know, when it comes right down to it, the men in our Army weren't much different from them. They talked about the atrocities, but there were atrocities on our side too. Like I say, I wasn't the one that was pulling the trigger. In fact, as a medic, before that day, my platoon went in some towns. At crossings there were still Germans floating all around. It was like a big chicken farm. One had a chicken here and one had a chicken there. But there were Germans running around. We'd go to these crossroads and just sit there in case the Germans came that way. We never met anybody, except I had gone out with the reconnaissance outfit. I had never taken care of a wounded guy in my own outfit. Except for blisters on the feet or something like that (*chuckles*).

T: So no combat wounds or anything like that.

S: No. But up until that day I had never taken care of any. I had taken care of wounded Frenchmen and even went out with the reconnaissance. The first time I took care of a wounded American officer, I put a splint on him and brought him back to the aid station. What they do after they got him back there, I never found out. But I brought in two wounded Germans and brought them to the aid station. I felt bad about that, because they didn't do anything for them. I was mad. I mean, because here I went to all the trouble of bringing the wounded Germans in. They were all shot up. I wasn't equipped to take care of something like that. I was an aid man.

(1, A, 247)

T: It sounds ironic that the Germans, once you were injured, the Germans gave you, it sounds like, better treatment than the Americans had given the Germans that you dumped off there.

S: But I just wonder if someone up there (*points to heaven*) didn't know that I had done something right.

T: That's a very interesting story, Mr. Alle. Now to get back to our main thread, you were at Limburg for it looks like a month, five weeks, something like that.

S: Yes. About five weeks.

T: Were you out of the hospital at all or were you in the hospital that whole time?

S: I was there the whole time until the day they moved me out. They put me in a boxcar.

T: Before you left Limburg, were you able to send any kind of mail, postcard or letter home?

S: No. No.

T: So nothing at all.

S: We had that over there when we got to [Stalag III-C] Küstrin, but they never had anything at Limburg.

T: And did you get your German POW dog tags there at XII-A Limburg or at III-C Küstrin?

S: They gave those to me right away.

T: At XII-A Limburg.

S: Yes. In the hospital too, there was a compound there where they separated everybody and sent them where they were supposed to go.

T: How would you describe the way you felt physically when they moved you out of XII-A? What kind of shape were you in?

S: It wasn't good, but... It was a little tiresome riding in that boxcar.

T: Were you ambulatory? Could you walk?

S: Oh, yes. I walked.

T: That boxcar. Was it part of a larger train where you were in with a bunch of POWs being moved?

S: I don't know. We were in one of those little forty and eight boxcars. I don't know how many there were. We all went to III-C. That's where they dumped us all off. Whether there was more than one boxcar I don't know. I can't remember.

T: How crowded was the one you were in?

S: Pretty close.

T: From your memory, was there space to sit down or lie down?

S: I sat down with my back up against a wall. They didn't have any seats.

T: But you don't remember being packed in so close that you had to stand.

S: Not there.

T: Was that train bombed or strafed at all on the way?

S: No.

T: Let's talk about III-C Küstrin. That's the place you spent most of your time as a prisoner. It looks like from maybe 20 October [1944] like that to 25 January [1945].

(1, A, 287)

S: I had no idea what the dates were. Really.

T: But doing some figuring from when you were captured, and how long you feel you were at Limburg, it looks like about three months you were at Küstrin. November, December, January. Right?

S: At Küstrin. Yes. It was something about the middle of October, I guess, [that I arrived there].

T: And that lasted to 25 January [1945,] when the camp was evacuated.

S: Yes.

T: You got to that camp. What I'll ask you to do first is sort of go in through the front gate and describe the way that camp looked to you.

S: It looked like a bunch of chicken houses. The first prisoners, they had they put them in big vacant buildings. But they could escape from them. Like you see in the pictures where they built tunnels out of the place. But these chicken houses, if you would have taken a board off to build a tunnel you would have frozen to death. Because there was just one board on the outside [wall].

T: Was your barracks up off the ground or was it level with the ground?

S: Level. Like a chicken house. That's what I compare it to. A chicken coop. After we got there, there was thirty-three of us in that one room. These barracks were long. They had three rooms in each one of them. They had ten of these buildings and they had three rooms in each one.

T: So thirty rooms all together, I guess, doing the math.

S: Yes. And there was thirty-three in our room.

T: Wow! Was it meant to hold that many guys or did it feel like it was a little overcrowded?

S: It was overcrowded, but we made out. I mean, like I say, we slept together. Doubled up to keep warm.

T: In the bunks there.

S: Yes. We didn't have bunks. We were on the floor. They had a bunk and people slept on there, and there were people that slept underneath them.

T: So there was more like a platform almost?

S: Yes.

T: So you weren't necessarily in an individual bed. It was just, lay together.

S: Yes. Me and my buddy, we slept on the floor. Underneath the bunks. And there was just as many down there as there was above, I think. I don't know.

T: One of the things I wanted to ask about that is, did you have a person or persons in camp you were especially good friends with?

S: Yes. Yes. This one here. In fact, I wrote to him last night.

T: You showed me an article here with Kenneth Bennaly. You didn't know him before prison camp, did you?

(1, A, 332)

S: No. No. He was in a different outfit altogether.

T: How did you happen to become good friends there in that situation?

S: Because we just happened to be sleeping next to each other, and then we thought it was a good idea to move our beds together and he started talking about his life and we just conversed about things back home and stuff like that.

T: Now was he on the march with you too when you went out through Poland?

S: Oh, yes. And there were thirteen of us.

T: And he was one of them too?

S: Yes.

T: In your words, how can friends kind of help each other in a prison camp situation?

S: Just talk about other things and kind of get your mind off of what you're doing. I always felt like we were all kind of like brothers. We were all in the same fix. The ones you picked out to talk to, why, just like family. There were thirty-three men in there, and there must have been ten guys in there that I never said boo to.

T: That's interesting. So you kind of find the people you're going to be with, and other people are just sort of in the room together.

S: Yes. It's like kids going to school. One kid will pick another kid or maybe five that hang together. It's just like a bunch of kids.

T: Did you have any work details there at III-C?

S: No. It was a noncoms camp. In the German Army the noncoms and the officers weren't working. But they had twenty thousand Russians there to do all the work that had to be done.

T: So the Americans weren't, you weren't doing any work.

S: They wouldn't even allow us out of the compound.

T: So let me ask you, how did you pass your time during the day? You had a lot of time to kill.

S: Sit and daydream about home.

T: Did you have any kind of card games or anything else to do?

S: Once in a while. We played cards once in a while. But in a place like that there doesn't seem to be interesting... I don't know.

T: When you sit around and sort of talk, what kind of things do guys talk about?

S: Ken and I, he was married, and he talked about his family back in New Mexico. I told him what my life was like. And about food a lot.

T: What about food? --

End Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 382.

T: Your conversations about food, how did those go? Where you talking about what you were eating or what you wanted to eat?

S: Food. Mainly about what we'd like to have.

T: And what was that from your memory? What did you want to have?

S: I wanted a big hamburger.

T: That was in the front of your brain.

S: Yes. A hamburger and a banana (*chuckles*).

T: A banana? That's interesting.

S: She (*motions to Shirley, in next room*) took me out for a banana split the other night.

T: So bananas are still something you like.

S: Yes. Didn't get any bananas over there. I have a banana every morning with my oatmeal.

T: So bananas were something that you thought about.

S: Yes. Bananas and hamburgers.

T: Now how about what the Germans supplied for you? What do you remember getting from the Germans?

S: For food? In the morning they gave you a cup of ersatz coffee, which is made out of burned barley. It doesn't taste like coffee. I never drank it, and every once in a while I'd get a pot of it and soak my feet in it.

T: So it was not something you wanted to drink.

S: No. There were a few guys that would drink it. I was still a little fussy. I didn't like it. Then for lunch we'd get this big bowl of soup. Sometimes it was made out of sugar beets and potatoes. Once in a while you would get beans. I had never seen a black-eyed bean. I thought we were eating black-eyed peas until a guy told me, he said, "That black is a bug." He pulled it apart. It was a bug. There was a bug in it (*chuckles*). There's protein in bugs. So I ate it. And every once in a while we had oatmeal soup. Then every evening we would get a fifth of a loaf of bread.

T: The bread, was the bread delivered already sliced or did you guys have to slice it?

S: Yes. They cut it and you got a fifth of a loaf of bread.

T: Who did the slicing?

S: I don't know. It was sliced when it came in.

T: You didn't have to worry about dividing it up.

S: No.

T: Was the food prepared in your barracks or was it brought in?

S: No. They had a mess hall down there, and someone was sent down to get it.

T: Do you remember the food being pretty much the same every day?

S: The same thing. Once in a while you would get a hunk of cheese. It was awful tasting cheese. I couldn't eat it. I still don't like cheese.

T: You like bananas though.

S: Oh, yes! (*both laugh*)

(1, B, 406)

T: Now the Germans were supplying food, some food. Did you get any Red Cross parcels there that you remember?

S: We got one. When I was in the hospital.

T: So at Limburg.

S: Yes. I shared one with a Canadian, in Limburg.

T: So one that you shared there and one that you remember at III-C.

S: Didn't get a whole parcel. I shared it with about five different guys.

T: So the one at Küstrin was shared as well.

S: Yes. But there was only two the whole time I was in there.

T: So you really had to subsist on what the Germans supplied for you, which wasn't very much.

S: But they didn't have anything.

T: Yes. By late 1944 the war was going pretty badly for the Germans.

S: Yes.

T: Let me ask about the Germans, the guards there. What kind of guys were they?

S: The guards didn't do anything. They used to take roll call for our barracks. We called him *achtundachtzig*. Eighty-eight [in German].

T: Why?

S: He'd get out there every morning and give the report. *Achtundachtzig*. Give the report to the...

T: So that became his nickname.

S: So we called him *Achtundachtzig*.

T: What kind of a guy was he? Good guy or bad guy?

S: I never talked to him, but there was one guy there that... Christmas Eve... You want to hear it?

T: Yes. Sure.

S: We had singing. We sang songs. One guy that had been in the Metropolitan Opera came in our room, American. And sang to us. There were about six hillbillies and they were singing hillbilly Christmas songs. But then after they got through they

were talking about drinking and all their conquests. That didn't seem like that would be the topic on Christmas Eve to me.

So I went outside and here was (**). He was warming up. He was going to make a snowball. And I made a snowball and I saw the guard down there and I threw a snowball at him. "*Was ist los?*" he said ["What is going on?" in German]. And I said, "Merry Christmas." And he said, "*Kommen Sie hier.*" ["Come here," in German] And he sang for me, in German. *Silent Night. Silent Night*, in German. It was written in German. And it sounded a lot better in German.

(1, B, 428)

T: So the Germans weren't people you had to be afraid of, it sounds like.

S: No. I wasn't afraid of them. If you each had a gun in your hand, why then you might be afraid of them but I never...

T: So from your memory, did you see them ever being mean to prisoners?

S: No, I never did. I saw after-effects where they'd been mean to French people, or the French claimed they had been, and I saw, I didn't see it happen, but I saw the atrocities the American pulled too.

T: From what you saw with your own eyes, though.

S: No. I never...

T: These Germans, younger fellows like yourself or were they older?

S: In the prison camp they had old guards.

T: Now when you say old, forty, fifty, sixty?

S: Fifties and sixties.

T: Old guys.

S: Oh, yes. Yes. They couldn't have stood up on the front lines. They put them in as guards.

T: Right. Right. Anybody I guess healthy enough was likely shipped out to the Eastern Front. So these guys, these German guards, were from your memory, older fellows that were just fairly decent.

S: Yes. In fact, the one guy that sang for me, he lived in the United States. He worked in three different places, Cleveland was one of them. I can't remember the other two.

T: He had been in the States himself.

S: Yes. And he could talk, not real good English, but broken English. I could understand him.

T: Very interesting how the two groups don't really, they have a lot more in common than they have holding them apart here. The Americans and the Germans.

S: We hated Hitler and they hated [General George] Patton.

T: So you had something to share there too. Say, in the camp there, how much news did you prisoners have about what was going on outside your little world?

S: None. Not really. We heard about where those paratroopers were in Malmedy. We heard about that. Of course the Germans were getting the best about it when we heard about it. When it went the other way we didn't hear anymore.

(1, B, 453)

T: So when it going well for them they'd tell you?

S: Yes.

T: Were there any kind of rumors about how the war was going, or were you just kind of up in the air?

S: More or less up in the air I think. They had propaganda things. They would tell you stuff and then you knew darned well it was a lot of baloney. They even had a guy dressed up with an American uniform come into camp and tell you that he was supposed to try to escape or something like that. But you knew darned well it was a bunch of malarkey.

T: Did you worry that, or wonder if, there were German spies among the prisoners?

S: There was one guy that I was suspicious about because he looked so neat and clean and he'd disappear during the day.

T: Was he in your barracks?

S: Yes. He never said anything. He'd just sit there and look at you. But then I used to sit and look at other people too.

T: Let me move to the next topic here. On 25 January 1945 that camp at Küstrin, was evacuated. How much advance warning did you have that the camp was going to be evacuated?

S: We knew ahead of time that we were going to go.

T: The Germans told you, or were there rumors?

S: No. Well, I mean, they had to prepare us. It seems that everybody was able to go. I guess they had a hospital there too, but I never was in it.

T: At Küstrin.

S: Yes. We just lined up in the morning and I was in the first company, Company Number One. That's probably why I joined the Russians, and the ones in the back calmly ran back to the prison camp.

T: Talk about what happened that day because, again, a lot of camps were evacuated and marched and yours, your marching column, had a different experience. So what happened from your perspective as you were marching there?

S: We just marched down the road about two or three miles. I was in the first company, so I was right up at the head. Not the first one in the column, but I was maybe about ten rows back.

T: So near the very front. Were there any Germans up ahead?

S: There were guards walking alongside of us. Every so often. Not by each one. Most uniforms they—you look at them from a distance, they all look alike. All of a sudden bang, bang, bang! The first thing I did was head for the ditch.

T: Could you tell who was doing the shooting or where it was coming from?

S: No. I didn't know where it was coming from. But then I hit the ditch. After a while I couldn't hear any noise. I looked up and I couldn't see anybody.

T: No other prisoners either?

S: Well, then they started to pop up too. Being a medic I looked for wounded. I found two dead people. I don't know who they were.

S: But the column that was marching was now scattered, right? I mean, it was no longer a marching column.

(1, B, 487)

S: No. In fact, there wasn't hardly anybody there. Just a few of us like me that came out of the ditch. I saw the Russians coming and I said, "Americanski." They waved me back to...

T: So the Russians came over to where you guys were there. What was going through your mind at that time? In a sense, the marching was suddenly just ended. Were you concerned about what was going on there?

S: Yes! Had no idea. I never knew it was the Russians. I thought maybe they were going to—at first I thought maybe they were going to take us out there. You heard the story where the Germans took out prisoners and shot them out there. I thought they sure as heck can't shoot two thousand people out here. I got up and there was a guy standing there. I said, "Americanski." He flagged me back and I went and I saw two bodies laying there. They were both dead. Americans. I didn't know them.

T: When the Russian pointed sort of that way, behind himself, toward the Russian lines then...

S: It was kind of like—remember these kind of community farms? It was like a small town. A farm all built, with all big buildings in there. I first went there and there was still shells going around, so I hid in one of those pits in the garage where they raised the cars up. Do you remember that?

T: Right. Like where the mechanic would stand. Down. Yes.

S: Before they had the hoists. I sat there for—me and two other guys sat down there—for about an hour or so. Then we decided to pop up, and guys were populating those buildings. There must have been about five hundred all together. I think all the rest of them went back to camp. Then we got together, and there was thirteen of us from my room and we stuck together.

T: At that point how did you, as a group or individually, decide what to do? I mean, you've got the Russians on one side. You've got the camp and the Germans on the other. How did you make your decision what to do?

S: The Russians made it for us. They told us to go that way, and we went through. They didn't bother us. We just walked on by our own. We hitched a ride on a boxcar.

T: As you headed east, what's the first place you stopped? I mean, at the end of the day I guess you've got to park yourself somewhere.

S: Some vacant building. I remember at one town, about the second or third day out, we were going through this town and there was a distillery there and I won't drink, but I went in and I took a bottle of champagne and I was going to be a good Joe and give people a drink. I met this Russian and I gave him a drink and he said, "No. For babies. Vodka." He gave it to me. "Drink or puk, puk," he said.

T: He pointed a gun at you?

S: Yes. "Drink or puk, puk." That was the first time in my life I was drunk.

T: So Russian vodka.

S: Oh, boy! That's enough to burn up your insides (*chuckles*).

T: No kidding. As you were walking, a group of about thirteen of you marched, and again, to sort of paint the big picture, through Poland and you ended up down at Odessa on the Black Sea.

(1, B, 529)

S: As soon as we got to the Russian border the Russians wouldn't let us go roam around freely in Russia. They took over. Put us in boxcars and...

T: Then you went on a train the rest of the way?

S: It was just as bad as being prisoners in Russia, and they were in Germany. I mean, we were under guard all the time.

T: And still this group of about a dozen, thirteen guys.

S: But altogether there must have been about five or six hundred of us.

T: Were you traveling together in these boxcars?

S: I rode in boxcars a lot of time with Polish people that were going home.

T: How long did that train trip take? I mean, rail conditions were kind of shaky at that time. That's a long way.

S: It took us from January 27 until the last of March to get there. Because it was walking and riding in boxcars, and sometimes the boxcar would go this way first, then come back this way.

T: How often did you come into contact with Russian military people as you were going?

S: Not too often. I mean, it was everywhere. It didn't bother one way or the other. Except when you got to Russia. Then they...

T: Were they curious as far as who you were and why you were there?

S: No. Americanski. We waved our hands. Americanski.

T: You didn't feel any kind threat from these Russians at all.

S: No. No.

T: Did you encounter Russian civilians at all while you were traveling? Walking or riding.

S: No. A lot of Polish civilians. There was a lot of boxcars of Polish that had been slave laborers in Germany. They were going home. They didn't know if they had a home or not. But home is where the heart is. They were the happiest people. I never saw people like the Polish people.

T: Really? Even in a difficult situation.

S: Of all the people I met, I have a soft spot for the Polish people.

T: Really? Why do you say that is?

S: I mean, they share everything with you. They had nothing, but they would give you half of nothing. Have a loaf of bread. They'd break off a chunk for everybody. I remember that one boxcar, I swear, they were singing something in Polish and I swore I was singing with them. And I don't know a word of Polish (*chuckles*). But I just loved the people.

T: And so were there instances where they helped you out with food for example. You had to feed yourself.

S: Oh, yes. When we got to [the city of] Lodz, Poland, they picked up a big meal for us. Borscht.

T: That's stew or soup.

S: Borscht has beets in it. If there's one thing you hate in this world, it's beets.

T: You hate beets?

S: Yes.

T: So what did you do? Did you eat the beets?

S: I kind of ate around them. I didn't eat too much. It was no big deal for me.

T: So you had a couple of instances where Polish people actually shared their food with you.

(1, B, 566)

S: Oh, yes. In the boxcar. You get in that boxcar, so crowded you couldn't all sit at one time. You had to sit and some stand. Some old lady came out. She broke off her loaf of bread. Others would share. And they had gone through a lot more than we ever did.

T: Yes. They really did. What, as you were on the trains or walking, you must have passed through who knows how many cities and towns. What were the cities and towns, what did they look like?

S: Most of them were in shambles, because the Germans had gone through there first and then the Russians were coming through. The front line troops weren't too bad, but we always used to call the rear echelon, when they came through, the rape and arson squad. Because, I mean, they didn't have to worry about fighting, so they were taking out their... *(trails off)*

T: So the Polish cities and Russian cities that you saw looked in pretty tough shape.

S: Yes. The Germans had gone through there, and the Russians. A couple times, I suppose.

T: That's right. Back and forth. What would you say, when you think about the marching and the rides you had, what was the most interesting experience you had during those months.

S: Just the joy of being free, I guess. We thought we were freer than we were in the prison camp anyhow. It was just the joy of thinking about going home.

T: So that was on your mind now, consciously. Getting somewhere.

S: Yes.

T: What would you say was the most dangerous experience you had during those months of marching and riding?

S: I never really felt like I was in any danger. I never got separated from our group.

T: So staying with the group was important.

S: Yes. Because the Russians were known to take people and make them laborers.

T: Did that happen to you at all ever?

S: Oh, no, no. I never got separated from my group.

T: Did anybody in your group speak Polish or Russian?

S: Yes. We had one of us stayed there.

T: And what language did he speak? Polish or Russian.

S: He was Polish. His name was Puraka.

T: So he started with your group but didn't finish with your group?

S: He stayed in there. He met a girl in that twenty-four hours we were in Lodz.

T: And he stayed in Poland?

S: He didn't go with us anyhow. He said he was staying there.

T: Were you tempted to stay back, or did you want to stay with the group?

S: I wanted to stay with the group. I had my two best friends in the camp. We kind of hung together.

T: And who was that? It was Joe and...

(1, B, 606)

S: Kenneth. And there was an ex-paratrooper in there. I can't remember his first name. His last name was Hill.

T: So the two of you, the three of you then, really stuck together.

S: Yes.

T: Let me ask about getting to Odessa. I mean, that's a long way. How did you finally—you didn't have a map. How did you actually make sure you got there?

S: The Russians put us on a train and took us there.

T: So they made sure you got there.

S: And then they gave us a bath when we got there.

T: Now when you got to Odessa did you find Americans or did the Russians house you somewhere?

S: There was some group that was stationed there. Americans.

T: Did they look after you once you got down to Odessa then? The Americans.

S: No, not really. Then we got on a boat and when we were on the boat we were under English control really. It was an English boat.

T: In Odessa do you remember meeting or talking to any American military people?

S: No. I think some did though. But I didn't.

T: And you remember getting a shower or a bath or something?

S: Yes. We got a bath and we didn't get to wash ourselves. They had some woman wash us. Russian women.

T: That matches somebody else's story who went from III-C out through Odessa. And did you get new clothes?

S: No.

T: Same old stuff back again?

S: They just washed it up.

T: That stuff must have been pretty threadbare by that time.

S: Yes.

T: On the ship, the ship was a British ship you mentioned, right?

S: Yes.

T: And where did it take you?

S: Italy. To Naples. It stopped off in Turkey and it just stopped over to refuel or something. In Turkey. And then again in Egypt. Someplace in Egypt. Then we went to Naples.

T: When you got to Naples were there America military there to take care of you?

S: Oh, yes. Americans had control of Italy by that time.

(1, B, 637)

T: So this is the end of March 1945.

S: Yes.

T: When did you finally begin to feel that your POW experience was really over? Was it in Odessa, on the ship, there in Naples? When did that really hit you?

S: Well, it didn't really hit me until I got back to Boston.

T: So really it took until you got back to the States here.

S: Yes. You didn't know if you were dreaming or something was going to happen to you.

T: You went through quite a journey there really. If you think even from being wounded and in the hospital at Saarbrücken, to the whole botched march away from Küstrin, to going across the Soviet Union, that's a pretty amazing story. How do you account for the fact that you made it?

S: Because I was used to walking. I was more active than most people. I looked like a kid. I suppose I acted like one. When I went in the Army I looked like—they thought I was lying. They went and wrote to Stillwater, Minnesota, and got my right age.

T: Really didn't believe how old you were?

S: I looked like a sixteen year old kid.

T: Part of it is being in good shape, but how much of surviving what you did is good fortune or something else?

S: Good fortune. But you have to fight for good fortune, too. I mean, good fortune doesn't always just fall in your lap.

T: Good point. How much do you attribute your survival in one piece to religion, or faith?

S: A lot of it.

T: Explain that. What do you mean?

S: Like talking about that lady giving me that drink out of that bottle that time. When I was in the hospital. I still swear to this day that she was an angel. I don't know.

T: Would you consider yourself a particularly religious person when you went in the service?

S: Yes. I was brought up by my grandmother.

T: So you went to church on Sunday when you were growing up.

S: Yes.

T: How would you say that your faith helped you while you were a POW?

S: I prayed every day when I went to sleep. I'm still a kid at heart, I guess.

T: Do you feel that somebody was or some extra force was watching over you?

S: I felt about that little nurse and that guy that took me to that—that German guy. I couldn't see him, but I just didn't feel like he was a German guy. He talked perfect English and I couldn't figure out how an American could take me to a German hospital. So...

T: You sure were fortunate a number of times.

S: Yes. The Lord was with me.

T: You mentioned you got back to Boston. By ship or by plane?

S: By ship. Got back the day before Roosevelt died.

T: He died April 12 [1945].

S: Yes. I got there on the eleventh. And I went in town to get—they gave me a pass to go in town to get a milkshake, and I went in there and I went in a drugstore and it came over the radio that Roosevelt died.

T: How did that hit you? That news that the president was dead.

S: I don't know. I never had too much faith in Roosevelt.

T: It wasn't something [that] impacted you really severely.

S: No.

T: How soon was it before you were able to get back to Minnesota to see your family?

S: It must have been a week, I think.

T: So you were back before the end of April.

S: Yes.

T: Now for our purposes, here's how the questions go. When you first saw your family here in Minnesota, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

S: Nothing. I never lived with my family really.

T: The people you considered your family.

S: My grandmother was dead by that time. She died when I was thirteen and I never knew my mother until I was six and half years old. She left me at my grandmother's and I spent most of my life, until I was thirteen, with her. Then I went home for about three years, when I was thirteen and I stayed until I was sixteen.

T: With your mom, your real mom.

S: Yes. Then after that I never lived there anymore.

T: After sixteen where did you live?

S: With an uncle. My mother's brother.

T: So he's the guy you call your step-father.

S: No. He was my uncle.

T: Well, when you saw the people who were closest to you in Minnesota, did they ask you about your POW experience at all?

S: Oh, a little bit. They didn't make a big deal about it. I never said anything about it.

(1, B, 721)

Shirley Alle (*entering room*): No. I mean we knew about it, but we never talked about it.

T: You and Shirley were married 1946, right?

S: Yes.

T: When you were married, from your memory, did Shirley know you had been a POW?

S: Oh, yes.

T: How much do you remember telling her about the POW experience? Not what she remembers, what you remember.

S: We never talked about it. She got a letter after I was liberated already that I had written in the prison camp. But you can't write anything in there because the Germans are going to check what you write.

T: So you remember that you informed her about it. When you talked then, before or after you were married, how much detail did you give about it?

S: I don't think it was—you know, I've forgotten all about that. After I got home I forgot all about it. It wasn't until 1987 when I... I never told anyone. Just the people that had known it.

T: Would you say, Mr. Alle, if somebody had asked you, would you talk about it or...

S: I'd just kind of brush it off. I mean, I never talked to anyone.

T: Let me ask you the difference. If somebody had asked you about your combat experience, was that something you could talk about?

S: Like I say, I never had too much of that either. We never had any real combat except when I went out to pick up a wounded or something because we set up roadblocks in there because the Germans were like ants. They were all over. In my platoon the whole time we were over there, that whole month, all we did was set up roadblocks. We never actually got into any real combat.

T: You worked as a medic too, so it was kind of a different can of worms, wasn't it? You have a different experience. --

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

T: When you worked at the Post Office in St. Paul, you mentioned that nobody really knew you had been a POW.

S: No. Until that one day when someone mentioned that Snuffy [Harold Kurvers] had been a prisoner of war [in the Pacific].

T: That's Harold "Snuff" Kurvers. And he's somebody you had known for a long time at the Post Office, right?

S: I worked with him. I mean, we worked side by side for—in the same final case. Even then we never talked about it.

T: That's interesting. How did you find out about Kurvers, that he had been a POW?

S: Somebody mentioned it. That he had been a prisoner of war. I don't think they knew when they told me, that I had been one, too.

T: Oh, really? So it was really something that...

S: Because he had me working right alongside of him. We both worked in the North Como section of St. Paul. And this happened to me and I said, "Hey, Snuff, I hear you were a POW." And he said, "Yes." I said, "I was too." But beyond that we didn't...

T: So it was really something that, there you worked next to somebody for a long time and neither of you knew that about the other.

S: Snuffy must have felt the same way I did, because he never mentioned much of it, and he was in the Death March [on Bataan, in 1942].

(2, A, 13)

T: Yes. Bataan and the Philippines, and in Japan. The whole works. Now you've been a member of American Ex-POWs since 1987 you said.

S: That's when I found out about it. I never knew there was such a thing as that club for American POWs, and I hadn't belonged to the American Legion or VFW or anything until that time. Then we happened to be sitting next to this guy up in Silver Bay [Minnesota] and he mentioned that he'd been a prisoner of war, and I said, "Yes, so was I." He said, "Do you belong to the ex-POW club?" And I said, "No." He started to tell me about it, and then after that there was a Dr. Swift, who was a doctor out of St. Cloud, who specialized in working with ex-POWs. I met him and then I went out there. I knew I was getting compensation, but I thought it was for this (*points to shoulder*).

T: The shrapnel.

S: Yes. I never even bothered to see. Prison camp was just like a bad dream.

T: You've talked about it being good, bad, and in the middle somewhere. Sort of a mixed experience.

S: Yes. Everything isn't bad, you know.

T: That's right. I thought it was interesting the way you talked about it, it was a help for you in some ways.

S: Like I told you earlier, I was sitting there one day [at Limburg XII-A]. I used to stutter quite a bit. That's why I never talked much. I don't stutter too much now. I just happened to be sitting there one day. (*pointing around*) He's no better off than I am. He's no better off than I am. He's no better off than I am. Went down the line. It was just like a big cloud lifted.

T: That's really interesting, yes. With your POW experience, is that something that came back to you, any parts of it, in dreams after the war?

S: Not really. Dream about Ken once in a while because we talked together and a couple of the guys, couple other guys I was friendly with. But as a whole, I mean, outside of them I never was really chummy with anybody there and we never discussed it while we were there. The ones I knew, we didn't anyhow.

T: Any kind of images like from the day that III-C was liberated or any other parts of it that have come back in dreams to you over the years? Being captured or any of that stuff?

S: No. I think a lot about, like I told you, I got a soft spot in my heart for the Polish people. I think about them a lot. Some of the little incidents that happened. Nothing you can think of offhand. It comes back once in a while.

T: Have you ever been back to Germany or Poland?

S: No. I have no intention and no plans on going back, either.

T: Is it something you would be interested in doing or not?

S: No.

T: How come?

S: I'm good now. Why should I go look up and weep about something that's past?

T: Some people have gone back. But it's not something you've ever thought about. In fact, something you don't want to do really.

S: No. Never gave it much thought really. Like that picture. A lot of pictures. In fact I went over—the [picture of the] hospital bed [at Limburg]. That was sent to me from somebody that had gone over there. It looked familiar when I saw it. A lot of people have written. Not a lot, but a few that have gone over have written to me and have told me how it...

T: Some people seem to want to go back and see that stuff and other people don't really want to.

S: Why look backwards?

(2, A, 49)

T: You mentioned, too, earlier that you spent time thinking about the future, and looking forward. Even when you were a prisoner.

S: Yes. I wanted to go home. I didn't know what I wanted to do.

T: Did you think about that, what you wanted to do when you got out of the service?

S: It wasn't too much different than what I did before I left, I guess. I was lucky. There was a lot of people that never had a job before. That was back in hard times.

T: You were a little older than some other guys, weren't you? You were almost twenty-six when you got, you were twenty-six when you were discharged.

S: Yes. But I'd been in the Army a lot longer than a lot of them too.

T: Yes. You had. For almost five years.

S: Yes.

T: Talking about your POW experience, you were featured on the front page of the newspaper here in Grand Rapids last week. You're doing this interview today. Has talking about it like this in an interview situation something that has always been easy for you, or not?

S: I never thought about it enough to talk about it. I mean, I don't have anything against anybody. I mean, I don't hate the Germans and I don't hate the Russians and I don't—I just figure that's the way it had to be.

T: That's a good sense of not hating people. That wouldn't help.

S: I never had it so good as a kid, so it didn't seem that bad to me.

T: Do you think that's something that kept you going?

S: I think so. Yes. I mean, I wasn't any worse off than I was before.

T: That's a good point actually. I guess if somebody had had it pretty good before they might have noticed how bad they had it, but you're saying just the opposite for you.

S: Yes. It wasn't that much worse. When I was a kid and I still lived at home I had to sleep in the attic (*chuckles*). I used to classify myself as "Cinderfella."

T: That's pretty funny. The last question is this: what would you say is the most important way that your POW experience changed you as a person? How was Samuel Alle in 1945 when he got out of prison camp different than the person who had gone in?

S: Not that much different. Except that I didn't have to worry about a job anymore. The world was a lot better after I got home than it was when I went in.

T: You were gone the whole time. You were in the service the whole time the US was in the war, that's right. Let me ask if there's anything you want to add to the interview. Things that I forgot to ask or we didn't get to that you think is important.

S: I think we covered just about everything, haven't we?

T: We did a pretty good job I think. I'll thank you again for your time today, and turn this machine off.

END OF INTERVIEW