

**Interviewee: Lee Bedsted**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 31 March 2005**

**Location: by telephone to the Bedsted residence, Park Rapids, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, June 2005**

**Editing by: Thomas Saylor, June 2005**

Lee Bedsted was born 31 October 1923 on a farm near Tyler, Minnesota, and grew up there. He entered military service in March 1943, with the US Army Air Corps, and was trained as an engineer/top turret gunner on B-17 Flying Fortress 4-engine heavy bombers.

Lee arrived in England in May 1944, and was assigned to the 546<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, stationed at Grafton Underwood. His crew completed twenty-eight bombing missions before their aircraft was shot down on 12 July 1944, while on a mission to bomb rail yards at Munich in southern Germany. Of the nine-man crew, five survived.

Lee spent the next nine months as a POW of the Germans, at Dulag Luft interrogation center, and Stalag Luft IV at Gross Tychow, in far northern Germany (Jul 1944 – Feb 1945). The Germans evacuated Luft IV on 6 February 1945, as Soviet forces advanced near to the camp, and POWs then were marched through Germany until liberated by American forces near the central German city of Bitterfeld on 26 April 1945.

Lee spent several months in military medical facilities recovering from his time as a POW, then in October 1945 was discharged from the Army. Again a civilian, he got married (wife Beverly) and spent a career as an industrial arts teacher and then a high school counselor in Austin, Minnesota.



Photograph showing Lee Bedsted's B-17 aircraft ("BK-F") flying in formation on 22 May 1944, over Germany.

B-17G Flying Fortress #42-97273 (BK\*F, known as "ACES AND ATES")

Source: 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group Association,

<http://384thbombgroup.com/content/pages/One384thAircraft.php?AircraftKey=42-97273> Last accessed 22 March 2016.

**Interview key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**L = Lee Bedsted**

**[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 31 March 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project; my name is Thomas Saylor. This evening I'm speaking with Mr. Lee Bedsted at his home in Park Rapids, Minnesota. First, Mr. Bedsted, this time on the tape, thanks very much for taking time to be part of this project.

L: You're welcome.

T: For the record now, you were born on 31 October 1923, on a farm in Lyon County, Minnesota.

L: That's correct.

T: And that's in far southwest Minnesota. You entered service in March of 1943. So you were not quite twenty years old.

L: That's correct.

T: On the other end of that, you were discharged from service October of 1945.

L: Yes.

T: By early 1944 you were flying in England with the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 384<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, 546<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron, and flying missions from Grafton Underwood, in England. To sort of get the conversation going, let me ask you if you remember the first combat mission that you flew?

L: Oh, my. No, I don't really. I can't distinguish one from the other right now. At that point... *(pauses three seconds)* Yes, I think it was. It was Posen, Poland.

T: That's a long mission for the first one.

L: That was a long one. We'd go in across the North Sea, across Denmark, and then into Poland and then drop our bombs and come back out again in order to get down to altitude so we didn't have to use up any more oxygen than we needed to.

T: Right. I was just looking at the information I have from you. You flew an awful lot of missions in just the two months you were in Europe.

L: Yes we did.

T: How does that wear on a person after a while flying missions so consistently?

L: I don't know. We were young and as long as nothing happened, why—we didn't look forward to them. We knew that when we got up there we were going to encounter anti-aircraft flak and fighter planes, and always hoping that we would come back from each mission.

T: From your perspective there as a top turret gunner, what was more of a threat on a mission by mission basis? Was it flak or enemy planes?

L: I would say probably more the fighter planes. The flak, we could see it. You could see them exploding out away from the airplanes. If they got close to us like they did the day that we got shot down, I called the pilot and said, "Can you maneuver a little bit?" He said, "They're tracking out there. Right on our path. I can't do it." It wasn't long and, boy, we got hit.

T: In the top turret there, how often would you estimate that you used your guns? Was it an every mission thing, or not every mission?

L: No, not every mission. I would say probably, you know, by the time that we were flying in May and June and the first part of July of 1944, the German Luftwaffe had been pretty well knocked out of the sky, and I would say a third of the time they would cue up on us but by that time we also had American fighter planes escorting us. That was always a welcome sight.

T: Sure. I bet it was.

**(1, A, 41)**

L: The only time that we were vulnerable was when one set of fighter planes would escort us to a certain distance and then another one would have to come in and pick it up and take us to the target. They never took us over the target. Otherwise they would have had to fly into the flak. And they could down themselves by just flying into it. So we were vulnerable when there was a changing of the type of fighter planes. We had P-47s [Thunderbolt fighter planes] escorting us and we had P-51s [Mustang fighter planes] escorting us. I don't know whether we ever had P-38s [Lightning fighter planes]. We might have.

T: Mostly the Thunderbolts and the Mustangs it sounds like.

L: That's correct. And the Mustangs were a sight to behold. And they did a beautiful job.

T: Let's go to 12 July 1944. Was there anything about that mission in particular, as you got ready and took off across the [English] Channel, that was in any way different than the other missions you'd gone on?

L: Yes. Because we were flying—sometimes they referred to it as the “Coffin corner” or “Tail end Charlie.”

T: What does that mean? How would you describe that for a listener?

L: The best I can do to describe it is that we were the last plane and the low element. In other words, they were stacked up six planes and we were the back plane on the left side. There was another one on the right side and one in the middle and then three more up ahead. We were all stacked together. So we were the low element of the squadron—of the group, I should say. Not the squadron. The whole group.

T: And in that position is a plane more vulnerable to ground fire?

L: Well, they used to say that it was more vulnerable to fighters because there was nobody below us in the way of bombers that could provide firepower. So we had to take on anything that came from below.

T: Right. They would be able to see or shoot at your plane first.

L: That's right.

T: Does that mean that you, as a really experienced crewmember by this time, were any more worried or concerned about that mission than you would have been about past missions?

L: No, not really. I just felt that we had come as far as we had, and we were going to make it the rest of the way.

T: One of the things I ask people is about the sense of optimism. You know, in a sense, you could look around you and see that planes are being downed regularly. How is it that a young man comes to the conclusion that it's not going to be him?

L: *(chuckles)* Well, one of the things that I found out after I got shot down and I saw the record of the losses for our group, they hadn't lost a plane for ninety days, and we happened to be the first one.

T: So I guess there had been a pretty good record for a while.

L: Oh, yes. Yes. And you get to feeling hopeful, complacent a little bit maybe, and thought boy, we're going to make it.

T: But complacent can be a dangerous feeling, can't it?

L: Ah, yes. But you don't expect it. I mean you know it's there. The possibility is there. Every time you went on a mission.

**(1, A, 77)**

T: And yet it was something that was always an arm's length away, in a sense?

L: Yes. We always watched the bursts of flak and, like I say, the day that we got shot down the ball turret gunner called the pilot and said, "Boy, those bursts of anti-aircraft are awful black. They're right on our path."

T: Describe what happened from your perspective in the top turret. I mean, the flak looks different to the ball turret than to you, I guess.

L: Yes. He's looking down and I'm looking out both sides and the front and the back.

T: Walk us through what happened. You mentioned earlier it was rather sudden what happened to your plane and how fast it went down.

L: Yes. From what I could tell it was a direct hit on number three engine. I don't know whether the shell actually exploded or it went right through the engine. It set that side of the wing on fire.

T: So you could see this clearly from where you were sitting.

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). I was looking right down at it. And six feet in towards the center of the plane it [the flak shell] would have killed us all up in the front there.

T: What was going through your mind at that time? I mean, you'd been through a lot of missions. This is something new.

L: Scared. Really scared. And how are we going to get out of there?

T: Now the pilot gives any and all commands to bail out, right?

L: Goes to everybody.

T: From your recollection, how long was it before he gave that command?

L: One second. Immediately. Just as soon as we got hit he called, bail out.

T: Was the wing blown off or not?

L: No. No, not that I could see. It looked to me like that number three engine might have gotten blown off.

T: But the plane was still airworthy, in a sense.

L: Not much, but we were still up there and the pilot was fighting it to keep it from going into a spin and rolling over.

T: When you heard the command to bail out, can you estimate how long it took you to get out of the plane?

L: The first thing I did, I turned to the pilot, and the copilot was in his seat and the pilot was in his. The pilot said to the copilot, "Get out of here!" So I got out of the way and went down through the passageway down into the front of the plane. I could have gone out through the bomb bays, but I didn't. There was a bomb bay door, a door into the bomb bay right out of my turret. But I didn't go that way. I went down to the lower level where the bombardier and the navigator were, and there I took a hatch. There was a lever for releasing the hatch in that part of the plane and I was working on that. After we got together on the ground the bombardier said, he said, "I was standing over top of you and pounding on the door with my foot." Because he says, "It didn't seem like you were going to get it dislodged."

T: Now you had a chest pack on, is that what it was?

L: Chest pack. Yes.

T: When you left the plane, is this your first parachute jump?

L: Yes.

T: Also your last?

**(1, A, 118)**

L: Yes (*chuckles*).

T: I've talked to a lot of one-jump veterans.

L: Yes. (*both laugh*)

T: What actually transpired there? You leave through the hatch in the bottom of the plane. Now get us down to the ground. Because here you are, you're leaving the plane.

L: After the hatch let go, of course we were up at altitude, and the oxygen is pretty thin there. I just toppled over and went out the door. I don't remember exactly when I pulled the ripcord, but it was probably very shortly after I left the plane. Then I could see the ground. I could tell I was descending toward it. In fact, I landed quicker than I thought I was getting there and I came together pretty hard. I didn't get a chance to flex my knees and that, so my knees came up to my chin practically. I collapsed on the ground and took my parachute off and gathered it up. I knew that we were near Munich [in southern Germany] and that if you could get into the woods and hide you might be able to make it to Switzerland.

T: Let me ask you, before that day, had you ever given any thought to the fact that your war may end with you as a prisoner of war?

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). Oh, yes. We were informed about that. About what we could do. What we should do, what we shouldn't do. Yes. Oh, yes. The thought was there. The possibility.

T: Was there any indication given by the Army anyway of what kind of treatment you could expect from the Germans?

L: No, not really. They told us more or less how to protect ourselves from poor water supplies and other than that they didn't tell us that we might get shot at, you know, when we got on the ground.

T: So in a sense this is all new, you're on your own now.

L: Oh, yes.

T: Were you near any other members of your crew there on the ground?

L: Eventually.

T: At first though, no.

L: No.

T: How long was it before German civilians or Germans in uniform found you?

L: Well, I'll tell you exactly. I gathered up my chute and I started running toward the woods. I was not too far from woods; I was in a grain field. I don't know what possessed me, but I looked to my right and there was a soldier kneeling down with a rifle and tracking me.

T: How far away was he would you estimate?

L: Fifty yards.

T: Not very far.

L: (*chuckles*) No. I came to a screeching halt and threw my hands into the air.

**(1, A, 157)**

T: What was going through your mind there? I mean, now you're on the ground—you've had the Germans as the enemy for a long time. Suddenly they're right in front of you.

L: Yes. It was quite a shock. In other words, coming down in the parachute was a lonesome feeling, but it was also a feeling that at least I was alive. Then when I got on the ground and I saw that guy with the rifle I knew that I was not free any more.

T: Where did he take you?

L: The first thing he did, he ran up to me and he said in perfect English, he said, "What squadron are you from?"

T: In English?

L: In English. And that was a bit of a surprise.

T: Yes. You might have expected to hear a number of things. Probably not that.

L: Yes. They were trained to do that. In other words, they wanted to get you while you were susceptible to fear and that and see if you'd spill what squadron you were from and so forth. So he marched me back over to the outpost where the other German soldiers were, which wasn't that far. So I didn't have much of a chance of escaping. And when I got there the ball turret gunner was there, and then it wasn't too long and they brought our tail gunner in. There were two German soldiers [and] they were carrying him. He was sitting on a rifle between them. He was hurt.

T: Was there any questioning done at that location by the Germans?

L: No. No, there wasn't. Basically because, at that time, we were all under the bombardment of the planes that were going over and dropping their bombs on Munich.

T: You could hear or see this?

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). And the Germans were more interested in watching to see where those bombs were dropping and how many more planes were coming across there than they were in trying to interrogate us.

T: So in a sense it worked to your advantage, it sounds like.

L: Yes.

T: I mean, in a sense it kept them from, it almost gave you a pause to catch your breath, it sounds like.

L: Yes. It was, one minute you're up in an airplane dropping bombs and the next minute you're down on the ground and you're getting bombed yourself.

T: That was a new experience for you, wasn't it?

L: *(laughs)* Oh, yes.

T: How would you describe that?

L: Scary. That's the only way I can describe it. It was awesome.

T: I guess you couldn't know whether the bombs were going to come over where you were either.

L: Exactly. I didn't know how often those German guards, the German soldiers we had there, had been susceptible to that kind of a bombardment. I know they must have been through it often, because we were really going at Munich on those raids the day that we went. We had gone the day before to Munich. In fact, it might have been two days before. So we were on the third mission to Munich. We were saturation bombing it.

**(1, A, 198)**

T: So they'd seen you before most likely. Your planes, I mean.

L: Probably. Or a lot of them like it.

T: Were you kept at this particular location very long, Mr. Bedsted, or did they move you guys out?

L: No. Just as soon as the air raid was over they put us in a truck and they transported us to the airport at Munich. I suspect that if it was a civilian airport, it was under military control. They took us there and put us in solitary confinement.

T: Just the three of you were transported there from your crew?

L: No. All five of us.

T: Now were there other Americans as well or just the men from your crew?

L: No. I'm going to guess now that the one day that they had us all come up into this one particular area of the airport there were probably fifteen of us.

T: And all Americans?

L: Yes.

T: Did the Germans threaten you in any way at this particular location or question you more or were you pretty much left alone?

L: They threatened us.

T: In what way?

L: We were standing out in this, like a lobby, and they started shouting at us that they didn't want us to be chatting with each other. So they made us all stand up and face the wall and I thought, oh, boy! We're going to get shot now! Then they came over and they tapped me on the shoulder and they said, "You're to go into that room over there." I didn't know what it was for, but when I got in there, there was a German major who started interrogating me.

T: In English again.

L: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Wanted to know what squadron I was from, where I was born, what state I was from and all that, and all I told him, all I ever told him was that all I can tell you is my name, rank, and serial number.

T: Was it scary at all, in a sense, refusing to answer his questions? Were you intimidated in that situation?

L: Yes. Because after I refused to answer his questions and kept telling him that I could only give him my name, rank and serial number, he said, "If you don't answer these questions I'm going to have the soldiers come and take you out and shoot you."

T: So he made a very direct threat to you then.

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). Then he went to the phone and started calling and I thought, Oh, boy, I've had it.

T: That's more than once now you've kind of been in a situation where you thought you could be shot at or killed.

L: That's true, yes. Yes. That was the second time.

T: Now how did that situation end?

L: Then they took me back out into the room and they started interrogating others. And nobody came to get me to take me out and shoot me.

T: So they took people in one by one, it sounds like, hoping to get some kind of information.

L: Yes.

**(1, A, 238)**

L: That's right. They just wanted to see if anybody would break down and give them more than just the rank, name, and serial number.

T: This is at an airport. Did they keep you here very long or were you moved on to another facility?

L: We were there, I think, three nights. In other words, that first day and then probably two more nights. One time while I was in solitary confinement, I think it was that same German major who interrogated me, he came and asked me if I knew Lt. Matlock, who was our co-pilot. I said, "I never heard of him." We were told that we do not tell who your crewmembers are and so forth. And I don't know why he came and asked me if I knew Lt. Matlock. I regret to this day, and have always regretted it ever since that day, that I wish I had said, "Yes, I know him."

T: Why do you regret that?

L: I think he was alive and he wanted to talk to me.

T: Matlock did not survive the war, did he?

L: No.

T: So he asked, and now you have to wonder what was behind the question of the German major.

L: That's right.

T: Yes. And of course there's no answer, is there?

L: No. I've thought about other things, because when we were in Phase Training the co-pilot asked me one day, he said, "Do you know how to play billiards?" And I said, "Yes, I do." He said, "Would you go with me to town and teach me how to play billiards?" And I said, "Yes I would." And I thought, well maybe he had my name

written down on a piece of paper or something and they found it. That's as far as I could take it.

T: All kinds of possible explanations.

L: Yes.

T: Now when you left the airport facility there, did you leave with other Americans?

L: Yes. I think it was all of those that I told you about that were out in that outer lobby or foyer or whatever you want to call it, and they took us down into the center of Munich to the train station to put us on a train to leave Munich. At that time the city of Munich was full of smoke and dust. People were walking around with face masks on. They had really taken a beating for two or three days.

T: And the train station, being right in the center of town as it were, you had a chance to sort of see what the city looked like.

L: And we also had a chance of getting bombed again.

T: Did that happen?

L: No, it didn't. No. They got us on a train, and off we went.

T: Did you, at the train station there or while you were in town, encounter any German civilians?

L: I saw them, but no encounter with them.

T: No interaction between civilians and the group of POWs.

L: No.

T: The train you took from Munich there, boxcar or passenger car?

L: It was a passenger car.

T: And all of you who moved to the train station went together?

L: Yes.

**(1, A, 288)**

T: And where did the train take you?

L: I think that the next stop after that was Wetzlar. You've heard of that?

T: Yes. The Dulag Luft interrogation facility is located there.

L: Right. Wetzlar had an optical factory in it. In fact, they made the optic for cameras. If you ever got yourself a good German camera, why it probably had a lens from Wetzlar.

T: You were there for another reason. Were you interrogated again at this particular facility?

L: I don't recall that we were. It was more or less just a place to house us for a while. I don't recall being interrogated there. American bombers came over and bombed the city of Wetzlar.

T: While you were there.

L: Yes. And we were up on kind of a hill, and we were looking out the window at these airplanes going over and all of a sudden we saw like a white contrail coming down. I said, Gee, that looks like a fighter plane, and all of a sudden all hell broke loose down in the city and we dove for cover because they were bombing it.

T: And so right next to the facility where you were being held.

L: Not too far away.

T: Was there any damage to the buildings that you were in?

L: No. No. No. It was farther away than any damage could be done by what was happening down there. It was still a surprise to us, because that was the first time that we had been—well, except for when we were outside of Munich and they were still dropping bombs. This was a raid, and we got to see the bombs as they hit the ground in the city.

T: What does that look like from the ground when you see that?

L: It's just a bunch of explosions taking place and black smoke and debris and dust flying. Like I say, we didn't know whether they were going to drop any on us. We ducked for cover. Under tables and anything we could hide under.

T: But you don't recall being questioned or interrogated again there.

L: No. The next time that we got interrogated was at Frankfurt.

T: And what happened in that particular situation?

L: Well, Frankfurt was called the Flea Farm. That was where a lot of guys got lice and fleas, out of there. And there they put us in solitary confinement again and went through the same routine about what squadron you were from and who your pilot was and your copilot and who were your crewmembers, and if you gave them your name, rank and serial number why they sent you on your way back to solitary confinement. Unless you started talking. Then they'd pump you for more.

T: So the wisest thing to do was not to start talking, it sounds like.

L: That's right.

T: How many times did they question you there?

L: I think it was three times. They kept at you a couple times to see if you'd break down.

T: Were you offered any kind of perks or positive things if you would tell them?

**(1, A, 350)**

L: No.

T: Just threatened if you didn't.

L: No. They just kept asking questions and went through the routine and then gave up on it.

T: When you were moved from the place you're questioned here, was the move to Stalag Luft IV?

L: Yes.

T: And was that on a boxcar or a passenger car?

L: Boy, you know, I can't remember. I think it was a passenger.

T: That means that you didn't take any trips in boxcars then.

L: Yes. We took one when we were on that march after we left Stalag Luft IV.

T: But not until then.

L: I was going to tell you a humorous thing about our experience at Frankfurt. We got marched into the compound there and it was a big area out in the front there. We were all standing around just shooting the breeze, and there was a German sergeant that came out there and, oh, he was just angry and incensed that we were

lollygagging around and he hollered at us, “American jitter-bugging son of a bitches, line up!” I almost laughed out loud because I’d never jitterbugged in my life (*chuckles*). He thought we were all jitter-buggers.

T: That’s interesting how in the midst of something that really isn’t very funny that a humorous moment can come up like that.

L: Yes. And then there was another fellow that was being interrogated—

**End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 386.**

L: —well you bombed New York and the fellow, he accepted that. He thought that they actually had bombed New York. So they were fed a line of propaganda and they believed it. When an American soldier tells them, you bombed New York, why, they believed it.

T: Let’s move to your arrival at Stalag Luft IV. From the train station to the camp, how did you get there?

L: We got in there early in the morning. It was just a little after daybreak, and they got us out of the train. We marched down the road with the guards along with us. They marched us right into the camp. The next day that group that came in were not quite as lucky, because they were chained together and they had police dogs or German shepherds that would nip at them and the soldiers, the guards, had fixed bayonets and they made them run with these chains on and the dogs biting at them. Then they prodded them with the bayonets if they fell.

T: So the people who arrived the next day recounted these stories to you.

L: They got it. The word was, and I don’t know how true it is, they said one fellow had something like fifty superficial bayonet pokes in his back.

T: Describe the way the camp looked to you, the compound, the barracks buildings, et cetera.

**(1, B, 404)**

L: It didn’t look like any American barracks. The closest to anything that we had in America was the barracks that we had down in Mississippi. They looked a little bit like that. But it was a compound with—I’m not sure how many barracks. Probably, I’m going to guess twenty. Twenty individual buildings. Barracks. Then a barbed wire fence around it. Then another wire inside away from the barbed wire. On posts. A single wire, and we learned that you better not go near that. You could walk next to it, but don’t try to do anything with that wire or go over on the other side of it.

T: That was the end of the safe zone where you could walk.

L: That's right.

T: By the way, when you were captured, what rank were you?

L: I was a staff sergeant.

T: In your own barracks here, how large was that? Was it one large room or a number of smaller rooms?

L: It was a large barracks with, oh, boy, I'm not sure how many rooms there were in there. But in our particular room there were twenty-four of us in it.

T: Twenty-four guys in the room.

L: Yes.

T: On bunks against the wall?

L: Yes. Bunks against the wall. I think we were triple decked.

T: That was my next question, how many bunks tall? So three tall means eight stacks of three, it sounds like.

L: I would guess, yes.

T: For you now as the daily routine here sort of took shape, did you have roll calls every day?

L: Every day.

T: How many times a day did you have those?

L: At least twice.

T: And what was the pattern? How did they work?

L: They would come into the compound, and they would have a German sergeant who would holler something into the barracks, and everybody knew that we had to get out and stand roll call.

T: Now when you stood roll call, what specifically did you have to do outside?

L: Just stand in a column. It was more than a column. We were probably three deep and three long columns. Then the German counted us.

T: And you didn't count yourself, out loud. They counted you.

L: No. No, they counted us. Then he would go and report to another noncom, and that noncom would make a total and then if the camp commandant accepted that then we were dismissed to go back into our barracks or if we wanted to we could go exercise. Walk around the compound.

T: Were there things to sort of pass the time here?

**(1, B, 434)**

L: We played cards. We thought at first that we would exercise so we could stay in shape, but we didn't get enough food for that so we gave that up.

T: But there were cards. Are those things that the Germans supplied, or that you had from somewhere else?

L: I think they probably came from the Red Cross.

T: Are you a good card player?

L: Well, (*chuckles*) I learned to play bridge there.

T: You hadn't played before camp.

L: No.

T: The people you played with, are they people from your own crew that you kind of stayed with or are they new friends you made there?

L: There was only one from our crew that stayed, and that was the ball turret gunner. He stayed with me.

T: So I guess you met new people there.

L: Oh, yes. Yes. Yes. There were twenty-four in that room, and I've had some contact with them. Some of them have died since. The ball turret gunner and I, we went from the time we got shot down until we got liberated and went back home. We were together the whole time.

And the tail gunner, when they came carrying him on a rifle [when we were first captured], we didn't think he was going to make it. He looked like he was really hurt. What had happened was that he had a backpack and he wore it all the time because there wasn't much room back there in that tail. He crawled up near the middle of the plane to go out a different door and his back... (*pauses briefly*) No, he had a door of his own, that was it. He had a door of his own, but it was a small door

and he bent over to go out and it wouldn't let him go out so he just yanked the ripcord and let the chute take him out. When it yanked him out like that it broke a couple of the shrouds along one side, so he had what was known as a screamer. In other words, it was spilling air and so it went to the ground faster. He hit the ground and was dragged by the wind up against a stump and hit his back. We thought we'd never see him again. But one time when we were on the march we came around a corner and there he was.

T: So he had been in the same camp?

L: Yes. Yes, he was in the same camp, in a different compound. Our camp was made up of four different compounds, A, B, C and D. There were 2500 in each compound.

T: That's practically a small city unto itself.

L: Ten thousand. And we were both American and British. The British were in one compound and the Americans were in the other three. Then they had some Russian detachment there of prisoners of war that did menial work and stuff around the camp.

T: Were they kept separate from you?

L: Yes.

T: So you had no contact with them. You could observe them though.

**(1, B, 466)**

L: Just to see when they came into the camp. Like they used to come in and empty the latrines. They had a special wagon that took all of the stuff out of the latrine.

T: Like a sewage removal system or something.

L: Yes. Yes.

T: And they came in and did that.

L: Yes. The thing they brought in and took it out with, we called it a "Super Duper *Scheisse* [German: literally 'shit'] Scooper."

T: And I know what *Scheisse* is. This is a regular visit this thing made, and they were Russians.

L: Yes.

T: Now as a noncommissioned officer you didn't go on any work details, did you?

L: No. No. They adhered to the Geneva Convention for that. As a noncommissioned officer we did not have to work.

T: That means you had a lot of time to pass, didn't you?

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*).

T: You mentioned playing cards. How else did you pass your time?

L: We had some books that we could read. Basically a lot of bull sessions.

T: What did guys talk about when they have a lot of time to talk?

L: Well, a lot of them shared their experiences of being shot down and what happened to them. Like there was one fellow in our room that was limping and I said, "What happened to you?" He said, "When I got ready to bail out," he said, "the co-pilot said [to me], my chute got blown out of the plane." We were told that if that happened you would just take your straps from your harness and put them in with his and then lock them in together and then you go down together. This co-pilot said, "I'm just going to grab onto your legs, and we're going to go together." And when the chute opened he just stripped off [fell to his death]. Then when he stripped off he practically pulled his hips right out of their sockets. So he was hospitalized for a while because of that injury that the co-pilot did to his legs.

T: And the co-pilot must have just fallen to his death, I take it.

L: Oh, he did. Yes.

T: You must have heard a full range of stories of guys, how they got to the camp, and other things.

L: Oh, yes. There was another young fellow that came in and he was a friend... I'm not sure just exactly how come he knew one of the fellows in our room, but this fellow said, "Let him tell you about what happened to him when he got shot down." And he said he landed in this little village, and a German *Wehrmacht* [Army], a local policeman or soldier in that little town, he stood him up and he shot him, and the bullet went in along the right side of his cheekbone and came out the center of his neck. It knocked him down and he was unconscious, and they dragged him into a morgue there and he started to come to and the German pulled out his gun again and was going to shoot him again, and there was a nurse in there. I don't know why she was in there. But she told him no. She made him put his gun away. Said that if he lived through this he deserves to live. That's just one of them that...

**(1, B, 504)**

T: It sounds like you had time to listen to each other more than once.

L: Oh, yes.

T: Now you mentioned that you stopped exercising because you weren't really strong enough. Let me ask about the food you remember the Germans supplying in the camp there.

L: Well, we got a basic ration of bread, which was their bread that was made with sawdust. It had a certain amount of sawdust in it. Molasses. I found out later what the recipe was. Then we got, I can't remember how often we got a Red Cross parcel, but it was only a partial parcel for two of us [to share].

T: I wanted to ask you. You remember getting parcels, but you didn't get your own. You had to share.

L: Yes. The ball turret gunner and I, we always shared what we got. Everything that came in, like cans and stuff, had holes punched in it because they didn't want us to store it up.

T: So you had to use it up.

L: Had to use it. The things that were in the parcels were, there was some Canadian butter and Canadian jam, salmon, hard tack biscuits, hard chocolate bars.

T: Do you remember cigarettes in there too?

L: And cigarettes, yes.

T: Now were you a smoker at that time?

L: Well, I tried it, but I didn't like it.

T: So the cigarettes were for you something to keep or something to trade?

L: We used them for trading. We also used them for playing poker.

T: So they were currency.

L: Oh, yes. That's where I learned what inflation was like (*chuckles*). The reason I say inflation, because when we got on the march there were civilians that would line up along the route where we were going and we'd say, "*Haben Sie Brot?*" [German: "Do you have bread?"], and if they had some we'd say, give you ten cigarettes. Then some other GI would say, "I'll give you twenty."

T: Oh, no kidding. So there was a bartering among yourselves.

L: Yes. Sure.

T: Let's remember to come back to that, because the whole march and the interaction with civilians is a good theme. Now in the camp there, how much contact did you have on a daily basis with the German guards?

L: Probably every day.

T: Did they come into your barracks or into your room every day?

L: Yes. We had one that came into our barracks quite often. Some of the guys, they taught him bad words. And he didn't realize what they were until one day he came back because he had said some of those words to his commandant and he got chewed out. So when he came back the next day he was mad at us.

T: Yes. So he was not an English speaker at all.

L: No.

**(1, B, 540)**

T: Was he about your age or was he an older fellow?

L: He was probably a little bit older. Yes. He was probably a middle aged man. Maybe in his late forties.

T: So certainly someone you wouldn't expect to see on front line duty.

L: No. The guys that we had on the march were even older.

T: Older than that?

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*).

T: The guards in the camp, could you expect decent treatment from them? Fair treatment?

L: Yes. Yes. We didn't know if sometimes when they came marching in with the whole crew what they were up to. If it was more than just roll call or whatever it was. But we got so that we expected that they were going to treat us okay.

T: Did they ever come in and search your rooms?

L: Yes. And they would do that when we were out for roll call.

T: So you weren't in the room. They could just go through it.

L: No.

T: Ever any indication of what they were looking for?

L: They were looking for evidence that someone might be making tunnels. That they were trying to tunnel.

T: So a possible escape.

L: Yes.

T: Did your barracks sit up off the ground or on the ground?

L: They were up off the ground. So if you were going to tunnel you had to do it at night when they couldn't see you. I understand there were some attempts at tunneling. Then they found it and they asked the guy, "What did you do with the dirt?" And they told him, they said, we dug a hole and put it in (*chuckles*).

T: You know there's all sorts of stories about escape. Is that something that guys realistically thought about, yourself included?

L: You know, I really didn't, because I didn't know where I would go. In fact, we understood where we were located, which was an awful long way from [where] the American invasion [at Normandy] had just taken place. So we had no idea where they [American forces] were. We wouldn't have known where to go.

T: You were hundreds of miles from the Allied, from the American lines.

L: Oh, yes.

T: So it sounds like it was something to talk about, but the realistic assessment was not very good.

L: Right. There was no way other than tunneling out, because if you tried to go through the fences, something like that, the guards up in the towers would shoot you.

T: So I guess one kind of resigns oneself to a camp existence.

L: That's right.

T: You know, from inside the camp there with all these guys, from your perspective, how well did prisoners get along with each other?

**(1, B, 575)**

L: Considering our circumstances, very well.

T: I am just thinking, if I was in a situation like yours, and not fed very well and awfully bored, it could lead to all sorts of problems.

L: There were no fights. I don't remember ever a fight taking place. And we had one common washroom that everybody had to use. It was a polite avoidance of when others were using it, and share and share alike.

T: I guess you kind of have to in a situation like that. I mean, you're all in the same situation.

L: Yes. There was one stove in our room. We had to keep that going during the day to keep warm.

T: You were there through fall and into the winter, weren't you?

L: Right.

T: Did you have any fuel for that stove?

L: Yes. And I don't remember where we got it. It apparently was furnished, and we just had to go and pick it up and bring it in for the stove. It was just a small stove—wasn't very big. Because the room was so small that it didn't require a lot.

T: A small room with twenty-four guys in, it sounds like you might produce some body heat actually.

L: That's enough heat right there.

T: Now the bunks that you had, what kind of a facility was this?

L: It was just boards across the bottom of it and then a straw mattress. Very flat and very hard.

T: Those straw mattresses now, I've heard from other guys that these were sometimes full of small critters.

L: *(laughing)* Yes. You know, I don't recall any, because I don't recall any critters while I was in the barracks. I think basically it depended on whether you bathed enough and so forth. But no, I never had any lice or any kind of critters in there.

T: Did you have a problem with that on the walk later? The march.

L: Oh, yes. Sure did.

T: But in camp there you were graciously spared that.

L: Yes.

T: Another thing I wanted to ask in the camp there, and you were there for seven, eight, nine months, whatever it was.

L: We were there like September, October, November, December, January, and we left February 6 [1945]. It seems it was early September [when we arrived]. That would have been about six weeks in route [after we got shot down on 12 July]. Maybe we got there in August.

T: How much information or news or rumors, call it what you want, did you receive about how the war was going outside of the camp?

**(1, B, 619)**

L: Over in the British compound we were told that they had a radio over there.

T: So a rumor of a radio.

L: Yes. They had managed to put together a radio over there. I don't know whether it was just a simple crystal radio or whatever it was, but they were picking up newscasts. Then each compound would send people out into the *Vorlager*, which would be the front lager [storage facility], and those people went out there to work on the Red Cross parcels, getting them ready to bring into the various compounds. I'm not sure what else they did out there. There may have been a medical area out there that people could go to if they needed to. So there were certain people that went out there every day. They would pass the word then about the news. What they were getting on the radio. Then they would come back to the compounds, and then they made an effort that one fellow would come around to the barracks each day and give us the news of how things were going on both fronts.

T: Do you remember actually kind of hearing these updates and feeling like you were sort of being kept up to date?

L: Oh, yes. Yes. We knew when things were getting mighty close, and we were told that we were probably going to have to evacuate. Based on the closeness of the Russians that were coming in from Russia. Getting closer to us.

T: Now this whole recognition that the Russians were coming, I mean in a way that's good—that means the Allies are winning. On the other side, it's going to mean kind of a jump into the unknown. Evacuation of the camp—how did that sit with you as a young man?

L: Well, it's always kind of scary, because you don't know whether you're going to get caught in the crossfire. Going out onto the road was a very uncertain thing. To march out of the camp.

T: How much advance warning did the Germans provide that the camp was going to be evacuated?

L: Not much, but we got it from our own people.

T: In a sense you knew it before they told you.

L: Oh yes, they said, "You make preparations now because when we evacuate here you want to try to have something that you can carry whatever food you can carry." So we made knapsacks out of shirts. Sewed the sleeve to the seam of the shirt and sewed the bottom of it together and then put your arms through the, they were like, when you sewed the sleeve to the seam you had a loop there. A sleeve loop. So you put one arm through one of them and one arm through the other one. Then you tied it together in the front with a shoelace, and then you could open the back up with buttons and stick stuff in there.

T: That's pretty creative.

L: Yes it was.

T: I guess necessity was the mother of invention.

L: I wish it had been my idea, but it wasn't (*chuckles*). Somebody else suggested it and we all jumped on it.

T: That means you had needles and threads available to you, to sew?

L: Yes, we did. I think there were some Red Cross parcels, some parts of Red Cross parcels, that had sewing materials—not materials, but thread and needles and buttons and things like that.

T: Say, before you actually left on 6 February, did you have a chance to write home to your folks? Let them know that you were alive and well?

L: Yes. Yes. We had certain things we could write. We had postcards. It was like a postcard that you could send—one way of communicating. Then we also had a letter that was a fold together.

**(1, B, 682)**

T: The three panel letter?

L: Yes. You've probably seen those?

T: Yes. Yes, I have. So that you were given those and had a chance to write.

L: Yes. And you had to be careful what you wrote, because they were going to censor it anyway. And if you wrote too much your folks wouldn't get much.

T: Did your folks send anything to you while you were in camp?

L: Yes, but I never got it.

T: So you heard from them later that they sent it, but you never received anything.

L: I never received a thing. Not even a letter.

T: Boy, that had to be tough.

L: Yes. That was a long time without any communication. But they got ours.

T: And I guess you didn't really have any way of knowing whether they were getting the stuff you were sending.

L: I did not until I got home. Then I saw what I had written to them.

T: That had to be tough for your folks.

L: Yes, it was.

T: Now your folks—did you have brothers and sisters?

L: I had three sisters and one brother.

T: Were any of them in service?

L: Yes. My brother, my youngest brother was in. That was a sad story.

T: So your folks were worrying about two boys.

L: Yes. In fact, when I got home on convalescent leave after V-E Day, we got word that my brother, he was seventeen years old, had been on the USS *Indianapolis* when it was torpedoed [on 30 July 1945] out in the South Pacific.

T: To pick up the trail of your story there, you don't remember getting any news at all, and you had very little warning, some rumors, that the camp was going to be evacuated if the Russians got closer. What do you remember about the actual

evacuation? I mean, this has been your home for a number of months and suddenly you're on the road.

L: Yes. Actually, through those news that they brought in every day we knew it was coming and we were ready for it. Then one evening they said, "Tomorrow we're leaving; we're evacuating the camp."

T: When the Germans actually gave the word, what was the response of the men around you?

L: The Germans never really gave us the word. There was a communication, within each compound there were, the highest ranking noncommissioned officer in the compound was some kind of a liaison between the German command and us. So they would talk to them, and they said for them to inform us then that we were leaving.

**(1, B, 732)**

T: So the word came to these senior officials, senior officers.

L: It came through our own people.

T: Right. As you left the camp, talk about that as you actually get on the road there. What is this like having all these men suddenly taking what little belongings they have and marching out the door?

L: We just didn't know where we were going. We started marching down the road, and off we went. Marched until we came to a barn. Then they moved us in there and we'd sleep there. On February 14, which was Valentine's Day, we slept outside on the ice and snow, and it rained. Now we had blankets, the blankets that we had in the barracks at the camp we carried those with us. Rolled them up, put them around our shoulder and had a blanket roll. It wasn't much for sleeping outside in the ice and snow, though.

T: It doesn't give any rain protection, does it?

L: No.

T: Did the Germans give any indication, or were there any rumors about where the march was going?

L: No. Had no idea where we were going. I kept track of all the different little hamlets that we went through. I kept track of them on cigarette packages, the paper from the cigarette packages.

T: Sort of ersatz writing paper, as it were.

L: (*chuckles*) That's right.

T: As you were marching, did you go through cities and towns?

L: No. We usually skirted them.

T: So mostly on the outskirts of places, whether large or small.

L: Right.

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

T: You mentioned that you did have some interactions with civilians while you were marching.

L: Only, for instance, if you could pull off a trade with some cigarettes. You might be able to buy an egg or an onion.

T: Now did you, did the POWs search out the civilians, or the civilians search you out, or how did that work?

L: Well, actually they had apparently seen enough of the evacuations and that, that they knew that guys had cigarettes that they would like to trade and they would try to sell whatever they could to them.

T: Now were you ever part of one of these kind of trades yourself?

L: I might have been able to...you know, when you're marching in a big group like that there's an awful lot of competition to buy what they have.

T: You mentioned that earlier. Talk about that. How do you decide who gets what?

L: The first guy that got there and paid the price, why he got it.

T: So there was competition in a sense between the prisoners.

L: Oh, you bet (*with emphasis*). Yes. Then it wasn't too often that we had that kind of contact. We would march along, and if we stopped for a little rest we would look to see what there was around and see a mound out in a field. They would let us walk over to that, and there were sugar beets in there. That was a terrible thing to have to eat, a sugar beet that's been stored in a dirt mound all winter, and try to do something with it.

**(2, A, 16)**

T: What do you do with a sugar beet that's laying out in a dirt mound?

L: You try to eat it and get it down and hope it will stay down. One night we came into a farmyard, and the farmer had cooked a batch of potatoes for his hogs and instead of giving them to the hogs... Unless they decided that that's what we were going to get, because they had just shoveled them out of the potato bin and into the cooker. Sand, gravel, the whole works. But we munched out of it what we could. And it was hot.

T: The kind of hunger you're talking about here is different than the hunger in the camp?

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). Yes. We were never really hungry in the camp. We knew we didn't get enough, but it was not anything that, we knew we were starving. On the march we were starving.

T: Were the Germans supplying any food that you recall?

L: I think once in a while we got a small piece of bread. Nothing else.

T: So in a sense you're kind of on your own.

L: Pretty much. Pretty much. One time we stopped at a farm and I said to the ball turret gunner, I said, "You know, there's some oats in this bin over here. I have no idea what we could do with that, but let's get some." We built little fires out in the yard and then we had—you know what a Klim can is?

T: Yes. From the powdered milk.

L: Yes. We used that for our cooking utensil. Then we would, I can't remember where we got the wire, but we'd wire a handle onto it and we'd use that with a stick and try to hold it over the fire. If we had some potatoes we could cook the potatoes in it. I said, "I think we could cook this oats." Well, the oats is full of hulls—it's not refined. We cooked it and we cooked it and we choked it down and boy, it wasn't but a few minutes and up it came again.

T: I guess you're willing to take a chance on almost anything.

L: Yes.

T: Your ball turret gunner, you mentioned him a number of times. What was his name?

L: Melvin Gerhold. He's from Columbus, Ohio. Actually Groveport, Ohio, which is just south of Columbus.

T: So you and he were together, you mentioned, the whole way through here.

L: Yes.

T: What can good friends kind of do for each other in a daily situation like this?

L: I had dysentery while we were marching. I would have to go to the ditch and relieve myself, and he always told me, "Don't you stay there! You get done what you have to do, and then you get back here!" So he kept goading me to keep going no matter how bad it got.

T: Physically, how had your condition declined from when you were in the camp?

(2, A, 45)

L: That was rough, because I was just passing mucous and blood. Then it somewhat abated, got a little better. Could get some food in. It got a little better. There was no medication. Didn't have any medication.

And then we came to a camp that was occupied by a lot of—the guys referred to them as "gooks". You know what gooks are?

T: Yes. Chinese, I would say.

L: Yes. These were Chinese, or Indians [from India]. Gurkhas, I think. Anyway, fortunately at that time we were sleeping in a tent. We woke up one morning and Mel said, "Someone slit the tent and stole my shoes." Stole his shoes. When you're marching and you don't have shoes, that's tough. Now he took an old jacket that he found there and he started stitching together with a needle and thread and made himself a pair of just cloth slippers and tried to walk that way. We were marching along and he got to the point where he said, "I can't walk anymore." I said, "Climb on my back," and I carried him for a while. He was a big man. So that was the kind of thing that we shared.

T: When you're friends you do that for each other, I guess.

L: Yes.

T: How did he handle the shoe situation, because I'm thinking on a day to day basis he can't go on like that?

L: You know, I can't remember. It seems to me that somewhere a few days later after we were marching he was able to get another pair of shoes. I can't remember who or where [or] when he got them. How he came about getting that pair of shoes.

T: That sounds like it could be just fatal, not getting shoes.

L: Oh, yes.

T: Was your column, as it walked there, did it stay pretty much the same size or did men come and go from this column?

L: You couldn't tell.

T: What do you mean by that?

L: Well, like for instance when Mel told me, he said if I dropped out to relieve myself, you get back here. There were guys that dropped out, and they didn't come back. Now this is where this Dr. Caplan was trying to pick up people that were that way. Just felt that they were ready to give up. Then he would pick them up. He had a wagon. Some Germans had a wagon, and they were trying to keep the fellows that were in bad shape, get them on the wagon and bring them along that way. This is all that we heard, because we never saw it. They were behind us.

T: Right. So you couldn't see it.

L: No.

T: You mentioned on the walk, on the march too, that you finally had trouble with fleas, ticks, et cetera.

L: We had lice. When we would get to a place that we were going to stay for the night, we would start checking through our clothes and kill lice.

T: And for those listeners who haven't done that before, describe that process.

L: (*chuckles*) You would look in areas where the seams, where there were seams, and they would hide in behind that. So you'd pull the seam back and get a hold of the louse and crack it between your fingernails. You could never kill them all, because they had laid eggs in there and you'd get a new batch.

**(2, A, 85)**

T: So it was a continuous thing it sounds like.

L: Every day. You never got rid of them until we got liberated.

T: So this is something, I guess you learn to live with it or...

L: Yes. That's right.

T: What's uncomfortable about the lice? Is it more the sleeping or the walking? How do they make themselves felt?

L: It's more when you're sleeping. It doesn't bother you during the day. But at night they start moving around on your body underneath a piece of clothing that's tight against you. It just disturbs you. You scratch them, get them away from you.

T: So it's even more difficult to get any kind of restful sleep.

L: Oh, yes.

T: You know, you said earlier too that the guards are even older now.

L: Yes. We had some real old men that were guarding us. They walked alongside the column. They didn't look too happy about what they were doing. But they had a rifle and we didn't (*chuckles*).

T: Could you expect decent treatment from these old guys?

L: Yes. Yes. We never were mistreated by the guards. One time we had a civilian that walked into the column and hollered, "So this is the *Terrorflieger!*" [German: literally 'terror flyers', phrase used to describe Allied airmen responsible for bombing cities] Then he laid a haymaker on one guy's chin.

T: But that's, from the way you are describing it, sounds like it was the exception as opposed to the rule?

L: Yes. It was. We didn't see that very often. I saw it that one time. Now there may have been other times with other people that it happened to that we didn't see.

T: Sure. I guess your world is really only as far as you can see.

L: Near the end of the march they [German civilians] were coming out and bringing water out to us.

T: So things changed, their treatment of you.

L: Yes. And one guy said, "Hey, don't forget, they're the same people that cheered when Rotterdam was bombed." [reference to German bombing of Rotterdam, 1940]

T: So some things were not forgotten right away.

L: Right.

T: The column, as you were marching, do you remember being bombed or strafed by Allied aircraft ever?

L: Yes. We actually were not marching. We had gotten to this one small town where there was an aircraft components factory, and it was not being used. They housed us in that. One day, all of a sudden, we heard these aircraft and they flew so low over the place that the skylights broke from the concussion of their engines. We ran back and forth. The guards scattered. The GIs scattered. We looked out and they were strafing a train. Just a mile or so away from the place we were staying. So we never got strafed as such, but we were close when they were doing it.

T: That must have been ferocious, I'm just thinking. It was loud enough as it was just having them fly over your building.

**(2, A, 121)**

L: Exactly. I thought they were going after the building. Especially when the glass started falling out of the top of it.

T: Now when you think about the time you were marching there, what for you was the most difficult part of all that? You've talked about a lot of really pretty awful things.

L: I would say the lack of food and the poor places to stay. Not knowing when or where we were going and where we were going to end up.

T: So the sense of the unknown never really went away.

L: No. No. It was very uncertain as whether we were going to make it or not.

T: And when you say uncertain whether you were going to make it, because of your declining health or you weren't sure what the Germans would do or...

L: It was more about where the fronts were and whether we were going to get caught in the fighting.

T: Between the two lines.

T: Yes. Did you really care at this point whether ultimately it was the Americans or the Russians that would find you first? Did that concern you?

L: Not really. Because I didn't know; we had talked about it. We knew the Germans did not want to surrender to the Russians. Because of what they had done to the Russians when they were on their Blitzkrieg over there. The Russians were going to get revenge; they knew that. They didn't want to surrender to them. So we figured that they were probably going to march us until they could surrender to the Allied forces.

T: So that you kind of pieced together what was going on through deductive reasoning and a few rumors.

L: Yes. Yes.

T: Did you learn anything from the guards about what was going on?

L: No. They never told us a thing. If we got it from the guards it would have been that the guard might have said it to somebody else and then it traveled through the column. That's a possibility. And I'm not so sure that the guards knew very much. They had a job to do, and that was to keep us moving along on a march.

T: On the march, did you move every day or were there days when you didn't march at all?

L: There were days that we didn't march. We would spend some time in a place and then off we'd go again. When the Russians started to get closer. We marched across the northern part of Germany and then they put us in boxcars and we went south for a while, and then got off and started marching again.

T: That's right. You mentioned the boxcars earlier in our conversation. You did spend some time in them then.

L: Just one ride. I don't remember how long it lasted.

T: Eventful, uneventful?

L: Uneventful. We were not strafed. It was just being locked into it and nothing—they didn't give us any food while we were in there.

T: They hadn't been giving you food for a while now, it sounds like. Since you left the camp really.

L: Yes. We'd get some bread once in a while. Then one time on the march they said, "We're going to see if we can't find a place for you here to get some Red Cross parcels." So there was a group of us that went along with a guard and marched I don't know how far. It was a long way and we got a couple, two, three or four packages of Red Cross parcels and brought them back to the group. That wasn't much for the number we had.

**(2, A, 164)**

T: Sure. Is that the only time you recall getting Red Cross parcels while you were marching?

L: Yes. Just that one time. That was the only time in the three months.

T: So the food was really, or lack of food, was a serious problem.

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). I think I went from 185 pounds to a little over 100.

T: Boy, brother, that's skin and bone literally.

L: It is. I was pretty rickety.

T: When you were found, it was by Americans I think you said, right?

L: We actually were marched to the Americans.

T: By your German guards?

L: We were near the Elbe River and the guards had told us, "Tomorrow we're going to turn you over to the Americans." And we said, oh yes, you bet. And they did.

T: They really did.

L: Yes. We marched down the road and for goodness sakes, there were some GIs standing along the road with their guns. Some of our guys grabbed the rifles from the old German soldiers, busted the stocks off of them and threw them out in the ditch, and then they were prisoners of war.

T: What happened to those old guards?

L: I have no idea. I have no idea. I think they probably got treated better than they ever had on the whole march, and probably even before that.

T: Yes. The little remarks you've made about the guards, they weren't doing all that well either.

L: No. They were old folks that were letting the young guys get up to the front.

T: Let me ask you, what was going through your mind at that time? This is a long, long march, and the POW experience has come to an end.

L: I was hoping to get back home again of course. Prayed a lot. Prayed a lot while we were on it. Prayed a lot in the camp. We actually had some church services in the camp.

T: That's one thing we never got to talk about. Let me ask you: when you were in the service, before you were a POW, would you consider yourself a person of faith?

L: Yes.

T: And how would you describe the ways that your faith was able to help you?

L: Well, I hope it was through my faith and my prayers... I would say that it helped me.

T: Talk about the church services you alluded to a moment ago. So these actually took place while you were in the camp?

L: Right. We had a main hall that was just off the kitchen where they prepared some foods for us. They did prepare, like in the morning, they had a breakfast. I don't know what you call it. Gruel or whatever it is. Like oatmeal. Something like that that they prepared. And we all got a ration of that to take back and eat in our barracks. Then in the evening they'd prepare a big pot of some dried vegetables and stuff, soup. Once in a while they'd throw in some horse meat. That was what they did in the kitchen.

**(2, A, 207)**

T: That was central preparation facility where you picked the food up from.

L: And then off of that there was a main hall that we could have gatherings in. We had church services in there.

T: Were those regular services every week?

L: I believe so.

T: And you were free to go if you wanted to.

L: Yes. There were always guards in there. They always watched to see what was going on. We had a Christmas Eve service in there.

T: Do you remember that service?

L: I sure do. I guess it was as much of a Christmas as we could have in there. I don't remember whether there was even any decorations. They might have even made some decorations and decorated the hall.

T: How well attended was that service, do you remember? Were there a lot of guys there?

L: Yes. It was a good turnout. I don't think it was one hundred percent. The hall would not hold everybody. It basically took care of those that wanted to go.

T: So a little piece of home, actually, at that time of the year.

L: Right. And we sang Christmas carols and there were guys that had a lot of [initiative] to put things together.

*(pause to interview)*

T: You mentioned services being important. Now let me pick up the thread from the day you were found, or ran into the Americans, 26 April 1945. What's the first thing the Americans did with you there?

L: The guys that were along the road didn't do anything. They were out there doing a job. They had to watch. Some of our guys grabbed a hold of them and hugged them and kissed them (*chuckles*) and they were rather embarrassed by that. Then they took us to a place where they deloused us. Got stripped down naked, and they had us take a shower and then they put delousing powder on us. I can't remember whether they gave us the clothes back, but the clothes if they did give them back to us they had put them into a big washing machine.

T: So you've got, if not new clothes, at least things that are clean again.

L: Yes. Right.

T: You've had those clothes on how long, brother?

L: Oh! From February 6 until April 26. That's a long time to try to keep clean underwear (*chuckles*). Oh, yes!

T: Were you taken to Camp Lucky Strike or one of those camps in France?

L: Eventually.

T: How long was it before you got there?

**(2, A, 256)**

L: Not too long. I can remember the first mess hall that we went to, and we were in line there getting ready to be fed and there was a captain ahead of me and he looked down and he saw that white bread and he cried. That white bread they were going to give us. He cried when he saw it. It looked like angel food cake.

T: I bet it did after what you'd been eating. Now how did your stomach do with the adaptation to different food and lots of it?

L: I had trouble with it. I went on sick call, and they gave me a shot of paregoric. That was the strongest shot of whiskey I ever took (*laughs*). And I took that. We were staying in a house that people had evacuated. There was a cook stove in there

and I told the guys—I knew we could get some chickens or something like that and some potatoes. I said, “I’ll cook a meal.” Because I had seen my mother cook stuff. And I went out scrounging and found a place where a lady had some geese and ducks in pens. I felt so badly about this since the day that we did this. They took one of the geese out of there and she said, “Nein, nein, nein.” She didn’t want us to take this goose. I don’t know what it was; it was a special stock or whatever it was. So we took one goose and three ducks and went out and took them with us and killed them and I roasted the goose. Made mashed potatoes and gravy and I don’t know what else. We found some carrots and made a meal for us. Then I said, “Well, I don’t know what I’m going to do with those ducks.” So we cleaned those and I threw them in a pot and made duck soup.

T: Now were you able to keep this food down?

L: No. After I got through cooking all that, I couldn’t eat (*chuckles*).

T: That’s kind of the punch line to the story here.

L: Yes.

T: How long was it before your stomach was able to sort of handle normal food as you might say?

L: I tell you, after that paregoric, that seemed to help. I think probably within a week I was starting to keep food down. It’s amazing how fast you gain the weight back that you’ve lost too.

T: Really?

L: Yes. But it’s kind of a, a puffy fat.

T: So not the kind of lean weight that you had lost.

L: No.

T: How long was it before you felt yourself physically back to normal, if we can use that word?

L: Oh, it was a gradual process. You know, you’re so happy to be liberated that your mental state takes over and heals you faster than your body does.

T: That’s an interesting way to put it. Really the kind of uplift from just being out.

L: Right. Exactly.

T: The physical stuff was taken care of; were you debriefed at all, questioned by the Army about what you had been through as a POW?

L: A little bit. They told us not to talk about anything that had happened to us. "Don't communicate with any of the parents of the people that you've been with."

**(2, A, 315)**

T: Oh, did they really?

L: Yes. And of course, I had that co-pilot on my mind. Then eventually after I was out of the service they said, "You can communicate with anybody you want to." So I finally did communicate with his family.

T: Was that contact that you initiated or they initiated?

L: I wrote to them and told them what I knew about what happened to him, and then I explained to them that the German major had come to me and wanted to know if I knew Lt. Matlock. After I started college they thought that that was my home address and they came to see me at college and I was back home in my own hometown. So I didn't get to see them.

T: Did they correspond with you at all, his parents?

L: Yes, they did prior to that. Then that was the end of it. They were from Long Island, New York.

T: They came all the way out to Wisconsin to see you?

L: Yes. I was sorry that I didn't get to see them.

T: They must have been very concerned to know more.

L: Sure.

T: How long did Matlock sit on your mind like that?

L: About sixty years. It's never left me. These things, every once in a while they come back to me and I think about them.

T: Well, one of the things that we're coming to is, after you were no longer a POW, and this could be really from that point forward, how often did you have dreams specifically about your POW experience? Not your combat experience.

L: I don't recall that I really had like nightmares or anything like that. I had things that would... I can remember one time after I got home I had a date with a girl and it

was on the Fourth of July. As I was driving down through this area where there were a lot of people around, somebody shot a firecracker right off next to the car and I just said, "Holy mackerel!" And she said, "Thank goodness you didn't say something else!"

T: So dreams, not really. What I've heard you say really is that people or situations, you think about them, but not really in a dream situation.

L: Right.

T: When you got back to Minnesota, I think you mentioned your dad was terminally ill at the time.

L: We were living in Wisconsin at the time.

T: So they were off the farm, your folks. Or they were on a different farm.

L: They were on the farm.

T: And compounding this really is, the news about your brother came. My gosh, you weren't home all that long, either, when that news came.

L: I wasn't home very long when that happened.

T: How much did your mom or anybody else in your family, your three sisters too, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

**(2, A, 372)**

L: Not much. Never asked me much about it.

T: Would you say that's more because they didn't ask or you didn't really tell?

L: Both. I think one thing was that my dad, being terminally ill with cancer, they had lots of things to be concerned about. We probably talked about it some, but not much. That's the kind of thing that... I taught in Austin [Minnesota] for thirty –

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

L: There were a lot of people who never knew that I was a prisoner of war.

T: You're kidding. After thirty-three years in the district?

L: Thirty-three years.

T: Building on your last comment, it just never came up in conversation?

L: Didn't talk about it.

T: Is it something that, had somebody asked you about you would have affirmed it, or just said you'd rather not talk about it?

L: No. I think I probably would have related it to them if they asked me. My kids all know about it. I wrote, I put it down in writing and my grandsons, my children, have asked for a copy of it so their kids could do something in school with it.

T: Is that something you were able to do pretty early after your POW experience ended or did it take you while before you could do that?

L: Oh, that was a long time. In fact, I didn't write that until after I retired, in 1983.

T: So it took you almost forty years to get to it.

L: That's right.

T: When you sat down to write things down, how difficult was that?

L: It wasn't difficult at all. That flowed quite easily. I should go through it again and probably elaborate a little more on some of the things, because my youngest son said that to me. He said, "Dad, you ought to elaborate a little bit more on some of the areas."

T: Right. So your children have seen a copy or a version of this already.

L: Yes. In fact, we're living in an apartment in Park Rapids now, and when we moved in here, the lady that's the manager here said, "You're a former POW, aren't you?" And I said yes. Because she saw my POW license.

T: So now you have it on your license plate too.

L: Yes. And she said, "Do you have anything written down about this experience?" I said, "Yes, I do." She said, "Could I see it?" And I said yes. So I brought her a copy and she looked at it, and she said, "Would you mind if I make a copy of this, and I'll put it in the library here of this apartment complex." I said, "Go ahead." So they put it in there. For some reason or other somebody borrowed it and it never came back.

T: I guess we'll take the positive spin and say it must have been well written and popular.

**(2, B, 409)**

L: I hope so *(both laugh)*.

T: The last couple questions. One of those is to ask you how your interactions with the Veterans Administration have been over the years.

L: Well, I first went to them in Milwaukee when I was living in Wisconsin, right after I got out. Because I was having trouble. I had a hearing problem. They were very stingy with their compensation. I got a ten percent disability. Then when I got to Austin, Minnesota, I went through the VA in St. Paul and there was never anything other than checking me over and so forth. I got a hearing aid from them that way.

Then just two years ago there was an ad in the paper here in Park Rapids that said that the DAV [Disabled American Veterans] was going to be in Park Rapids in a motor home, and they would like to have anybody that was interested in stopping by to see if they needed any help, and I did. And I went in there and I explained some of the things, and when I was done he said, "Oh, my God! You should have been on one hundred percent disability years ago." So after a little while that's exactly what I got.

T: But it took a long time, and really by accident.

L: It took fifty years.

T: And thanks to the DAV on that one.

L: And I'm happy with the VA. I go to Fargo. I get all my medication from them. My primary care is here in Park Rapids with a doctor, and then I get my medication from the VA. They do checkups on me.

T: Right. Now are you a member of American Ex-POWs?

L: Yes.

T: How long ago did you join that organization?

L: Oh, probably ten years ago.

T: What led you to them, first of all? How did you become a member?

L: I think I belonged to the national Ex-POWs first. That was just through mail and sending in my dues. I joined on a life membership with the American Ex-POWs. Then we have a local chapter. I'm trying to think of how I happened to get into that. I think it was because there was a lady in town here whose husband was a POW and he died, and she goaded me on to come over to the chapter meetings.

T: How has American ex-POWs organization been helpful for you?

L: Basically to find out that there are other people who have the same problems that you do, and we were all alike. We didn't talk about the experience. And they provided an opportunity for us to tell our story.

T: Was it reassuring in a way to hear from other guys that they had kind of reacted the same way you had, not talking about it, kind of just going on with your life?

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). Yes. When I was in Austin all those thirty-three years I belonged to the American Legion, but I never had any opportunity to—I have one thing to tell you. My daughter was in an American history class, and when she was in tenth grade and the teacher said, "We're going to be studying World War II. If any of you have a chance to interview somebody, why don't you do it?" So she told them, she said, "My dad was a POW." He said, "Interview him." And do you know, he used that tape that she interviewed me for I'll bet you ten, fifteen years.

T: Now how long ago was that that you did that? A long time ago?

**(2, B, 453)**

L: Yes. Well, she's fifty years old now.

T: So we're talking thirty-five or so years ago now.

L: Oh, yes. Longer ago than that.

T: So your first interview, in a way, or conversation about this was a long time ago.

L: It sure was.

T: Does it get easier to talk about it as you do it more often?

L: No. No. In fact, one time a young pastor here at our church in Park Rapids said, "You know, for Memorial Day, I could get you to get up and just say a few things to tie in with my sermon." And I said, "Okay, I'll do that." And I did do that. I gave a little spiel at the church and then he picked it up from there and gave what he was going to do related to the Memorial Day.

T: But it might not have been something you volunteered for, I hear you say.

L: No. He liked what I did and that made me happy.

T: When you got back to civilian life you got a job and went back and got your master's degree. Do you feel you had an easy or kind of a more difficult time adjusting to civilian life again?

L: I often thought about it. Whether it would have been easier if I hadn't gone through that experience. I don't know. That's a hard question to answer. I'm not sure what it did to me. (\*\*\*) for several years and I think it was related to that experience and I haven't had it now since I retired.

T: So in a way having more time on your hands after being retired has been a good thing?

L: Yes.

T: The last question I have is kind of an overarching one, and it's to ask you how would you describe really the most important way that your POW experience changed you or changed your life?

L: Hmmm. I'm not sure. I think that I'm a gung ho American.

T: Is that different than you might have been or than you think you were before?

L: I think so, yes. I have a feeling that I own a good piece of this country. Not me alone. A lot of the guys that went through that.

T: Yes. That's an interesting way to put it. In a sense, that you can stand up and be counted.

L: Yes. Definitely. Got an investment of time and emotions. I think about people who never went in the service and I wonder how they feel. Well, I know how some of them feel. And I can see why they feel that way because they didn't, they never had an involvement.

T: Right. That's something that, in a sense, you can't make up. Not like a make up assignment.

L: Right.

T: I forgot to ask you this: do you have or have you had contact with people you were a POW with?

L: Just the crew members.

T: For example Melvin Gerhold, the ball turret gunner.

L: I was the best man at his wedding. And I've been to see him a couple times in Ohio, and he's been to see us a couple times. Once here in Park Rapids and another time when we were in Arizona he and his wife stopped by to see us out there. Then I finally got to see the tail gunner. One time we were coming back from Texas and we stopped in Branson [Missouri], and I knew that he lived south of Sedalia, in

Missouri. I saw him then, it was after I retired [in 1983]. And I saw him. And, you know, I think I saw him before that, too, because our group had a reunion down in Sarasota, Florida, and all of us got to that except the navigator. He had a stroke and he couldn't make it. Since that time the bombardier who was there, he has died. I suspect that maybe the navigator has died.

**(2, B, 497)**

T: Is Melvin Gerhold still alive?

L: Yes.

T: So that's a friendship that's been lifelong.

L: Oh, yes (*with emphasis*). Yes. We went through hell together.

T: Would you describe that friendship as different than other friendships you have?

L: That's probably the best friendship I had in the service.

T: Experience can really bond a person then, can't it?

L: Yes. Yes. We got along just fine in the prison camp and on the march and after the war and so forth.

T: You must have known him for sixty plus years now.

L: Yes.

T: Well, that's the last question I had for you, and at this point I'll ask if there's anything that you want to add that we perhaps didn't cover or that you think is important.

L: You know, I think there are a lot of people that don't realize what we went through on that march across Germany for that length of time. Some people have referred to it as the Shoe Leather Express. You know, the Bataan Death March [Philippines, 1942] was a horrible thing, but it only lasted a few days.

T: You probably didn't have much shoe leather left on those shoes by the time you were done.

L: We're lucky we had anything left.

T: Yes. You didn't have many pounds on your frame the way you talked about it. You lost a whole bunch.

L: Oftentimes I've been concerned about the people who dropped out and what happened to them.

T: Yes. Because they just faded from your view, literally. Well, on the record Mr. Bedsted, let me thank you very much this evening for a very interesting conversation.

L: I appreciate it, and I'm glad to share it with you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**