

**Interviewee: Earle Bombardier**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 24 May 2004**

**Location: telephone to the Bombardier residence, Fergus Falls, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, July 2004**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, October 2004**

Earle Bombardier was born 23 May 1922 in Crookston, a small town in northwest Minnesota. He graduated from Crookston High School in 1940, and was drafted into the US Army in December 1942. Earle volunteered for airborne duty, and was trained as a paratrooper.

Earle was with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, and was part of the D-Day invasion of France on 6 June 1944. His plane was shot down over the coast on the day of the invasion. Twelve days later, on 18 June 1944, Earle was captured by German forces after a firefight that left twelve of his group of thirty men dead.

As a POW, Earle spent time in several temporary facilities, including Camp 201 near Alencon, France, and Trier, Germany. He then was at Stalag VII-B Memmingen until October 1944 before being sent on a work detail with approximately sixty other POWs to the city of Augsburg, in southern Germany. Earle performed various types of work here, mostly timber cutting, until he was liberated by US forces in April 1945. Earle spent several months recovering from his time as a POW, and was discharged from the Army in November 1945.

Again a civilian, Earle got married in 1947; he and his wife raised four children. Earle worked from 1948 – 1984 with Otter Tail Power Company in Fergus Falls, Minnesota. He was active with the American Ex-POWs organization, serving as state commander for Minnesota.

**Interview key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**E = Earle Bombardier**

**[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 24 May 2004 and this is the POW interview with Earle Bombardier of Fergus Falls, Minnesota. First, on the record Mr. Bombardier, thanks very much for taking time this evening to speak with me.

E: You're entirely welcome.

T: Some of the information I want to put in the record. You were born 23 May 1922 in Crookston, Minnesota. Graduated Crookston High School class of 1940. Drafted into the US Army December 1942. Served in Europe with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, and were captured in France in June of 1944.

And it's there I want to begin. And if you could describe in your own words the time when you were captured. You were a paratrooper. You were on the ground, and what finally happened that led to your capture by the Germans?

E: First of all, our plane was shot down. It crash landed, but we jumped before it went down completely. We lost almost all of our equipment. We finally got about thirty fellows together. Scattered around. They were in the same position we were. They were scattered all over and we were just trying to get a group together. So we just fought indiscriminately with small groups of Germans back and forth there in the swamp where we landed. We didn't move very far until finally a day or so before we were captured we got some indication of where we were actually at, and then we started marching through the swamp there and trying to get to the American lines so we could get re-supplied and back in the fight again. But when we approached the American lines, these Americans were very skittish. Evidently had been tricked by the Germans or something. We yelled at them that we were Americans. They just opened up on us, and so we finally retreated and then we ran into a bunch of German SS troops. They killed eighteen of our thirty men, and we were captured. In the battle there, I was knocked unconscious by a concussion grenade and lost the hearing in one ear and lot of the hearing in the other ear.

T: Did that ever come back, Mr. Bombardier? Your hearing.

E: It came back some in the left ear but my right ear is still no good at all. It never did come back there. It was a terrific experience I'll tell you. Horrific I should say, because I was knocked out. When I came to there was a big German standing there with a machine pistol pointed at me, and I wasn't about to argue with him.

T: No. The men that were killed of your thirty, were they killed during a firefight or after you surrendered?

E: No. They were killed during the firefight.

T: Were the Germans very close to your position as far as where the firefight took place?

E: Evidently they were. Yes.

T: What was that like, from your perspective, to be a prisoner? I mean suddenly the Germans you've been fighting, the Germans you've learned about or heard about are standing right in front of you.

E: It's hard to explain what you feel. I guess one thing that you notice most of all is your lack of being able to move around as you want. Everything is controlled and you're told what to do and when to do it. Yes. It makes you feel sub-human almost, because you're just kind of like an animal to them.

T: How much was there a sense of fear among you or the men around you of what might happen to you?

E: There was some. Yes. We weren't treated that badly at the front. It seems that combat soldiers have respect for other combat soldiers even though they're the enemy. But it's when you get back into the rear echelon. That's where you start getting some of the abuse.

T: Was that the case for you as well?

**(1, A, 49)**

E: Yes.

T: Did the Germans that captured you originally, how long did they hold onto you as it were before they turned you over to somebody else?

E: Oh, just a matter of two or three days.

T: During those couple days, what kind of interaction was there between these Germans who have captured you, and you and the other men who are now prisoners?

E: There wasn't much interaction at all.

T: Did they keep you fenced off or under guard?

E: Oh, yes. Definitely yes.

T: What is the first time you were actually questioned by a German or a team of Germans?

E: The first time was after our boxcar ride and they, the Germans, interrogated us and, of course, we gave the usual information: name, rank and serial number. The Germans took that very lightly because they just smiled to themselves and then they would relate all the information that we withheld. They knew more about us, I think, than some of our own men did.

T: Now this was a number of weeks after they actually captured you, wasn't it?

E: That's right.

T: So up until this time you hadn't really faced any questioning or interrogation as it were.

E: No. That's right.

T: When you were initially captured, did they frisk you or take anything off your body?

E: Oh, definitely. Yes. They took everything. The thing they were most apprehensive about was our hand grenades. We had hand grenades strapped to our belt, and they were very apprehensive about those. We had to take those off. They wouldn't reach over and grab them. But they took everything.

T: Was there any kind of abuse of the prisoners who did surrender by the Germans?

E: Not right at that point. Probably the worst abuse was starvation. On our march to Alencon from where we were captured, we were strafed by our fighter planes, and the Germans kept on marching us down the road and I can still remember looking back over my shoulder and seeing all of those .50 caliber guns open up on those fighter planes and they were directed right at us. You could see chunks coming out of the tar road you know, where these things were hitting. It was a horrible experience.

T: It sounds like a sense of powerlessness where you can't really do anything about it.

E: That's right.

T: Did you come under air attack any other time while you were a POW like that?

E: Oh, yes. Yes. When we were in these boxcars and being transported that twenty-nine days, we were under attack many times. The Germans had us in those boxcars, which are much smaller than the boxcars here. They're what they call a forty and eight. Either forty men or eight horses. So they were much smaller, and they had us with sixty men in a car. We were just packed in there like sardines, and then the Germans had a little area right by the door where they had some barbed wire put up there. They had a little spot for themselves. The two guards would sit there. Then when there was an air attack they would jump out and lock the doors and run for the ditch and there we sat like pigeons. They bombed us and strafed us. We were locked in there.

**(1, A, 87)**

T: What's that like being trapped in a boxcar like that?

E: Oh! You can't imagine. I even find it hard to try to explain it. But it's something when you sit there and you watch those .50 caliber bullets coming through the roof of the car and they drop bombs and the car was rocking back and forth and you have no way of protecting yourself or anything.

T: Was anybody injured in the car you were in?

E: Yes. I think there was two or three killed and a couple injured.

T: And you escaped injury yourself though?

E: Yes. I did.

T: Through luck or what?

E: The good Lord was watching over me.

T: Boy, twenty-nine days in those boxcars. You may as well start paying rent.

E: Yes.

T: Backing up, you were marched to Alencon, France?

E: That's right.

T: And what kind of facility did you find when you got there?

E: Just a big enclosure. Barbed wire enclosure. Three thousand men there. They had a couple little makeshift barracks, I guess you would call them. That was about all they had there. Of course there was nothing to eat and we hadn't had food for many, many days. They finally asked for some volunteers because they had a

hospital there that they had set up. It was actually an old French garrison. They wanted volunteers to go there and act as stretcher-bearers to carry the wounded as they brought them in and bring them in for surgery. So, in order to get out of that compound, I volunteered for that.

It was a tough chore, I'll tell you, because the stairs in there, they went up half a flight and then they turned and came right back up the other half. As is typical of the Germans, they had their operating room on the top floor, which was the fourth floor. So we had to carry those wounded Germans with all of their equipment, minus their weapons of course, but their pack and everything else. We had to carry them all the way up to the fourth floor, and then the condition we were in, that was pretty tough duty. So anyway, they got them up there and then we just left them down in the hall and then somebody else carried them into the operating room.

I finally was promoted to the job of carrying them into the operating room, and that was just like working in a slaughterhouse. We carried them in there on the stretcher. They would roll them off on the table. They had no anesthetics, no bandages, with the exception of some makeshift stuff that was like crepe paper. Stretchy stuff. They'd just roll them off on the table and they'd start cutting on an arm or a leg and they finally would pass out and they'd just wrap that paper around and put them back on the stretcher and haul them out in the hall again.

T: Like an assembly line.

E: Yes.

T: You weren't trained in the medical profession I take it.

E: No.

T: How did you handle that? Being sort of part of this medical business.

E: Well, it was strictly volunteer. Just to get out of the compound.

T: And the conditions in the compound were what?

E: Terrible. Absolutely terrible.

T: Was it open or were there actually buildings?

**(1, A, 125)**

E: There were a couple of makeshift buildings there, but that was it. I remember one day the Germans butchered a cow, and we got the udder and the intestines and the head for the three thousand men that were in there. That's what we got for food. So some of our makeshift cooks boiled all of that and then distributed it as a broth and little pieces of flesh with it. That was what we had.

T: Did working as a stretcher-bearer get you any extra food rations?

E: No.

T: But it got you out of the compound.

E: Yes.

T: Now you stayed there less than a month, you estimate.

E: I was there, yes, until about the middle of July as I recall.

T: What kind of sleeping facilities were there?

E: Very poor (*chuckles*). Very poor. Most of the time they slept on the floor. When there was a floor even. Some of them slept out in the yard.

T: Right. And the men who were there, how many of them were Americans?

E: It was a mixture. I wouldn't venture to say. I think probably primarily most of them were American. There were British there too though.

T: I see. I see. And you mentioned kind of a work detail with the stretcher-bearer. Anything else to do there or was this essentially, from the way you looked at it, kind of a holding facility?

E: It was a holding facility. It wasn't too far from the front, and so any prisoners they had they just routed there.

T: How was your health about this time? Had you been injured at all or wounded during the capture?

E: Yes. That's where I lost my hearing.

T: But any kind of flesh wounds or broken bones or anything?

E: No. I was hit in the back with a rifle butt but other than that, no. My eardrums being broken, that was the worst that I had.

T: And did that cause you discomfort or pain during the day, from day to day, or not?

E: Yes. Yes. They have a ringing in your ears all the time. I had a lot of pain and a lot of discharge from the ears.

T: And medical attention? You haven't mentioned any.

E: No (*chuckles*). That was nonexistent.

T: It sounds like if the Germans were not getting anesthetic, that there was no time for the Americans.

E: No. No. Even when we got into a permanent camp in Germany there still was no—there was a little bit of medical attention. Several guys ended up in the hospital, German hospital, but for the most part there was no medical attention.

T: From Alencon you were marched to Paris, right?

E: Right.

T: About how far is that? How many days did that take?

E: Oh, I don't remember that. It didn't seem like it was too awfully long, but it's hard to tell. In a situation like that time doesn't really mean that much to you.

T: Longer than a couple of days though?

E: I would guess something like that. Yes.

**(1, A, 162)**

T: And how many of you, if you can estimate, were marched out of that camp?

E: That I can't tell you honestly either. I would guess several hundred.

T: And the men that you were captured with from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, were you still pretty much together as a group?

E: No.

T: What happened to the men you were captured with? Were they in this facility at all at Alencon?

E: Some of them were and some weren't. I don't know what happened to the other fellows. There were I think two or three of us that were in Alencon that I saw. Now, as I say, there were three thousand men there. So it wouldn't have been hard to miss somebody.

T: Right. So as you walked out of here you didn't walk out with anybody that you had been captured with.

E: No.

T: Were you essentially by yourself, or had you kind of fallen in with another group of guys?

E: No. You just kind of tend to stay by yourself. At least I did.

T: Did the Germans give you any indication where you were going when you left there?

E: No.

T: And I'm wondering, did they ask for volunteers to leave the camp or was there simply a sweep of men who were pushed out?

E: No. There was no volunteering at all. They just took a bunch of us and that was it.

T: When you marched to Paris, did you stay there at all or were you essentially taken to Paris and trained out?

E: Yes. We were taken to Paris and put on a train right away.

T: And that's the boxcar ride that was twenty-nine days.

E: That's right. Yes.

T: My goodness. I'm trying to imagine. You must become quite familiar with the people you're in a boxcar with.

E: Not necessarily. No. You converse with them, but I think—I know in my own mind I was—it was just like a big nightmare. We didn't do much conversing at all. We were thinking about what was going to happen to us and so forth. Thinking about when the next air raid was coming and so forth. There wasn't much conversation.

T: How much did you find yourself wondering about what was going to happen next?

E: A lot.

T: Worrying about it or thinking about it?

E: Thinking about it mainly.

T: Because again no indication had been given to you what was going to happen.

E: That's right.

T: How did you order your mind or to sort of manage day after day in the boxcars? That sounds like perhaps the most difficult thing you've described about your POW experience, and I'm sort of wondering how you disciplined yourself mentally to get through that.

**(1, A, 198)**

E: *(sighs)* That's hard to explain too. I guess you just tell yourself well, I'll just get through today and hope for tomorrow. I guess that's about all I can say about it.

T: Almost like a one day at a time approach.

E: That's right. Yes.

T: The other people in the car with you there. How did they seem to be managing or dealing with the same situation?

E: The same way I did.

T: You already mentioned not a lot of conversation as it were.

E: No. No.

T: Just kind of get through from day to day. And how much was food on your mind? Because I think I remember you saying they weren't supplying a lot.

E: Yes. Food was a primary thing that you were thinking about. I know just about all the time we were in prison camp that food was the primary thing on your mind. You know for most fellows our age you'd be thinking about girls and fun you had and everything like that. No. Our mind was primarily on food. When we finally got into the camp in Augsburg we would sit at night and talk and we would plan out what we were going to have for our first meal when we got home.

T: So food became an all-encompassing topic.

E: That's right.

T: And you're right. That is ironic that we think of ourselves in our young twenties and normally at home we're not thinking about food.

E: When I went into combat I weighed 173 pounds. I'll tell you, there was no fat on me. When I got to the base camp in Germany the middle of October I weighed 115.

T: Holy cow! You dropped fifty-some pounds.

E: Yes. Yes.

T: You've mentioned a lack of food. I mean really no food being supplied as a standard all the way along here.

E: That's right.

T: When you're being marched or in these boxcars was there any way to acquire food?

E: No.

T: The Germans throw food in occasionally?

E: No. Absolutely not. In fact when we got off the boxcars in Trier on the last leg of our journey to Memmingen, the civilians were stoning us as we marched to the compound.

T: That's like icing on the cake, isn't it?

E: Yes.

T: The boxcar ride ended twenty-nine days later in southern France you mentioned.

E: Yes. I don't know just how far down it was but it was quite a ways.

T: When you were in the boxcars, is your memory one of doing more sitting or more actual traveling?

**(1, A, 236)**

E: Would you repeat that?

T: Yes. When you were in the boxcars, is your memory that the boxcars were more often moving or more often stopped?

E: Oh! I think it was stopped about as much as it was moving. As I said, they would go down in one direction and the railroad tracks would be blown up so they'd back up and they'd try a different way. So I guess about half the time you spent just sitting in boxcars. Not traveling.

T: Now when you got out of the train there, I take it you could still walk under your own power?

E: Yes. Very hard I'll tell you. A lot of the guys, we had to carry them they were so weak.

T: Again, mixed nationalities among the people in the train or your car or mostly Americans?

E: They were all Americans.

T: You've got all American here.

E: Yes. Yes.

T: And you mentioned the facility that you ended up, the temporary facility in the southern part of France there, is where you were actually interrogated for the first time.

E: That's right.

T: How did this interrogation differ from any of the questioning that you'd had prior to this time?

E: I didn't have any questioning before that.

T: This is the first time someone's even asked for your name and your rank and your serial number.

E: That's right.

T: How many Germans were doing the questioning?

E: Oh, they had small groups there that were questioning us. In my particular case I think there were three.

T: And just you they were talking to?

E: Yes. Yes.

T: I'm trying to think. Were you worried or afraid of this particular situation?

E: Yes.

T: And because of what you had heard or just the way your mind worked?

E: Yes. You see, when you get off of a train after undergoing the stress that we had there, you know, your mind is in a turmoil and this is what they took advantage of because they figure you were—well, just like in the case with these prisoners over in Iraq that were mistreated there in that prison over there [Abu Ghraib Prison, Baghdad]. They break down your morale and you get to the point you'll tell them what they want to know. So this is part of the thing. I think it was part of their

practice as far as interrogation. Just wear you down and then they'd get you to tell what you knew.

T: How long do you remember them talking to you, Earle? Was it a long time or was it pretty much a quick...

E: It was fairly quick. They had all the answers anyway.

T: That's what you mentioned.

E: Yes. They just stood back and smirked, you know. Give our name, rank and serial number and they'd just sit back and smirk because they knew all the answers and they'd come right out and tell you. You don't have to tell us. We can tell you. And they did.

**(1, A, 281)**

T: Very interesting.

E: Yes. Very.

T: How long did they keep you there at that temporary facility?

E: I would guess we were there probably not more than a week.

T: And when you left again, did you leave with the same group of guys you came in with?

E: They just picked groups at random. I think there were probably some from the original group that were in that, but I don't really recall.

T: Your next stop was actually into Germany for the first time.

E: Trier.

T: In western Germany there.

E: Yes.

T: West central.

E: Yes.

T: You mentioned when you got there and you went there by train, right?

E: Right.

T: And you got off and you faced German civilians for the first time.

E: Yes.

T: Were you prepared for the reaction you got from them?

E: No. Not really. I thought they'd more or less just stand there and watch us. But they were throwing rocks at us and calling us names. Of course we couldn't understand what they were talking about, but they were yelling at us.

T: It must be a frightening situation to not be able to defend yourself in any way either.

E: It is.

T: The facility at Trier, was that a permanent facility or just another holding area?

E: Well, no. I think it was probably a temporary. I just wanted to explain a little bit too. We were talking about food. And that is when they put us in this compound, there were barracks. On one side of the compound the wire, the barbed wire, was nailed onto the wall of an old warehouse, a big huge building. And this warehouse was set up on a little rise in the ground so that it went up probably about three feet above the ground level. Being curious of course, we started looking through there and the cracks in the walls. We had asked the commandant for Red Cross parcels. And he said oh, no, they don't have any Red Cross parcels. American planes were bombing all the trains and everything so they couldn't get anything through at all. But in looking through the cracks in the wall there we discovered that the place was stacked high with Red Cross parcels. So a few of us kind of determined that maybe it might be a good idea if we explored that. So we did. We tunneled under the foundation and we got in there one night and we got out a few of those parcels and then we covered the hole back up again, and it just happened that one of the British soldiers spotted us doing that. He was bound and determined he was going in there. We said no way. If you want to go in there you better wait until tomorrow night. The next night then the British were over there. Didn't even start to get dark hardly and they were over there. They weren't a very quiet group either. A German guard spotted them and they captured them right and took them out. I never did see them again so I don't know what happened to them.

T: This is at Trier, right?

E: Yes. That was at Trier. Needless to say, those few Red Cross parcels we got out of there, we were smoking one cigarette after another and eating food. As fast as we'd eat it, it would come up and we'd eat some more.

**(1, A, 340)**

T: You were throwing it up again.

E: Yes.

T: This is the first real "solid" food you've had in weeks and weeks.

E: That's right.

T: You've lost a bunch of weight by now.

E: Yes.

T: So the Red Cross packages were in the compound and you'd been lied to by the Germans.

E: That's right.

T: Now you only stayed there about a week.

E: I would guess about that. Yes.

T: Then you were taken to VII-B.

E: That's right.

T: And how were you transported from Trier? By train or did you walk?

E: By train.

T: You arrived in Memmingen mid to late October '44 by your information, and once again you didn't stay very long.

E: No.

T: Did you get POW dog tags here with an actual number, a POW number?

E: Yes. We finally did.

T: Anyway, now you got to this camp and I don't want to spend a lot of time about it because you were there for what, about two weeks?

E: No. Not even that long. I think about a week.

T: Did you volunteer for the *Arbeitskommando* to leave the camp, or were you picked?

E: I was picked.

T: Talk about moving to Augsburg. Augsburg's pretty far from Memmingen. Were you once again on a train?

E: Yes.

T: I'm imaging by now that being on German trains is probably bringing bad images in your mind.

E: Yes. In that particular case it wasn't in boxcars. It was on a passenger train.

T: And how many of you were shipped down there?

E: Sixty.

T: Sixty guys. All Americans?

E: Yes.

T: And all enlisted men like yourself?

E: Yes.

T: Was any description given to you about what the heck you were going to be doing down there?

E: No.

**End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 375.**

T: What encountered you when you got down to Memmingen? Was it more of a prison camp or a compound as it were?

E: No. It was a prison camp.

T: Were there other prisoners already there when you arrived?

E: Oh, yes. A lot of prisoners there.

T: So here, this work camp is a fairly large scale operation.

E: The work camp? The work camp was not large. We only had sixty men there.

T: And so it was just the sixty of you at the work camp at Augsburg.

E: Yes. Yes. At Augsburg. Yes.

T: And you gave that a number, 663-B?

E: That's right.

T: Is that a number that the Germans put on your dog tags or referred to you by?

E: I don't remember too much about those dog tags. No. I don't think so. I think they just had other information on there. I don't think there was anything about the camp.

T: You were at Augsburg it looks like six months, the longest period of time that you spent anywhere as a prisoner of war. At least in one facility. What kind of quarters or barracks did you encounter there at Augsburg?

E: We had regular barracks. We had bunks in there, but we had material just kind of like a gunnysack that we filled with straw, and that was what we used for our bed. But they had bunks in there.

T: How large were the barracks rooms? How many men to a room in other words?

E: We had thirty men to a room. They were large rooms.

T: And was there a stove in there for wintertime?

E: Yes.

T: What about the food situation, again. Were you fed regularly here at Augsburg?

E: The food was very poor. To start with we would get a slice of sawdust and molasses bread. We'd get a chunk of that and some real thin watery soup. That was our ration of food. Then just before Christmas of 1944, then we finally got Red Cross parcels.

T: So the ones that you hadn't seen officially up until this point.

E: That's right.

T: The first one.

E: Yes.

T: And how many times did you see a Red Cross parcel?

E: Well, the first one I saw was at Trier. I didn't even know what was in the things.

T: How many times did the Germans supply them for you?

E: Oh, we got those about every week.

T: The Red Cross parcels?

E: Yes.

T: And when you got a parcel, was it yours personally or did you have to share it with a number of men?

**(1, B, 407)**

E: No. We each had one. They had cigarettes and instant coffee and crackers and a chocolate bar. Fruit bar. They had quite a variety of things in there.

T: Now the German meals, you mentioned soup kind of. How many meals or things did they serve a day? Was there only one meal?

E: Twice a day.

T: And when were those from your memory?

E: In the morning and evening.

T: The soup, was that the evening?

E: Yes. The soup was in the evening. In the morning they had sometimes, if you were lucky, they had some marmalade to go with your bread.

T: Any hot beverage, ersatz coffee or...

E: Yes. Ersatz coffee.

T: And what was the typical work detail? You're here in this work camp. What did they have you doing?

E: To start off with it was kind of an indiscriminate thing. For my part I worked in a factory there where they had stores of cloth. Big bolts of cloth. We worked in there unloading those from boxcars and putting them in storage there.

Then it wasn't long after that we all started working digging air raid shelters. About, I would guess something like a mile or a mile and a half from our camp. There was a big hill, and on the far side of the hill was a German tank factory. On the opposite side of that hill was where we dug the air raid shelters. We had these little

narrow gauge track that we had to lay down as we dug in there. And these small ore cars that we would haul the sand out with. Now this is all sand. We would go straight into the side of this hill, oh, probably thirty feet or so and then we would start down at an angle. So we would go down probably twenty degrees or something like that. An angle. We had to lay those tracks in there, and we had to shore up everything with timber as we went because otherwise it would have caved in.

T: Sure.

E: Then we hauled all that sand out and dumped it outside of the entrance.

T: And was this work that went on for a number of weeks, the building of the air raid shelters?

E: Yes.

T: And of the men who were at the camp, you arrived there. You found a bunch of other prisoners there. All Americans or different nationalities?

E: All Americans.

T: And was everyone doing the same work, Earle, or were there different work details?

E: There were a few that had different ones, but for the most part we were digging air raid shelters.

T: It sounds like an enormous construction project then, with a lot of guys working on it.

E: Oh, yes. Yes.

T: How many hours a day did you work?

E: We put in some long days. We'd leave at daybreak in the morning and come back when it was getting dark.

T: And you were there from October to April, so some of those days were longer than others and some were shorter.

E: Yes.

**(1, B, 439)**

T: How far from the camp location to your work site?

E: I would guess a mile or mile and a half.

T: Now were you forced to march through town to get to the work location or did you manage to avoid civilians on the daily route?

E: I would say for the most part it was rather isolated there.

T: So you didn't come into contact with German civilians.

E: A few. Yes.

T: Did you have any repeat of the stone throwing incident that you had at Trier any time in Augsburg?

E: No. Never.

T: So that was a once and done deal.

E: There were a few times after an air raid when a few of us would go out and dig bodies out of the ruins, and at that time they looked pretty belligerent and they called us names and things but they never, ever threw stones at us or anything because the guards were always there watching. Without them it might have been a different story, but they had a lot of respect for the military and they didn't dare challenge them at all.

T: So ironically enough the German military was there perhaps protecting you from the German civilians.

E: Yes.

T: Very interesting.

E: Yes.

T: Did you sense that even then? That you could tell that it might have been a different equation had those soldiers not been there.

E: Oh, definitely (*with emphasis*). Yes. At least temporarily. A few days after the bombing raids people seemed to settle down and kind of accepted things for what they were. I wondered many times, had that been in this country [the USA] would the situation have been the same. Would the civilians have massacred you or what.

T: Yes. How did you answer that question? Because it's an interesting one.

E: I think it would have been different. There, you see, the people were so regimented they didn't dare challenge the military. Here it's a different story. In fact, with a lot of enlisted men in the service, they had very little respect for officers. That's not the way it should be. But that's our way of life.

T: Yes, it is. For better or for worse.

E: You challenge authority.

T: That's the American model I think.

E: Yes. That's about it.

T: Yes. How many air raids do you recall at Augsburg? Were they a frequent occurrence after a while?

E: Oh, yes. Definitely. Yes. The Americans would bomb during the day and the British at night. The guards would come in and roust us out of our bunks in the middle of the night and we'd grab what few clothes we had and take off on the run. Now this was in the wintertime. It was pretty cold out there. So we would run. I would guess it's probably a mile to a big civilian air raid shelter. We'd get in there until the bombing was over, and then they'd march us back to the barracks again. But that happened quite often.

T: Were you sharing air raid shelter space then with German civilians?

E: Yes.

**(1, B, 472)**

T: Were there ever any difficulties with that equation?

E: Never.

T: I take it the guards were there with you.

E: Yes.

T: You mentioned in the air raids too that in the aftermath of those that your job, at least once you mentioned, was to clear rubble or clear bodies out of rubble?

E: Yes.

T: Can you talk about that? That sounds a bit much.

E: In what respect?

T: First, as you mentioned, I was thinking specifically about having the living German civilians there as you're doing this kind of work and that might be uncomfortable, but just was there any kind of shock with having to clear corpses out of rubble?

E: It wasn't that bad. We realized what the Germans were going through and since there was a lack of able-bodied men, you know most of the able-bodied men were in the service. So they didn't have many people to help with these things so they called on us. I recall about three times that we did that.

T: As you saw the town—I mean Augsburg is not a big city, but it's taken bomb damage and people are being killed. Did you find yourself at all empathizing for the German civilians there?

E: Yes, I did.

T: Did that bother you at all that in a sense and this is supposed to be the enemy and yet you were feeling kind of bad for them?

E: No. Didn't bother me at all.

T: It's the civilians really that often suffer in wartime.

E: Yes.

T: As opposed to the soldiers.

E: No. I can honestly say that I met a lot of nice people over in Germany.

T: During your time there.

E: Yes. Yes. Even though I was a prisoner. They, for the most part, they treated us pretty well.

T: Can you give an example of that? I mean of a person that you might have met or somebody that you felt fairly decent about?

E: When I was in Alencon I don't know whatever happened, what caused it to come about, but one day I went with one guard and we went to a warehouse. I was doing some work there. I don't recall what it was. But anyway, this guard's name was Heidrich, and typical German. He carried like a briefcase with him. They all carried that and they had a piece of bread, probably half a loaf of bread and some things like that in there and some cheese probably, and so anyway, it came lunch time so he invited me to sit down with him and he shared his bread with me, and I could understand a little bit. He could talk a little bit, so I could understand him. He

would say a few words in English, and then he would say some words in German. But I could gather from what he was trying to tell me that he had a brother that looked very much like me and his brother was killed on the Russian front. So he kind of took a liking to me. He was a very, very compassionate man. I would say he was probably in his fifties.

T: So just the two of you sitting there. I mean during this conversation. What had you been taught about the Germans before you got overseas? In Army training or even when you were still a civilian. Had you sort of been taught to think that the Germans were a certain kind of people?

**(1, B, 516)**

E: Not necessarily. No. The only thing that I ever heard much about them was when we were getting ready to go into combat. They said this would be a piece of cake, because most of the German troops over there where we were going were what they called static troops. They were old men and young boys. It was anything but (*chuckles*).

T: So you weren't prepared for what you found.

E: I guess we were partly, but I kind of learned by that time not to take anything at face value (*chuckles*).

T: So it's one of the lessons you learned out of the service.

E: You bet.

T: So you hadn't been given any kind of what you might call indoctrination that the Germans were a certain kind of people or to create in your mind certain kind of image that they were...

E: No.

T: Horrible culture or anything.

E: No.

T: Did you meet people in Augsburg? Any German civilians or military people while you were in Augsburg that impressed you as being okay people?

E: Yes. I met a couple there. One was when I worked in this factory unloading this cloth material into the warehouse. There was an old fellow there. A civilian. His name was Purcell Banal. I got to be pretty friendly with him. Then there was another older fellow there. We called him Pop. He was another civilian. He was pretty decent to us too.

T: So you've met some decent Germans. On the other hand, were there Germans that you would have preferred not to see again?

E: Yes (*chuckles*). Yes. There were a couple of SS officers that I would have preferred not to see again.

T: Did you see SS at your camp there in Augsburg on any regular basis?

E: Not on a regular basis. No. But at one time, I was telling you about, when we were hauling this sand out of these air raid shelters with the little cars. We had a winch there that we used to pull those things up the incline and then out to dump the sand. Anyway, these old cables were all rusty and everything, and one time we brought the car up and the cable got across the railroad track there and the car ran over it and it cut the cable. The Germans called that sabotage, and they were going to shoot the four of us. There were four of us in the one crew there, and they were going to shoot us because that was sabotage, they said.

T: You're still sitting here, so obviously that wasn't the outcome, but what happened there?

E: They called us on the carpet. This SS officer stood right there and yelled at us and he said we were going to be shot. Of course what could we do? But evidently we didn't.

T: No kidding. Yes. We're still talking. Now among the guards that you had there, these mostly younger, middle age, older men?

E: Most of them were older. We had one, the corporal who was in charge of the compound there was, I suppose, probably in his thirties. The rest of them, for the most part, were older guys. But we had one young soldier that came in there. We called him Africa. Not knowing his real name, we called him Africa because he had been in the Afrika Corps in Rommel's force over in Africa, and he was wounded and sent back to Germany to the hospital. While he was recuperating then they put him in there as a guard.

T: Right.

**(1, B, 560)**

E: He was only about eighteen years old. One of the finest people I've ever met.

T: What made him a good person, Earle?

E: Yes.

T: What made him a good person?

E: I'll tell you, mainly because he saved our lives. We were working on this air raid shelter and right next to this thing was a kind of a rooming house, and they had a little bar in there. We'd go in there and have our piece of bread in the morning and the afternoon, and we had some of this German nonalcoholic beer, and there was an old Dutch lady who was a displaced person that was kind of running this thing. Every once in a while after we got acquainted with her, she'd tell us some of the things that were going on in the war. Finally after quite a while she got to trust us, so she told us she had a radio built into that bar and she was getting the BBC news.

So one day we went in there, and the guards always stayed outside. We went in there one day and we told one of the fellows, okay, now you watch the window to see that the guard doesn't come in here without us knowing about it. This one fellow that was supposed to be guarding the window, he got to listening to the news there and he got real interested and wasn't doing his job. All of a sudden the door opened and here's this young soldier, and he could hear what was going on and everything and he could see us there. He didn't say a word. He just closed the door and walked away. And he never said a word about it. But I'll tell you, he had all the cigarettes he wanted and all the chocolate bars and everything else.

T: He had you dead to rights if he wanted.

E: That's right. He could have shot all of us right there and been justified in doing it. Anyway, we got pretty friendly with him and although we did it kind of on the sly, you know, because we didn't want the other Germans there to know about it. He was always worried about when he was called back to the fighting that he was going to be going to the Russian front.

T: So he had his own worries.

E: He came in one night and he was all smiles. He said no, he said, I'm going to the American front. So we all wrote a letter and we said you take this with you and the first chance you get you surrender and you give them that letter to whoever captures you. And we loaded him down with chocolate bars and cigarettes and off he went. I never heard another thing about him.

T: It's almost like you're sending off one of your own.

E: Yes.

T: That's very interesting. For people like that, were there German guards who you might call abusive or not so good?

E: For the most part no. For the most part they did their job and they were kind of grumpy at times but no, I can't say they were really that abusive.

T: You mentioned getting the news here a moment ago from this radio. How were you able to outside of that or were you able to keep in touch at all with how the war was going?

E: The only thing you had was the German newspapers and, of course, they were all slanted. The Germans were winning all the battles and everything and the war was going their way. So that was the only thing we had outside of that news we got from the BBC.

T: Were there, in absence of news, was that replaced by rumors?

E: Oh, yes. Sure. Sure.

T: Any of those rumors turn out to be true?

E: Very few.

T: Let me ask you. You heard the rumors and you must have a bunch of ones that were wrong. Did you still listen to them?

E: Sure. Oh, yes.

**(1, B, 609)**

T: How come?

E: Any news. Rumors or not. You always listen to.

T: Otherwise you get nothing, right?

E: Yes. You keep hoping that some of it was going to be true anyway.

T: Were you a fairly optimistic person who kind of kept their mood up while you were a POW?

E: I tried to be.

T: How did you do that?

E: I think two things that kept me going mainly was my faith in God and my faith that we were going to win this war. I had no doubt about that whatsoever. I think this is what sustained me more than anything else.

T: You mentioned faith first. Let me ask you. How would you describe yourself in religious terms when you went overseas? In other words, were you a religious person before you were a POW?

E: I would say I wasn't that good a Christian. However, your faith improves when you get in a situation like I was in. Many times there I'll tell you, you rely on something. And there's only one thing to rely on that counts and that's faith.

T: And let me conclude that thought by asking how much of that change would you say you kept after you got back to civilian life?

E: Most of it.

T: So you would say it sounds like that your faith was markedly changed by your POW experience.

E: Yes. Definitely.

T: Other than optimism and this kind of thing, how did you observe the prisoners around there at Augsburg getting along? Was there a fair sense of camaraderie or were there frictions between prisoners?

E: No. I never noticed any friction. Oh, there would be a little once in a while between individuals, but for the most part, no. It was a sense of camaraderie.

T: Does that mean that you as a POW could depend on or trust the other POWs around you?

E: For the most part, yes. There were a few I wouldn't trust too far, but for the most part, yes.

T: Does that include with things like food or other valuables like cigarettes? That you could leave laying around or was that not wise?

E: Well, there was a time when food was something you didn't leave lay around, because starvation is something that tempts people to do things they wouldn't normally do. Of course when we got to Augsburg we were getting, not right away, but we started getting Red Cross parcels, and so that kind of took care of the chances of somebody getting greedy and stealing from you.

T: Did prisoners trade among themselves for things?

E: Sure.

T: What was a frequently traded for item from your memory?

E: Bread was an important thing. But mainly we traded back and forth. Some of the guys didn't smoke. So they would trade their cigarettes for probably a chocolate bar or for maybe some instant coffee or whatever.

But then we traded with the Germans too. And bread was one of the all-important items. The Germans had what they called a *Weissbrot*, or a white bread. That was just delicious. And we would trade with the Germans and get things like that.

**(1, B, 661)**

T: What did the Germans want from you?

E: Cigarettes mainly. Cigarettes, chocolate bars. Those were big. Soap. You don't think of soap as being very important, but it was to them.

T: So it came in the Red Cross packages.

E: Yes. We got one bar of soap in there.

T: Was there a going rate for things? Like if you wanted a bread you knew what it would cost, or did that vary a lot?

E: I think for the most part it was pretty standard. We kind of tried to keep it that way. Of course some guys will get carried away. In order to get something they will pay more than the rest of the guys would. But for the most part it was pretty standard.

T: So if you wanted something you knew what you had to trade to get it.

E: That's about it.

T: Now could you approach any of these Germans for trading or were there only certain ones you could pick out?

E: You didn't generally make any overtures there until you got to know them a little bit. But just to walk up to somebody and say would you like some cigarettes? I'll trade you cigarettes for bread or whatever. After you got to know them a little bit, then you felt a little more confident in doing that.

T: So you'd want to strike up a conversation or just sort of talk to them a little bit to see if they might be willing?

E: Yes.

T: Now were you one of the talkers or were you one of those who kind of benefited from the trading? Did you talk to the German guards yourself in other words?

E: I didn't talk to the guards too much.

T: Could you trade with German civilians too?

E: Yes. Sure.

T: Would you say that more of the trading was done with civilians or with...

E: Yes. Most generally, yes.

T: Where did you encounter them? Outside the camp working?

E: Yes. They never came into the camp.

T: One thing about being in a camp like this I'm wondering. Did the subject or the theme of escape ever cross your mind or those around you?

E: I don't think I ever heard any talk about escape. For one thing we had a lot against us, because we only had a couple of fellows there that could speak German well enough so they could have gotten by with it. And then after we got the Red Cross parcels we would have had enough food so we could have had a little stash put away so that we could use. But there were so many things against us that I don't think that there was much talk about escape.

T: Did you feel guilty at all not wanting to escape or not thinking about it?

E: I guess so. Yes. Yes. Not as much about that as I did feel guilty about being taken prisoner in the first place.

T: Explain that. I'm not quite sure what you mean.

**(1, B, 710)**

E: I guess it isn't that easy to explain, but you know when you think about your buddies that were killed and those around you that were taken prisoner and you feel guilty because you feel you weren't doing your job. A lot of other guys were out there fighting, and here you were a prisoner and couldn't do a thing about it. You felt guilty in that respect.

T: Have you wrestled with that since the war as well?

E: Yes.

T: How have your feelings developed on that question over the years?

E: Oh (*sighs*). I can't really answer that. It's something I guess I'll deal with until the day I die. The guilt is still there. I know our doctor at St. Cloud VA talks about that.

We don't linger on that type of thing. We talk about other things. I guess the guilt feeling is something that we probably all have, and will retain.

T: Were you surprised when you learned maybe through the VA or other conversations that other POWs have the same feeling?

E: No. I wasn't surprised.

T: And you mentioned when you have conversations that it isn't something that comes up, that feeling.

E: No. No. It's there, but you don't talk about it that much.

T: When you got back to the States and were discharged as an ex-POW was that something that you preferred not to talk about with people?

E: Yes.

T: Was that coworkers or would that be your family as well?

E: I didn't talk about it with anybody for a long time. I distinctly remember when my youngest son was born, our neighbors, who belong to our church, they were very church-going people and we thought we wanted sponsors for him so they agreed to be sponsors for him. After the baptism then I took them out for lunch and he asked me a few questions about it, and before that I'd never talked about my experience at all. I told him about this... [the boxcar story]

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

T: When you told this guy about the train ride he literally didn't believe you?

E: That's right. He called me a liar.

T: How did you respond to that?

E: I didn't say anything at all. I just told him, I said I'm living proof that you can exist after going through something like that. You survived. It wasn't easy but I just let it go at that. I didn't say any more about it.

T: What year was that, Earle?

E: Oh, let's see. He was born in '56. It must have been about '56 sometime.

T: You mentioned that talking about it wasn't something you had done a whole lot of even before that time.

E: No. No. And afterwards it was even worse.

T: Yes. Did you really kind of clam up after that kind of an experience?

E: Yes. It wasn't until, oh gosh, it must have been about 1981 or '82 that we had a fellow, an engineer at the company where I worked, that was quite a historian. He was a World War II veteran too. A wounded veteran. Very intelligent guy. Very compassionate guy. He started one day making up a history of the veterans that worked with the power company. He came to me and he wanted me to tell him my story, and I said, no I won't do it. He kept after me and after me, and finally he came around one day and he said, "I've got everybody except you. Now," he said, "I think you better reconsider." So I finally told him. I said, "Against my better judgment I'll give you just a few minutes." We sat down and started talking, and my God, it just like opened the floodgates. It just poured out. They made a tape of it. I'm not as reluctant to talk about it anymore as I was then.

**(2, A, 20)**

T: That's clear. You're talking to me on the phone now. Yes.

E: Yes. But for a long time there I wouldn't talk about it at all.

T: When you started to talk to this guy, he's from Ottetail Power Company I take it?

E: Yes.

T: Were you surprised what was coming out of your mouth?

E: Yes. I was. Really. I really was.

T: When you were talking, did you find it easier to talk about your combat experience than your POW experience?

E: About the same.

T: And is that the same now? I mean I didn't ask you really anything about your combat experience. Is that something you can also talk about more easily these days?

E: Yes.

T: Now you've been a member of the American ex-POWs for a while too.

E: Yes.

T: When did you first join that organization?

E: I would guess somewhere around the early '80s.

T: About the same time as this interview with this guy?

E: Yes.

T: How has membership in that organization helped you?

E: I think it gives you a sense of camaraderie for one thing and it keeps you up to date on legislation and so forth. I'm a past State Commander of the Minnesota ex-POWs.

T: I didn't know that.

E: Yes. I think primarily those are the two things I think that interest me most is the fact that they keep you updated on all of the legislation that affects ex-POWs and the camaraderie that you have with people that have gone through the same thing you've gone through.

T: So a sense of having someone that understands where you're coming from.

E: That's right.

T: This talking to people. Your first wife died thirteen years ago now, but what year were you two married?

E: 1947.

T: When you were married, was your wife curious to know about your POW experience?

E: No.

T: Did she know you were one?

E: Oh, yes.

T: Did she not ask or did you make it clear you didn't want to talk about it?

E: I think it was a little of both.

T: And with your kids as they were growing up? I mean kids ask questions.

E: Very few questions.

**(2, A, 43)**

T: Was that because Dad made it clear he didn't want to talk about it?

E: I think that was probably part of it. Yes.

T: Where is that with your three remaining children now? Do they feel comfortable asking you about it and do you feel comfortable talking about it with them?

E: I feel comfortable talking about it with them but they ask very few questions about it.

T: Have they over the years or don't they seem to have a curiosity about that?

E: They don't seem to have the curiosity. They have their own lives to live.

T: Yes. Sure. So you have to talk to historians like me I guess.

E: Yes.

T: Let me go back to Augsburg. That was the place you were liberated from.

E: No. No.

T: I'm sorry. You're right. It was the camp you spent the most time in, but you weren't liberated from there.

E: Yes.

T: About Augsburg, what would you say of the six months there if you think about it in the big picture, what was the most difficult thing for you at that camp?

E: I don't know. There were a lot of things that were difficult. I think probably the living conditions. Until we got the Red Cross parcels, the lack of food. We didn't have any changes of clothing. I was one of the more fortunate ones, because when we went into combat we wore our winter uniforms, our OD uniforms. Then over the top of that we wore what they called a gas impregnated jumpsuit. So I had some extra clothes there. The problem I had mainly was that you didn't have any place to wash these things. The water was ice cold and there was no soap or anything to wash them until we got our Red Cross parcels. Then we had a little soap. But we tried to conserve on that for trading purposes and for just our own cleanliness. I know with my jump boots, they just literally fell right off my feet.

T: Were you bothered by fleas or other bugs and things?

E: Lice. Yes.

T: Body lice?

E: Yes.

T: Was that at Augsburg primarily, or other places too?

E: Augsburg primarily.

T: The last place you went was part of timber cutting commando.

E: Yes.

T: How long did that last exactly, Earle?

E: Well, it lasted from when we went out there in April until we were liberated.

T: Less than a month it sounds like.

E: Yes. Yes.

**(2, A, 69)**

T: But close to that.

E: Yes.

T: How close to the city of Augsburg was this?

E: I don't really know. I would guess probably within forty miles or so.

T: Did you walk out there?

E: Now you've got me. I don't even remember that. I remember being there, but I don't remember how we got there.

T: All right.

E: I think we went out there on trucks, but I'm not sure.

T: And you mentioned about twenty men.

E: Yes.

T: Was it the same twenty men and you stayed out there? You didn't go back to Augsburg anymore?

E: No. No. We stayed right there. We had a barracks there and a compound.

T: Were there other men already there or just you twenty?

E: No. Just the twenty of us.

T: And what was the work there exactly?

E: Our job was to cut timber. We cut these big pine trees and then we cut them into cordwood length and we stacked it. Then we had to cover up the stump of the tree and we had to plant another little evergreen right next to it. The civilians from the village came up there and they picked up all the little twigs and everything and put them in a bag and then hauled them home. It was, I think, probably the most well-remembered time of my POW experience was being out there in the woods. We had some guards that were very good and we got along pretty well out there.

T: Was the work more difficult than Augsburg or not really?

E: I didn't think so. Of course, when you're doing something you kind of like you know it isn't quite as bad.

T: Yes. That's the truth. Did they feed you any better out there?

E: No. Well, you see, the thing is that a lot of people think that the Germans had a lot of food and they wouldn't give us any, but that was far from the truth because the Germans didn't have an awful lot themselves.

T: Right.

E: So we had about the same rations that we would have got from the Germans in Augsburg. But we had our Red Cross parcels. That was what kept us going.

T: You've mentioned that more than once that the regular Red Cross parcels were what kept you going.

E: Yes.

T: The guards out here at the timber cutting commando, the same people from Augsburg or new faces to you?

E: There were some new ones. I think there were a couple from Augsburg. The rest were new.

T: Was it evident to you when you went out there that the war was winding down or were you really unaware of how things were going by that time?

E: We were pretty much unaware of how it was going. We kind of suspected from the few chances that we had to listen to the BBC that things were winding down, but I mean it wasn't really something that was that apparent at that time.

T: You were out in the sticks.

E: Yes.

T: Literally the sticks here.

E: Yes. You're right.

T: Describe then the liberation, because it was the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored I think you said.

E: Yes. The 14<sup>th</sup> Armored.

T: Did they literally just show up one day?

E: Yes. We got up one morning, and the gates were open. The guards were gone. For a few days before that the Germans were retreating like crazy on the road that ran through that village. They were practically running over each other trying to get back away from the front. Anyway, we got up the morning we were liberated, and the gates were open. The guards were gone. We started hearing some shelling and so we went out and started looking around. We were kind of afraid that—there was a big barn right close to our compound there, and we thought that maybe they might start shelling that thing and probably get off course a little bit there and probably shell our compound. So three of us went out to see if we could meet up with the reconnaissance. So we went out there and we met them. The first guy I saw was a guy I went through Basic Training with, a fellow from Duluth.

T: No kidding!

E: Yes. His name was Rossberg. He still remembers what I said to him at that time. I came up there and I saw him and I said, "Rossberg, you SOB, what are you doing here?" *(laughs)*

T: That must have been a bizarre situation, to see a face you recognized.

E: He still laughs about that. He laughs about that. He went through Basic Training with me. We left from Fort Snelling and went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for Basic Training. Rossberg was always kind of a wheeler-dealer. He was always looking for an advantage someplace. When we finished Basic Training they said well, you have a choice now. Either go into gliders or go into paratroops. And he said, "I don't want either one." So he moved out of there and I didn't see him again until I met him over in Germany.

T: With the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored.

E: Yes.

T: That is one of those stories you can write home about. Now you ended up at Camp Lucky Strike.

E: Yes.

T: How did they get you there? Were you flown out of where to get...

E: Mannheim.

T: Out of Mannheim?

E: Yes.

T: And you stayed there about a week too, you said.

E: Yes. Right.

T: Was the Army giving you any kind of debriefing? Sort of wanting the details of your POW experience at all?

E: No.

T: Ask any questions about where you'd been and all that kind of stuff?

E: No.

**(2, A, 129)**

T: Did they ever do that?

E: Not that I can recall any way. No.

T: So what you got was a once over physical at least and some food?

E: (*chuckles*) Let's put it this way. They took us by truck. When we were repatriated they took us by truck to Mannheim, and my buddy Rossberg went along and he got a few days of leave so we spent some time together. I remember the first meal I had. I went into the mess hall and they had pork chops and mashed potatoes and green beans. And that was my favorite food while I was in the service. So I went over into the line and they heaped my mess kit up. I started to eat and I'd no more take about three bites and I got through the door and it all come up, and come back and eat

some more just like I did at Trier with that Red Cross parcel. Anyway, that was about the way it went for me all the time I was at Mannheim. Nobody ever said anything about getting me any kind of a diet or anything.

Then they flew us from there to Lucky Strike, and while I was at Lucky Strike I went up to see a doctor and he asked, "How are things going?" I said, "Not too bad I guess, but I can't keep any food down." And he said, "What are they feeding you?" I said, "I've been eating pork chops, and mashed potatoes and gravy, and green beans." He said, "Good God, man. Don't you know how big your stomach is? About the size of a teacup. No wonder you can't handle all that food." So he put me on a bland diet. I wish I had kept my mouth shut.

T: And that was the first real medical advice that you had.

E: That's right.

T: When you got back to the States, did you have any kind of medical care here before you were discharged?

E: No. I went to Fort Snelling. I wanted to go to the hospital then and they said no way, you're going home on a sixty day furlough. So I went home and I encountered the same thing. My mother would cook all my favorite foods and I'd eat a couple bites and it would all come up. The only thing I could keep down was whiskey. I drank about a fifth of whiskey a day.

T: You're joking?!

E: No. It's all I could get by on.

T: That's a lot of alcohol.

E: I was about half drunk all the time.

T: Was that amount of drinking, politely put, was that new for you?

E: Yes. Yes. It was.

T: Something you picked up in the service or after?

E: No. No. I never did drink much.

T: How do you explain that then?

E: Well, you have to have something on your stomach to keep you going. There is some nutritional value in liquor I guess. But I couldn't keep food down. That was the only thing that would stay down was liquor.

T: How long did that last? The food thing.

E: Oh, gosh. It must have been a month and a half or so at least before I could keep any solid food of any amount down.

T: So you put on weight I guess only slowly then.

E: Yes. Very slowly.

**(2, A, 166)**

T: When you got out of the service had this kind of stabilized? The weight and the food thing?

E: Yes.

T: That was November.

E: Yes.

T: You came back to Crookston after you got out of the service.

E: Yes.

T: What kind of issues did you have, Earle, with dreams or nightmares about your POW time?

E: Boy! Every night.

T: Now was it more about your combat experience or your POW time?

E: Both. I think probably my POW experience was equally as bad as the combat experience.

T: Were there, of those dreams, were there certain images that appeared more than once or recurred?

E: Yes. The experience I told you with the SS officer, threatening to shoot us because of sabotage.

T: Yes.

E: That kept going through my dreams. I still dream about that once in a while. But gradually the dreams disappeared. I would say by probably the middle '80s I was still having some but not like I had prior to that. But then after my wife died they started coming back again.

T: Do you still have these occasionally?

E: Oh, yes. Yes. I have night sweats and nightmares. They vary though. It's not all about that but it varies. And it's not as often. It's, oh, sometimes two, three times a week.

T: Has the VA been able to help you at all as far as addressing the dreams side of it?

E: I belong to this group down at St. Cloud VA.

T: Jim Torella?

E: Dr. Torella has... We get down there in the group and we start talking about our experiences and things. He's done a lot I think as far as easing the pain for us.

T: How long have you been down there in that group?

E: I think it's six years.

T: And is that a weekly or bi-weekly or monthly?

E: Weekly.

T: Weekly.

E: Yes.

T: Do you see a lot of the same guys there when you go?

E: Oh, yes. Yes. This is my family down there. Yes.

T: And it's just you guys and Dr. Torella?

E: Yes.

T: The guys you see is it guys from Europe only or Pacific too?

E: World War II.

T: Is it guys from the Pacific or Europe?

E: Both.

**(2, A, 197)**

T: Both. When you encounter guys from the Pacific, you have different experiences in many ways although you were both POWs. How easy is it for you to share experiences or to understand the other person? Someone from the Pacific.

E: It's not hard to understand. One of my best friends is an ex-POW of the Japanese. He was captured on Bataan and went through the Death March and all that. In fact he's going down to Washington now to represent the State of Minnesota.

T: No kidding.

E: For the Memorial. Yes.

T: That's like in a couple days here.

E: Yes.

T: That's good. So you find it easy to sort of talk to POWs of the Japanese because you have enough in common.

E: Oh, yes. Sure. One of the things that I found was a little disconcerting was that down at St. Cloud they refused to give us mileage for traveling down there because they said we could go to the group in Fargo. But Fargo doesn't have anything to offer really. Then the Fargo VA started a group here. And they said why don't you come here? So we said fine, we'd go down there. So we went down there one day. This friend of mine that goes with me to St. Cloud. When we got there, there were about I suppose probably a dozen or so guys there but they were all Vietnam vets.

T: Oh.

E: We just felt like fish out of water.

T: In what way? I mean here you're both POWs, right?

E: They weren't POWs. These guys were the PTSD.

T: I see. They didn't share your POW experience.

E: Yes. That's right. I don't think any of those guys were ex-POWs. PTSD is, well that's something. That goes with all veterans to a certain extent. But these guys were all Vietnam vets and I don't think any of them was a POW, so it just didn't kind of fit in with us. So we didn't go back anymore.

T: So you go to the group, Dr. Torella's group, that you had always gone to.

E: But not as often. We used to go down every Tuesday but now we go about once a month.

T: Is that because it's a hassle to go down there or because you don't feel you need it that often?

E: No. It's because it's pretty expensive to go down there, for one thing. That's 250 miles of driving. Then this fellow that I go with, well, I was going with two other guys but then one of them died last November and the other one now he fell down and broke his hip and he's been hobbling around with a cane for the last year, and his wife has been having a lot of health problems and he doesn't like to leave her. So it's kind of tough for me driving down there alone.

T: That's an awful long way to go down and back.

E: Yes, it is. For an hour session.

T: That's right. You spend three times as much time in the car.

E: Yes.

T: Let me ask you. One of the last questions I've got is we've had a pretty open discussion and I thank you for it. If I'd have come to you twenty years ago, ten years ago and asked you for the same kind of interview, what might you have said to me?

**(2, A, 241)**

E: I think ten years ago probably about the same thing I'm telling you now. Twenty years ago, no.

T: So that pivotal decade of the 1980s for you of opening up and the VA...

E: Yes. Yes. Yes.

T: Well, the last question I have is this, Earle. When you think of your POW experience, what would you identify as the most important way that that experience changed you as a person do you think?

E: I think it's probably made me more, how should I say it? Compassionate? I think when you stop thinking about your own problems and you start thinking about other peoples' problems. I think that's probably one of the biggest things.

*(break in the interview)*

T: When you got back from the service millions of guys were getting out of uniform. Do you feel that people noticed you or offered help in kind of adjusting to civilian life from your combat and POW experiences?

E: Very few.

T: Family or coworkers or even the VA for all that matters.

E: No. The VA I had nothing to do with at all. In fact in 1947 the VFW filed a claim for me about my hearing and I went down there to Fargo VA and about a month later I got the nastiest letter from them. Really I think what it said in essence is that who do you think you are that you determined that you are eligible for any compensation. That was the kind of answer I got from them.

T: Wow! Basically told you to get lost.

E: Yes.

T: Would you say that you had in any way a difficult time adjusting to civilian life again? In the first couple years.

E: In some ways. Yes. Yes. I found that I guess in raising a family and trying to—I find this hard to explain. I think my family suffered for my experience. I mean there were a lot of things I should have done differently. I look back at it now and I just shake my head and I say, well, a lot of this is my fault. That's water over the dam.

T: Do things like that still bother you or have you found a way to get past that?

E: No. It still bothers me.

T: It's tough. Those things we can't correct.

E: Yes.

T: After the fact.

E: Yes. That's right.

T: By the time you started to work at the power company in 1948 would you say that you were better adjusted than you were in 1945 or '46?

E: No. No. It took a lot of years.

T: So your first wife obviously noticed the difficulties you had?

E: Oh, yes. Yes. It was a tough time for her and it was a tough time for my kids.

T: It's tough when you have to look back on things like that and we say we wish we would have done things differently.

E: Yes. Yes. I know.

T: I can sympathize and I've gone through nothing like you have. That's the last thing I wanted to ask you, Earle, and I wanted to again, on the record, thank you very much for your time this evening. You are extremely sharp with details and very open as far as your description of events and I thank you very much for it.

E: You're entirely welcome. My pleasure.

T: One thing, you will get in the mail from me or from someone in my office here a letter thanking you for your participation but then when we have this transcribed and we do transcribe all these, we will send a copy of that to you in the mail and you're welcome to copy that, distribute it or do what you like with it.

E: That would be fine. Thank you.

T: So thanks very much and if I can do anything else I think you have my number and please don't hesitate to call.

E: Thank you very much.

T: Thanks, Mr. Bombardier.

E: You're welcome.

**END OF INTERVIEW**