

Interviewee: Warren Claypool

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 1 April 2005

Location: Claypool residence, Bemidji, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, May 2005

Editing by: Thomas Saylor, June 2005

Warren Claypool was born 18 January 1919 on the family farm in Ottertail County, Minnesota, one of five children. He grew up on the farm and attended local schools.

Warren entered the US Army Air Corps in 1942, and was trained as an engineer/top turret gunner on B-17 Flying Fortress 4-engine heavy bombers. By late 1943 he was in England, part of the 526th Bomb Squadron, 379th Bomb Group, 8th Air Force. The 526th Squadron flew from Kimbolton, England.

Warren flew his first mission in October 1943, and continued to fly missions until his B-17 was shot down on 13 May 1944 over German-occupied Denmark, while on a mission to the northern German port city of Stettin. All nine crew members survived the crash, and were taken prisoner by the Germans.

As a POW, Warren was first taken to the Dulag Luft interrogation facility, then to Stalag Luft IV, located at Gross Tychow, in far northern Germany. With advancing Soviet forces nearby, the Germans evacuated Luft IV on 6 February 1945. Prisoners were then marched around Germany in small groups; Warren was not at another POW camp. This group of marching POWs was liberated on 26 April 1945 by the American 104th Infantry Division.

Warren spent a brief period at a US Army camp in France, then one in England, before being transported back to the United States. He spent some time recuperating from his months as a POW, then was discharged in late 1945.

Again a civilian, Warren returned to life as a farmer. He and his wife Brenda raised a family of eight children.



B-17 Flying Fortress bombers dropping bombs over Germany, 1944.

Source: 398th Bomb Group Association, <http://www.398th.org/> Last accessed 22 March 2016.

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

W = Warren Claypool

[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 1 April 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History project; my name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm speaking with Mr. Warren Claypool at his home in Bemidji, Minnesota. First, Mr. Claypool, on the tape now, thanks very much for being part of this project today.

Now, here's the background information. You were born on 18 January 1919 on the family farm, and that was in Ottertail County [Minnesota], right?

W: That's right.

T: And you've lived on farms your entire life.

W: I wouldn't live any place but.

T: You farmed until you went into service, and you went into service in 1942. By late 1943 you were in England flying with the 8th Air Force, 379th Bomb Group, 526th Bomb Squadron, and that squadron flew from Kimbolton, Station 117. You flew your first mission in October of 1943 and continued to fly missions throughout. I want to now go to 13 May 1944. On that day your life was going to change a little bit. Let me ask you first, was there anything different about that mission than all the other missions you had flown? And you had flown more than thirty.

W: Anything different about the mission I was shot down?

T: Right.

W: Yes. We went to briefing that morning and the engineers of all the crews were called into a room and said that you're going to [the city of] Posen, [present-day] Poland today. You can't possibly go there and back in ten hours and you'll only have gas for ten hours. You boys had better do something to get the planes back. That was the orders from the briefing. As it happened we didn't get to Posen. We got as far as [the German port city of] Stettin and we got shot up.

T: On the missions you flew, which was more of a danger, German planes or flak?

W: We were hit by a plane that day. We only had damage to the prop up on the number one engine. That's why there was a cloud of smoke in the air.

T: Was your plane not able to stay with the rest of the group?

W: No. It was partly the pilot's fault.

T: And what do you mean by that?

W: He lost his nerve about that. I'd never flown with him before.

T: What happened exactly from your perspective?

W: He pulled the engines too hard and burned them up. The other three engines. I had come back two or three times on two and three engines, but that man couldn't get us back.

T: So you think that another pilot may have got the plane back.

W: Yes. It's possible. I hate to say that, but it was true.

(1, A, 73)

T: Before we starting talking you mentioned that your plane made it all the way to Denmark before it crash landed.

W: Yes.

T: Were you aware, Mr. Claypool, that the plane wasn't going to get back to England?

W: As we were flying toward Denmark I could see the outline of Sweden under the right wingtip. As we got to this point in Denmark we took a vote by the crew, do we want to try the North Sea on the engines as they were or crash in Denmark. We decided to crash in Denmark, because in the North Sea even the warmest time of the year you won't stay alive twenty minutes in the water. It's that cold.

T: Was it possible to take the plane to Sweden?

W: It would have been.

T: Was that something that was discussed?

W: My crew, which I was only part of, always vowed we'd never go to Sweden under any circumstances.

T: Why is that?

W: The ones that went to Sweden were interned until they had a German crew interned and they sent them all back. And we had too many crews that had gone to Sweden to get out of combat. And we weren't going to be one of those crews.

T: So crews that went to Sweden, there was a kind of a...you didn't want to do that.

W: Yes. We always said we never would.

T: So for you, you'd rather crash and be a POW?

W: Yes. I think that most any man would.

T: Why do you say that?

W: Because of the fact that when you did come back early you had to face the boys and give an answer why you went to Sweden.

T: So you had to explain yourself.

W: Yes.

T: As the plane was flying and it was clear you wouldn't make it back, what's going through your mind?

W: To begin with, at the time we decided to crash, there wasn't any time for anything. But as we left the group going down, the big thought on my mind was that I'm going to walk away from this when we get to the ground. But my mother won't know I'm alive.

T: So thinking of your folks already.

W: Yes. And she didn't know I was alive until 11 July.

T: So it was almost two months before your mom found out.

W: Yes.

T: That must have been hard.

W: A ham radio operator in Pennsylvania called her and told her.

T: That's how she found out?

W: Yes. It was another month or two before the government told her [in a telegram]. The ham operator got the message. I've got a copy of it here.

(1, A, 108)

T: Talk about the crash landing of the plane, how that went.

W: We had been told, in fact, just what to do. The crew was always seated back between the bomb bay and the last waist in a crash position. I was engineer. I stayed with the pilot and copilot and I put the landing gear almost down, but when the wheels touched the ground I threw the switch and they came up in the plane and put it down on the belly. Now our biggest danger there was fire naturally. We lucked out—we didn't have any. Now we did crash in about a five acre field with a stone hedge all around it.

T: Can you estimate, as engineer, how fast that plane was going when it hit the ground?

W: Yes. I suppose our airspeed was down to about eighty miles an hour by then. We'd been flying the treetops for a long time.

T: When the plane hit the ground, does it stop suddenly or is it a fairly bumpy long ride?

W: It stopped quite suddenly once the wheels came up. The only man that got a scratch out of it was the bombardier, and he was naturally, an officer. He got up before the plane settled down and the post that held the ball turret cut the end of his finger, and that was the only scratch in the crew. There were nine of us on that crew that day.

T: So you walked away without a scratch.

W: Yes.

T: Now before this particular day, how much thought had you given to the idea that you might become a prisoner of war?

W: That I might become?

T: Yes. I mean, is that something that you had ever thought about?

W: Yes. I imagine I did, because of the fact that we already had twenty-eight thousand casualties in the 8th Air Force at the time I went down. So that it was a sure thing that you were going to get it sooner or later if you didn't quit. So I'm sure we thought about it but, well, your best friend lay dead and they took him back. They took him out of the plane and you forgot about him and went out the next morning and flew another mission. You couldn't stop and let those things worry you or you wouldn't have been any good to anybody.

T: Let me ask. How do you not think about things like that?

W: I think you get, let's call it a fear, takes over and makes you numb. The way you walk into it day after day knowing what may happen, but your buddies go. You go. I'll say this, that we never in all the flying had a plane from the 8th Air Force turn back, retreat. No matter how tough it was they kept going until they made the target.

T: Does that mean that flying missions for you, flying missions got easier as they went or harder?

W: Yes. Well, we were doing a job that had to be done and we finally got to the point where it didn't hurt any more. If your nerves didn't break, you kept doing it. They had a nice home that they sent a man to for a week or so if he went flak happy. That's what we called it. Which we had many of them that did. We had some seventeen year old boys that never spoke again after their first mission. From fright. Don't let any man tell you he wasn't afraid.

T: So you were afraid too.

W: Naturally (*chuckles*). The only thing is, being afraid makes you fight harder to stay alive you see.

T: Yes. Now when the plane crash landed in Denmark, how long was it before Germans came to get you?

W: You mean the ones that captured us?

T: Yes.

W: It was the occupation army of Denmark. The German army. And when the plane stopped sliding in this little field we came up against some trees and there was a big pile of dirt, and there was a German guard standing on that pile of dirt and down in the trees behind him was a Quonset hut full of German soldiers.

T: So you were captured, it sounds like, immediately.

W: Yes. If it had been anyplace but right there the Danes would have had us out and took us to Sweden. Then it would have been all right.

T: Why is that?

W: Because we didn't go on our own.

T: Let me ask you, you know, you'd been flying missions for six, seven months against the Germans. Now the Germans are face to face with you. I mean they're right in front of you, right?

W: You mean after being flying and be a guest of the Germans.

T: Now with German soldiers capturing you, they're right in front of you.

W: Yes. If we had been in Germany proper we would have been lucky to have them in front of us, because the civilians would have killed us. But we're in Denmark so we had no fear of civilians there.

T: What about the Germans? Did you have fear of them?

W: It's kind of amusing, if you'd like me to explain the capture.

T: Yes. Talk about the capture.

(1, A, 193)

W: In the German Army the guy with the most rank has the shortest gun, one about five inches long. The man, the guard in the dirt, had a rifle about seven feet long (*chuckles*). They came out of that building and started yelling, which the German is good at. All at once one of them was going to look in the plane and I told him in sign language it was going to go boom. We did have everything set to blow up that they might get to use, see? They yelled at each other for a few minutes and finally they decided maybe we had pistols on us. They started yelling *Pistole* and made us put our hands in the air.

Then they took us into this building and made us take all our clothes off and we stood there for two hours with our hands in the air, I suppose, with no clothes on. Now it took me a year or two to figure out why they took our clothes off. You see, at that time, a Jewish baby had to be circumcised. They were looking for Jews in the group. It was that simple. After all of this happened, now this was the German army up there. It wasn't the Gestapo. There never was anything wrong with the German army. They were just doing what they had to do. Then they took us on train from there.

T: Were you questioned at all when you were first captured?

W: Yes. This is all when I was first captured. But there was quite a little in the next two days, see?

T: So you were taken by train to Germany?

W: I was taken from Denmark to Frankfurt, Germany. Frankfurt on the Main.

T: Were you questioned before you were taken to Frankfurt?

W: No. We weren't even prisoners of war. They didn't even feed us.

T: What happened when you got to Frankfurt?

W: As the train came into the railroad station [at Frankfurt] there was a roof out over the platform. I see American boots hanging four feet off the platform. I jumped up and politely, very, very loudly told our guards—I knew I outranked that German guard, and the German army had respect for rank. And gave them orders to protect us and they did. They got us to a compound. The crew that had been brought in ahead of us, the civilians had took them and hung them there on the railroad platform. They were still hanging there.

T: So you saw these Americans hanging there.

W: Yes. I saw them before I got out of the train.

Then they had cement, small cement buildings, what must have been a playground for the college in Frankfurt. We were put in there under solitary confinement overnight and the next day we were interrogated.

T: Were you interrogated as a group or individually?

W: No. We were in solitary confinement all night. So we were interrogated individually and then my turn came. I was taken out of the cell by a German major. He must have been regular army. I was in cell 7, and he said seven to us is the same as thirteen is to you. An unlucky number, see? He got me into the little room. He says I want to tell you this morning your CO of the 26th squadron was promoted to major. You might like to know.

T: So he already knew that.

W: *(laughing)* Well, they knew everything. Then he looked at me and he checked my name, rank and serial number and he says, "I know there's no use of asking a man like you any questions so," he said, "I'll tell you." He says, "Your father was born in Pennsylvania, Armstrong County, in 1882. He has no birth certificate." Which he didn't. "Your mother was born in Ottertail County, Minnesota, in 1885." He named my two sisters, which was the oldest in the family and when they were born. My brother older than me and myself and my two younger brothers. They had all that information on us. Now the reason they did was they knew that the Air Force, if they didn't kill them, they'd have them as prisoners eventually. They thought they had something to work with, which I suppose they did. Why should they get all that?

(1, A, 275)

T: What kind of questions did they ask you at all, Mr. Claypool?

W: They wanted to know what we were doing and what we were going to bomb next and all that stuff. All that kind of questions. But he knew there was no use to ask me, so he didn't waste any time on me. One of the kids, if they were scared, why he'd try to pump it out of them. There was a lot of pressure put on you when you were captured...especially by the Japs.

T: Now how long was it before you were transported to Stalag Luft IV?

W: We were interrogated...I don't just remember. We got something to eat then. We must have. We were marched back down into the marshalling yards and put in a forty and eight boxcar. I think there was twenty to thirty of us.

T: All Americans?

W: Yes. They had accumulated in two days.

T: Now were you still together with members of your own crew?

W: Yes. The radioman was, the others I hadn't really met.

T: This was your first mission with them, that's right.

W: The radioman and I were together all the way through.

T: Now the boxcar ride, what do you remember about that?

W: We weren't overly crowded. It was nice. And it was early enough in the spring, so it wasn't too hot. Our biggest danger was to be bombed on the way by our own planes.

T: Did that happen to your train?

W: Not really. But I did walk that march rather than ride a train out because I didn't want to be caught in the train. Anyway, we went up to Berlin to get there. The outskirts of Berlin.

T: Could you see outside the boxcar?

W: Not very much. There were a few cracks. I knew where I was. Of course, there again, as we talked before, being a farm boy I had ways to know. I always knew where the sun was and I always knew which way we turned. You know.

T: You could keep track of which direction you were moving. You knew which direction you were moving.

W: If the sun's out, that tells you everything. If it's dark I always knew where the North Star was—if they were out. And of course when you're in the country you don't go by minutes, you go by miles and directions. North and south and east and west. That helps you quite a little. But anyway, we finally got up into Poland, to the camp.

T: Now how far from the train station to the camp?

W: I'd say that it was in the neighborhood of three miles. Now the train station was a building out in the forest. A brick building in the forest. Just a very small station.

T: Kind of in the middle of nowhere.

W: Yes. There's a name to it there. Grosstychow, or something they called it then. It's something different now.

(1, A, 340)

T: Yes. It's Polish now.

W: There's a lot of that changed when they got the Germans out of there.

T: Right. How did you get from the train station to the camp?

W: We walked. There was about twenty or so of us. We were the first men to Stalag Luft IV.

T: And you got there in late May or early June?

W: Yes. I think we must. I got to the train station in the middle of the day sometime, and we were marched out there, marched out to the camp. I remember very clear. If you're familiar with Bemidji a little bit, there's a lot of Jack pine forest and so on. It was a forest somewhat like that. As we walked out there, there was one short ways of trees, and the next short ways had been logged and the stumps and everything removed and the dirt worked up, and another short ways of timber. Then we came out into a big opening, and across this opening you could see three barracks and a barn and a kitchen. Now that's where we were put in the beginning. The book will tell you different, but that wasn't part of Stalag IV. It was used later, I think, to house the French internees they had doing their work.

T: How long did you stay at that place?

W: We got there—these numbers will be a little rough—I'd say on 13 May to Frankfurt. We lost two days getting up to the prison camp perhaps. What would that make it?

T: About the seventeenth?

W: Yes. Let's call it the seventeenth.

T: Did you move into barracks then?

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

W: These barracks were close to the ground. You could step through the window onto the ground. Which we started doing. I was with the room with a young man whose last name was Taggle. If you look in the history books, he was shot. He was in the room with me. The order came that we weren't supposed to step through the windows anymore. The order hadn't any more than come and he went outside and he wanted something that was in the room and he walked up to the window and put his hand on the window sill and I was on the inside with my hand on the window sill and the guard shot him. The bullet went in his left shoulder and clear through his body and lodged in the roof. Naturally it killed him dead. He was dead before he hit the ground. I have a picture of the Germans hauling him on a wagon out of there. Anyway, I took a quick look out the window, but I knew better than to get any part of me outside. Anyway, there again, they try to tell you in the history that he was shot.

We went east a short ways, took a left, and went north quite a ways and we were standing in front of the main gate at the camp.

T: So it was a little bit away from where the main camp was.

W: Yes. We didn't realize it was over there.

(1, B, 403)

T: In the main camp now, what were the barracks buildings like?

W: The barracks building in the new camp was up on stilts. You could walk under them without bending very much.

T: So they were high off the ground.

W: Yes.

T: Inside the building was it one big room or separate rooms?

W: They were separate rooms designed for, I believe, eight men.

T: In bunk beds?

W: Yes. Just boards nailed together on posts. Slats in them, with a little bit of straw in the mattress.

T: Now the room was designed for eight. How many men were actually in there?

W: At the time we left the camp we had over sixteen in the room.

T: So that's a lot of guys in a small room.

W: Yes. That was too many. There wasn't beds for everybody, but you don't run your buddies away.

T: Now as a noncommissioned officer, a tech sergeant, you had no work details, right?

W: We were noncommissioned officers, yes. No work details, which was probably the worst thing that could happen to you.

T: Explain what you mean.

W: Well, if you have gone to work you'd have had something to think about besides the prison life.

T: So you were bored.

W: Well, anxiety is what got you in the prison camp. I put it this way, if the Germans said we were going to shoot you in the morning we'd have laid down and gone to sleep that night. But when you wonder, are they going to shoot us in the morning? That's anxiety (*chuckles*).

T: So it's the not knowing.

W: Yes. This we lived with. Now the camp, when you went out of the barracks—you want to carry on more in the barracks?

T: You tell me what you think is important about the barracks.

W: They were quite tight, so no light could show out when the doors were locked. There was a door to each room. It was built pretty much out of rough boards, but it was in the forest up there in Poland is I suppose why. The latrine was in one end of it and supposedly a wash room, but no water. The latrine had shades and a big vent that could be cleaned from outside. Otherwise it was one story up on the posts.

T: Did you have daily roll calls?

W: Yes. We had roll calls day and night. Anytime somebody got mad they had another roll call. If the count wasn't right you stood there until it was.

(1, B, 439)

T: And they had roll calls every day?

W: Yes. There was one every morning and one every night.

T: And what about food? What kind of food was provided?

W: In those first barracks we were in, all we got was dehydrated cabbage, and we never got Red Cross parcels until we got in the new camp. Then we never got a full parcel per man per week. We were lucky to get a half a parcel.

T: So you remember getting Red Cross parcels, but not often, and not your own.

W: We never got more at most than a half a parcel per week. The tin can food the Germans opened before they gave it to us. So it was made so you had to use it.

T: Right. Because it would spoil.

W: Yes.

T: You talked about no work details, and does that mean you were bored during the day?

W: Bored? I suppose it would have been, if you let it. You could still get to be that way.

T: What do you mean?

W: I was lucky. I can amuse myself all alone, wherever I was at. My buddies called me a loner. I spent my time through the day, when it was legal to go out—you couldn't have more than four men in a group or the guards would get excited. I spent my time in the yard picking up cigarette butts that came out of the food parcels, and prune pits. There would usually be some dried prunes or something that way. I'd pick them up and I'd split them open. I'd sell them back to the rest of them for food later on. They'd throw them away when they had plenty, but they'd give me their bread. We said, cover the food that the Germans gave us in the camp. They gave us some boiled potatoes now and again. Once in a great while we would get a little barley soup, and that was good. There might be some meat floating in it that didn't look the best, but it was good.

T: You learn to eat what they give you?

W: Yes. You had to. You knew you had to put it in your stomach to exist. But anyway, they gave us some bread every day and it was made about two-thirds sawdust instead of flour, but it was edible. It seemed like the old system would chew up anything and take it.

T: You eat what you have to, I suppose.

W: Yes. Yes. There again now, my mother said there isn't such a word as can't. I always remembered that. You can do it if you put your mind to it, you know.

Now when you got out of the barracks in the camp there was a very high, a ten foot high fence, and in from that fence thirty feet or so was posts with an inch square railing on them. Any time you put your hand on that railing the machine guns started firing.

T: And you knew that.

W: Yes. That's how close you could get to the fence. You knew better than to put your hand on that.

T: You know, you said a minute ago that you were kind of a loner.

W: Yes.

(1, B, 492)

T: Now most men have said they had a good friend or a couple good friends. Is that true for you too?

W: Everybody was as good as the next guy to me. I had favorites perhaps, and naturally I favored my radio operator because we were all the same family.

T: You had flown missions with him.

W: Yes. Well, he needed help too. He was an eighteen year old kid.

T: How could you help him?

W: We'll get to that when we get on the march. We could help him, I might say this now, by keeping a stiff upper lip. It was the same in the flying. If the old man had been scared and showed it, the kids would have all broke.

T: So you were setting an example?

W: Yes. The group in the room, I was chosen by the rest of them to be the room leader. I had the meetings with the Germans and answered to them what was happening in the room. Which I didn't mind at all.

T: How often did you meet with the Germans then?

W: You would be stationed to a German at least every day. During the time we were in the camp they could put in the old German soldiers from World War I to guard. They'd come in the room and talk. He sat in the room and he said, you know, we could take Churchill and Roosevelt and Hitler out and shoot them and we could all go home (*chuckles*). There was a lot of truth in it.

T: Now you were the room leader.

W: Yes.

T: And what special duties did you have as room leader?

W: It was my duty to be sure everyone in that room was out for roll call. If somebody was asleep and didn't hear the whistle, it was my duty [to see that] he was out of there. That was most of the duties. You had to keep peace within the room. I had a way to do it, but I won't tell you while we're on this recording. If you want to ask me later I will. That kind of thing has always come easy for me.

T: What things?

W: Well, that kind of responsibility.

T: Why is that?

W: Because to begin with, I was raised in the country without much, and taught, I guess, to take responsibility from the time I could walk. It makes a difference, you know. You bet it does. That's why our farm kids are lucky. They get responsibility young.

T: In the camp did you see that city kids had more problems?

W: Yes. Now the leader of Compound B was a miller, a Louisiana swamp rat right from the swamps, out of a shack down in Louisiana. He was the leader of our compound and he was a good one. He'd defy those Germans, and they had ten guns pointed at him threatening to shoot. He'd stand there and defy them, and he'd get away with it. Now there comes a day when you have to do that.

T: Let me ask about: in the camp what kind of information did you get, if any, about how the war was going?

(1, B, 541)

W: We managed somehow to get a little information to us from a radio of some kind. Those German guards would trade us most anything for American cigarettes.

T: And those came in the Red Cross parcels.

W: Yes. There was a couple packs in each parcel. But we didn't have many. But I never smoked one because it was too good to buy food with.

T: What could you get from the Germans for cigarettes?

W: Oh, well, a loaf of sawdust bread was always good. Later on I traded cigarettes for onions. That was on the march. We'll get to that when we get to the march.

T: Sure. In the camp do you remember Christmas 1944?

W: Yes, I do. This friend of mine over in Wisconsin—and I'll get to him later—Christmas Eve him and six other guys were brought into the prison camp. They'd been on the road for most of a week with no food. This was Christmas Eve. We had within the room, put away a little bit of what we got a hold of to have a little splurge on Christmas Day. Two of them had to come into our room and they were hungry. They got that food we'd saved for Christmas. Really, that's about what Christmas amounted to, is helping somebody.

T: Yes. Was there any special Christmas service or anything you remember?

W: There probably was in one of the barracks, but there again I'm a loner. I wasn't going to get caught in any crowd.

T: So you avoided crowds.

W: Well, they'd have a group go someplace in a room. If it was a German formation, all right, but there was always up against the guards. I'm going to keep a low profile and stay alive. That was my aim.

T: How do you keep a low profile in camp?

W: I just stay out of sight as much as possible. I guess that's what it would be.

T: The German guards. What kind of men were they?

W: To begin with we had some Gestapo and they weren't men, they were terrible. Later on when the war started going bad, they got put in the front and we got a bunch of old men. Old army men, and of course they were no different than we were. They were doing what their country demanded them to do. You see the Gestapo—Hitler's army was an army of its own, taken by kids and teaching them

what Hitler wanted them to know. They had to put those people out on the front. We could tell in the camp that they were losing the war because of that.

T: Did you get any other news about how the war was going?

(1, B, 592)

W: In the camp? Not really. You didn't know whether it was rumors and made up by somebody or not. But it seemed like there was a few things filtering in somehow. You see, in that group of prisoners there was a man from every trade in the life. There were radiomen. There was everything. They could take a piece of wood and a couple pieces of metal and make something work. It was way beyond my thoughts, because I wasn't schooled in that. But it's surprising what you got when you get a group like that together. One man in the room that I remember quite clearly was a great big guy from Massachusetts. He had been a milk delivery man in civilian life. He could pronounce and spell any word in the English language and give you the definition for it. When something that much comes out a man like he looked, you wonder, see? He liked sitting and that's what he did.

T: Another theme: How much warning did you have that the camp was to be evacuated?

W: About ten hours. That it's going to be evacuated.

T: Were there rumors before that?

W: Yes. The rumors was gunfire. You could hear the war.

T: Was that a good thing or a bad thing?

W: I was going to put it this way. To go on the march was a terrible thing, but it wasn't a bad thing to be liberated by the Russians either.

T: Let's talk about the march, which started with the camp evacuation on 6 February 1945. You had you say about ten hours warning.

W: Yes. But it may happen. We had time enough so we kind of put together little packsacks out of what we could get a hold of to carry stuff in. The Red Cross had managed to bring in some shoes and another blanket and overcoats which kept us alive. The overcoat and the blanket.

T: When you left the camp, Mr. Claypool, when you left, what did you have with you?

W: See the camp was evacuated. Most of my barracks went in the morning, at eight o'clock. There was a few of us that were held back and went with Compound C at six that night.

T: When you left the camp, what did you have with you?

(1, B, 640)

W: We had our blankets and an overcoat, and if you were lucky you got a pair of shoes. My radio operator had such big feet he had to cut a hole in the toe of [the shoe] so he could get them on his feet. But he walked in them. That night we left I'd say there was twelve inches of snow on the ground and the thermometer was below zero.

T: So it's not the best weather for marching.

W: No. I think of it every February.

T: What did you have? Did you have shoes? Did you have food?

W: I managed to have the GI issue shoes. I had the ones I had with me on the plane. I could wear them on the plane because I was up front where I wouldn't freeze. I know when I walked through that gate by being a northern boy I had to keep my feet as dry as possible and that you don't do in leather shoes. I also knew that if I ever took them off I'd never get them back on again. I'd be walking barefoot, because there was swelling. I think my feet were froze completely for two or three days at a time. You got the shoes over them, you better leave them.

T: So you didn't take the shoes off.

W: I was used to frostbite from being a northern boy.

T: So you didn't take your shoes off.

W: Didn't take them off. I'd unlace them and let the pressure off where I could and try to dry them on my feet.

T: On the march, what kind of food did the Germans provide?

W: None whatever. They managed to get us some Red Cross parcels. That's a wrong statement. They did get potatoes from the farms. And they'd cook them in a big vat and we got some of them.

T: Did you get those, from your memory, regularly?

W: No. Nothing was regularly. There was no set way of eating. I might add here that one thing that helped me there, all my life, from the time I was small, I watched my dad throw his axe over his shoulder and head for the woods to cut timber. And then when he got the hedge of the brush away from the house he'd break a twig off,

usually a basswood if he could, that had nice buds or a hazel brush or something that way and he'd chew it all the time he was in the woods. So whenever I got near anything I had that in my mouth and I was chewing them. I didn't necessarily swallow it, but I got a lot of good out of them.

T: Why would you do that?

W: To get something in your stomach. I mean, you chew your food, you can spit the food out, but if you swallow you chewed out of it you get a lot of good. It was one thing that helped me sustain my strength. Plus the fact that they marched us mostly on little dirt roads where there was some brush and so on along them.

(1, B, 701)

T: So little country roads. Did you march through any cities and towns?

W: Towns? Not any towns of any size. The map I have here took us north of Stettin right on the—you know, that's pretty much all water up there.

T: Yes. It's very flat and very wet.

W: We crossed right on the coastline. Of course that was dead of winter.

T: Right. Where did you walk then?

W: You see we left up there in Poland. We followed the crooks in the road pretty much. From there until we got north of Stettin, then from Stettin we went west, it would be. I want to tell you we went east and that would have got us to Russia, wouldn't it?

T: Yes, it would.

W: *(laughing)* That's what I like about talking to you. Can't fool you. And the map shows that when we got east of that, we went east a ways and then dropped way down.

T: Now just to check. When you left the camp was it one large group of men?

W: It was what was in Compound C and a few out of B that were in the group that left, and it made a pretty big bunch. Then later on we got broke into smaller bunches. Pretty much down farther. Now when we left the camp the main gate of the camp was on the east side. We had to go out through that gate and we walked for a distance. It's dark already and I know if we kept going that direction we'd be in Russia so we had to, that first night, swing around the camp south to get to going back west. I can remember that circle that first night. We walked all that night and all the next day without actually stopping.

T: You know, the march for almost three months didn't often go in a straight line.

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

T: You walked a lot of back and forth or around in circles.

W: The army's coming in. They wanted to get us down into Switzerland to Hitler's stronghold and they couldn't get by. The Russians were already coming in below Berlin, east or west, and the English and Americans, of course, [US General] Patton was south of us. It was the British up in the north corner [of Germany], where part of the group was liberated.

T: Now on the march, where did you sleep at night?

W: The first time we got to lay down we were told we could stay there the night. There was a foot of snow in the trees and the mistake that was made, the group ahead of us had stopped there the night before and it was a filthy place. So after that we stopped in a clean place. Most of the time you just stopped and scraped the snow back and laid down.

T: In your memory, did you sleep more outside or more inside on the march?

(2, A, 15)

W: The first part of it was more inside because we were in too much forest to have farms to stop in. After we got down into Germany proper then we had these small farmsteads with big hay sheds. Hay shed is a pole building with just a roof and something on the sides.

T: So you could sleep in those.

W: Of course there again then we were herded in. Not room enough to lay down. Dysentery was killing you, and you had to get up to go.

T: I wanted to ask about your health. Did you have a problem with dysentery or diarrhea?

W: Yes. Dysentery was terrible. I do have to say this, I have to give my mother credit for helping that group of men. I was taught as a small kid if you had the runs, go to the woodstove and get a charcoal out of the ash pan. That will stop your runs.

T: Anything else about health, or food?

W: I had a pocket watch that was my dad's, and the Germans hadn't taken from me because it was my own watch. It wasn't GI issue. I traded that to a German guard

for a loaf of sawdust bread. I can remember we got next to a farmstead and I got a chance to build a fire. It was a long a little dirt road. I charred that loaf of bread until it was black all the way through and I ate all I could and passed the rest out. While I'm doing this, this Dr. Caplan, that the book's about, came up and saw me doing that. He realized the charcoal would do it and had all the men doing it. I have to give my mother credit for the way she raised me. Our dysentery was so bad we were passing blood. When you should have been resting all you could do is get up. You didn't dare mess yourself up too bad or you couldn't have stood it either.

T: So that was a problem.

W: Oh, a terrible problem. And that was a health problem as well. A very bad health problem. That and the lice.

T: That was my next question, about lice. Was that a problem for you?

W: We didn't realize it was as bad as it was until we were trying to get rid of them. When you've got some warmth at night you could feel them crawling.

T: That makes it hard to sleep.

W: And they do drain your body of strength, you know, because they eat on you. It might not show, but it isn't good.

T: It must be hard to sleep with the lice and the dysentery.

W: Yes, it is hard. You wished they'd go to sleep too, but that's when they came to life.

T: You noticed them at night.

W: Now we said something a while ago about these young men giving me credit, thanking me for keeping them alive? This man over in Wisconsin, here six years ago I went down with a thing, I was losing my muscle. I couldn't turn over in bed. He heard about it and he and his wife came over in January. It was terrible cold. He had to come and thank me for keeping him alive on that march. All I could do, I couldn't pick anybody up and carry them, but when I found one of those young fellows that was giving up I'd kick them as hard as I could. They'd get up and want to kill me but they'd walk the rest of the day.

(2, A, 58)

T: You were a little bit older, right?

W: I was old enough. I suppose I could save what I did have because I didn't worry to death myself about what was going to happen.

T: Now you mentioned your radio operator earlier. You said on the march you helped him.

W: He was from Buffalo, New York. A city boy. When you've never been out in the woods and in the country and had to live off the country it's a pretty big item. And it's helping him that way. I probably kicked him a couple times and he wouldn't get up. You see, the doctor in the end that had a wagon and he'd load the men that couldn't walk through the day on it and then fifteen or twenty of the other boys would push the wagon. We had no horses for it. I tell you, it really helped. If I had been from Louisiana I wouldn't have made it, I'm sure.

T: So being from Minnesota was a help, you think.

W: It wasn't only that, but the one thing we had going for us, there wasn't a man in that group who wasn't the healthiest man the United States had or he wouldn't have been in the Air Force.

T: Now on the march, were you ever strafed by Allied aircraft?

W: Yes. We were bombed one night. We'd been in a building and we were out the next morning and they come in and bombed the railroad that went right by it and so on. There were times that I might have tried to get on it, with the group that was supposed to get a ride on the train, but I didn't want to because of the fact that that's what our aircraft was after. And I do remember very clearly one day that—you see, the beginning of that line of men was a mile long. I always tried to stay from the front of it as much as possible. If something happens you're safe, until the end of the line comes anyway. And I ended up, unless I had a terrible fever that day and I could hardly get one foot ahead of the other, but when they had a rest I never stopped. I just got up and kept walking forward. I never quite got to the tail end, that far back. Things like that. That was a bad day.

T: On the march, did you have good days and bad days?

W: Personally? The best days with the bad...I don't know (*laughing*). There were good days, physically good days and bad days naturally.

(2, A, 99)

T: What was, for you, the biggest challenge or problem on the march?

W: Staying dry enough so you didn't freeze to death. Trying to sustain your body with something to eat, no matter even if it was wood. One thing that I managed to have, I managed to get a few potatoes in my pocket. When we made a camp and the Germans didn't give us anything I managed to build a little fire under a tin can I had and I boiled those potatoes, and I'd usually manage to try to get a hold of an onion to

throw in with them. That was mighty good food. There was no water thrown away either. It all went down. Such things as that.

T: With the food, how did you find the food you ate?

W: The potatoes, usually they stopped us in a farmstead, and if you were sharp enough you could find their potato pit. When you went through the villages, if there were (***) along the street there was one under your coat. The German guards, if you could give them a chunk of that when you cooked it up at night, why they looked the other way. They weren't eating any better than we were, the poor guys.

T: The guards on the march, the same guards from the camp?

W: No. Well, yes, I suppose they were. Undoubtedly in those three months they were changed over. Anybody that was able to fight was taken off and somebody that couldn't was put on.

T: How did the guards treat you?

W: I never had a guard actually physically abuse me. I suppose maybe I didn't give them a chance; I didn't give them a reason to. And of course, I think one thing that helped me there, my name is English you know. Claypool. The ones that had a good German name, especially if it sounded Jewish, were in for trouble. They couldn't decide why a German should come and fight against the motherland. So that probably helped me a little.

T: Let me ask you about the end of the march. It was Americans that found you?

W: We had been making the circles and our small group of a couple hundred men probably broke off and went south. I have here a picture when we got to the bridge near Bitterfeld, Germany. I was just trying to think of the name of the river.

T: Elbe.

(2, A, 148)

W: Yes. I've got a picture here of part of our group crossing that bridge.

T: That's about the time you were liberated?

W: Yes. But before we got to the bridge, that's when we were liberated. Before we got to the bridge we were in a small farm. Our group wasn't very big at that time. I suppose two hundred. We were asleep. It was still dark. We heard this commotion in the yard and we looked out and there was an American Jeep in the yard and a United States major standing up in the Jeep firing his pistol in the air. Any German that was there could have shot him. He got attention from the Germans and gave

them orders to have us headed for the river by daylight or they'd shoot them all. We went through two or three villages after we left that farmstead. You see, most all these villages are just a collection of buildings for the people who farm the land around it.

We finally came up on a wide gravel road, and it was going straight toward this village, toward this town. We must have been going straight north at the time. When we got out on that road, well before we got there, we'd made up our mind when we went through one of those villages there was always a sharp turn in them, corner, that we'd take the guns from the guards. Which we did. I took a gun from a little German that was walking alongside of me. I said to him that if he wanted he could take off over the hill. He said, "If I don't go in with you I'll starve to death." I brought that gun home with me.

Anyway, when we got out on that gravel road, this same major sat in his Jeep and he gave every man to know as he went by if you didn't like some of those Germans, they'd been mean to you, they'd shoot them right there. And they would have.

T: He said that?

W: The American major. It was the [Army] 104th Timberwolf Division.

T: From what you saw, were any Germans killed?

W: No. There was no reason to. We didn't hate the Germans. We'd been moving with them. We were their guests (*chuckles*). Of that bunch. In the beginning there would have been a lot of them. But I remember we got down to a level of the river, and this bridge, it's a Frank bridge and there's about twenty-five men on it. If I was one of them I couldn't tell. If I had looked in the mirror I couldn't have told. I've got a note on the bottom of this one. "Some of the Stalag IV being liberated by 104th Infantry." There's another name I don't make out. The writing isn't too plain. "...river at Bitterfeld, Germany April 26, 1945 after six hundred and thirty miles forced march."

(2, A, 212)

T: Let me ask the day you were liberated, what were your thoughts that day?

W: My thoughts? I guess my thoughts were pretty much they were any day, because I wasn't out of the woods yet. You know what I mean?

T: No.

W: Most of the young boys in the group were hauled away to a hospital. I used the expression, I just went up over the hill and kept going. When we crossed that river we went up on the flat and there was a little building. I understood it had been a school. I have here in front of me a German passbook I picked up in that school that

day. It has a name or two in it. I tried to write the names of the march in it and so on. But the ones that had been liberated that morning, which Bill Cupp [of Northfield, MN] was with, was taken by the Army and taken care of. When we crossed late in the afternoon somebody said, here's this building. You can go in but look out, it might be booby-trapped. And spend the night. In an hour or so the big dump truck came with a load of K rations and dumped them in the street. It was almost two days before we got any attention from the Army.

T: Could you eat? Was your stomach okay?

W: No. I ate a part of a can of K rations. I went from skin and bones until I was puffed up as though I was rolling fat. And I was sick.

T: So it was hard to eat?

W: Yes. It wasn't a lot to eat, but it was something.

T: How long was it before you felt back to normal?

W: I think probably on the stomach it was probably six months before I was somewhat back. I didn't give it much thought. I just ate what I could and didn't eat too much. I went from the march to England, which didn't have much for food.

T: Yes. But back to the building.

W: We stayed in that building. The next day I took that rifle I took from the guard and went out on the outskirts of Bitterfeld, Germany, and shot a little deer and took it in and roasted it on the sidewalk. Right in town. Nobody stopped me (*chuckles*). And some time then the following day they loaded us up and took us out into the woods to delouse us. We stripped our clothes all off and threw them in one end and they went through boiling water, and we went through DDT and everything else and out the other end and got some clothes to put back on. Then after that was over we were loaded into trucks. I don't remember that trip too well. I was too contented to worry about it, I guess. And taken to Halle, Germany.

T: That's near Bitterfeld.

W: Then to France. And we were there a couple of days. Did you have any other questions in there?

T: Yes. Now you got to go to England, right?

(2, A, 273)

W: Yes. We got to Halle. We were there for a day or so. In the morning we got word that Eisenhower was coming in that morning to talk to us. Out on the airstrip was a

pile of old wooden crates. Stop there, it said. So we'd assembled out there. It was rather amusing. He came in. Of course shot his stars out and flares that let us know it was him. When he got off the plane there were two or three senators with him from someplace. He came to the group of us. We opened up and let him to the center, but we closed up. We wouldn't let them in (*chuckles*). They were civilians, you see.

What he told us, he said anyone that wants to go to England there will be planes in this afternoon to take you to England. Otherwise they'd all be taken to Camp Lucky Strike and they'd load them on the ships. If there was room for ten men, they'd put twenty on. Get them home as fast as they could. And that's what happened there.

It was rather interesting, my going to England. I've got a picture here in front of me that was taken shortly after I got to England. I got some decent clothes on and a necktie anyway.

T: How long did you stay in England?

W: To begin with, when I got off the plane in England, I don't know which airbase it was, but my 379th Bomb Group a short time before had been completely moved out of England to Africa. So nobody knew me. I had no home.

T: Right. But you had a wife in England.

W: Yes. I had a home there. I had a son too, that was born while I was in the prison camp. The thing of it was, I had a year's wages coming and no way to get any money whatsoever because nobody knew me. So I went to the International Red Cross every other day and they'd give me four pounds in English money. I was in England for six weeks or so, I guess, because I wanted to make arrangements for the wife to come to America while I was there. Which I did. I managed to get by.

T: When you saw your wife, Brenda.

W: Yes. Brenda Evans.

T: Now how much did she ask you about your POW experience?

W: Over the years? Not a thing. She'd spent half of her eighteen years hiding from bombs. Bomb shelter and so on. She didn't talk about the war in any way. And of course, I wouldn't talk about it unless it was another veteran.

T: Why?

W: The stories we had to tell, you'd been a blowhard, a liar, if you'd have told anybody. "You couldn't live through that. You can never have done it." You know what I'm saying?

(2, A, 338)

T: So you thought people wouldn't believe you?

W: I mean if you told them the truth, they wouldn't believe you, so why tell them anything, see? Anyway I came home then on a Liberty ship. Seventeen or eighteen of us in a little cabin on the back of it. An old freighter.

T: When did your wife get to the US?

W: She got to come about, it must be a year later.

T: A year later?

W: Yes. They weren't hauling anybody's bride home until every man was home. There was no place for them. When she came, she came in first class all the way. Right to Bemidji on the Pullman.

T: But it took a year!

W: Yes. It was a year before she got to come.

T: Mr. Claypool, after you were a POW, how often did you have dreams or even nightmares about your POW experience?

W: Here six years ago when I was down with that muscle thing, there was a nurse that worked for home care started coming to see me. She still comes every other week. That was her first question, the same question as you just asked me, and my answer to her was that I have never had. I say that I don't have because I was old enough to understand what it was. You know what I mean? I knew that I was safe, away from it, and I was able to forget it. But I do have a mind that doesn't forget.

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 382.

W: —that's where my kids were born. The oldest boy in England of course. The rest of them were all born on that little farm.

T: Over the years, how often did you talk with neighbors or people at your church about being a POW?

W: My neighbors? I'll tell you one reason why I would probably say no about that is that too many of them had the impression that if you didn't want to be a prisoner of war, why did you give up?

T: Really?

W: Why did you let them take you? That would be boys that stayed out and never went, because they were on the farm. So you had that to live with. So you just kept peace in the family. Wouldn't give them much of an answer if they asked something.

T: Let me ask you, now today, you and I are talking about it. How come?

W: We [POWs] all decided a few years back that it was time to get it out.

T: Why?

(2, B, 396)

W: We hope it helps our future generations to keep from starting wars and so on. If you noticed our emblem that's on our flag, three little Latin words on it.

T: It says "Non Solum Armis."

W: Yes. That means not by arms alone. That's the belief of any ex-POW. We want the thing settled without arms. That's why that's there. Of course that was put there many years ago.

T: Right. Now you're a member of American ex-POWs?

W: Yes.

T: How has that organization been helpful for you?

W: You mean what it's done for me?

T: Yes.

W: I tell you, my wages when I was flying were three times what a man on the ground got and I got fourteen cents an hour. Do you believe that? A man on the ground got four cents an hour, but being I was flying I got flight pay and so on and brought it up from the rank to give it more money.

T: The American ex-POWs, that group, what about that?

W: The American ex-POW group fought until we got it through. For three years now or a little longer, we've been getting one hundred percent service connected disability, and that is a figure of 2229 dollars a month.

T: So you didn't get one hundred percent for many years.

W: I am at this time. And I feel it kind of makes up for that money they didn't pay us. I'm going to live to be one hundred so I can collect on that (*chuckles*).

T: Good. One more question and that is, when you think about your POW experience, what do you think is the most important way your POW experience changed you as a person?

W: You should have learned from in other words? Let's put it this way. There's days I look at what's happening to our country and within our country that I wish they'd have let Hitler have it.

T: What do you mean?

W: Let him win the war (*chuckles*).

T: Why?

W: When you see some of the things that are happening that shouldn't be. But that's beside the point.

T: Yes.

(2, B, 431)

W: I'd say that, well, I don't know. There's many answers to that. Just what to use. I do know this, I don't believe we should have a thing that anybody doesn't have the right to have. But that freedom I fought for was for everybody in the world, not just me. And I don't believe that we're so brilliant that we have the right to go around the world telling other people how to live. Our religion is as much to blame for that. I am careful when I make that statement to the school kids that I'm not talking about Christianity. I'm talking about religion. And every skirmish we've got in the world is between religions.

T: Well, Mr. Claypool, that's the last question I have. Thanks very much again from taking time for this interview.

W: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW