<u>Interviewee</u>: William Hall
<u>Interviewer</u>: Thomas Saylor
<u>Date of interview</u>: 16 April 2004
<u>Location</u>: dining room table, Hall residence, Oakdale, MN
<u>Transcribed by</u>: Linda Gerber, May 2004
<u>Edited by</u>: Thomas Saylor, October 2004

William Hall was born on 10 February 1924 in St. Paul, Minnesota. One of four children, he attended local schools, graduating from Harding High School in 1942. Following high school Bill was drafted into the Army. After Basic Training Bill was assigned to a light machine gun crew in Co K, 115th Regiment, 29th Infantry Division; this unit landed at Normandy in June 1944. Bill was in action in France until his capture on 4 October 1944 in an engagement near the French-German border.

As a POW, Bill spent several weeks at Stalag XII-A, Limburg, before being transported by train across Germany to Stalag III-C, near the eastern town of Küstrin. When in late January 1945 the Germans evacuated this camp due to the advancing Red Army, Bill and many other POWs briefly escaped before being re-captured several days later as the Germans temporarily took back Küstrin. Many former III-C POWs, Bill among them, were subsequently marched off to Stalag III-A, at Luckenwalde south of Berlin. This camp was liberated by Red Army units in late April 1945, but the POWs were forced to remain as negotiations for their return to Western Allied control dragged on after V-E Day. Bill ultimately reached American lines and was flown to a hospital facility in Bristol, England, and several weeks later taken by ship back to the United States. After some time at rehabilitation facilities stateside, in late 1945 Bill was discharged from the Army.

Again a civilian, Bill got married (wife Catherine) and helped raise a family; he spent his career in banking in the Twin Cities area, retiring in the early 1990s. This interview was conducted in April 2004 at the Hall home in Oakdale, Minnesota.

Interview Key:
T = Thomas Saylor
W = William Hall
[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: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today is 16 April 2004, and this is an interview with Mr. William Hall, at his home here in Oakdale, Minnesota. First, Mr. Hall, on the record, thanks very much for taking time on a bright, sunny day to talk with me.

W: Glad to.

T: Just for the record, some of the information I took off tape, and please correct any mistakes. You were born in St. Paul, Minnesota on 10 February 1924. Grew up there and graduated from Harding High School, class of 1942. You were drafted into the United States Army in 1942 and by 1944 were serving with K Company, 115th Infantry Regiment, 29th Infantry Division, and that was in France.

W: That's correct.

T: I'd like to move from there actually, to the circumstances surrounding your capture and I wonder if you could briefly bring us up to speed as far as how your unit got in the position it was in that led to your capture.

W: It was during the big push when the American Army and British Army were chasing the Germans out of France back into their homeland. We had arrived across the border from Belgium in a small town. I believe the name was Kusrath. That was in Germany. And we occupied that without any resistance at all. It was not occupied. There were three cities there, Virgin, Kusrath, and Shirewaldenraff. That's where the Germans had concentrated some troops. Our mission at this point was to reorganize after a long journey by train through France and begin the battle preparations to remove elements of the German Army from those three locations. And that's where were and why we were there.

T: What was your job specifically in K Company?

W: I was a light machine gun squad leader. Under my command were probably at the most eight to twelve people and a light machine gun supposedly is a light air-cooled machine gun as opposed to a water-cooled heavy machine gun and they're easier to transport and so forth.

T: Thirty caliber weapon, right?

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W: Thirty caliber. Right.

T: What happened on 4 October 1944 that led to your capture and I guess as a follow up, were others captured with you?

W: Yes. The entire company. The company was probably under strength a bit. Not too much. But we had received orders to attack the town directly in front of us which was Scheierwaldenrath, Germany. The entire company with the exception of one mortar unit and one heavy weapons unit were left behind in the town of Krusrath. So early in the morning, probably three thirty, four o'clock in the morning, we made a frontal attack across a field toward Scheierwaldenrath. Resistance was very light. Some small arms fire. We lost a few fellows wounded. No deaths. And occupied the railroad station of the town. That probably was about six o'clock in the morning.

We were there probably most of the day without much activity. Couldn't find the Germans. They had moved out of the city—or town it was. It was not really a city. About four or five o'clock in the afternoon we started receiving heavy artillery barrage. Coming, we didn't know from where. We later learned it was actually from SP guns, which is a short military term for self-propelled weapon. It's a tank like carriage that carries a 75 millimeter or 88 millimeter weapon. Now the Germans had several of those running around the roads circling the little town of Scheierwaldenrath, behind us, to the sides and so forth. So in effect we were surrounded.

T: These were bigger weapons than you certainly had with you.

W: Yes. The only thing we did have with us as far as artillery, we had three light tanks. It's a small tank, the lightest made, very thinly armored, with a 47 millimeter gun.

T: In other words, no match for this heavier weapon.

W: No. A 75 millimeter or 88 millimeter was perhaps the best gun the Germans had. In fact better than ours. So two of the tanks attempted to go back across the field from where we came to Krusrath to report what was going on because our radio was out, and the Germans immediately blew those tanks into oblivion. So that left one tank and that brave guy started out by himself. Zigzagged all over the place. They finally blew him up also. So we knew right there we were in big trouble. So most of the company became separated because now we were in the bulk of the village so we were into the houses. So some of the companies, some of the platoons would go into one house, some would go in another. We chose a house and went on the second floor, the upstairs and set up a machine gun in the window.

The intense fire just kept coming worse and worse until finally armored infantry, German infantry, started coming through an apple orchard directly to our front. We had a great field of fire there and caused many casualties. But the

Germans kept coming. They were supported by their MG-42. That's their machine guns.

Then the SP [self-propelled] guns came up and started coming through the apple orchard and dispersing the troops. We saw them coming and saw this big long barrel coming toward the window, so we just started hightailing it downstairs. When he fired he blew away half the wall and all the bricks and so forth fell on top of us. So really we had kind of a chute right down to the second floor. From there we went down the basement and tried to hole up down there, and it wasn't very long until we could hear footsteps upstairs on the floor and someone in broken English called down into the cellar, "If there's anyone down there, you should come up or we'll throw a grenade down there."

(1, A, 60)

T: How many of you were down there now?

W: There was probably…it was my squad and part of a rifle squad.

T: How many men total? Can you estimate?

W: I would estimate twenty-five.

T: Were you the ranking noncommissioned officer?

W: No. No. There was a rifle platoon sergeant, a tech sergeant, and Jim Jordan was his name. He was in charge. So, I asked Jim. I said, "Jim, what are you going to do? There are tough guys upstairs. The Germans are going to blow you up here." He said, "I think we better just give up." I said, "Boy, you really hate to do that." He said, "Well, what do you want to do, just die?" I said, "No, I don't." So we took kind of a poll of all the rest of them. We agreed we better tell them yes, don't shoot. We'll come up. So we did.

T: At that moment, can you talk about what was going through your mind? This is a difficult situation.

W: Yes. Plain, stark fear. The main reason is that we had caused many casualties in the apple orchard [with our MG fire]. There were dead people [German soldiers] out there and they knew we probably were part of that procedure, so we thought when we come upstairs and they see us they're going to do the same thing to us. They aren't going to take any prisoners.

T: Did that go across your mind then…

W: Yes.

T: That you thought that even if we give up, they may kill us anyway.

W: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. And it didn't work out that way. When we got up there we found…there was a German officer who was courteous and treated us as a fellow combatant and asked us if we had cigarettes. We said yes.

T: He spoke English to you?

W: He spoke English. We passed them around. Then he took one and then I gave him a package and he gave one to each of his guys. There were probably thirty of them. Wiped out the cigarettes till they were all gone. Then we started receiving a barrage of our own artillery. I'm kind of getting ahead of myself there.

T: What about that moment when you came in a sense face to face with the enemy? I mean you've learned about the Germans. You've been in combat with the Germans. Suddenly they're standing as close to you as you and I are.

W: Yes.

T: What was that situation like?

(1, A, 79)

W: It's kind of awesome. We had seen them at distances from twenty-five to fifty to one hundred yards. And had been shooting at them at that distances no doubt. But come face to face with your counterpart, your fellow man, whether he's German or Russian or whoever he is, you have a feeling, strangely and oddly enough, of comradeship. I don't know why that is. But we felt, hey, that guy's in the same situation we are. He's just winning the game right now. That's all.

T: Here you are at age twenty…

W: Yes.

T: The faces you were looking at among the Germans, what kind of men were they?

W: They were practically my age and older, probably up to thirty. I think the officer that we talked to probably was in his, it's hard to remember, but probably early thirties. So they were generally the same age.

T: Was there any communication between these mostly enlisted soldiers around here? On both sides? Or were people sort of standing around?

W: The Germans were talking amongst themselves. Yes. They were laughing and talking. Of course I couldn't understand a word they were saying, but I suppose, you know, probably talking about us and the situation. Whatever. We didn't do much talking. No.

T: So between the Germans and the Americans there was little communication.

W: Very little. There was a language barrier. The German officer spoke fairly good English and I think some noncom, probably his aide, spoke fairly good English. Other than that it was too much just to…

T: Foreign language.

W: Yes. Couldn't understand it.

T: Were you, at that point in time, this location, searched or questioned at all in any way?

W: No. Not by the front line troops. They took our weapons, but that's all. They didn't take anything else. Or write anything down. Not a thing. For one reason, we were in the middle of another barrage as I mentioned. Our company commander was named Waldo Schmidt, a great person, who realized that we couldn't go anywhere and we were stuck in the middle of this battle and couldn't get out. Couldn't go back or forward. So he had called Cannon Company which was part of the artillery support to lay a barrage on the town. Our own artillery. So they started firing on us. He was killed in the process, and we were several of us wounded because of that situation.

T: How long was it between the moment of capture there and the time when this barrage started? Can you estimate?

W: Well, the barrage started before the capture. Yes. We were in the basement…or in the top when the self-propelled gun was coming through the apple orchard. That's about the time Captain Schmidt had called for artillery. So we were getting our own artillery and their fire. When we were in the basement we were getting it from both sides.

T: Right. So it sounds like it was pretty important to get out of that location, that physical location.

W: It certainly was. Yes. I think in that respect, the German troops who captured us knew that. They knew we were helpless and there was some humanitarianism going on there. They didn't let us stand around in that terrible barrage. They hustled us out of there. Out of the town, up a hill to a farmhouse. That's where we met a fellow I still remember as Hauptman Eggert. Captain Eggert, I guess. The battalion he was—I later found out through historians—the German battalion was the Eggert Stucker Battalion which had come from one of the towns…the one I mentioned…not Shirewaldenrath, but the… [Virgin; from earlier in the conversation]

T: Kortracht?

W: No, the other one. There was Kusrath, Shirewaldenrath, and ah…I can't think of the name of it.

T: Luckily it's on tape.

(1, A, 122)

W: It's on tape. Anyway, that's where they came from and the armored column came from there. And he was very, very courteous.

T: And also spoke English.

W: Yes. Very good English. Oxford accent English.

T: Was this the same day still, October 4?

W: Yes. Same day.

T: The sense of fear you described at the beginning, has that gone away by now?

W: No. No.

T: Was it the same kind of fear that you're going to be killed, or was it a fear of the unknown, or what kind of fear did you have now?

W: Fear of the unknown, I think. There was a fear initially of being killed, yes. Secondly, what's going to happen to us? Are they going to throw us in a dungeon or put us in chains or what? What are they going to do?

T: Had you given any thought, I mean as a soldier, before that time, up to this day really, October 4, of being a POW or what might happen if I were captured, or was that something that really never crossed your mind?

W: Never crossed our mind. No, I don't think I have one instant where I did ever think of being captured.

T: So this was something that you hadn't even given any thought to previously. So it really was trying to deal with a new situation.

W: Yes. Absolutely.

T: When you got to this rear location, how many Americans are together with you now?

W: There was our group, probably about twenty-five and the rest of the company, so probably 150, 200 people.

T: So a pretty good size group of men.

W: Yes. It was. It was the entire unit.

T: Was there any kind of interface with the Germans here? A kind of questioning that went on or were you really just held and shuffled to another location?

W: No. At that point we were interrogated. They had set up, in the farmhouse, a table, and there was another German officer who called us up [one by one] and… They always say Geneva Convention, all you have to tell them is your name, rank, and serial number, and you don't have to tell them what unit you're in. Well, on my shoulder is the 29th Division patch. On my helmet is the 29th Division patch. So he immediately said, 29th Division. I said yes. And he said, "Can you tell me about where you camp?" I said, "No, I can't tell you that." He said, "Okay. All right."

T: Did he really ask you politely, you responded politely, and that was…

W: He got mad after a while because I wouldn't tell him much about the United States. He wanted to know about our country. "What kind of living conditions have you got?" "Really, it's none of your business. What's your living conditions?" "Don't get smart!" He started pounding the table. I thought, he'll probably shoot me now.

T: Were there just the two of you talking here?

W: Just the two of us talking, yes. But there were people all around.

T: Germans or Americans?

W: Both. Our guys are in the back, and theirs are in the back of the table. So it got a little heated for a little bit but then it settled down and they took our name and our rank and our serial number. He did ask what occupation I had. I told him a student. So he wrote that down, and I've got a copy of that stuff.

(1, A, 155)

T: What they wrote down?

W: Yes. I've got the original sheet that they fill out. Before you go I'll show it to you.

T: Please. Yes.

W: It's good I didn't put it in the safety deposit box. I've got it. But anyway, then they interrogated us at that point as to what we did in civilian life and if we had any

money, and of course we had to give them our billfold, and I had to give them my ring. I had a ring that my brother had made for me long ago. I had to give them that. And you had to give them your watch. They let us keep our dog tags. I guess internationally they do that because if you're killed, how do they identify you?

T: So your personal effects were asked for, not necessarily removed physically.

W: No. Well, they'd point. Give me your ring. Or give me your money. They'd tell you what they wanted. If you had anything to disclose, you say no, it's all I've got. They know we're unarmed. They took all our arms. They took our helmets. Took our canteens, our web belts. Everything like that.

T: Really? Canteens and web belts too.

W: They took all that. All your equipment. So we were just in our plain OD uniform. In World War II troops, other than airborne, went into combat in a class A OD uniform rather than you see the green fatigues today and the camouflage. We didn't have that. So we stood out like a sore thumb I guess. So that's what happened right in that particular instance.

T: At the end of October 4, what was the mood of the men around you? Was there a nervous sense that people had or were there different kind of reactions among the people around you?

W: You know, there was still an attitude of, we're still the Yanks. We're still the guys, you know. You might have us here, but we're better than you are. There was still that attitude. They put us in the basement in the farmhouse. Probably 150 people down there. Packed in there. Another guy came to the top of the stairs and he said in kind of broken English, "For you the war is over." So we knew that. But he said, "Our new weapons will destroy you." And everybody laughed at him. He didn't like that very well. He <u>slammed</u> the door. That's all we ever heard him say. In answer to that question brought to mind that we still had the courage to tell them, hey, you're not as good as you think you are. You might have us now but…

T: Did you spend the night in this basement location then?

W: Yes. Yes.

T: What were people talking about that night?

W: Well, you know it's hard to remember because there's a lot of conversations, but I suppose mainly about what's going to happen. What do you think is going to happen? Are we all going stick together? They had a lot of buddies there. A lot of people who were in combat with me. Maybe they're going somewhere and we're going somewhere else. That kind of disturbed us a little bit. We didn't know. I think

the fact that we weren't aware of what was going to happen bothered us more than anything.

T: So that's more than once you've mentioned a sense of uncertainty. Just because you don't know what's going to happen next.

(1, A, 193)

W: Yes. Yes.

T: To move to the next step. The first camp you were in was XII-A Limburg.

W: Right.

T: How were you transported from the point of capture there to Limburg?

W: By train. It was a very short trip. Probably…I don't know the distances between Scheierwaldenrath and Limburg.

T: So you took a short train ride. What was eventful about that particular train ride?

W: Not much about the train ride. Not that train ride. I had another train ride that I was on. A different story. No, not much eventful. We were crowded in there pretty good. And again, wondering where we're going. We didn't know Germany. Had no idea as far as the landscape goes. It looked like it does here. No point of reference, so we didn't know where we were going.

T: When you got to the station at Limburg, were you marched then as a group to the actual camp XII-A?

W: Yes. Yes. Up to the gate.

T: When you arrived at XII-A Limburg, what impression did that camp make on you when you first sort of began to notice it?

W: There's a story about that that is a little different. It was a very somber thing. It was full of barbed wire all the way across it and on each entrance to the camp, the gate, were guard towers. Not towers, but huts or something. Striped. Striped color. I don't know why they do that, but German guards in there.

Then we stepped through that gate. The first person we met was a United States trooper, airborne trooper. I think the 82nd Airborne, immaculately dressed in khaki uniform, pressed shirt, pressed pant, shined boots. Just like he came out of the barracks. Tough guy. He wanted us to know that he was in charge. The Germans had put him in charge of "you vermin," he called us.

T: Vermin? He used that word?

W: Yes. Sure. And he said, "Now I'm going to take you down there and get you some food, and if anybody can't make the menus I'll punch your eyes out." I know the guy's name. I hate to use it because I don't know what happened to him. So he marched us, double timed us. We could hardly…we hadn't had much food. The only food we had since the capture was a couple pieces of their sour bread. So we were practically starving. And why he double timed us all the way down there, a bunch of us, to their kitchen where they presented us with a tin cup, a tin bowl and some sort of a soup mixture with really, garbage. It was long, stringy stuff. Whatever they could dig up I guess. And then he went on again to tell us that we were subhuman and that the Germans were in control here and that we better obey their rule. Gosh! Who's this guy!

T: What did you make of this? I mean in a sense, I can imagine being greeted by Germans, but here's an American?

W: He had a German with him. A German officer with him, just like buddies. We thought, you know, what's the guy's name? The traitor. Aaron Burr. We thought this is Aaron Burr personified. It's gotta be him. He came back. It's a joke, but nonetheless that's what we thought of this guy. I mean, how could a fellow…we can understand how a person of that rank, and he was the top kick, master sergeant, we know that had superiority over you as far as orders go about military procedure. This wasn't anything to do with military procedure. This was German procedure. And he was making out as though he was in charge, and we would obey everything he said. Now, going back after the war, I found out that a lot of guys had turned this fellow in and something, I guess, happened to him. I don't know what. That really put…our spirits went right down the drain.

T: When you saw him.

(1, A, 248)

W: Oh, yes.

T: In total, Mr. Hall, how long did you stay at Limburg?

W: You know, that's hard for me to remember, but I would say probably a month. That might be too long.

T: Okay. So this was a transit stop it seems like for you.

W: It was kind of a holding spot really. There were French in there. Russian, American, British, Polish. So it was a kind of a melting pot. I would say probably three weeks.

T: Okay. What kind of a routine was there at this place? You mentioned a moment ago, off the record, about the daily meal, but was there a daily routine of roll call or work details, things like this?

W: Yes. Roll call. They just count you off. And that was early in the morning. And early in the morning they would give you two slices of black sour bread. You didn't get the soup until the afternoon. And then a tin cupful of ersatz coffee. Probably soybean coffee. Something like that. And that was the routine. And that was kind of a humdrum day the rest of the day. There wasn't anything to do. You just go back to those barracks we had and sit there and just kind of feel sorry for yourself. But that's about all you did.

T: How long did it take for you to adjust to the reality that you were now a POW?

W: Not very long. Not very long. There's certain things that happened at that XII-A that let me know exactly what I was.

T: For example.

W: Germans are civilized people. The Germans have contributed so much to civilization it isn't even funny. What happened to them? There was one instance. The latrine was a long building, with holes in the floor. That was the toilet facility. And the British troops and our troops would go in there. The Germans came in with a fire hose. Out in front of that building was an open cesspool. The Germans washed people out of there and washed four British soldiers into that mess. I still think of that today. It's the worst possible thing I ever saw.

T: A cesspool of sewage.

W: Yes. Floundering in that filth. Four British soldiers. And laughing and spraying them with water. I thought, my God! What are we, back in the 6th century? I thought, can this be the German people I've read so much about? The honorable soldier? Who were these guys? So I guess right away I knew what I was in for.

T: Is there another instance that you can relate that sort of suggested the same thing to you?

W: Oh, yes. I got very sick in XII-A. For one thing there were lice. The place was ridden with lice. We had straw…tarpaulin filled with straw, which was just nests for lice. Your daily exercise would be to take off your clothing, turn it inside out and go to the seams and crack these little white lice crawling around with your fingernails. That's what you did. That was your big deal all day. So I developed a horrible rash from the bottom of my chin down to your groin. And scratching and itching, it just turned into raw meat.

And then I developed a severe case of dysentery. Terrible. I went into a coma. And I had two good friends, Bill Shortell and Jim Jordan, who carried me over

to the so-called camp hospital. It wasn't much better than the barracks we had. They had a British doctor. Some people today, the kids especially don't understand this, that the only thing he had available to treat us with was Nestle powdered milk. The kids say, they had powdered milk way back in those days? Yes, they certainly did. But that was to dry up our insides. So that's what he had. I since have written to that doctor. I got his name somehow and he wrote back. Many years ago. He's probably deceased now, but at the time was eighty-four years old. He had come back to visit us. Our country. And he mentioned those times. And I told him, you know, all he had was that can of milk to give me. He said, "You should be thankful that's what I had."

T: Yes.

W: They wouldn't give me anything else.

(1, A, 318)

T: So it sounds like your health deteriorated rather quickly.

W: Yes. It did. Yes. The [US] Army food isn't the best in the world. It was K rations and C rations. But it was food. There were D bars and…it was good, wholesome food. Whether you liked it or not. It was wholesome. Nutritious.

T: Yes.

W: What we got there was not wholesome and it wasn't nutritious. We were getting garbage. We were getting soup that had worms in it. The first time I saw that I couldn't keep anything down. It was just unbelievable. I kept thinking to myself, where are we? Who are these people? Where are the Germans I'd been taught to believe are noble people? What kind of group is this?

T: When you got dysentery you ended up in the hospital as it were. Did you recover, or recover well enough, to be moved because within a number of weeks you were moved to a different facility.

W: No. I didn't. I was in there probably, I suppose, a week. One morning I could hear a commotion outside the windows. I was second floor. And there was a group standing around a little podium with one of the master sergeant's cronies, who was distributing five or six cigarettes to each person. Then I heard him say, "When you get on the train you'll have a little more to eat than you got here." I thought, "My, gosh, they're moving out!"

So I recognized Bill Shortell down there and I yelled out the window and I said, "Bill, are you guys going?" "Yes," he said, "We're moving out." I said, "Well, so am I." He said, "You can't go out." I said, "The heck I can't. Can you catch me?" So the two of them get under that window, and I jumped out of the window. I almost broke their arms. I jumped out of the window to get in that group to go.

T: So you were determined not to be separated from people you knew.

W: Absolutely. Absolutely. I didn't want to be left there alone.

T: Was it not wanting to be left or not wanting to leave people that you knew?

W: I think both. Maybe more so [not wanting to leave] people that I knew. Because they were the ones that took care of me. I certainly didn't want to lose them. I knew nobody else. If they were going, I was going to go. So I made that trip in that train. Sicker than a dog.

T: Did you leave that same day then? That you jumped out the window.

W: Yes. Same day.

T: So you had to walk back to the train station at Limburg?

W: Yes.

T: In the condition you were in.

W: They carried me halfway.

T: Now the train. You went on a train again from Limburg to III-C at the town of Küstrin.

W: Yes. That was directly all the way across Germany.

T: Yes, it is. East of Berlin. That's quite far. The present day German-Polish border. Now can you compare that train trip to the first one took?

W: It was a nightmare. That's the one that keeps me awake. That's the one I keep going to the VA for help. That's pretty tough to –

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 374.

T: Let me ask you. On the train trip from Limburg to III-C Küstrin, how long…you were in boxcars again?

W: Yes.

T: And how many of you were being moved approximately?

W: Well, per boxcar I can tell you. I don't know totally on the train. But the boxcars, first of all, you and I are familiar with American boxcars. They're huge, big, roomy. They're not so in Europe. They're small. The French called them forty and eights.

T: Forty men and eight horses. Yes.

W: Right. The same size that the Germans used. So they packed seventy of us in that boxcar and partitioned it off by half. They put a wire screen with two guards in there with a wooden stove and some kind of facilities. I don't know. They gave us two cans. One for water and one for toilet. We couldn't even sit down. You were lucky if you could sit down.

T: So the inside of this railcar was divided. It's supposed to hold forty as a whole. Here it is divided into two parts and seventy are in the half.

W: Absolutely. We were nose to nose. It was miserable. And it got to be pretty…griping, you know. People yelling and hollering at you. I was sicker than a dog, and I had to use that filthy can. That wasn't very pleasant.

T: Remnants of dysentery or still had it?

W: Oh, yes. Yes. We pulled into a town, what it was I don't know. A long trip. And they pulled into this rail yard. That was probably late in the evening. Maybe six, seven o'clock. And the Germans locked the doors. They took down the screen. So we were able to use the whole car. But they locked the door. Couldn't get out. No water. No food. Nothing. We're in these cars. All of a sudden, it must have been an hour later, maybe just at dusk, we could hear this drone. This heavy engine drone. We knew, oh, my God, it was bombers. And ordinarily who they were…we couldn't see them. But we could assume that they were the British Lancasters. They did the night bombing. And they unloaded on that railroad yard. And they unloaded on that thing for an hour or over. There was stuff flying off the sides of the boxcars, and the boxcar was jumping up and down and guys are screaming. They bombed that rail yard and [the Germans] wouldn't let us out of there. We stayed in there. We could finally hear the bombers going. They were going home. And they didn't let us out all night.

In the morning they opened the door. And they were laughing. They wanted to know how many of us soiled our pants and that kind of stuff. Very funny. That, I'll never forgive them for. Never, ever forgive them for that. It's like putting a spider in a bottle and playing with it. Looked around and the rail yards were a mess. Of course, they were saying how many aircraft they downed. They didn't down any. There was no evidence of any aircraft down. But there was certainly evidence of overturned boxcars, burning buildings, holes in the ground. Disrupt the rails. So we had to stay in that position for three or four days until they laid some new tracks and brought in a new engine and then proceeded on our way toward III-C.

T: So it sounds like that moment of that experience of being bombed and being locked in a boxcar must have been…

W: That's the worst.

T: How did you respond to that particular situation, where I can only imagine what emotions might go through my head.

W: You know, I was so sick, really. I really almost thought geez, maybe I should just die. Maybe let those bombs hit us. What the heck's the difference? I feel so lousy now. I'm going to die anyway. Why not just blow us up? That was my thought. I figured, heck, if it's going to happen, it's going to happen.

T: It sounds like you're describing almost a sense of resignation as opposed to a stark fear that might have been that case with other people.

W: Yes. It wasn't so much fear, because maybe I was too sick. I think it was probably my own physical condition at the time was taking down from where I might have been had I been well. [Otherwise] I'd probably be screaming and yelling with the rest of them.

(1, B, 416)

T: As you were aware of people in your surrounding area in that car, how were other people responding to that particular situation?

W: At the time? They were distraught. Praying. A lot of praying. One…I forget who it was. Some big heavyset guy, sergeant, led a big prayer service. Had people praying. Regardless of denomination. Pray. So that helped. I even got in on that myself. That's the only outlet you had.

T: Would you, at that time, consider yourself a particularly religious person?

W: No. Not more than anyone else. No.

T: So being involved in an act of…actively praying for something, would you even call that out of character for yourself at that time?

W: No. No. I was raised to go to church every Sunday. The only time I would miss going to church was in the military. When you didn't have an opportunity. So I was raised as a religious person.

T: So this was something that was a part of your past and very comfortable for you.

W: Very comfortable. Yes.

T: You stayed here a number of days. Did the Germans feed you at this particular location?

W: Oh, yes. Finally. After making big fun of us they did bring us some bread and, to our delight, I guess, some sausage. Bits of sausage. Not a whole big piece of sausage, but parts of sausages, which was a real treat. Then they gave us some sort of a cheese. It was awful. Just awful. Oh! It was kind of a runny type cheese. Yellowish and brown. I couldn't even take the smell of it. I was sick anyway. Here people were saying, "Don't you want that?" I said, "No!" "I'll give you five cigarettes for it." So I gave it to them for five cigarettes.

T: It didn't appeal to you although it maybe should have because you hadn't had much to eat.

W: Yes. Right.

T: How did you pass the time in a sense? Were you kept in these boxcars all day and night while you waited there or were people…

W: You mean while they were repairing the yards?

T: Yes.

W: Yes. They let us out I think it must have been around noon every day. We could walk no further than the length of the boxcar or two boxcars and stretch your legs and that type of thing. Then they'd give you the bread and the little piece of sausage. But water! Water was a low commodity. They had trouble giving us…it was just like they had the Sahara Desert. Finally they brought a large can of water. Just like a bunch of dogs lapping that water up.

T: So food was supplied really before the water was.

W: I guess the bombers knocked out their water supply or something.

T: Did you ever learn the name of this particular town or stop?

W: No. Never did.

T: And really it was irrelevant.

W: Yes. Yes. It wouldn't have made any difference.

(1, B, 444)

T: Eventually you got on your way. Was it an uninterrupted journey then to Küstrin?

W: Yes. All the way from…we must have been there more than halfway, I would say. And the rest of the trip was uneventful. Other than misery. There was no water. No food.

T: None of the…

W: No more attacks. There were periodic stops. There was a periodic stop maybe to change an engine. That type of thing. So we were confined there mostly with the exception on a few days, as I said, they let you out to exercise your legs.

T: So this whole, this journey, which is a long trip anyway, took days and days and days.

W: Yes. It probably did. Because of the bombing and so forth. That delayed the thing right there a week. I don't know long…I have no idea. I can't recall. But I know it was a long trip.

T: Do you, can you recall when you arrived at III-C in Küstrin?

W: Yes.

T: When was that?

W: Let's see. That had to be, probably November. I don't know what part of November, but before the holiday season. So it would have been in November.

T: So that takes into account the couple weeks you were at Limburg and then this long trip…

W: Yes. Right in the middle of November. I'm not sure.

T: You've now been in two camps.

W: Yes.

T: With the experience or the mental image of Limburg in your mind, how does Küstrin compare or contrast to that as far as the conditions or the barracks, food, etc.?

W: Oh, it was completely different. Yes. XII-A was a, excuse the expression, a hellhole. III-C was fairly decent. The camp was divided into blocks or barracks and each individual barracks probably held, oh, maybe forty, fifty men. I forget how many blocks there were. But the conditions were better. The mattresses were not better. Still straw. Still lice. But it had a stove. A stove in there. We did have regular coffee and bread in the morning. There was none of this stuff, well, maybe

you'll get it and maybe you won't. We actually got that. Gradually started getting used to that type of fare. I was able to eat it pretty well. My dysentery was coming along pretty good. It was just…generally it was a lot better. There was nothing to do. Absolutely <u>nothing</u> to do.

T: It sounds like you almost appreciated III-C conditions because of what you had been in before.

W: Absolutely. Yes. It was a great relief.

T: What kind of sleeping quarters or barracks facilities did you actually have here?

W: Well, they were…I think the barracks were two high. The bunks were two high. One on top, one lower. Raised up from the floor. A long table in the middle with a single light bulb overhead. They provided us with a deck of cards. A couple decks of cards. That's about all. But at least these guys could play with the cards. We'd trade…at the time we did start receiving Red Cross food packages there.

T: How often did you get those that you recall?

(1, B, 480)

W: We got one package divided by four men every week. And that lasted past Christmas. Then for some reason it stopped. But inside that package was enough to really sustain you. Sometimes we'd receive a British package. Sometimes receive an American package.

T: And you were splitting it with three other people.

W: Yes.

T: Now who were you together with? The people you traveled with, are you still together with the same guys?

W: With the two sergeants that helped me through my big trauma, yes. But some of the others, no. The reason being that where we were was a noncommissioned camp. You had to be a sergeant or above.

T: So all your enlisted people were separated out.

W: They went someplace else. God help them. We were probably treated a little better. I think I mentioned before, I think officers received a better—and they probably should have [due to] their station in the military. And we were treated probably a little better because we had a little authority. They realized oh, you are the people that were over the others. So we had a little better treatment.

Now most of our guards were World War I, old-timers. We had a couple young guards. They were the wise guys. But the old guys, we had one particular old guard. After we received some of the Red Cross packages, I recall…it wasn't Christmas, but it was shortly before Christmas. He was kind of struggling, and he'd come in the barracks and sit in the barracks and smoke his pipe. A couple of the guys spoke a little German, so he'd tell them what's going on out there. So we made him a present. We gave him a little bit of coffee. That was Nescafe I think. Some [powdered] milk, part of a chocolate bar, and some cigarettes, and told him to take them home to his wife, he and his wife. He came back the next day. The guy had tears in his eyes. He never had such good food. There I thought, hey, we're not…maybe they're not getting good food either.

T: This is an interesting…two experiences you relate of Germans. One which, of the inhumanity of those in the railroad cars who locked you in and then in a sense taunted you the next day. And within a couple of weeks here you've met someone who is…shows a human face.

W: Yes. I think it's a generation. The generation gap if you will. The first time we ever heard of that. Of course never heard of that, but I think that's what it must have been. These were World War I veterans. For the most part. That were guarding that camp. They were more humanitarian like.

T: So what did you make of the Germans? Here you've got all kinds of different Germans that you've come into contact…

W: A mixed bag. I'll tell you. A mixed bag. It's hard to describe them. I think the one group, the worst part that we ran into, I don't know where they came from. I don't know what their backgrounds were, what their upbringing was. It must have been terrible. They must have recruited all the dregs they could. For certain drudgery positions. That had to be the reason. Because we also ran into some German officers who were intelligent. High ranking people. Civilized. And we ran into others that were certainly not.

T: It sounds like humanity as a whole.

W: Right. Yes. I think we had a good cross picture of humanity. I'm sure. We had a real education. Certainly not out of the school books. But it was an education.

T: A couple guys that you've been together with now, several different stops along the way. How were friends, from your perspective, how were friends able to help each other on a daily basis?

(1, B, 521)

W: In our case, I think just good companionship and mutual understanding. I don't recall many real arguments, you know, nasty arguments. Oh, a few. But if they

were, they were over my father can beat your father. They were more of a close comradeship. I think, in prison camp, because the guy was in the same position you were and rather than look down on him because he was younger than you or he didn't look very good…that didn't come up. The fact that he was in the same situation you were made you realize that maybe I've got to rely on him. I better be careful.

T: Did you spend a lot of your free time, and it sounds like you had plenty of it, pretty much hanging together with the same people, day after day?

W: Yes. Mostly our barracks. Yes. In fact, all the time. We didn't intermingle with any of the other barracks.

T: Is that by German design or just the way it worked out?

W: Yes. We weren't allowed to do that. The only time you ever got to see most of them is the roll call in the morning, where they counted you off. That was done by an SS guard. That was a little different guy. Now they did that. And you lined up in front of your own barracks. You were not allowed to go over there. They were not allowed to go over here.

T: And so each barracks would come out so when a roll call was called in the morning you had to come out and stand and be counted or…

W: Yes. And [at roll call in the morning] the German [guard] would have his dog with him.

T: Same guy? Generally.

W: The young guy. The SS guard. He had a dog. Vicious animal.

T: So here's another type of German really.

W: Yes. Now he was dedicated to a cause. That's a different type of person again.

T: Could you tell that from him?

W: Yes. Oh, yes. Sure. They were spit and polish and blared in what old Adolf [Hitler] had planned for them. I think that's the only reason that they existed was for the glory of regiment, the traditions, the songs, the beer and what have you. Different. Different type.

T: Did he instill a sense of fear or nervousness in you or was it just kind of…

W: No. Awe. Every time I saw an SS officer. In combat you saw very few SS officers. You saw SS soldiers. They were shooting at you. You shoot at them. But when you

see them in this position, you're kind of in awe of them. The one guy that we had was in charge of the camp. The SS officer, had the skull and crossbones. He had an impeccable leather coat. Full-length leather coat. That isn't the kind in our Army. Nobody ever had a full-length leather coat that I know of. And had those shiny boots. You just had to think boy, I've seen him in the movies *(laughs)*.

T: No kidding?

W: Yes.

T: So he made really a striking visual impression on you.

W: Oh, yes. He sure did.

T: How much contact…I mean you mentioned this guard who…it was a Christmas present. You mentioned this SS guard. Does that mean that you had contact with Germans on a fairly regular basis?

W: Sure. Yes. At III-C and III-A. More in III-A when we moved again. But, yes, you had quite a bit of contact. There was a British compound there and a Russian compound.

T: At Küstrin. At III-C?

W: Yes. And in fact in all of them that I was in. III-A had the same thing. But the guards in charge of the gate going into the British compound was usually a fellow from World War I, or an older German soldier of the current war who for a few cigarettes let you pass through. So you could go over and visit the British. And you walked through the gate and you go over to the British…

T: The rules and regulations were flexible?

W: Yes. Sure.

T: That's interesting.

W: Yes. And under the nose of the Germans themselves. But under the right <u>kind</u> of a German. I think if the SS guard had been there, no. You would never get through there.

T: Did you learn to recognize or to pick out the right Germans?

W: Oh, sure. Yes. Now you knew the right guard. The guy you could probably count on to do something or if you needed something…I don't know what it might be, but if you needed maybe an extra blanket or something like that, some cigarettes and a little food would get that for you.

T: So there was bartering that went on under the table.

W: Oh, yes. Big flea market.

T: Now to stretch this across the three camps you were at, XII-A, III-C, and III-A, was that the case in all the camps you were in, that there was this kind of horse trading going on with the Germans?

W: No. More so at III-A than III-C.

T: So it was even more pronounced at the next camp you were at.

W: Yes. More intermingling in the next camp. Yes.

T: I'm wondering. I'll pick that up then. Across the three camps you were at, XII-A, III-C, and III-A, how much news did you get about the outside world? Even how the war was going.

W: We got a little bit. Not in III-C. [At III-A] We'd get information from the German guard. Now whether or not he knew anything or not, we didn't know. He let us know that the Russians were not very far away. He said they were coming. He kept saying, the Russians are coming. So he must have known something. But we didn't find out much about the war, how it was going, until we went to III-A. They had a radio there. Underground radio. Some of those prisoners had been in III-A from Africa. Transported from the African campaign to Germany. They had been there since. Old timers. They knew…

T: So they were well entrenched.

W: They were digging tunnels. The British were digging tunnels. The British were escaping every other Tuesday *(chuckles)*.

T: Boy! How about escape for you? Was that something that among the circle of friends you had, something that came in conversation ever or was it not something you talked about?

W: No, it's spontaneous. That came up because of the Russians.

T: When it actually happened.

W: Yes.

T: How about when you're sitting in these camps and you're killing time and talking about this and that. Did the subject of escape ever come up?

W: Oh, sure. Yes. Yes.

T: Was it something you talked about or something you really thought about or planned?

W: No. As far as I was concerned people never planned it. No. We talked about it. Yes. All the time. But no planning. No. There was planning. Especially in III-A by, as I said by older POWs that had been there for a number of years who understood the procedures and knew the layout of the camp, knew the tunnels that were being dug. So they knew all about that. They didn't necessarily let you in on those things.

(1, B, 605)

T: Ah, so there was a hierarchy among…

W: It was a clique. It had to be, because one wrong guy would tip somebody off. They'd be out of business. They were very careful.

T: Were POW populations cliquish in general? About things?

W: Yes. To that extent yes. To the extent of secret goings-on, yes. They had like little cliques that were very secret. Very secret about who they would let in on some of the things they were planning on doing and rightly so. Because with a melting pot of thousands of people how do you know?

T: Anybody could be a German spy.

W: Yes. They were very, very selective.

T: Yes. Where did you spend Christmas 1944?

W: In III-C.

T: That must have been just prior to the arrival of the Russians in the area.

W: Well, they arrived in January. The first part of January. I think about the third or fourth.

T: Talk about Christmas 1944. That was the only Christmas you spent as a POW. What was that like?

W: It was the most pleasant I ever had as a prisoner of war.

T: In what way?

W: The German commander, we had never seen him before, he came to visit each barracks to wish a merry Christmas.

T: The camp commander?

W: Yes. The German. With his baton and everything. Came in. Salute you, and you saluted him. And he'd say Merry Christmas, and away he'd go. Shortly after, that was in the afternoon, that evening all the trucks pulled in with big Red Crosses on them for Christmas packages, Red Cross packages. Each man had a package. Well, it was such good food. A lot of the guys just left it at the door. They'd eat it, and then it was gone. But it made for good trading. A lot of good trading stuff there.

T: It's interesting to hear you talk about this German commander as being, again, a person with a human side.

W: Yes. He was indeed. Yes. I don't know if probably the same guy could have been a tyrant concerning the Russians. Who knows? But the Americans, he seemed to have a kind of a, not a love for them, but you could tell the guy, he didn't hate us. He wasn't an Iraqi. He didn't hate us. He was in control and he let you know that by his bearing. I mean, this is the commander. I don't know what a full commander would be in the German Army, probably a colonel.

T: Yes. Could be. A camp commander.

(1, B, 639)

W: I think that's correct. Yes.

T: But here he was making these stops at each of the barracks. That's very interesting.

W: Yes. He did. On Christmas Eve. Very nice.

T: You mentioned trading and the fact that now this in a sense gave each individual man things to eat, keep or trade. Think across the three camps you were at, Limburg, Küstrin, Luckenwalde. Did trading go on a lot for stuff? I mean, was swapping part of the daily life?

W: Sure. Yes. All the time.

T: What was desirable? What was not so desirable to have?

W: You mean as a trade?

T: Yes. What was…if you have this, that's valuable.

W: Well, the most valuable was cigarettes. That's your gold. Cigarettes. I think followed by probably coffee. The Germans themselves as I understand it, didn't have coffee themselves. Maybe milk, powdered milk. The least desirable would have been some of the British biscuits that you got.

T: You occasionally got British Red Cross packages?

W: Oh, yes. Sure.

T: Okay.

W: And British tea. As a kid I was raised on tea. My mother was Irish. And she came from Ireland. We brewed tea and all I ever drank was tea. I think [it wasn't] until I got in the military did I drink coffee. I didn't mind the tea, but a lot of guys can't stomach tea. So that would be the most undesirable. They had no trading merit there at all. Couldn't trade a bag of tea for anything.

T: Was there kind of a, almost an accepted or understood value for things? I mean, if you have three cigarettes you know it would buy *x*, or did things vary in value depending upon what was around?

W: Yes. It kind of varied on what was around. I suppose you could buy several slices of bread for five, ten cigarettes today. Tomorrow maybe there was a thicker slice. It went up a little bit. It varied. Depended.

T: When you mention trading…holding things. Was it possible, was it safe, to keep stuff or was theft a problem at any of these camps? From each other.

W: Very little theft. Very little theft. I don't recall much theft at all. Yes, I do. Somebody stole somebody's…I think it was dog tags or some silly thing. Your identification. Somebody stole it. There was a big hubbub about that. But that's the only thing I recall anybody taking. Why they'd take that, I don't know.

T: Yet seems from the way you describe it that things like food or cigarettes or clothing might be…

W: You would think yes. But I don't recall anybody pilfering anybody else's little larder.

T: Does that mean that you could in a sense leave your box or leave your stuff on your bunk and it would be there when you came back?

W: More or less. Yes. The Germans would come through once in a while and inspect the place. And I would say there some things were missing after they left. They'd take some on their own.

T: How could you complain about that though?

W: You don't. Who you going to complain to?

(1, B, 686)

T: Right. Right. So theft among prisoners you don't remember being any kind of an issue really.

W: Not really. Not a big issue. No. There may have been some of that going on. I never became fully aware of it. No.

T: The next related issue is relations between prisoners. You mentioned cliques a couple times or friends. Were people generally open and friendly towards each other as prisoners or were these cliques in a sense hostile and protective of themselves?

W: No. Generally, I think the general POW population was very considerate of each other. The little cliques that I mentioned were primarily for security purposes only. The reason 3M has security people is to keep people out. The reason the bank has security is to keep people in. I think that's what it was. Security people were security minded and rightly so because they had a lot going on what they were probably doing.

T: Sure.

W: Especially some of the British. The British were tunnel diggers. From what I understand, they were digging tunnels all over the place. It's a wonder the whole didn't cave in *(chuckles)*.

T: The way you've been talking about III-C, it sounds like you're settling in here and this is not, from a POW perspective, not such a bad deal.

W: No. It was, really as far as the prison camps go, the three of them, it was probably the dullest of the bunch.

T: As far as the daily routine. It didn't sound like you were, lice excepted, uncomfortable or hungry though either.

W: Yes. We were hungry. Yes. Sure.

T: But not starving.

W: No. Not starving. No. In XII-A it was a different story. XII-A was just a complete nightmare in that place. III-C, at least knew there was food available. Whether or not you liked it, that's up to your stomach. But we did have a supplement in a little

Red Cross food from time to time. In fact, it was so boring in III-C that the Germans came around and asked if anyone would volunteer on a work duty. Noncommissioned and commissioned officers under the Geneva Convention do not have to work.

So we thought, geez, we got a chance to get out of this camp. So about ten of us said yes, we'll go. So we all got in this truck and the Germans took us out and we were going to build a roadblock in case…I suppose they knew the Russians were coming. We had to tear up the road and fill the road with some old scrap iron they had and we started digging it. Well, as one guy would dig the other guy would fill it back in. The Germans thought that's the dumbest bunch of guys I've ever seen! *(chuckles)* They can't do anything! That's the first time I ever saw Jewish prisoners. That was a shock.

T: So you weren't the only people out there working.

W: The Russians had to work. But this was a volunteer group. The only reason we volunteered was to get out of that place. It wasn't to help them. We were not going to help them, and we didn't. But as we were filling up the holes another guy was digging, along came—the railroad tracks were next to us—along came a column of Jewish prisoners. Wearing a white with black striped uniform, cap and SS soldiers on horseback. And every once in a while they'd kick one of these guys or he'd get down. So we'd yell at them. They paid no attention to us whatsoever. The Germans didn't. Paid no attention. They kept prodding these poor guys. They were just a bunch of skeletons. We had heard rumors that they were killing Jews. We didn't know.

(1, B, 743)

T: You'd heard rumors in the camps?

W: Oh, yes. It was all through the camp that they were…somebody had smelled –

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

T: Mr. Hall, I'd like to move to what is a unique part of your POW experience, because the prisoners at III-C, or at least some of them, were liberated from this camp, but only briefly as it turned out. Can you walk us through that experience with what exactly happened there?

W: Sure. I think it was early in the morning, early January, the fifth maybe. The Germans came through the camp and told us, "Raus! Raus!" Means: out. That the Russians were coming and that we had to get out and evacuate the camp immediately. They meant the whole camp. Some of us had kind of wooden boards that we were dragging that we used as a kind of a sled and we put some of our meager possessions on those. We all lined up on the road outside the camp and began to march. It seems to me we were going, at that time we'd be going east.

Right into the teeth of the Russians. So we marched perhaps, this whole swing camp, and my position on that march was probably fifty yards from the front. We were marching along.

T: A lot of guys on the road here.

W: Oh, hundreds. The whole camp. All nationalities. Everybody. We were marching along. I could hear automatic weapons fire, and I'm pretty familiar with staccato machine gun noise and I thought, "My gosh, that's pretty close." So it wasn't very long. All of a sudden I look up in front and here's a couple mortar shells dropping in the road. At that point the people just scattered. Off the road, into the fields and the Russians started dropping mortars into the field and the guys out there. Killing left and right.

T: POWs they're killing.

W: Yes. They apparently thought we were Germans. So I abandoned what I had on that sled. I had a kind of a diary I was keeping. I'd give my life to see that today. But I just abandoned that and started running down the road back toward the camp. I passed German soldiers throwing off equipment and I knew we were in big trouble. So we got to the camp and a lot of the guys wanted to run to the camp. They said there were air raid shelters there. I didn't know there were any in there. So there was a few of us, probably fifteen, twenty of us, decided no, we're not going to that camp. The German soldiers, combat soldiers, full combat soldiers now, they came up and the Germans told us—Oxford English. Where they get that, I don't know. He said, "I'll tell you one thing. You're going to line up and march down the road again or we're going to shoot everybody here. Now do you understand that?" He says, "We're in a battle here so you better understand that." So he said, "You want to go to that camp? Run in there. Otherwise you're marching out."

T: In the camp or up the road. Those were your options.

W: Yes. So we decided we'd go back up the road and maybe we could go across the field or something. We didn't go very far. Maybe a block and the Russians opened up on us again. So we ran back this time. Instead of going in the camp we ran straight into Küstrin, and we passed German soldiers digging positions alongside the road and rushed into Küstrin. We thought, boy, we're going to make it. We're safe. The Russians are coming. They're going to kick the Germans out of here. We're going to surrender to them. We're going home.

T: Was this being actively discussed among the guys you were with in this group?

(2, A, 34)

W: There were twenty of us running in there. Yes. Yes. We all decided we were going in there. The vast majority of the people didn't. They either stayed in the

camp or waited for the Russians to come. We didn't. We thought well, the Russians are going to come and we didn't know, they'd maybe shoot those guys. So we go into town. So we did. We're looking around for a place to safely stay. So there was a shed in back of a building and maybe about twenty to twenty-five of us. The building wasn't big enough. We could hardly keep the door closed. So we had to find somewhere else.

An old grizzled German with a Mauser rifle standing at the door and he told us, "March, march!" He was going to march us back toward the camp. So as we were marching down the road back toward the camp we were determining now how we were going to get this guy. Probably going to hit him over the head. And a German lady came out of her house across the street and spoke, screaming German at this old German, something about, we got the impression, let those people alone. So he threw up his hands and walked away and she motioned for us to get behind her house into a shed. There were other GIs in there.

T: Other prisoners from the camp.

W: Yes. Other GIs in there. Probably another forty, fifty. So there were probably sixty, seventy of us. So we all went in that little building and we could hear all this firefighting starting out there. The Russians were approaching that camp. Now that thing went on. We were in the middle of a firefight between the Russians and the Germans for probably five days.

T: No kidding.

W: Yes. And we were in this little shed.

T: In or on the outskirts of the town of Küstrin.

W: Right on the outskirts of the town, in the shed. Just as you come in this house and then the shed. At one point the boards of the shed were spaced so we could see. So we looked through those boards and we could see Russians crossing a field down below us there. And one of the senior sergeants said, "Well, I tell you what. We need volunteers to go out there and surrender to the Russians." And all of us said you've got to be out of your mind. These are the guys that were just shooting at us. We wouldn't stand a chance. We went out there to try to surrender, they'd wipe us out. So we didn't do that. We wouldn't do that. All that first night the Germans strafed the area with aircraft. Just screaming, all night long. Bombs dropping. And you could hear tanks going up and down the road. That went on for four or five days.

T: So there's no food or water.

W: Well, it was probably the third day. The German lady had a son. Probably a fifteen year old son. He knocked on the door and he had four loaves of bread. She was giving us this bread. And that's the only food we had. We thanked him very

much and he left. We never saw him or the woman again. And that sustained us for a while. Well, after probably the fourth or fifth day, in the morning, a German soldier kicked open the door and we thought, boy, those aren't the Russians. And it was a young guy. Really, all speak English. I don't know. But he said, "Who would you rather be with, Russians or Germans?" Of course we all said Germans. The Russians would have wiped us out. So he slammed the door and went away. It was about an hour later.

He came back with an officer and they ordered us out of the building. So we came out and the house that the woman had lived in, the roof was gone, part of the wall was gone. There were dead horses on her lawn. There was part of a Russian tank with the turret blown off up the field here and it looked like an arm and a shoulder or something laying in the road.

T: It's amazing that this shed was not damaged.

W: No. It wasn't. It was far enough off the road where the Russians made a concentrated attack down the road. Off to the side were these fields. So they didn't come up toward the houses. They went down the middle of the road or out in the field. Thank God they did that. Otherwise we'd not be here.

T: The town of Küstrin was pretty well destroyed.

W: It was pretty well wiped out. But the Germans had successfully repelled the Russians. So they had taken over the town and recaptured us.

(2, A, 75)

T: You've been captured once already as it were.

W: Yes. This is the second time *(chuckles)*.

T: Now you mentioned the fear that came with this before. How much of that is repeated the second time?

W: Much more so.

T: Why is that?

W: These were combat troops fighting Russians, freshly off the kill if you will, and Russians take no prisoners. Germans take no prisoners. So we thought right there, boy, we're right in the middle of the worst possible battle we could be in. This isn't Americans against Germans—this is Germans and Russians. You don't know what they're going to do. So that was our big fear.

After getting out of there, they marched us up toward more or less the center of town and there was a tank ditch they had dug across. It was full of water and six or seven dead Germans in that water. So they made us take these Germans out of

there. There was one German soldier we had to pull out and when he did half his head fell off and the brains all over my pants. I kind of lost it. They made us throw these people in the back of a truck. So we throw the dead Germans in the back of the truck. That lasted all day long. Finally, toward evening, German troops came along and gave us some bread and little pieces of sausage and some water. We spent that night just laying around on the ground really. No place to go.

And the Russians in the meantime are firing on the outskirts of the town because the combat troops have set up an MLR, main line of resistance, outside of the town having reoccupied that area and were holding the Russians at bay. Just outside of that camp.

Now the guys that had been in the camp were now wards, if you will, of the Russians. So as I understand it from talking to different people over the years, the Russians told them that they could go back through Russia. So these guys had to march through Poland I believe, all the way to Odessa. Got on a British ship which went to Greece and then to the United States. Where we didn't. We were recaptured, and had to go through the same baloney again.

T: So this group, it sounds like, was split up and scattered around. Some fell into Russian hands and some, like yourself…

W: Yes. We were recaptured by the Germans. The vast majority fell into Russian hands.

T: Was there a repeat of the whole interrogation at point of capture kind of thing?

W: No. Not at all. Not a word. They knew we were Americans. You know, our uniforms—what was left of them. We had nothing that front line troops wanted, so there was no interrogation. The following morning they just lined us up along the fence. I remember a red-headed German guard came along and told us to follow him. So he marched us out of town down the road. We didn't know it. Now we were on the way to III-A.

T: Was there a fear at any point here that again that they might kill you?

W: Yes.

T: You had this before. You mentioned it.

W: Yes. Yes. Not much though. I think, as far as I'm concerned, I don't know much about the other, how the other people felt, but I'm sure they did. I knew there was Russians and Germans, and I knew they hated each other. Absolutely hated each other. They offered nothing according to the Geneva Convention. The Russians didn't belong to it and the Germans just thought they were subhuman. And I thought, while we were in the middle of this thing, some of that madness is going to overflow onto us. That's what I thought. Well, thank God, it didn't. And they recaptured us as prisoners of war and marched us out. We were just lucky.

(2, A, 113)

T: At what point did you begin to feel you could relax? I mean that you weren't in imminent danger again?

W: Not until the Russians came into III-A.

T: Really? So you had that sense of still unease as a POW?

W: Yes. Until the Russians actually came in.

T: Did you walk the whole way to III-A?

W: Yes.

T: That's a bit of a hike.

W: Oh, it's quite a ways. That was the torturous march. I've written about that. We lost several people. It was cold. In fact, it was probably one of the worst winters they had there at the time. It's freezing, and they'd march us for a distance and overnight, the first stop overnight, you wouldn't believe. There's no place to go. No place to put us except a plowed field. So we had to lay down in a plowed field. Two guys together in a spoon position so you wouldn't freeze to death.

T: It is cold. You're right.

W: Yes. That's where you laid all night long. Maybe the temperature is twenty-five. Enough to freeze to death. And your feet freezing. You're just freezing to death. And in the morning you just wake up like a zombie. And you got back on that road and start marching again. For food we had to dig out of the frozen fields rotten carrots, potatoes, anything we could dig up. Until we came to a farmhouse one night. They put us in the barn. And there was straw in the barn so we kind of got into the straw and got warm. But there were rats in the doggoned straw. Now they were starting to bite some of the…if a rat had bitten me, I'd have gone over the edge. That would have been the end. I would have run out of there screaming and yelling. It didn't. Thank goodness.

Next day, the Germans gave us a big metal bowl, like a cauldron of some kind and told us to make soup. Well, what? How? So you dig what you can. So we put some of those old rotten carrots in there, potatoes in there. Pulled up the weeds. Put it in there. Boiled that stuff with some water. Made a pretty decent tasting soup. Well, in the process, this woman in the farmhouse saw all this and she motioned a few of us like that. So I went to the door. She said, "Come in." So I came in the kitchen. She had a big pitcher of cold milk and she pointed to us. "Go ahead and drink it." I thought, geez, when you've got it, what will these guards say? Well, the

guards didn't care. But the woman gave us that milk. First real act of compassion I saw other than the woman that gave us shelter.

T: Yes. Yes.

W: So it kind of renewed my faith and, hey, this is the people I haven't been seeing. This is the real German. They're here.

T: How many of you were on this march from…

W: Oh, there was probably, I suppose, 100, 150 of us.

T: No Russians?

W: No. No. Just Americans. And then we picked up a column of other troops coming from somewhere. There I met a fellow I still correspond with today. He was captured in South Africa and they had brought him to Germany.

T: South Africa?

W: Yes. They brought him to Germany to some camp near the Oder River. There was other camps in there. And they were marching him out of that camp to III-A.

T: What nationality was he?

W: He's from Massachusetts. He's an American.

T: American.

(2, A, 154)

W: His name is Art Gage.

T: So here this group is swelling in size as they go on.

W: Yes. It turned out, that this III-A really was a melting pot for [POWs]. The Americans were coming this way. The Russians were coming that way. They were squeezing the Germans. Hitler put out an order to kill all the POWs. Execute them. Of course the Germans didn't do that. Instead they crammed us into this few camps that were left.

T: And III-A was one of those.

W: III-A was one of them. Yes. We got there after that march.

T: How many days were you underway? Can you estimate?

W: Oh, gosh, can't remember. On that march?

T: Yes.

W: Five or six.

T: That's about right, given the distance.

W: I think so.

T: And the nightly sleeping conditions were whatever you…

W: There wasn't any. Yes.

T: Whatever you came across.

W: Yes. One night the only shelter we had was one night in a barn. Other than that, you'd lay down where you could. The weather had moderated somewhat. It wasn't as cold as it gets here in the winter, but it was thirties.

T: Cold enough if you're sleeping outside.

W: Oh, gosh. Yes. I think all I had was my field jacket. They generally issued a field jacket and OD [Olive Drab] uniform. Pretty cold.

T: Yes. Yes.

W: You get a little numb.

T: Temperatures around fifty, but not for thirty.

W: No.

T: The Germans on this march. Were they actively guarding or passively guarding or what kind of contact did you have with them?

W: They were downtrodden as much as we were. The leader of the march was this red-headed German. He was a younger guy. He was more enthusiastic. In fact, he was singing to himself and things like that. But the rest of them were middle age people and one old guard that was walking alongside of us had a satchel over his arm. So when we stopped one time for a rest on the road he reached in there and he pulled out a piece of sausage. You know what I thought? Geez, I'm finally seeing the right Germans. And he cut those pieces up and gave us pieces of sausage.

T: You have a number of distinct memories of acts of kindness from individual Germans.

W: Yes. Yes.

T: And yet you saw the darker side as well.

W: I think I was looking for the kindness. Really.

T: Do you think so?

W: Yes. I could hardly believe…all people can't be that way. They were in the time of Ghengis Khan or somebody. But they can't all be that way. Even he must have had people that were good people. Downtrodden but good people.

(2, A, 184)

T: Yes.

W: So did the Germans. They had to have. German people are not what I was thinking they were.

T: Through the years since the end of the war, have you harbored resentment against the Germans or, in a sense, forgive and forget? How would you…

W: Yes. Sure. I have. But only against certain types. Unknown faces. I couldn't even remember who they are. I couldn't point one out. So it's really not very sensible to do that. But the memory says you've gotta…that kind of person…yes.

T: Like the ones at the railroad…after the bombing. That night.

W: That kind, and the kind at XII-A. Those were the type of Germans I didn't think existed. That must have been the type that killed the Jews. That's the type that…why? What motivated that? So yes, I did harbor resentment against Germans. Not as a total population certainly. You'd have to be out of your mind. But certain segments of that population, yes. How they involved… God only knows.

T: This is jumping ahead, but I'll pick it up now. Have you been back to Germany since 1945?

W: No. No.

T: Is that something that you would have or would be interested in doing, or not really?

W: Not really. No. I've been to England. England, Netherlands, walked through all the fields in the Netherlands where the Germans opened the dikes, and some of those fields are still wet today. Believe it or not. And Anne Frank's house [in Amsterdam] and things like that. But as far as going back to Germany, no I really haven't thought…

T: A number of guys have related stories of how they've wanted to or actually have gone back to see places they marched or camps they were in. How does that strike you?

W: Well, I don't think you'd find them anymore. Number one, the reason I say that is I have a good friend from the 29th Division who did go back. And he went back to Krusrath. He was a lieutenant. One of my good friends. And I got a whole thing from him. His whole itinerary. He went to the towns of Krusrath, Shirewaldenrath, and the other ones that I mentioned, and the Germans couldn't even recognize it. He would ask Germans, young Germans on the street, do you remember American troops here? No. We don't remember that. No, that's beyond our time. No. They don't deny they were there, but they don't remember it. And then he would go by a certain place where one of the camps were. I don't know if he went to Küstrin or not. But he went to one of the camps. One that he wasn't even in. But a known spot. There's no more trace of it. It's gone. It's a field. It's growing crops. It's just…it's gone. And the average young German today doesn't even recognize it or admit that it was there. So it kind of soured me on that. Why would I want to do that? Just to stand on the ground and say I was here? That's like saying, this is where the Pope walked.

T: Yes. That's right. That's very interesting. Let's talk about III-A. Luckenwalde.

W: Yes.

T: Now you've come now to a third camp.

W: Yes.

T: By this time you've got a frame of reference, or two of them actually, for what a camp can be like. How does Luckenwalde fit in this kind of scenario?

(2, A, 231)

W: It was another different one. They not only had Russian, Polish, Czechoslovakian, British, American, but they had Italians. I didn't realize the Italians were prisoners of war until I got to III-A. I guess some of them that didn't conform to…because I think Il Duce readily agreed with Adolf.

T: Yes.

W: But some of his troops didn't, so they incarcerated them. So I saw them for the first time. A jovial bunch. Here they were. Nothing to eat. And they were all just happy go lucky people. It was a different setup.

T: Was it from your perspective an improvement or a digression from, let's say, Küstrin?

W: Oh, from Küstrin it was a digression. Yes. Quite a bit. Because, I guess, there were so many people from so many different areas and the conditions were so much different. There wasn't any Red Cross food. I shouldn't say that. Yes, there was. I think we had one instance where they delivered something. So that's the only thing we ever got there. Küstrin we did get Red Cross food. A lot of the guys you'll probably talk to never even heard of Red Cross packages.

T: Enlisted men especially said they rarely if ever saw them.

W: That's right. I talked to them too. So I consider myself fortunate, because it was good food. But at III-A we didn't see it. So that was gone. After the Russians came and we were allowed to roam the camp, yes, we found it then. Warehouses full of it. But they never distributed it.

T: So it was there but somebody…

W: Never distributed it.

T: You spent from what looks like mid-January until the end of April?

W: Yes.

T: So three and a half months there.

W: At III-A. Yes.

T: You mentioned more and more prisoners coming here. What kind of barracks, quarters or sleeping conditions did you have here?

W: They were much larger. The barracks were much larger. Instead of divided into blocks there were a series of long buildings, long barracks. I don't know how many people were in there but it was altogether different. They had tables in there and some of the guys had playing cards that they had brought with them from…I don't know where they got them. So they had a little of that going on. But there was very little trading. There was very little to trade with, except pieces of bread or that type of thing. That's the first instance I ever saw…maybe somebody will tell you about this. I haven't had anybody else tell me about it. Except somebody that I knew. They had what they called a blower stove. They would take an empty can of Nestle milk and somehow cut a hole in that and make a blade like a fan and put a rubber

band or something around that crank and make a sort of, put a little fire down in the bottom and make a stove. So they'd put this bread, put water on the bread. Make a sour pudding out of that. I never had any of that. I just couldn't, you know.

T: Labor intensive too.

W: Yes. It was. Something to do.

T: Was something to do one of the issues here at Luckenwalde?

W: Yes. It certainly was. Yes. Because it was a mundane camp. There were people coming in every day. Every day new people coming in. But we did have one instance that really intrigued us. There was a guy came in. You'll probably find out that Stalags were the name, of course, for German prisoner or war camps. But the Air Force was in what they called Luft. Dulag Luft. Now only air people were confined in there.

T: That's right.

(2, A, 282)

W: There were no infantry men in there. Supposedly. But we had a guy come in III-A in a full nice leather jacket with boots on. Curly headed guy. All dressed up. He said he was with the 8th Air Force. And he had people believing that. He told this story about being shot down and he was with the 8th Air Force. I think they were trying to dig a tunnel. At least the British were. So evidently somebody leaked that to him or something, and nobody ever saw him again. So I don't know what happened to him. But the Germans evidently planted the guy. I had a tough time believing that [then], but now that I think back on that, I'm convinced that that guy was a plant.

T: So he was there to get information.

W: Sure. Planted by the Germans. He was an Air Force or Air Corps which was unusual for an Air Corps person in with the infantrymen. It just wasn't done.

T: Did you…the couple people whose names you've mentioned before, Jordan was one of them…

W: Jordan and Shortell.

T: Still with you here at Luckenwalde?

W: Yes. They both followed me.

T: So you've managed to stay together through all these…

W: The three of us did. Yes. There was one other fellow by the name of Mike Vacca, and he stayed with us too. In fact, we walked out of camp with him.

T: At Luckenwalde.

W: Yes.

T: So you really have moved and stayed together.

W: Yes. The three of us. We stayed all together.

T: How important was that to you to make sure this group stayed together?

W: Oh, just terrific. I was in combat with them. Bill Shortell was a mortar sergeant. Jordan was a platoon sergeant, and I was light machine gun. So we were pretty close. In combat the rifleman has the terrible duty. He's the guy up front. The guy in the hedgerow behind him is us. Light machine guns, mortars and what have you. You're not very far behind but you are behind. So we…great comradeship develops between you guys. So I was very delighted to stay with them.

T: Was this a friendship or comradeship that deepened while you were a POW? That became different in any way?

W: No. It just got better. Yes.

T: How about since the war has ended? Are these people you stayed in contact with?

W: They are both deceased. They are dead. Yes. I did. Jim Jordan never…he was from Waterbury, Connecticut. I could never really find anything out about him. Didn't have a computer at the time, or else I probably could have looked him up. Bill Shortell lived in Silver Spring, Maryland, and I corresponded with him for several years until he died. He went into the dry cleaning business, and he was a pretty successful guy. But he was my best friend.

T: So these are relationships that you kept up after the war. They meant enough to you that you…

W: Yes. They sure did.

(2, A, 326)

T: How much news did you have at Luckenwalde of how the war was progressing?

W: Some of the guys you might run into. We got a paper. They had a paper. At least some of the Battle of the Bulge fellows had a newspaper that, underground newspaper, that was typed up. How they did it, I don't know. But we got one at III-A. And it was pretty factual. They had ties in a crystal radio to the BBC, so they were getting some information. Enough to write down and tell you that the war is getting closer. It looks like we're going to be all over pretty soon. We had that hope. In III-A, we had a hope that it was going to be over. XII-A and III-C we never had that kind of hope.

T: So there was a sense of optimism that you can date to this one particular location.

W: Yes. Yes, there is. Yes.

T: How did that affect your own mood? I mean you hear good news going around, but how did you internalize that?

W: Well, I…as far as thinking it might end?

T: Yes.

W: I thought, as far as I was concerned, a great relief. I'm not a professional soldier. Never wanted to be a professional soldier. I wanted to get in and get out. Do what I had to do at least. You know, what you had to do. So it was my thought that I'm finally going to get out of this. Not only this POW mess, but the military. Forget it.

T: You were not thinking about a career in the military.

W: *(laughs)* No. No.

T: Some guys do, but most guys give the exact response you gave which was enough, thank you.

W: Yes.

T: And the daily routine you've described here at Luckenwalde was essentially a lot of killing time again.

W: More or less. Yes. We had a lot of fun going back and forth between the British compound and ours. Like I said at III-C. This was even better.

T: So you could move almost at will it sounds like.

W: Oh, yes. It was a brutal camp though. The Russians were in the next camp. And one night, a guy, why I don't know, the Russians were concentrated in their latrine.

T: So they were in a camp adjacent to yours?

W: Right through the barbed wire fence. The next camp over. And the Germans opened up on their roof of that latrine –

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 378.

T: You mentioned the Russians were in the adjacent compound here at III-A.

W: Yes. And for some reason the Germans opened up on the roof of the latrine with machine guns and, of course, the Russians come bailing out of that place. Men and women. The Russians, the Germans incarcerated women with the men. There was no thought of anything else but survival. They were treated like animals. So they all came running out of there and the Germans were mowing them down right across from us.

T: In their compound.

W: In their compound. And there was nothing we could do about it. They laid out there on that ground for about three days. The stench became pretty horrible. So the Germans started picking up the dead. But why they ever did that, I don't know.

T: So there was never any kind of explanation or even rumor about why this had happened. It just…

W: No. If there would have been they wouldn't have given it to you anyway. It was between the two, the Russians and the Germans. Just hated each other.

T: So there was that camp, and it seems like a different world almost than your own.

W: Yes.

T: And you mentioned going between compounds. Was it possible to go between the Russian compound and your own?

W: No. No. The Germans would not let you over there. No. Nor did we want to go over there. I hate to say that but we…

T: Really. And why do you say that?

W: The conditions over there were so deplorable that…

T: You could see the conditions were worse.

W: Oh, yes. Yes. <u>Filthy</u>. No toilet facilities, no food. You know, they just let them starve to death. So we had no desire to go over there.

T: So you could see once again that the Germans had different types of behavior possible.

W: For different people.

T: It's interesting you could see this too. You could see the different conditions in a way.

W: Yes. You could. Yes. We did have fun, if you will. If there was any fun. Going to the British compound. My good friend I mentioned, Bill Shortell, he was a pretty big guy. We got to know a British soldier over there. That British soldier had a nice jacket. I had an old tanker's jacket. I traded somehow. And the British guy had his nice short jacket, you know, the British jacket.

T: Yes.

W: Really. So vanity plays a part in this thing.

T: Really?

W: Yes. I thought, that's great. I'm going to get that. So I asked the British guy if he'd want this tanker jacket. Trade you for your jacket. Well, *(speaking with a British accent)* "I don't know," he said. "But I'll try." So he did. Or he told me to come over.

Me and Shortell come over the next night and he would have that there for me and in fact, he liked that jacket so much he would give me—the British term for cigarettes was fags—he would give me a package of fags. I said, "You're kidding." "Nope. I will." So we went over there, and we found the guy on his bunk. He didn't have any jacket. He said, "I don't have any jacket like that." So Shortell was a big guy. Shortell grabbed him by the shirt and he said, "That's not what you said. Now produce the jacket and those fags or you're going to have two black eyes right here!" And the guy said, "Just a minute, mate." So he went down under his bunk, got the jacket and the cigarettes. No problem.

T: What prompted his behavior at the beginning?

W: Who knows? I don't know *(laughing)*. I have no idea.

T: So you ended up with this British jacket…

W: Yes. Fit fine.

(2, B, 410)

T: Now you mentioned how it looks here. What difference did that make?

W: I guess it must have meant a lot to me *(chuckles)*. But…probably being degraded for so doggoned long. All of a sudden I saw a guy with a clean looking jacket. I'm going to look great in that thing *(chuckles)*. That's what it was.

T: Did you wear that out of the camp then?

W: Oh, yes.

T: Yes.

W: Yes. I wore that all the way to our freedom.

T: Holy cow! Now freedom came when you were at Luckenwalde there.

W: Yes.

T: But when you think of the three camps you were in, what was the most difficult personal aspect for you of those three locations? What was most difficult for you?

W: Oh, in regard to what?

T: Well, your daily existence or your state of mind if you will.

W: I guess the most traumatic part was your state of existence. You aren't kidding about that vanity thing. But I just kind of threw that in so…to me it's an old joke. But actually it had probably something to do with it. You felt so terrible. You looked so terrible. You looked like, you know, you wondered: can I make it back to what I was? I was just a young guy. I wasn't used to wearing a beard or shaving or stuff like that. I thought, get me cleaned up here. Take a shower or do something. So that was, that really wore on you all the time.

T: The kind of personal appearance. How you felt about yourself.

W: I think that was one primary thing. Yes. But not only me. I think everybody else did too. You get tired of lice crawling around in your clothes and filthy conditions. No bathing facilities as such. Maybe a water tap for sixty, seventy, one hundred guys. One cold water tap. That's all you had. You drank that water. You washed with it. So you think, hey, this has got to end. Just got to end.

T: Did you manage to keep up a sense of optimism or a sense of positive thinking for yourself?

W: I think in III-A, we did. It was pretty tough to look forward to any kind of optimism that things were going to change for the better in XII-A, and III-C maybe a little bit. But you still were apprehensive about what's going to happen. Who's going to win this thing? We hoped we would. But then you get different tales from

the Germans, and they'd kind of make you go down a bit. So I think at III-A, optimism came into it. Sure. In III-A especially. Roosevelt died.

T: That's right. April 12.

W: Yes. Now he was…he was a hero. Politically…baloney. But I mean, I don't want to get into his politics or anything. That's what we thought. This is the leader of the country. No matter who he was. So he died.

T: The Germans passed this news to you or you found out yourself?

W: Got it on the underground radio. So I guess the day after he died that went through the camp. So the whole camp came out and stood at attention for three minutes. The Germans couldn't figure out what in the world is going on. All these guys are out there standing at attention. It was in honor of the president. So I guess we felt a real sense of loss when we lost Roosevelt. Because it wasn't his political thing. This is a leader. Whether it was Roosevelt, Kerry, Bush, whoever.

T: So it kind of crossed political lines or…

W: Yes. It did.

(2, B, 443)

T: Or political opinions.

W: Yes. Yes. This was the leader of the country. This was the guy that thumbed his nose at Germany. And Japan. He was our hero. As a leader. Not politically, but as a leader. So that made an impression on us, and I think it made an impression on the Germans. After they found out what we were doing. Here's a bunch of guys standing at attention. Nobody ever did that before.

T: That's a date that comes up. I'm also…just glancing and realize that you turned twenty-one years old in III-A there.

W: I sure did.

T: Did that make a difference to you? Did you notice that your birthday had come and gone?

W: No. I didn't *(laughs)*. No. I guess later on I realized I'm twenty-one. But February came and went like it wasn't even there.

T: Really?

W: Yes.

T: Were you aware of the date, really, as things went on or was time more a relative thing?

W: Very seldom. Yes. Very seldom. You knew it was Wednesday or you knew it was Thursday. But as far as it was the fifteenth of this month or the sixteenth, you had to get some kind reference. Somebody heard it on the radio. So it was lost. We didn't have the…no reference to it.

T: One thing with references. Did you have references to home. Your folks were still alive at this time.

W: Sure.

T: And you had two brothers and a sister.

W: My mother was deceased. She died when I was a kid. My dad was alive.

T: Were you able to communicate with them when you were a POW?

W: Yes.

T: Did you get any messages from them?

W: Yes. We got…oh, in fact, I can show you those. We got several what they used to call…I can't think of the name of it now.

T: V-mails?

W: V -mail. Yes. The Germans let us send those occasionally. And we got an occasional one from home. Mainly at III-C and III-A. Never at XII-A. We didn't start getting that ability until III-C. Then we did get word from my sister, my dad, my brother. My other brother was a Marine, and he was in the South Pacific so, I think I got one from him.

T: But he knew too where you were. He had got the news that you were a POW.

W: Yes. From the family. Yes. They sent a telegram, you know.

T: Yes. So your dad and your family had received a telegram eventually about your whereabouts.

(2, B, 468)

W: Yes.

T: Now what kind of things did you get? What kind of things were you able to tell them? I mean it seems like this is a circumscribed situation as far as passing of information back and forth.

W: You didn't say much. I think…if I show you one, it just says I'm alive and well. Don't worry. I'll be home soon. That kind of stuff.

T: Did you…

(Break in interview)

T: It's at the end of April that the Russians do actually get to III-A, and I'm wondering what you recall about the time when the Russians actually got to your camp.

W: Yes. I recall that very well. About two days before [the Russians arrived], a German officer came in the barracks and told us that in no uncertain terms the Russians were at the town's edge. Luckenwalde. And we should not go outside. He said, for your own safety do not go outside. You will be shot. And he said, I'm not sure by who, but you'll be shot. So he said, stay inside.

He was correct. They were there. So two days later, early in the morning, we heard this big rumble, and here came three or four Russian tanks right through the gate. Didn't open it. Just right through the gate. Just knocked it right down. Wall, fence and all. And driving one of them out, at least in the turret, was a woman. And she was standing up and waving and she stopped and we all climbed on that tank, on the treads, and she gave us halves of cigars. The worst thing I've ever had in my life *(chuckles)*. We lit that and I couldn't breathe for a month.

T: Oh, my gosh.

W: And then vodka. Pour it out in a tin cup. She gave us vodka. It was like drinking gasoline. I've never had any liquor during all that time. And it was the <u>worst</u> tasting stuff. Apparently they loved that. And this Russian woman in full combat [gear]. Then behind her came more tanks and more trucks and more troops. And they just took over the camp.

T: This time, from when the German announces to you, hey, the Russians are coming. Stay in your barracks. What's going through your mind about this whole situation?

W: Well, you know, I guess having seen these Russians and Germans fighting each other, nothing much changed. I thought when he came in that barracks to tell us, you go outside and be shot, we might very well be shot <u>inside</u>. How do we know? It's just…we didn't trust anybody. Least of all the Germans. Next the Russians.

T: Were there conversations about what's going to happen next?

W: Yes. Yes. There was a lot of anxiety then. Knowing that the Russians were on the outside of the gate. And especially from a small group like us, who had been liberated by the Russians once. Shot at by the Russians. We knew what they could do. So we were very worried. We thought, oh, my gosh, here we go again.

T: So you've got, in a sense, liberation staring you in the face but it isn't an overwhelming joy that you're experiencing.

W: No. No. It was fear. Because we had been through it. We saw the Russians come in to Kustrin. We knew what they could do. And we knew what they probably would do. We knew what they did do to us. They shot at us. They killed us.

T: That's right. On the walk out of III-C.

W: Sure. They killed our people. Whether or not they knew it I don't know, but the fact that remained in our mind, hey those are my guys you're killing out there. Those aren't Germans. Those are…

(2, B, 507)

T: So here these Russians arrive. You've got this image of the woman in the tank and the vodka and the horrible cigar. What is going through your mind now?

W: Well, I think after that died down then we realized, hey, they're not going to harm us. They wouldn't give us a cigar and then shoot us. Or vodka. They might give us the vodka and shoot us but –

T and W: – not the cigars *(both laugh)*.

W: So I think we realized then that we're going to be okay. They aren't going to harm us anymore.

T: Where were the German guards?

W: We don't know. They're gone. Oh, except for one. There's an old, like World War I type guard. Link was his first name; he was in charge of the barracks—the master sergeant. And the old German came in one night before this German soldier came in [to warn us], and asked for asylum. Link understood some German, so he spoke to him. The old guy wanted…he knew when the Russians came in he'd be killed. He said, "They'll kill me. I've got grandchildren. They'll kill me." So Link says, "I'll tell you what you do. We've got some old scrap uniforms here. Get into that. Get in that bunk. Cover yourself up and you're one of us." I never heard whatever happened, but that's what they did for that guy.

T: Did they really?

W: Yes. So we at least helped somebody. But he knew when the Russians came in, being a German soldier, they'd wipe him out. So, as I mentioned, he was an old guy and he had grandchildren he wanted to see again. So, you know…

T: The other German guards disappeared.

W: We don't know what happened to them, no. Apparently they just got out of there. For their safety. They would have been killed. Or possibly they were killed anyway, fleeing the place. But there wasn't an awful lot of firing into the camp. There wasn't much firing. There was a lot of activity with Russian vehicles breaking down fences and so forth, but no real firing so that eased our minds too. When they came through and the shots fired…all the firing was in Luckenwalde. Not in the camp.

T: When the Russians arrived, how did they take over the camp? Did they start to administer it or was it anarchy?

W: No. They [the Russians] set up a headquarters. In the town of Luckenwalde. As far as the camp goes, they sent officers in there to control that. In fact they let us move from the old barracks into the edge of town, into former Hitler Youth barracks. Unbelievable.

T: So you were physically out of the actual camp pretty quickly.

W: Yes. Yes.

T: Everyone or just your barracks or…

W: No. They evacuated the camp. They put them in Hitler Youth barracks on the edge of Luckenwalde. Unbelievable place. Thick woolen blankets. Good food. Everything you needed. That lasted two days.

T: And then what?

W: They put the Russian soldiers in there and sent us back to the camp.

T: So you were back in III-A again.

W: Yes *(laughing)*. Right back. So it didn't last very long. But some of us picked up some souvenirs, so we traded…which we lost anyway. But it was a souvenir utopia. You could have had anything you wanted in the Hitler Youth camp. They had armbands. They had helmets. They had daggers that said "Blut und Honor." Herman Goering stuff. Anything you wanted.

(2, B, 545)

T: So here was this…was there a temptation to pick that stuff up for trade?

W: Sure. Yes. But of course when we did, we moved back to III-A again. We left it all there. Never brought it back. But the Russians who then took our spot…must have made millionaires out of every one of them.

T: Holy cow! So within a couple days you've gone to this other facility. Now you're back at III-A…

W: Yes.

T: And is news being communicated to you as prisoners of what's going to happen and when?

W: No. No. Not by the Russians. The Russians did send a communiqué to—Link Ford was his name—to Link telling him that we would be allowed to roam free in the city of Luckenwalde. That we could go into town. Imagine that. Let us go in. So we took advantage of that. Moving around, we found some German homes. They would let us in. They would give us cabbage and potatoes and things we never had before. Then we went into the Russian headquarters and they made us sit in a room. There was probably fifty of us. They made us sit there and wait for this particular officer. He couldn't speak English and we couldn't speak Russian. But he came out and he had an orderly and a cart with white bread on it. With brown, nice golden brown crust, and he gave it to about every other guy. A loaf of that bread. What a deal that was!

T: So food's coming now.

W: Yes. The Russians were confiscating it, it wasn't their food. It was what the Germans already had. But the better part of the Germans again did have it. But anyway, they were supplying it to us which was nice. But then, Link had communicated with them some way to ask if they would get in touch with American troops who were approaching the Elbe River and ask if they could send a convoy up to pick us up and take us back to their lines. The Russians refused.

T: This was being told to you. You realized the Russians…

W: Yes. They said no. You're going to have to communicate and stay with the Russians. We will determine where you're going to go. Thinking all the time they'd send us back to Russia. If they ever did that, Lord only knows where we'd end up. Maybe Siberia.

T: Was there rumors among the men about what might happen or what to expect? These kind of conversations?

W: Yes. A little bit. Not a great deal. But there was some. Yes. What might happen if indeed we said, well, we'll just wait for the Russians. Let them do what they will. I guess we decided, at least Bill Shortell, Jim Jordan, and myself and that Mike Vacca, decided we weren't going to do that. I'm not going to do that. Enough is enough! So we thought how can we get out of here? How <u>can</u> we get out of here?

T: How long did it take in days, if you can estimate, before you came to that kind of a conclusion? Taking two days? Twenty days?

W: Oh, maybe a week. Because we were allowed to go into town, and that was a big deal for us.

T: Yes. Talk about that. I mean, here you are in a German town that has been damaged by the war, Luckenwalde, but there are German civilians there.

W: Yes.

(2, B, 584)

T: Is the war over yet?

W: No. Not yet. Still going on. But there's sniping around the edge of the city. The Germans and Russians.

T: I'm wondering about the interaction between these—yourself as POWs and the civilians. What was that like?

W: They kind of welcomed us.

T: They knew who you were obviously.

W: They knew we were Americanski. Amerikaner. They knew that and there was kind of a sense of, not a real comrade feeling, but you could tell they liked us. Some of them even kind of had compassion written on their face. I think. As to what we had suffered. Some of them knew what we had suffered. They themselves had suffered, you know, because they didn't have the proper food. But they knew we weren't getting it. It was going to the population first, and anything that was leftover going to the POWs. These, by the way, were some of the same Germans as when we had walked on that march. [When we] marched through some of the small villages [they] would throw garbage at us.

T: This is the march from Kustrin to Luckenwalde.

W: Yes.

T: So you had abuse from civilians along the way.

W: Yes. But that's that group again. You know, that I never could figure out who they were. So I think in that town of Luckenwalde they felt a little bit more akin to us than they had before. Well, the Russian presence certainly helped. Because I think walking down the street the Russians, every Russian soldier had a girl in his arm.

T: Really?

W: Oh, yes. She better be. You know. This was a brutal bunch, the Russians. I think every Russian soldier that walked down the street, we saluted. We didn't know if it was an officer or who he was. I don't think the Russians been saluted that many times in his whole life.

T: Was there a sense of intimidation or fear from these Russian soldiers on your part? As you walked in town like that.

W: I don't think we were…not afraid of them. Yes. There was a fear, apprehension as to what they might do. It's like saying hello to a stick of dynamite really. They'd been through some awful things. They'd seen their families wiped out, their farms burned, their land scorched, their women raped, children killed. You can't blame them. And no love for the Germans. None whatsoever. A lot of that could fall out and land on you if you weren't careful. You never knew.

T: It didn't take you long—to pick up your story from a moment ago—that you kind of talked among yourselves, you four guys, that you weren't going to stick around here. Did you really come to the decision you were just going to kind of leave?

W: Yes.

T: How did that transpire?

W: Just got together. Jim Jordan especially. I got to give him credit. He said, "I'm not going to take this anymore. These Russians aren't going to let us go. Do you want to go to Russia?" And of course I didn't want to go to Russia. "Well, why don't we walk out of here? Who's going to stop us?" Of course we said, the Russians are. They're going to stop you. He said, "Well, let's find out."

(2, B, 627)

T: Was that clear? That you really weren't free to leave?

W: That's right. Yes. They sent a directive around. They would not allow any American convoy in to pick us up. That, in effect, tells us we won't let you go. You're going to do what we want to do. So one morning we just…there was a woods. You walked through the gate of the camp, and there was a wood. Not much from here,

maybe a couple blocks over. So you walked through the woods. You came to the main road. Well, the three of us sat down on the main road and vehicles were going by. Down the road, the Germans…maybe in Germany you may have come in contact with a three-wheeled vehicle. This old three-wheeled vehicle's small but it had a back on the back with a tarp over it and it was weaving down, you know, it was very unstable. Weaving down the road with two Russians and they were really bombed out of sight. Drunk. So we waved them down. We thought this was our opportunity. So they had big smiles and they motioned in the back of the truck. So we got in the back and there were two dead pigs in there. So the three of us just squatted down—four of us really—under all that tarpaulin with those pigs. Pulled the tarp over us and they proceeded up to the roadblock. That's how the Russians were keeping people in and out.

T: So a security checkpoint really.

W: Yes. And when they got there we, of course, didn't dare move in there. We heard all kinds of laughter and backslapping and jovial…bottles clinking. They knew these two clowns that were driving that thing and security was lost. They let them go right on through with us in the back. So we drove down probably, oh, maybe fifteen miles. Finally we came to a screeching halt and the Russian got out. Still a big grin on his face and told us, "Out! Out!" So we got out and began our march from there to the Elbe River and the Americans. That's how we did it.

T: This march. Just the four of you?

W: That's all.

T: Any Russians around?

W: Yes. Yes. Ran into one group. Came to a farm, well, we came to an abandoned railroad where the cars were all burned so we got into the railroad car. Built a fire in there for overnight. Get warm. And we saw a farmhouse over there so we went over there to get some food. And there was a Russian vehicle in the front yard. A halftrack or something. And there were two Russian soldiers sitting in there talking and smoking a pipe and we approached and, boy, they were right away up came the rifles. We were not armed. Told them, "Americanski. Americanski." So they motioned us over and, "Oh, Da! Da!" And they patted us on the back and he said, "House. House." So we went in the house. There was an old German and his wife and she said, "Would you like some food?" Yes, we would. So she sat us down. Gave us two boiled potatoes and I think they had a sliced tomato and some milk. That's the best thing we ever…and some decent bread. They fed us pretty well. That night they put us up in the barn and let us sleep in the barn. Gave us a blanket and so forth. And during the night we heard all kinds of machine gun firing. All kinds. Real close. Never found out what that was.

I woke up in the morning. The farm family was still there, but the Russians were gone. Of course we couldn't speak German. They couldn't speak English so we

don't know what happened. Apparently during the night some kind of a firefight broke out.

T: Between the Russians and the…

W: It must have been a patrol, or a scavenger bunch of Germans, or something. But anyway, that's the only time we ever saw the Russians again.

T: From here did you just move to American lines? How did you know which way to go?

W: We knew that. Yes. We just moved…we just marched west. We knew the Russians were east so we just…we knew where the west was. The sun. So we kept going west all the time until we came to the Elbe River. We came to the Elbe River, the bridge between—I can't remember the name of the town—anyway, between the German side and the American side, was blown. The bridge was blown. So the only way you had to cross the bridge, you had to cross those girders.

(2, B, 688)

T: That were collapsed or…

W: Yes.

T: How long was this walk between where the Russians let you off this vehicle and the Elbe River?

W: Oh, my gosh! Geez. Well, I don't know. You'd have to look at a map.

T: Like a day? A week?

W: Oh, it had to be a few days.

T: So you were marching and sleeping…

W: Yes. It had to be a few days. I can't tell the distance.

T: Rather uneventful? Just kind of walk…

W: Well, we ran into a few firefights. There were pockets of Germans that were still in the countryside and the Russians had bypassed them and were now ferreting them out. So there were firefights. You could see down in the field. Every once in a while you would hear some firing going on and you'd see some Russian scurry across the field here, and Germans out here, and they'd be shooting the Germans down. One German was riding a horse. Not too far from us. And a Russian soldier

came up out behind a tree and the German stopped, and the guy just shot him right off that horse. Blew him away. So we thought…

T: Close enough for you to see.

W: Oh, yes. Yes. So they were still battling it out. The war hadn't come to an end yet.

T: Did you fear for yourself through all this stuff or…

W: Sure. Yes.

T: Because you could have been, in theory, captured by the Germans again or killed or whatever.

W: By the Russians or whoever. Yes. Captured by the Germans we probably would have been shot. But I think that they were probably at that point, thank goodness, too busy trying to control their own life. Trying to save their own life. Because the Russians were all over the place. The Russians were there. They were in Berlin.

T: Yes.

W: They were all over the countryside. Luckenwalde was very close to Berlin.

T: Yes. It's just south. When did you hear about the war being over?

W: In the American camp.

T: When you got there. So you had to cross these girders? Was that a traumatic thing or not?

W: Yes. Oh, boy! Yes. The muddy Elbe River is down there. Fifty, sixty feet below. So Bill Shortell, Jim, and myself would get on a girder, straddle it and inch yourself across that way. Mike Vacca <u>walked</u> across those like it was nothing. Just <u>walked</u> across the girder. We were amazed. This guy walked across there without falling.

T: How far down to the water?

W: Oh, fifty feet. Muddy old Elbe down there. But the first thing we saw was a patrol of Americans.

(2, B, 729)

T: On the other side.

W: On the other side. One guy was a corporal so he said, "Who are you guys?" We told him we were POWs. My gosh! He had a camera. He took pictures. And we asked him, "Is there any way we can get those copies of?" Sure. Give me your name and address. So we did. We never heard a word *(chuckles)*. I'd like to see him. But that was the first group. Then that patrol took us back to the camp wherever the camp was. I don't know what unit it was, what division of the Army it was. But there was a large cook tents out there. So they brought us in there and two doctors came in. And the doctor said, "Where are the POWs here?" And I said, "Right here, Sir." So they came over and he said, "Don't you guys move." So they brought us in bowls of oatmeal, toast and coffee. Gourmet.

T: It must have felt like it.

W: Oh, the finest restaurant in the world didn't compare *(laughs)*.

T: Is this a point in time where you finally were able to exhale, kind of relax?

W: Yes. Yes. Yes. We knew it was over. We knew it was over. So we stayed in the camp with the Americans till they could arrange to get us back down. Most of the Americans were liberated by the Americans. They were sent to Camp Lucky Strike in France.

T: That's right.

W: And they were sent home that way. We didn't go there. We went –

End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: You didn't go to Camp Lucky Strike.

W: No.

T: They packed you on a C-47 and off you went to Bristol, England.

W: Yes. Yes. The medical personnel put us on a C-47. Went to Bristol. Then they quartered us at—I can't remember the hospital—they called it hospital plants in those days. So we were in hospital plant in Bristol for rehabilitation. We're all walking wounded. Thank goodness. So we were able to go into Bristol. First (***) in a British town. Boy, it was just something. And they treated us like kings. There is one nationality in this world that does like us, and that's the British. The British were glad to see us. We were glad to see them. So we had a great time in Bristol. We went to the pubs. We had just a terrific time.

T: Were you starting to feel better physically pretty quickly?

W: Yes. Yes. They had, I can't think of what it was, what kind of a treatment for dysentery. But it was pretty darned good. I don't think it's ever left me the rest of my life. But they certainly arrested it and they cleared up a rash. They had some sort of salve and so forth. When you first saw the doctors in those tents they made a big deal out of looking at the lice out of the clothes.

T: Really? This is in Germany still.

W: No. This was Americans. The Americans.

T: But in Germany rather. When you first saw Americans.

W: Right. And they of course wondered, you know, how did you ever live with those things? You know. Well, it wasn't very easy. But I think going into Bristol and seeing British people, good old normal human beings again if you will, was a big uplift.

T: Spiritual uplift in a way.

W: Oh, yes. Sure.

T: You stuck together with these three other guys?

W: I correspond with…

T: I mean in Bristol. I'm sorry.

W: Oh, yes. Yes.

T: The four of you really have followed every step of the way.

W: Yes. Well, Jim Jordan had a severe wound. He had a bleeder of some type, wouldn't stop. He stayed in Germany. Over there.

T: How old was that wound? Was that a new one?

W: No. It's an old one. Kept reoccurring. Kept opening up and the Germans, they didn't have the facilities for him. I don't know what it was. Something with his neck here. He stayed behind. But Bill Shortell, Mike Vacca, and myself, we all went over.

T: How long were you kept in Bristol?

W: That was probably until about May 15. Right in there. In Bristol. And then went to hospital in Bristol, after that they told us they were going to send us home. They sent us home by hospital ship. The *Blanche F. Sigmund*. Named after a World War I nurse. A Liberty ship. And that was kind of a delightful cruise, because we knew we

were going home. Going to Charleston, South Carolina. And we had to stop every once in a while, especially around the Azores while the doctors operated on somebody and they'd drop anchor and then we'd go again. So it took a long time.

T: So England down to the Azores and then across. That was okay.

W: Yes.

T: Yes.

W: And then, like I said, they had to operate on these people. We had to be still.

T: Yes.

W: But it was a lot of fun on board that ship. We had a lot of fun.

T: How did you pass the time on the ship?

W: Oh, we had good food, number one. We had darned good food. Every morning.

T: You would notice that, wouldn't you?

W: Oh, yes. Bacon and eggs *(laughs)*. I didn't even know there was any chickens left. But they treated us very well. We passed the time by movies. *(phone rings)*

T: Other POWs on board the ship too or were you kind of…

W: Yes. Sure. No. There was not a great number of them. But there were mostly combat wounded. There were a lot of POWs.

T: Among yourselves, or the other POWs that you might have met on board the ship, how much did you talk about your POW experience?

W: With non-POWs?

T: Or with other POWs.

W: Oh, other.

T: Is this something you compared experiences?

W: Yes. Yes. Because there were so many different things. Some guys would say, you got all those Red Cross packages? I didn't get a thing. And some of them would say, boy, we ran into some real good people. Others would say we had just a rotten time. So it's altogether different.

(3, A, 43)

T: So really comparing and contrasting.

W: Yes.

T: And outside the group of POWs? Was your experience a topic of conversation when you met people were not POWs?

W: No. No. Came home and got married in September.

T: Now your wife, Catherine, was somebody you knew before you went overseas.

W: Yes. I don't believe anybody even asked me anything about being a POW.

T: This is the next thing I wanted to get into is, really, the last part of it is the postwar. When you got back to the States, and South Carolina, how soon before you saw your family? Your dad, sister and brother.

W: Well, the first thing they did for us, they sent us to Charleston, South Carolina, to the hospital, Stark General Hospital, and we were there for a while. I can't tell you how long. From there I was from the Midwest and they transferred me to Gardner General Hospital in Chicago and then discharged me out of there back to Fort Snelling and then I was with the family. It was about September. And they sent me from there to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for rehabilitation and then back home. So it was probably from May to…probably didn't see them until June, and then briefly saw them. Then after Hot Springs, Arkansas, they sent me to Camp Crowder, Missouri. Reassigned me to the Signal Corps and discharged me.

T: You were discharged in…when were you discharged? Late '45?

W: 1945. Yes.

T: When you first saw you're your brother and your sister, your dad, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

W: Not a great deal. Not really a great deal. My brother did. The Marine.

T: From the Pacific.

W: Yes.

T: Who had not been a POW.

W: No. But my dad didn't. My dad was just wondering mostly about your wellbeing, and thank God you weren't killed, and that kind of thing, you know. As far as, you

know, what was it like in the POW camp, my two brothers at the time, the one that you've got there…it was Jim and Mel. Mel was the oldest, and he was the most interested.

T: Because he was the Marine or not?

W: No.

T: Jim was the Marine.

W: Jim was the Marine. The older one was not in the service and he's the one you got all the V-mail from. So he was very interested. Yes.

T: Did he ask you questions and he wanted to know the details in a sense?

W: Yes, he did. Yes.

T: How forthcoming were you?

(3, A, 68)

W: Not very much. Not very much. Believability. It's hard for me to understand somebody who doesn't believe me. You going to believe that? Are you going to believe that this is Bill Hall telling you this? Do you believe that?

T: So rather than tell your brother what you really went through, you kind of give him a sanitized or shortened version?

W: Yes. Just held it in. Told him, oh, you know, it was pretty tough, but it was okay.

T: That's more a case of he was asking and you were reluctant to tell.

W: Absolutely. Yes.

T: Your sister and your dad didn't really ask much?

W: Not about the POW. No.

T: Now, you had a Marine brother, and you yourself had combat experience. Did they ask you about that kind of stuff?

W: Oh, yes. Yes.

T: So it was the POW they didn't ask about.

W: No. It was kind of a secondary thing. On the other hand, I didn't offer very much.

T: This was the next question. Whether they didn't ask or you didn't tell.

W: Yes. You know, if they would have mentioned something, which they probably did. I can't remember. But they might have mentioned certain things, wanting to know certain aspect. I probably didn't offer anything. Ahh, it's all over.

T: Would you, or did you, at the time, find it easier to talk about your time as a combat soldier?

W: Yes.

T: Why is that?

W: It wasn't as traumatic. Yes, it was. What am I talking about? It was probably worse. But it was easier to talk about. People knew more about it from movies, radio, the combat conditions of World War II. They didn't know a single thing hardly about POWs. They didn't know about that.

T: When did you land in France? I never even asked you.

W: Normandy.

T: So from June through October you were a combat soldier.

W: Yes.

T: And that was something that you found easier to sit down and have a conversation about.

W: Yes. Yes.

T: That's very interesting.

W: Yes. I think that one reason though is that it was familiar to people. People knew. They knew all about that. They read the books. They read the newspapers. They saw it in the movies. They see it. They didn't see anything about POWs. They didn't learn about the Holocaust for heaven's sake until after the war.

T: Yes.

W: So then it exploded on them like a bomb.

T: So your Marine Corps brother, for example, he was in combat in the Pacific?

W: Yes. Yes.

(3, A, 92)

T: Here's a person who you could relate to, each bring your own combat experience.

W: Oh, yes.

T: And talk about those fairly openly?

W: Yes. Because it was all so different. So much different.

T: Where was he in the Pacific? Do you remember?

W: Yes. He was on Tarawa, and I think he was on the Canal for a short period of time.

T: He was through some serious stuff.

W: Yes he was. Yes. And then he was reassigned. After the war he was reassigned to the airbase as part of the complement over in Minneapolis, and from there they sent him back to Tokyo.

T: Occupation troops?

W: Yes. He was in Tokyo for a while.

T: So this is something you found easier to talk about with your combat experience.

W: Yes. Very much so.

T: Very interesting.

W: Yes.

T: When you got married…now Catherine you knew from growing up? Your wife.

W: Yes. During teenage times.

T: Somebody you had known for a while.

W: Yes.

T: When you got back and saw her again, and even when you were first married, how much did she ask about your POW experience?

W: There again, I don't think I let her. I wouldn't get into it. I didn't want to have to burden her with that kind of stuff. I think I felt as though: who else cares? Well, they did. I didn't understand that. Today I do. People like you. For heaven's sake. What you're doing. But I kind of thought, who wants to know about that? Number one, you aren't going to believe me. You going to believe that happened to me? No. That's what I felt.

T: Did that carry over to your life in the banking world too? With people you worked with, co-workers, employees?

W: No. I kind of opened up a little bit there. They would ask more direct questions. They had heard that the guy was a soldier and that kind of stuff. So they would ask about POWs. Yes.

T: And with direct questions you would answer direct questions?

W: As best as I could at the time. Sure.

T: Ironically, what I think I'm hearing is that perhaps your coworkers knew more than your wife?

W: *(laughing)* I think, probably. I'm probably over exaggerating that. Maybe I'm trying to be too protective here. But no. About the same.

T: Would you say that you were very forthcoming with details, or was there still a part of it that only Bill Hall knew?

W: There's only a part of it that I knew. In the first place, to tell them that I had, in effect, escaped from one group into another…it would be very difficult to say anything…I saw that in the movies. Is that what you're telling me? *(chuckles)*

(3, A, 120)

T: They had no frame of reference, in other words.

W: Not really. If they did it would be related to some midnight movie.

T: It's interesting that we're sitting here today. Now you had three children. As they grew up, how much did they know about their dad? In the POW experience.

W: Not a great deal until, oh, until they had reached their teenage years. As small children they didn't. They had no interest in that. Later on my oldest son [was] very interested. And now my younger son. He's probably most interested of them all. He wants to know everything all the time. He wants to know about it. Then he keeps saying he appreciates that. I told him, you don't have to appreciate it anymore. It's done. Just think of the people that never came back.

T: Yes. That's true.

W: Yes.

T: The interview that we're having today, you've been most forthcoming about talking about your POW experience.

W: Thanks.

T: Is this something that had I come to you in 1960 or 1980 and made the same request, how might you have responded to me?

W: I think I would have delayed it. I probably would have told you well, maybe later on. Let me think about it.

T: You certainly would have been…you couldn't imagine yourself saying yes immediately or sitting down and having the same level of conversation.

W: I don't think so. No. I don't think so.

T: The Veterans Administration is one of the last things I want to ask about. You make use of the Veterans Administration now…

W: Yes.

T: As far as a discussion group for POWs.

W: Yes.

T: When did you first get involved in that?

W: Gee, it's got to be six years ago.

T: And how did that come about?

W: Well, I was having tremendous nightmares. I've had them ever since coming out of the service and they were getting pretty bad. Especially watching that History Channel. That would affect me something terrible. I didn't know how to tune it out. And it would come up during the night. And make it tough on everybody. So I decided I have to do something about that. I can't let that go on all the time. So then I went out and asked to see the Psychiatric Department. See if they could help me. And they did.

T: So you took the first step to go ask them.

W: Yes, I did. Yes. They didn't come to me. No.

T: These nightmares or dreams. Have those bothered you since the end of the war? In varying degrees.

W: Ever since. Yes. Yes.

T: Are there certain images that recur that you can count on making return visits…

W: Yes. One in particular, I guess. It just comes up all the time. I can hear it. It was a firefight in the hedgerow country. It was around St. Lo or someplace, and we had a lot of people wounded, killed there. Well, one of them was wounded and laying out in the field. And we didn't know that, so we pulled back to set up a defense and during the night we hear the guy calling out. "Help me! Please help me!" Well, a couple of guys did. They got up and tried to get out there, and they got killed. The Germans wiped them out. So we just…we couldn't do it. We couldn't go get this guy. I never found out what happened to him, and during the night the voice just disappeared. We don't know whether the Germans got him or he died or what. It's always troubled me.

(3, A, 160)

T: The voice.

W: Yes. Why didn't I…why didn't you get up and go get him? Were you afraid? You bet! You bet! But it's a heck of a thing to say you were afraid and give up on a guy that needs help but you just couldn't do it. Several of them tried. So we knew there was no hope. That keeps coming back.

T: Were there any of your nighttime memories from your POW experience time or were they mostly from the combat experience?

W: No. That train thing. I think about that all the time. That was a…

T: The trip over to III-C.

W: Yes. When the British bombed the railroad yard. It was the most stressful period of my…it's the most stressful thing I can think of. It was <u>horrible</u>! You remember in your history. Go way back to the Black Hole of Calcutta. It was reminiscent of that kind of stuff. You couldn't get out of there. You know. If you could just open the door and jump out and run. Even hide under the boxcar. But you couldn't get out.

T: So you were trapped.

W: Yes. It felt like a…bee in a bottle or something.

T: What from that particular experience is the recurring image that you dream about?

W: I think probably the people that I knew that are lost or gone. I see them all the time.

T: The people from the boxcar.

W: Yes. And other people that…oh, from III-A. I know a lot of people there. Like probably today if they walked down the street I wouldn't recognize them. But in my mind I can see a face. I don't know who it is, but I know him. Yes. I think that reoccurs more than anything.

T: In a sense, you have really two sets of traumatic experiences. One that you can talk about, which is the combat experience. That's in a way, I forgot about that. That's one thing that could also be in there as well as this POW thing. Some guys have one or the other. In a sense, you have both. You're not blessed with both, but you've got both.

W: Yes.

T: Boy! How much help has the Veterans Administration provided, do you think, in the six years you've been going to them?

W: I think as best they can. I shouldn't say they're understaffed, but they're overpopulated.

T: With people you mean.

W: With patients. Yes. And I think that hinders them to a certain extent. I think sometimes, not me. I haven't done that, but I know some people that have. Get the idea, that hey, I'm so old now they don't care about me anymore. You know, let's go on to somebody here we can help. We can save. That old guy's going to die anyway. That's their feeling. That's terrible. But I don't think they feel that way. If they do they're in bad shape. I think the VA has done the best they can. There's a lot of mistakes out there.

(3, A, 197)

T: Do you feel they've been able to help you as far as dealing with memories or nightmares, these kinds of things?

W: Yes. Sure. They have. Yes. I have some medication to take and consultation with doctors and so forth. Yes. They've helped me. Sure. Because they understand.

T: They are sympathetic.

W: They are. Yes. They understand. They're very…I have to say that the personnel, to me, are sympathetic. There's a sign down there. It says when you go to the cafeteria, "Welcome to America's Heroes." Well, that's not true. They're not all heroes. But it's a fine feeling to think people think that way. So they've done some real good I think.

T: How has talking about things, your POW experience or combat experience over the years, helped you? I mean this interview today, for example, is something you said you couldn't have done twenty, thirty years ago.

W: No. No.

T: How has talking made this easier for you to digest, in a way?

W: Oh, I think it…especially talking to people like yourself who have an understanding of this thing. It means a lot to me because just talking to somebody who says oh, yes, I've heard that all before. That's what turns you off. But to have somebody say, yes, I understand. I want to know about that. Not only do I want to know I want the people coming behind me to know about it.

T: Yes.

W: I want them to know. People should know how the Romans react and [what] they said, unfortunately we don't know those things. This way we've got a chance to tell people.

T: You said it.

W: That's what I think.

T: Good for you.

W: You bet.

T: You're hired *(laughing)*. The last question I have for you is kind of a larger reflective question. It's to ask you to think about how your, just your POW experience, if you can separate that out from being a combat soldier, the way or the most important way that that POW experience changed you as a person or changed your life.

W: Oh, boy! Religiously it helped me.

T: How so?

W: Well, I've always had religion. I've been brought up that way. But it was something that I felt that I probably had to do because it was my obligations from the parents down, and so forth. But now it's a different obligation for me. It's a thankful. It's a difference. Instead of saying I have to do this, I have to go to church. I have to talk to a minister or whoever. No. Now, it's I have to thank somebody. So I think if indeed there is a better person than I am, I'm sure there is, to thank him occasionally. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. You know. Who did that for me? Certainly wasn't the guy across the street. Somebody up there.

T: Is that something that you felt in 1945 as well, that you recognized even as a young man, twenty-one, that there was a difference?

W: Oh, sure. Yes. Especially the religious side of it. Because I've only been taught that religion is the basis for our law and that's what threw me off. These people aren't obeying the law. Of humanity. They are not obeying that law. What kind of people are they? So that affected me very much. Not that I'm a zealot or something like that. I'm not. But I think it gives me a basis for what I am and what I hope to be, and it tells me right from wrong. It tells me good from bad. It makes me good feeling as against bad feelings. I can override bad feelings with a lot of thought about who's looking out for me.

(3, A, 248)

T: Did your POW experience then, in some ways, make you a better person?

W: Sure. I think so. Yes. It made me realize that in order to get along, better be dependent on each other. No matter who you are. There's somebody in that background or somebody near you that you need help, whether it's spiritually or religiously, or just peace of mind. You got to have help. You can't do it yourself.

T: Yes. You had some concrete examples of how you relied on each other, the small group of you very much so.

W: Absolutely. Yes. Yes. I was borrowing a phrase…I guess it was a band of brothers. At least four of us anyway.

T: The four you mentioned. You managed to consciously stay together every step—you jumped out of a window to stay with those guys.

W: Yes. I did.

T: That's pretty serious.

W: Almost broke their arms.

T: Let me ask if there's anything you'd like to add or a statement you want to make before we conclude. I've asked the last question that I brought with me.

W: The only thing would be my admiration for you and what you're doing. Really, you're the first one that's really sat down with me and went over everything in detail. I have written some things. I've talked to people and talked to kids. That's fine. But to know that there's somebody that's really interested that's going to make a record of this thing, that some kid somewhere someday will sit down and say, gee whiz, you know. That was quite a deal that guy went through. I wish I could have met him.

T: That's why I do it, and I thank you for the compliment.

W: You're very welcome. You deserve it.

END OF INTERVIEW