

Interviewee: Edwin Luoma

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 11 June 2003

Location: living room, Luoma residence, Eveleth, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2003

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, March 2004

Edwin Luoma was born on 6 September 1919 in Eveleth, a mining town on Minnesota's Iron Range. One of five children of Finnish immigrant parents, he attended local schools, graduating from Eveleth High School in 1937 and Eveleth Junior College in 1939. He was employed as a bookkeeper in nearby Hibbing when he was drafted into the Army in November 1942.

Edwin completed Basic Training at Camp Roberts, California, and then spent time in the Army Specialized Training Program (ATSP) in Cincinnati, Ohio. When this program was disbanded, Edwin was sent to the 106th Infantry Division, made a mail clerk, and assigned to Headquarters Company of the 422nd Regiment. In October 1944 this unit shipped out to Europe; several months before the unit departed, Edwin was married (wife Mildred).

Sent in early December to the front line on the Belgian-German border, Edwin's unit was overrun by the German offensive that began on 16 December, and on 19 December, with more than a thousand other Americans, he was captured by the Germans.

Edwin spent the next 106 days as a POW in Germany, at camps in Bad Orb and Ziegenhain, Germany. Conditions steadily worsened, and hunger and neglect claimed lives. Edwin was finally liberated when advancing US troops overran Ziegenheim on 30 March 1945. He was moved to a field evacuation hospital, then in early May 1945 shipped to the United States; he spent the time until his discharge in December 1945 at several stateside medical facilities.

Again a civilian, Edwin returned to the Iron Range, was reunited with his wife Mildred, and helped to raise a family of four daughters; he worked many years for the Duluth Missabe and Iron Range Railway, in Duluth, retiring in 1983. In retirement Edwin and Mildred (d. 1996) moved to a lakefront home outside Eveleth, where this interview took place in June 2003.

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

E = Edwin Luoma

[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 the Wednesday, 11 June 2003, and this an interview with Edwin Luoma at his house in Eveleth, Minnesota. First, Mr. Luoma, on the record, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

E: You're welcome.

T: Let me start by putting on the record some of what I've learned from you here. You were born on 6 September 1919, right here in Eveleth, Minnesota.

E: Right.

T: You were one of five children and both of your parents were immigrants from Finland. Your dad worked in the mines for a while but then got out of what he called dangerous work. You went to schools in Eveleth. Graduated from Eveleth High School 1937 and from Eveleth Junior College 1939. You also spent some time at a CC [Civilian Conservation Corps] Camp and you were working as a bookkeeper for the Range Motor Company in Hibbing at the time you were drafted into the Army and that was November of 1942. Now, you were working there in Hibbing when the United States got involved in World War II, specifically when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor 7 December 1941.

E: Yes.

T: The first thing I want to ask you, if you remember what you were doing when you first heard the news about Pearl Harbor?

E: I don't recall exactly what I was doing but I'm sure I was working at Hibbing.

T: For Range Motor Company.

E: For the Range Motor Company.

T: Do you remember once that news was around town and in the papers and on the radio, do you remember how you reacted to finding out the US was now at war?

E: Well, I was apprehensive of course. As to my fate, I had two brothers that already were in the service.

T: They were already in the service?

E: They were in the service and I was hoping that I would be salvaged from being inducted as kind of a support for my parents. But that didn't work out.

T: So you were hoping that you wouldn't be selected for military service.

E: Right.

T: If you remember, how did your parents react once the war started? They had two boys in the service and maybe a third going in. How did they react?

E: I would imagine with the third boy going in they were pretty apprehensive about the whole thing. After all, they would be left alone.

T: Were your sisters still living at home now?

E: Yes.

T: So when you left for the Army it was your mom, your dad, and your two sisters still living at home.

E: Yes.

T: You worked for about a year before you actually were inducted into the Army in November of '42. Now you worked at the Range Motor Company up there in Hibbing as a bookkeeper.

E: Yes.

(1, A, 60)

T: Now if you think about your job, that year that we were at war before you went to the service, what changes did you notice around the Range Motor Company once the US went to war?

E: I don't recall much, any reaction to it. Anything.

T: For example, did the company get more business and hire more workers or do you remember men leaving the company to go into the service and being replaced by women or...

E: I don't think they ever had a woman employee.

T: Let's move on to Basic Training. Where did you go for Basic Training in the Army?

E: I went to Camp Roberts in California.

T: California is a long way from Minnesota.

E: Yes.

T: Was that the first time you had been that far away from home?

E: Yes.

T: How did you handle that? Being so far away from home.

E: You had to handle it. What else you going to do? You're with a bunch of guys and we went by troop train. I remember going through the panhandle of Texas. It was 105 degrees on the outside and you can imagine what it was inside. It took such a long time to get to Camp Roberts.

T: They went by way of Texas. That seems like the wrong way anyway.

E: Right. Yes.

T: What was the hardest thing for you about adjusting to the Army?

E: The fact that I had to take orders from men that I don't think were capable of handling it.

T: You're being very kind. People that you had trouble respecting, is that it?

E: Right.

T: You were made a mail clerk, right?

E: Right.

T: Tell me, what does a mail clerk do specifically? What were your duties?

E: We would pick up the mail from a distribution point and bring it to our company and then call out the names as we sorted the mail and hand them the letters or whatever it was. That was it.

T: It sounds like pretty easy duty.

E: It wasn't bad at all.

T: You could have had much tougher duty.

E: Absolutely.

T: Did you consider yourself pretty fortunate to have a job like that?

E: I did.

T: How did you get it? How do you get selected for a job like that?

E: I knew a staff sergeant in the supply department and I think he put a good word in for me.

T: You shipped overseas October of 1944 with the 106th Infantry Division. You were in the 422nd Regiment. Now you joined them, was that at Camp Atterbury, Indiana?

(1, A, 145)

E: I forget where exactly they came from. Most of our cadre was foreign to me. They were not Rangerites. They were not Minnesotans. They were...

T: They were from all over, I guess.

E: I guess. Yes.

T: What kind of an adjustment was that for you to be in a unit in the Army with people from all over the country?

E: It was tough. There was no question about it. You get KP duty every so often and potato peeling and... It just was not pleasant.

T: Would you say you liked the Army, it was just okay, or you disliked the Army?

E: I hated it.

T: You're honest. What did you dislike the most about it?

E: The fact that you're taking orders from strangers.

T: Let's talk about your time when you were over in Europe. You shipped over in October 1944. Do you remember the voyage across the Atlantic?

E: Yes, I do.

T: Tell me about that.

E: Most of the men became seasick.

T: You too?

E: I had a touch of it. But they fed us cold oatmeal and cold coffee. It was a British ship that we went across on. I remember going topside and getting some fresh air to kind of settle my stomach so that I wouldn't get seasick anymore.

T: Did that work?

E: It worked.

T: Do you remember the compartments? Were you in a big room or a small room for sleeping or what?

E: It was one man to a bunk and it was on hammocks.

T: Hammocks. Really?

E: Yes.

T: How was that for sleeping?

E: Not bad.

T: It swayed back and forth I guess.

E: Yes. Yes.

T: Did that make you wish you'd join the Navy?

E: *(laughs)* Had I joined the Navy, I know I wouldn't have ended up the way I did.

T: That's for sure.

E: Yes. It didn't appeal to me that much.

T: But I guess you take what comes, right? Just take it the way it comes.

E: That's it. Yes.

T: You moved up into front line positions in December 1944. Do you remember moving up and actually taking those positions?

(1, A, 202)

E: Yes.

T: Talk about that a little bit.

E: It was one of the coldest winters that they ever had on record in Germany as I recall. I was fortunate to have two [kids], I think one was a kindergartner and the other a grade school kid, that used to come by and stop by and tap the tent that we were occupying and discuss their day.

T: Little kids?

E: Yes. With me and show me pictures and I befriended the family and they gave me fresh eggs.

T: No powdered stuff there.

E: No. That's right.

T: So it sounds like there was some contact with the local civilians. You weren't there many days but you saw some civilians there.

E: Yes.

T: How would you describe the contact with local civilians? Friendly, not friendly?

E: I would say they were friendly.

T: So they came by. The German offensive in December 1944 took the Americans pretty much by surprise.

E: They sure did.

T: You were in the 422nd Infantry Regiment. That was right on that place the Germans attacked.

E: Right.

T: Do you remember what was going through your mind when you became aware that the Germans had attacked? That this attack had started.

E: Panic of course. I recall one man had taken his M-1 rifle by the barrel and slamming it up against a rock and of course that would cause the dogged hammer to move forward and it shot him in belly. It was so disorganized that we never really had good contact with the officers.

T: How many days was it before you were actually captured by the Germans?

E: I would say we tried to escape them for about a week. Going further back into our own territory. I would say about a week before we got captured.

T: How many of you were there? You say we were trying to escape. How many people, how many Americans are we talking about?

E: What's a company consist of? I don't know.

T: So it was your whole company there.

E: Yes.

T: Headquarters Company, is that what it was?

E: That was Headquarters Company of the 422nd Infantry Division.

T: So for about a week Headquarters Company managed to avoid capture?

E: Yes.

T: Talk if you can, fill in some details about those days after the Germans attacked, before you were captured. What were you doing? What went through your mind in those days?

(1, A, 251)

E: I was assigned to the supply division that set up tents that housed the officers and I remember us going off the highway into a ditch and everything came tumbling down on top of me. Luckily I was not injured at that time.

T: Luckily.

E: Yes. We could hear the front moving ahead, moving ahead, moving ahead and getting closer. The bombing was louder. We knew that it would not be long before we were overtaken.

T: So you knew before it happened that eventually you would be captured.

E: Yes.

T: How did that make you feel when you knew that?

E: We were real despondent.

T: Despondent you say?

E: Yes.

T: Did some people handle that better than others? This fact that the situation didn't look very good?

E: I really wouldn't know that. All I know is that we were bombed (***) . We could see the flares and see the holes coming with the shrapnel. It made an imprint of the .50 caliber machine gun shell, you know. Exactly the same size. Then next of course everybody was hugging the floor. This was the worst part really to endure.

T: The shelling?

E: Yes. Being trapped in a train. Doors locked.

T: This is after you were captured now, right?

E: Yes.

T: Don't go that far yet. Before you were captured: were you shelled before you were captured? I mean when you were with the Americans. Did you get some kind of shelling on your position at all?

E: We could hear them going above us and we were saying, "Yeah! Give them hell boys." That's about it.

T: Let me ask you about the circumstances when you were captured. Actually the moment or the incident when you did fall into the Germans' hands. Do you remember that?

E: Yes.

T: Can you talk about that a little bit?

E: Sure. We were all in our position, and to see these Germans drive off with our big four by fours, all our radio equipment, all our supplies, everything that we owned.

T: What did they leave you with?

E: They left you with an overcoat and the clothes that you had on. I was fortunate that I was able to keep my boots.

T: Right. Because it was very cold, right?

E: Oh, yes. It was a bitter cold.

T: Cold like northern Minnesota or not quite that cold?

E: Colder than this.

T: Colder than up north here?

E: Yes.

T: That's pretty cold!

E: That's pretty cold. You bet.

(1, A, 304)

T: Talk about your own feelings at this time. Were you angry or nervous or scared? How would you describe yourself when you got captured?

E: Angry of course. And scared. Didn't know what to expect for the next day. Like I say, we were boarded into boxcars...

T: You said the word angry there. That you were angry when you were captured. Angry at whom or at what?

E: Angry at the Germans. Our enemy.

T: They were just doing their job too though, right?

E: They were doing their job too, of course.

T: Were you angry at all at your own officers or at other enlisted men?

E: Mostly the officers, because of their inadequacies.

T: In getting you into this position you mean?

E: Right.

T: When you were first captured, did the Germans search your pockets or anything like that or take anything away from you?

E: I was the first one to lose my watch, because I happened to have my hand up like this, you know, and my watch was exposed. So they took my watch.

T: Did you hand it to them or did they take it off of you?

E: They took it off of me.

T: What kind of soldiers were these Germans looking into your eyes? What kind of men were they?

E: I hated them. I suppose that's a natural reaction. The treatment that we received from them when we were captured wasn't that bad. I don't know if it was because of the pleading of our officers or what it was. Whatever it was, when we got to Bad Orb and took that two mile hike up the hill after being crowded into that [boxcar]—forty men to a car for standing room only...

T: That's right. Because you were transported by train to Bad Orb--that's Camp 6A.

E: Right.

T: Before you got on the train, was there any kind of initial interrogation by the Germans of you or other men?

E: No.

T: So what I hear you saying is you were all captured and then marched to the trains?

E: Right.

T: How long a march was that from capture to train? Do you remember?

E: I don't recall, but it must have been at least five miles.

T: All in one day though.

E: Yes.

T: Were men mistreated at all on that march from capture to train that you observed?

E: No. We were threatened. Nobody better try to escape. That was enough warning for us.

T: Did they tell you this in English or did someone translate this?

(1, A, 351)

E: Somebody translated it.

T: One of the Americans translated?

E: Yes.

T: So you got to a train station where everyone was loaded onto boxcars. Were you with any other Americans by this time or just the group you were captured with?

E: Just the group that I was captured with. The officers occupied the first five cars—that were struck by bombs. The rest of the train was left intact.

T: And that was just enlisted people.

E: Yes. You could feel the doggoned boxcar rocking as each bomb went off.

T: Was the train stopped when this was happening or was it moving?

E: It was stopped.

T: Now these were British or American planes, right?

E: British. British planes mostly.

T: Now you're in this boxcar, locked up in very close quarters, right?

E: Right.

T: What goes through your mind when the door is locked and the bombs are dropping?

E: You just prayed and prayed and prayed. That's all about all I can say. And hugged the floor as much as possible. Some men tried to escape through the barbed wire that was over the opening on the end of the boxcar and that's the last you knew of them.

T: They got out, but you didn't see them again.

E: That's it.

T: What happened to them?

E: Oh, I'm sure they got shrapnel and killed one way or another.

T: So you were panicked, but there's nothing you could do really. You had to sort of wait until the bombing stopped I guess.

E: Right.

T: People around you, how did they handle the situation like this?

E: The same as I did. Everybody became Christians, I'll tell you (*laughs*).

T: It's amazing what a little bombing will do, isn't it?

E: Right (*chuckle*).

T: That sounds pretty terrifying. This was at night, wasn't it?

E: Right.

T: The train, I guess the train was repaired and then moved forward again, or...

E: Yes.

T: Was there a chaplain in your car?

E: A chaplain assistant.

T: What was he doing at this time?

E: Well, praying for all of us and trying to console...

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.

T: You said trying to console everybody.

E: Yes.

T: With success or not?

E: I would say it helped. Yes.

T: How long were you on that train?

E: Oh, I forget the number of days. It's not in my diary?

T: I don't know. I didn't read it.

E: Whatever that number of days it is...

T: What kind of condition were you in when you got off that train? This was near Bad Orb, right?

E: Yes.

T: What kind of condition were you in?

E: Weak. Hungry and thirsty.

T: Now what about food and water supply on the train?

E: Nothing. No food. No water.

T: So you were pretty weak by this time.

E: Oh, yes.

T: Let me ask you, how long were you at Bad Orb?

E: Well, each day seemed longer and I would say four months.

(pause in tape)

T: So in checking your records, it seems that you spent the time until 25 January 1945, about a month, at IX-A Bad Orb and then were moved as a noncommissioned officer to Ziegenhain, which was Camp VII-A, and it was there that you were liberated on 30 March 1945.

E: *(nods yes)*

T: Let's talk about Bad Orb first. The first camp you were at. From your memory, talk about the conditions at Bad Orb. The sleeping facilities and the food. Things like this.

E: Food was rationed. We had a cupful of watery dandelion, I called it dandelion soup.

T: Pretty watery.

E: Pretty watery. For lunch. Then for supper we had... it ended up with ten men to a loaf of bread.

T: Did you get slices or a whole loaf? I mean given to the prisoners.

E: We got slices. We took turns. Each one had to have a turn. Assigned a turn. To take his choice of the slice of bread that the slicer had sliced up. Take that to your bunk. Some tried to toast it. That was a waste of...

T: Why is that?

E: *(chuckles)* You're burning it to carbon.

T: Who sliced the bread? The Germans or the Americans?

E: The Americans.

(1, B, 455)

T: So you sliced yourself and took turns in order picking a slice.

E: Yes.

T: From your opinion, was the bread sliced pretty fairly?

E: Yes. Yes. The guy did his best in slicing it and you had to look pretty careful to make sure that... Now that was not that big but it was that big...

T: I see. So the pieces were the same size.

E: Yes. Then we'd go around and...

T: Pick up the crumbs really... with wet fingers.

E: Yes.

T: So nothing was wasted I see.

E: Nothing. Nothing.

T: Soup and bread. Doesn't sound like very much food.

E: No.

T: Did you feel you had enough or were you still hungry after eating?

E: After eating you felt like you had taken a drink of water. That was the feeling that you had.

T: So you could have used more food.

E: Of course.

T: How about the sleeping arrangements? Did you have big barracks or small barracks?

E: They were big. At least five hundred men to a barracks.

T: So these were big barracks.

E: Big barracks.

T: How about the sleeping arrangements? What kind of beds did they have for the prisoners?

E: They had straw mattresses that were full of lice. Every place where your clothes were kind of restricted you would feel the lice. Human lice. They were crawling and biting at the ankles.

T: So around your waist too where your underwear would be I guess.

E: Around the waist. Yes. It was just horrible. I'll tell you.

T: So the lice were something that were there and you had them the whole time?

E: Yes.

T: Did they keep you awake at night too, that kind of thing? The scratching or the biting?

E: Yes. They would.

T: Now, it was cold outside. Was the barracks heated or not heated?

E: One stove only and it was maybe four by four.

T: For the whole place?

E: For the whole place.

T: So it sounds like it was still cold inside.

E: It was cold.

(1, B, 507)

T: What did you do during the day? What was the daily routine at Bad Orb?

E: We had nothing to do. If we had some organized sports or something, that was [something] I could look forward to, it would have been much better. But we had nothing.

T: Nothing to do at all.

E: Nothing to do at all.

T: So how did you spend your time during the day? You can sleep a lot of hours but what else do you do?

E: Make up recipes.

T: Food recipes.

E: Food recipes. Chocolate cake.

T: Now you're making kind of a writing motion with your hands. Did you have something to write on when you were there? Pencil and paper?

E: Yes. I had a four by five piece of toilet paper that they rationed out. And the toilet facilities weren't any bigger than where that doorway is. And then there were logs strung across and you'd have to do your business there.

T: This is an outside facility or inside?

E: It was inside.

T: But we're talking maybe twelve to fifteen feet long with logs and this is for all these men?

E: Yes.

T: Were some men unhealthy or sick when you were at Bad Orb?

E: There were quite a few that were sick. Yes. Dysentery, that was prevalent. Just plain weakness, from lack of food.

T: How about your own health at this time? What kind of shape were you in?

E: What shape was I in?

T: Yes. What shape were you in at this time? At Bad Orb.

E: Oh, I would say poor—I still have aftereffects of varicose veins. I had those stripped by a doctor up here.

T: Was that something that you got you think in the prison camps?

E: What?

T: Did that first affect you in the prison camps?

E: Yes. Yes. And then frozen feet.

T: Did you also suffer from dysentery at this time?

E: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

T: So dysentery, lice and frozen feet. So you had some problems here.

E: Oh, boy. Did I ever!

T: I think I hear you saying other guys were also suffering some of these same things.

E: Yes.

T: You talked about the daily routine. Really nothing to do, I hear you say.

E: Yes.

T: No activities, no sports, no cards, no books. Just a holding facility really. Bad Orb.

E: Yes.

(1, B, 560)

T: Let me ask you about the Germans. Now there were German guards in this camp, right?

E: Right.

T: What kind of people were these Germans?

E: Of course if you didn't respond soon enough to: "Raus! Raus!" Which meant get up, get up! If you didn't get up in time... I got hit in the rib with a rifle barrel, I mean the stock of the rifle, and broke my ribs at that time.

T: When you were laying in your bed there?

E: Yes.

T: So they hit you hard.

E: They hit me hard. Yes.

T: Was that kind of striking of prisoners, was that something that you noticed more than once?

E: Oh, I would say it was pretty common. Common place. Yes. They were awfully impatient.

T: What was the most difficult thing for you personally about being at Bad Orb, that first camp you were at?

E: When we would have to line up outside for nose count in that chilly, chilly weather with whatever we could salvage. Like I say, I was lucky enough to keep my boots. There's nothing colder than a GI boot *(laughs)*.

T: So it was better than nothing, but just barely.

E: That's right. Yes. Just the fact that you had to get up and have a nose call because somebody went over to the French barrack and was swiping food.

T: So there were different nationalities in this camp?

E: Oh, yes. French and British. US. I forget who else.

T: Did you have much interaction? Was there much interaction between these different nationalities?

E: We could talk between the fence.

T: So there was a fence between the compounds.

E: Yes. Yes.

T: But you couldn't move between the two areas.

E: No.

T: What do you think was the most difficult thing for you about that first camp at Bad Orb?

E: The most difficult thing that I could think about?

T: The most difficult thing that you had to put up with or that you experienced there at Bad Orb.

E: Yes, the fact that you got awakened any time of the night. I don't care what time it was. Two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock, five o'clock in the morning. When that "Raus! Raus!" came out, you moved.

T: How much did the broken ribs impact you? Did that bother you a lot or not really?

E: Not really. I just had to suffer through it. That's all.

(1, B, 609)

T: Was there medical treatment at all at Bad Orb?

E: No.

T: So if something was wrong with you too bad.

E: Too bad. Yes.

T: At the end of January '45 you were moved to VII-A Ziegenhain. How far was that from Bad Orb?

(pause in tape)

T: On 25 January you were moved by train again. This time to the camp at Ziegenheim. Do you remember being moved from Bad Orb to Ziegenheim? Do you remember that train trip?

E: I do. Yes.

T: What do you remember about that?

E: You'd follow orders and you'd follow the men. That's about all I could recall.

T: Was this an easier train trip than the one from being captured to Bad Orb?

E: Pretty much the same with the exception of the bombing.

T: So there was no bombing this time.

E: No.

T: What kind of physical condition were you in when you arrived at Ziegenheim?

E: I was in rough condition. There's no question about that. I went down from one hundred fifty-five pounds to ninety-six pounds.

T: When you were liberated from Ziegenheim you weighed ninety-six?!

E: I weighed ninety-six pounds.

T: You lost almost sixty pounds in just a few months.

E: Yes.

T: Well, you talked about not getting enough food. I think there's the proof, right?

E: Yes.

T: Talk about the conditions at Ziegenheim. How were they different from Bad Orb?

E: There wasn't that much difference really. The Polish guys were able to converse with the Polish guards.

T: Polish guards?

E: Yes. In Polish. We had a lot of them up here in the Range as you know (*chuckles*).

T: They were ethnic Germans from Poland or what were these guards?

E: I'd say mostly Polish.

T: So you were able to converse. You didn't speak Polish but some other guys did.

E: No.

T: How did that help? Being able to converse with the guards.

E: You'd get some idea of what's going to happen.

(1, B, 646)

T: Was it possible to keep aware of how the war was going, for example?

E: No. No. We had no idea.

T: So when you were in these camps you were in the camps. You really didn't have any idea of how...

E: Outside communication... no.

T: You mentioned the food at Bad Orb being thin soup for midday meal and this bread for dinner, for supper rather. What did you have at Ziegenheim?

E: Pretty much the same.

T: Thin soup...

E: Yes. Thin soup and I do remember some tea that I used to drink because it was hot. Other than that it was pretty much the same.

T: Was there anything to do at Ziegenheim? You mentioned at Bad Orb that there was nothing to do.

E: Nothing to do at Ziegenheim either. Nothing.

T: So how did you spend your time there then?

E: Making up recipes.

T: Talking about food again.

E: Talking about food again.

T: You know, as you talk about it, it sounds like food became almost an obsession.

E: Absolutely. I used to dream about the chocolate cake that... My folks used to go visit at Rama's and she made chocolate cake that was just delicious. It was a layered cake and...

T: So that's what the men were talking about. It sounds like women had moved behind food.

E: They were long forgotten.

T: Speaking of women... you were married by this time. You were married in 1943.

E: Yes.

T: How much contact were you able to have with your folks or with your wife once you were captured?

E: None.

T: Did you send any of the little postcards... those preprinted...

E: None.

T: Nothing.

E: Nothing.

T: When did your wife find out that you were actually a prisoner of war?

E: I guess it was at that Camp Lucky Strike.

T: It wasn't until then that she found out?

E: That's right.

T: So you were listed as missing in action?

E: Yes.

T: Before that?

E: I was missing in action according to my wife. That's the information that she had. She knew of nothing of my whereabouts for that whole period of time.

(1, B, 684)

T: You got back to the States. You saw her. When she talked about that, how hard was that on her? That period that she didn't know about you?

E: It was rough. The fact that she did not know of my whereabouts. Did not know that I was a prisoner of war. She recalls the day that the mailman that she knew very well came and delivered the message to her folks, who lived in the Iron [Range] on a farm, and that's the day that she got the word that I was a POW.

T: And that wasn't until you got to Camp Lucky Strike and that was April.

E: Yes.

T: So it months that she knew nothing.

E: Months that she knew nothing.

T: That must have been hard.

E: That was tough. Yes.

T: Did you have any children by this time or not? Was your oldest already born when you were overseas?

E: No.

T: Not yet. One thing you mentioned, Edwin, is that you kept a diary while you were in prison camp. What kind of things, what kind of events or thoughts did you write down?

E: The main thing that happened that particular day. Probably allowed an extra pat of butter. That went on. It was the highlight of the whole thing.

T: The writing. For you.

E: Yes.

T: I know that your diary... that's copied in here, right? Can we include some sections of your diary into this record?

E: Sure.

T: That's okay with you?

E: Sure.

T: Because we talk about it. I may want to reference some days. Because you have specific dates on some things there.

E: Yes.

T: You mentioned food was important and really a focus on your mind. I know that prisoners are supposed to receive Red Cross packages sometimes. How often did you receive Red Cross packages while you were at Bad Orb or at Ziegenheim?

E: Ziegenheim. Once. Bad Orb. None.

T: So in three months of POW time, you had one Red Cross package?

E: Right.

T: That's not very helpful, is it? Only getting one. When did you get that? Do you remember getting that one package?

E: It's probably in that.

T: You were liberated on 30 March 1945. By British or by Americans?

(1, B, 723)

E: By Americans. 7th Armored Division.

T: You remember...

E: That star never looked more beautiful in my eyes.

T: Talk about that day. Talk about 30 March. The day of the liberation of the camp.

E: Yes. We knew it was coming closer because the German guards and so forth would slowly disappear. We knew it was coming pretty quick. You could hear the front moving up.

T: You could hear things.

E: Oh, yes. When that 7th Armored Division tank moved in...

T: Did it come literally in the front gate or what did it do?

E: Went right through the front gate. That star never looked better to me.

T: Now what kind of physical condition were you in by this time?

E: Terrible.

T: Were you still able to get around okay? To walk or not?

E: I was able to walk. With help. I had two good buddies, Richard Hupp, and I forget the other guy's name. He was a sergeant. Big guy. They helped me on our forced march, one on each side, and I'd have my arms around them. They would say, "Don't you give up! Don't you dare give up!"

T: When was the forced march? For point of reference, was that before you were liberated?

E: Yes.

T: Was that before Ziegenheim or before Bad Orb, or when was that?

E: I can't answer that. I don't remember.

T: So when the Americans got to the camp, what kind of thoughts were going through your mind when it was clear that the POW experience was over?

E: Lots of joy. In fact men lost their mind because of overjoy.

T: What do you mean they lost their mind?

E: They would go berserk.

T: And do what? I'm not quite sure what you mean.

E: Uncoordinated. Couldn't respond really to anything. We gave them a sample of our rations and they said they would not feed this to their pigs!

T: You gave a sample of your rations to these Americans who were arriving.

E: Yes.

T: So these men that lost their minds sounds like they had a breakdown almost, a mental breakdown when it was actually over.

E: Yes. Yes. He did.

T: Just one guy that this happened to?

E: This one guy that I recall.

T: What finally happened to him?

E: I've lost track of him. I don't know.

(1, B, 761)

T: Let's talk about what happened to you at that point. When the Americans arrived what happened to you? Did you stay at Ziegenheim for a while or what happened next?

E: Yes. We were fed additional portions...

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

T: Mr. Luoma, you were saying that when the Americans arrived you got extra food, is that right?

E: Right. Right. They tried to stretch our stomachs somewhat.

T: Because it had shrunk, right?

E: Yes. We had gained some strength. We were skin and bones.

T: You said ninety-six pounds you were only.

E: Yes.

T: How long did you stay at Ziegenheim before you and the others were moved out of there?

E: I don't know. Too long.

T: It wasn't the same day that you moved out though? You didn't leave Ziegenheim the same day the Americans arrived?

E: No.

T: So you stayed there a while.

E: We stayed there for a while and then were transported to LeHarve.

T: That's Camp Lucky Strike, right?

E: Yes. Camp Lucky Strike. By troop planes.

T: You went by plane to...

E: Planes. Yes. We sat facing this way, toward the aisles.

T: With your back against the side of the plane.

E: Yes. Back against the side. Yes.

T: How long did you spend at Lucky Strike then? Because you had to wait for transportation to the States, right?

E: Right.

T: How long were you there? Do you recall? At Lucky Strike?

E: Must be in the notebook.

T: And what happened to you when you were there? Was it medical treatment or just food or was there psychological counseling? What were they doing to you there?

E: There was no psychological counseling. No. The food of course was adequate. In fact, we ate on our transport ship that came back; it had a week's supply, and I think we finished it in four days.

T: So you were eating a lot once you got...

E: Eating a lot. The first Sunday that I was home, I was over to my sister-in-law's—ate one dozen eggs. And I still wanted more.

T: So you were making up for lost time.

E: I was making up for a lot of things. Yes.

T: How long was it before you got your old weight back?

E: I don't know if I ever have. It was months.

(2, A, 68)

T: Let me ask you this. You got back to the States from Camp Lucky Strike and got to see your wife and your folks again, I guess.

E: Yes.

T: Did you get some leave to come up here to the Iron Range to see them or did they come to see you when you got to the States?

E: I had to come up here by bus.

T: You got a troop ship back and then a train and then a bus up here to the Range.

E: Yes.

T: Do you remember when you first got to see your wife and your folks again?

E: Oh, yes. I remember that.

T: Can you talk about that a little?

E: Yes. It was of course, happiness and joy. My mother-in-law rubbed my head and said, "You haven't got any scars there from..." She must have had a dream that I had... you know.

T: That's interesting.

E: My father-in-law he said he felt a pat on his right shoulder and he said that was God telling him everything is going to be all right.

T: Were they Finnish as well? Your in-laws?

E: Yes.

T: Were they speaking English to you or Finnish?

E: They were speaking mostly Finnish but... she could understand English pretty well.

T: How about your father-in-law?

E: Not too well.

T: Now your wife was also Finnish.

E: Yes.

T: When you talked to her did you talk mostly English or mostly in Finnish?

E: In English.

T: In English to your wife.

E: Yes.

T: But in Finnish to your parents.

E: Yes.

T: And when your kids were growing up later you spoke English around them?

E: Yes. What we learned at school.

T: I want to ask now about your time in the States, because now when you got back in the States you're an ex-POW. This POW experience is over but it's still part of your past.

E: Yes.

T: When you saw your parents and your wife and maybe your father and mother-in-law, that close family, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

E: They were very cautious in not asking too much about it because they knew it would just withdraw bad memories. They did as little as possible.

(2, A, 118)

T: So they didn't ask you very much, you're saying.

E: No.

T: How about from your end? How much did you volunteer? How much did you tell them about what you had been through?

E: Just the minimum. The essentials. That's about it.

T: I'm wondering how that worked, in the sense that they're not asking and you're not telling and yet everybody knows that this experience happened. Was that uncomfortable at all?

E: I didn't notice it. No. I think people were sensitive enough to realize that that was a pretty ticklish subject for me so they were guarded very much.

T: You say a ticklish subject. Was it a ticklish subject for you? In what ways?

E: It would bring back memories. I even tried down in Superior to go to a POW get together and some guy told me about landing on D Day and he, in full gear, and he's sinking and sinking and sinking and all of a sudden...

T: He's in the water with his pack on.

E: In the water. Yes. All of a sudden he felt somebody grabbing him by the shoulder and lifted him up. That's when I broke it off. I said, I've had enough of this.

T: Explain that. Why did you say that?

E: Because of the fact that it brought back too many memories.

T: Memories for you personally?

E: Yes.

T: How long ago was that in Superior, Wisconsin?

E: Oh, I can't remember exactly but I would say ten, twelve years ago.

T: So maybe 1990 or so. You were seventy anyway.

E: Yes.

T: What kind of memories did that experience bring back for you that you didn't want to think about then?

E: Just what they went through. You know. It brought back memories to me of what I went through.

T: Even though those were very different things. I mean landing on D Day and being in a POW camp are very different things.

E: Yes. Yes. I know that. I know that. But this guy's experience is the thing that did it. Here who was ever in charge, some officer, told him: "Unload!" And this was long before they were on the beach. And down he went until he felt this arm on his shoulder lift him up.

T: I'm curious what that brought back for you as a POW. What kind of things came to your mind then when he started to talk about this?

E: All the suffering that I had gone through. It just did not appeal to me anymore. You know, ordinarily... like we can talk about it. But ordinarily, like in a group session, you could pick out this particular guy that had this experience of being dumped off of that landing craft too early into deep water and next thing he knows somebody had lifted him up from the collar here and he finally got air.

T: Let me ask you this about memories then. You came back to the States. You were discharged from the Army in December of 1945. You came back to Eveleth. You're back together with your wife. Did you go back to the Range Motor Company in Hibbing to work? Or did you go work for the railroad now?

(2, A, 195)

E: I didn't go to work for the railroad right immediately. I worked for the mining company and got put out to the Spruce Pit and they said take this shovel and cover over this water area. There was no snow to cover it with.

T: When you were working there or for the railroad, you worked for the railroad a lot of years, right?

E: Yes.

T: How much did your co-workers know about your POW experience?

E: Nothing. Nothing at all.

T: Did they know that you had been a POW and not know any details or did they not even know you had been one?

E: They did not I don't think even know I was a POW. No.

T: Is that something that never came up or something that you didn't want to come up?

E: I didn't want it to come up. Yes.

T: Another part of this. When your children were growing up, a lot of us, a lot of kids when they were growing up at that time had fathers who had been in the war. Did your kids ask you about what you had done during the war?

E: What did they think?

T: Did your kids, when they were growing up, did they ask you about what you did during the war?

E: Yes. They casually would ask me and I'd respond to the best of my ability and tell them it was hell.

T: Did you tell them you had been a prisoner of war too?

E: Oh, yes.

T: How much detail did your kids want from you about that? I mean kids ask interesting questions sometimes.

E: Well, as little as possible.

T: As years went on with your wife, Mildred, did she ask you more questions as the years went by or not?

E: Yes. I remember one time I happened to have a vacation from the Ford Garage that I worked in, and we rented a cabin over here and she had, I'm going to say on purpose, taken a hot iron and burned—you could see the imprint of that doggoned iron.

T: On your shirt?

E: On my skin.

T: On your skin?!

E: Yes.

T: What was that all about? I'm not sure I understand that.

(no response)

T: Let me ask you this. About memories. After the war when you were back in civilian life, what kind of memories or dreams did you have that kept your POW experience alive in your mind?

E: It took me years to get over it. I would dream of the Germans being on the lightpole in the bedroom, and I'd be in the bathroom or in the closet hiding from them. And I would finally realize that, you know, I'm having a nightmare. Then I would fully wake up and get into the arms of my wife.

T: Did these dreams... did you have those for a long time after the war?

E: I had it for a long time after the war. Yes.

(2, A, 251)

T: Is that something that the Veterans Administration, did they provide any kind of psychological counseling that helped POWs talk about these experiences or...?

E: None whatsoever.

T: So what did the VA, how did they treat you as an ex-POW?

E: They just put a big stamp on there, ex-POW, on my file and that's [the file] that thick you know.

T: Inches thick of stuff now.

E: Yes.

T: Before we started to tape you mentioned that after the war you didn't get any kind of disability or help really dealing with your POW-related problems.

E: Yes. I started off as ten percent of my varicose veins...

T: This is right after the war you got ten percent.

E: Yes. Then shortly after that I got it for stomach ulcers and I got it for being sensitive to cold.

T: So your percentage slowly went up over the years. Your percentage of disability slowly increased over the years?

E: Yes.

T: Did this happen like in the first few years after the war or only much later?

E: Only much later. It took me a long time to get the hundred percent.

T: And that you said you only have had recently, one hundred percent.

E: Right.

T: I think I hear you saying that the Veterans Administration has been much more helpful recently than they were right after the war.

E: Right.

T: Is there a time when that seemed to change, from when they were not helpful to now they are helpful? When did that change? Do you remember? And why do you think that happened?

E: I can't answer that. I don't really know. All I know is that the service officers up here were very helpful.

T: Is that up here...

E: I go to Virginia.

T: Is there still an office in Virginia?

E: Yes.

T: And there's one in Superior, too, right?

E: Yes. They were very helpful in getting my disabilities.

T: I hear you talking of them more as a friend than as an enemy. The Veterans Administration.

E: Right. Right.

T: Getting towards the end here. About talking about your POW experience. You said that after the war you found it difficult or something you really didn't want to talk about, and yet here today we've been talking for quite a while now. What changed for you? What made it easier for you to have a conversation like this for example?

E: I suppose you become accustomed to it and repetition. The fact that I was a POW. Let's face it. You can't take that away from me. Nobody can. Nobody can take my feelings away from me. Every time I get the cramps in my legs I'm reminded daily of my own POW experiences.

(2, A, 300)

T: When you think back on your POW experiences now, and you'll be eighty-four this year, right?

E: Right.

T: How do you think back on that now as an eighty-four year old man?

E: Eighty-three.

T: Eighty-three. I'm sorry.

E: That's okay. That doesn't make any difference.

T: Not until September though. How do you think back on that now?

E: Nothing but horror. Just plain horrible. I'll be shooting up Germans tonight *(laughs)*.

T: How do you feel about the Germans now, fifty years later?

E: I know it wasn't the common civilian's fault. It was Hitler's fault. I blame him for the whole mess.

T: So you draw a distinction between the German leadership and the German civilians. So for you there is the German leaders who are responsible and then there's the German civilians and you don't hold them responsible.

E: Yes. I suppose. I still don't like them.

T: Have you ever been back to Germany?

E: No. I haven't. I've been to Finland twice.

T: You've been to Finland but not to Germany.

E: Not to Germany.

T: Some guys we've talked to have gone back to Germany for various reasons. Is that something that ever occurred to you? To go back to Germany, or not? After the war.

E: It occurred to me and I have a real close cousin and her husband that live in Amsterdam, and they have volunteered to take me to the prisoner of war camp sites. And I have refused to go.

T: Why?

E: It just brings back these lousy memories.

T: So for you it's best to keep those memories away as opposed to engaging them again.

E: Right.

T: Which makes me wonder why we're having this conversation, in a way because here I am asking you about this stuff too. The last question I have really, when you think about your military service and your POW experience together, what do you think is the most important way that your war experience, your POW experience, changed your life?

E: I think I am more tolerant to the daily routines that go on. I've been through the works and I just think to myself, you know, like hunger. If I get hungry, this is nothing compared to what I had to go through. It's things like that.

T: It's added a bit of perspective to your life it sounds like.

E: Right.

T: So there's hunger and then there's real hunger.

E: Right.

T: Anything else you want to add, Mr. Luoma, before we conclude? Something we've missed or you wanted to add?

E: All I can say is that my war experience was just plain hell and my civilian experience wasn't much better.

T: After the war you mean.

E: After the war.

T: Is that because of your job or because of dealing with your POW experience?

E: Because the job. How do you tell a widow how much her husband is worth?

T: You were like a railroad investigator you said.

E: That's right. I was the chief claim agent.

T: I wouldn't want that job.

E: *(chuckles)*

T: On the record, let me thank you very much for this time today.

E: That's okay.

END OF INTERVIEW