

**Interviewee: Hewitt “Lex” Schoonover**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 21 May 2003**

**Location: living room, Schoonover residence, Edina, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, December 2003**

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

Lex Schoonover was born on 28 October 1923 in Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. During the Depression years his family moved around, with stops in Bronxville, New York, and Washington, DC, before settling in Shaker Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland. Here Lex finished high school in 1941; he then attended Miami University of Ohio until being drafted into the Army in March 1943.

Lex completed Basic Training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, and then spent time in the Army Specialized Training Program (ATSP) at the University of Alabama. When this program was disbanded, Lex was sent to the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and assigned to the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, to an Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I and R) platoon. In October 1944 this unit shipped out to Europe; one month before the unit departed, Lex was married (wife Anne). Sent to the front line at the village of Schlausenbach, Germany, Lex’s unit was overrun by the German offensive in mid-December 1944, and on 19 December 1944, with more than a thousand other Americans, he was captured by the Germans.

Lex spent the next four months as a POW in Germany, at Camp IX-B in Bad Orb, Germany. Conditions steadily worsened, and hunger and disease claimed the lives of many. Lex was finally liberated when advancing US troops overran Camp IX-B on 2 April 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 November 1945 at several medical facilities.

Again a civilian, Lex completed his college education (University of Michigan, 1947) and went to work for the retailer Sears Roebuck. He managed stores in Mansfield and Cleveland, Ohio, and the Twin Cities, Minnesota, before retiring in 1987. At the time of this interview (May 2003) Lex lived in Edina, Minnesota.

*Silver Star recipient for actions of 16 December 1944.*

**Interview key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**H = Hewitt Schoonover**

**[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. This is the evening of May 21, 2003, and this is our interview with Hewitt "Lex" Schoonover of Edina, Minnesota. First, on the record, Lex, thanks very much for taking time this evening to speak with me.

H: You're welcome.

T: We're at your apartment here in Edina. We've talked for a little bit before taping, and I want to enter some of this information into the record. You were born on 28 October 1923 in Strasbourg, Pennsylvania. That's eastern Pennsylvania. Lived there during elementary school. Moved around a bit. Rocksville, New York, Washington, D.C.. Finally landed in Shaker Heights, Ohio, which is outside of Cleveland. Shaker Heights High School, class of '41 and then college at Miami of Ohio in Oxford, Ohio, southern Ohio, from '41 to early '43. In March of '43 you were drafted into the US Army. You went to the ASTP program at the University of Alabama. Was that about a year that you were there?

H: No. I had Basic Training before going to the University of Alabama.

T: And that was at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, right?

H: That's correct.

T: When you think of Basic Training, what was Basic Training all about?

H: It was to make us physically fit and to teach us how to use the weapons and also to make certain that we were able to march great distances carrying our packs with gas masks and without so we were in condition for it.

T: Was Basic Training for you then, a physical kind of training as opposed... Was it also a psychological kind of training?

H: I think it was more physical than anything else. Probably psychologically indirectly. In my mind it was physical.

T: That experience in Georgia, was that experience with the American South?

H: Yes.

T: What was your impression of the South? Of Georgia, or let's even say the University of Alabama because you were at the University of Alabama for a while.

H: I found the University of Alabama taught me more about the South than being in Basic Training, because among the courses that we took was history and we learned about the Civil War from the other side.

T: What was so different? Because you went to school up North. What was so significant about what you learned there?

H: The heroes that they talked about and the battles that they fought and the successes that they had which we didn't necessarily hear about up North.

T: So you weren't hearing about Grant and Sherman, but rather Lee and Jackson.

H: That's correct.

T: How about off-base? Now this was the University of Alabama. How about off-campus? Is that in Montgomery or in Birmingham?

H: No. It's in Tuscaloosa.

T: Did you have a chance to get to town at all?

H: Yes. We got into Birmingham on frequent weekends. Because ASTP was kind of an unknown branch of the service we were referred to as cadets. So we were treated as though we were cadets rather than privates or as military soldiers.

**(1, A, 70)**

T: This ASTP program, what was the point of that program actually?

H: We were to learn engineering. Be engineers. The idea when we started was that we would be there for four years and graduate as civil engineers so that we could work for the Army in that capacity.

T: And you already had a couple of years of college, so you would have finished that program within two years or would it have been—it was supposed to be four years originally?

H: They talked about four years. They didn't transfer in my credits, although the credits that I earned there were transferred out toward my degree at Michigan.

T: I see. So when you finished with the service that's the way you could finish the University of Michigan in '47.

H: Yes.

T: The ASTP program was discontinued.

H: Yes.

T: And did that discontinuation come as a surprise to you or was this kind of expected?

H: No. It came as a surprise to us. They needed soldiers overseas and they closed the program at all the colleges. They also brought into the infantry division, cadets from the Air Corps and other specialized services.

T: When was that program discontinued? Do you remember?

H: May of 1944.

T: So by that time you had been in the service a little more than a year. Did you finish the equivalent of a spring semester then at Alabama?

H: Two semesters.

T: So a fall and a spring.

H: Yes.

T: So by that time, you had the time at Miami of Ohio, plus a year here. So you were in pretty good shape once the war ended.

H: Yes. Except not all the credits transferred into the business school of Michigan.

T: I see.

H: They gave you credit for the hours but they weren't required subjects necessarily.

T: Okay.

H: Because we were taking trig and chemistry, physics.

T: How did you like school at Alabama? Was that something that appealed to you?

H: I enjoyed it. I kept my steel helmet on the shelf there and whenever I didn't feel like studying, I'd look at it and say this is better than the alternative.

T: So that was a motivating factor there.

H: Very definitely.

T: So you knew that by, at least when you were there at Alabama, by succeeding in this program you stayed out of the regular Army.

H: That's correct.

T: That's a pretty good motivator. When this program was discontinued, what happened to you?

**(1, A, 112)**

H: I was shipped to Camp Atterbury in Indiana.

T: With a number of others from the same program?

H: Oh, yes. If I'm not mistaken, all of them. All of us who were there went to the 106<sup>th</sup> Division.

T: Now was this a new division that was being formed?

H: Oh, no. It's a division that had been prepared to go overseas and the Army took out most of the trained people and put us in as replacements.

T: So the people who were left were inexperienced people. Talk about that time at Camp Atterbury, because you were there for a number of months.

H: Well, at Camp Atterbury we joined the division right after they came off of maneuvers, and we were not very welcomed because we were the college kids and they were the soldiers. So we had to make an adjustment there to fit into the program. There we were getting field training and we spent one week in the barracks and one week in the field so that we would learn how to live both places.

T: You'd had Basic Training, so this soldier stuff wasn't completely new.

H: No. No. It wasn't new, but it was more strenuous and better preparation for overseas.

T: Would you say you were disappointed that the ASTP program had been discontinued?

H: I wasn't happy. Yes. I guess I would say I was disappointed that it was discontinued.

T: Because you had said you had liked the program there as far as the academics went.

H: Yes. Yes.

T: When you were at Camp Atterbury, did you see yourself and this division as now sort of targeted to go overseas to Europe or the Pacific or were you not sure?

H: We felt rather certain that we'd be going overseas. We didn't know which way, whether it would be the Pacific or the Atlantic. Fortunately the type of training that I got there I think saved my life the first time I was captured, because I had learned to escape by running and falling and rolling and doing those things.

T: So some of the training you had at Camp Atterbury proved to be beneficial.

H: Very beneficial.

T: Now before you were sure whether it was Europe or the Pacific that you were headed to, did the Army do anything to prepare soldiers for duty either place by talking about the Japanese or about the Germans?

H: Somewhere. I believe it was before we went overseas. We were learning a little Japanese. *Ichi, nei, san, chi*. One, two, three, four. Using that in some of our physical exercises and hand to hand combat type exercises.

T: So there really was the uncertainty which way you'd be going.

H: Yes.

T: When you thought about it yourself, did you care which way you went as far as Pacific or Europe?

H: I preferred Europe.

T: Can you say why?

H: I didn't trust the Orientals as much as I trusted the Germans under the circumstances.

**(1, A, 162)**

T: Those feelings, is that something that the Army reinforced or helped you to see, or is it something that you felt you already knew yourself?

H: I think I felt I already knew it myself.

T: If you think about it, where might you have come and how might you have come to that conclusion?

H: I don't know. I don't know. Maybe from what I read in the paper. If I'm not mistaken, the Bataan Death March had happened before that.

T: In April of '42.

H: And I think that that made me more conscious of what it would be like to be in the Orient.

T: Would you say that the Japanese, the thought of fighting the Japanese, instilled a greater sense of fear in you than the thought of fighting against the Germans?

H: Yes.

T: When did you get the word that you were, or find out, you were heading to go to Europe and not to Japan?

H: When our troop train took us to Massachusetts.

T: Once you'd be sure to get on a ship to go to Europe. When you moved out to go to Massachusetts, Miles Standish, right?

H: Yes.

T: What was the mood of the people around you now that you're finally moving out to, one step closer to the front?

H: Apprehension and curiosity. Anxious to know what's coming next.

T: Those are two interesting words. Apprehension and curiosity. Apprehensive about what, if you were to define that more closely?

H: Our future. And curious to what it would be like to be overseas.

T: I hear you saying you were anxious to be there and anxious not to be there. That's interesting. You took a large troop ship. Was it an ocean liner?

H: Oh, yes. Yes. The *Acquatania*. It was next in size to the *Queens* [*Mary* and *Elizabeth*, also ocean liners].

T: So it was a big ship.

H: Big ship.

T: Did it make for a comfortable life?

H: It did, and it went directly. It zig zagged, but it didn't go in convoy, so it was a faster trip. We went over in a week.

T: That is much faster than some other trips we've heard. You landed in Scotland and then spent some time around Cheltham, England, is that right?

H: That's correct.

T: Talk about the kind of training that was going on there in Cheltham.

H: It was more of a delaying action than anything else. We were waiting to go over to the front lines. I can't recall any training that we had.

T: Did you know that you were actually just sort of treading water waiting to go?

H: Yes.

T: While you were there did you have any chance to interact with the local population?

H: Yes, because I was a Jeep driver. I drove a small truck over there and I would take the men into the city who had passage for the evening and pick them up at night to bring them back. So I had the opportunity to spend my evenings in town with the local people.

**(1, A, 207)**

T: How did you find the people in England?

H: They were very friendly. And they were very pleased to have us there actually. We were helping them fight the war. They treated us very kindly.

T: Did you observe any kind of misunderstandings or conflicts between civilians and people in uniform?

H: No.

T: So things seemed to go, from your perspective, pretty smoothly.

H: Yes. The biggest problem we had was interpreting their words.

T: And vice versa, I suppose. Did you find the accent an adjustment?



H: No. But their expressions. Our colloquial expressions and theirs were not the same. You know. They said I'm going to get laid tonight. That means I'm going to get paid tonight. It's different.

T: Much different actually. Right. Now you're with the 106<sup>th</sup>, and you were in the, again for the record, the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Headquarters and Headquarters Company I and R Battalion, is that correct?

H: I and R Platoon.

T: I and R is intelligence and reconnaissance?

H: Yes. It's the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment 106<sup>th</sup> Division. Yes. I think you've got that right.

T: You go from division to regiment.

H: Then to company.

T: You arrived in France in, was it end of November or was it December already? When you got to France.

H: No. It was middle of December or middle of November, I believe.

T: And at that point you mentioned you spent some time sort of waiting again. Sort of a camp in France.

H: We were bivouacked, living in our tents in the field. Pup tents not big tents.

T: So two man tents.

H: Yes.

T: And the weather was not very good.

H: In the rain. All the time.

T: So you're already wet and muddy by the time you went up to Belgium. How was the adjustment here? You keep coming one step closer. There was Massachusetts and England and now in France. Did you begin to feel at all that this was the real war yet or not?

H: Not really but we knew we were close.

T: Did that sense of apprehension and curiosity, did those both kind of continue at this point?

H: No, not necessarily. Particularly in France because they were welcoming us. They hadn't seen many Americans and the Germans had just been chased out so to speak. They were grateful for our being there.

T: Did you have contact with the local population there in France at all?

H: To some extent. Again, I was driving. We tried to buy bales of straw at the farmers' houses around there so that we could take it back and put it in the bottom of our tents to keep dry.

**(1, A, 247)**

T: Because otherwise it was just ground, right?

H: Yes. Mud.

T: It sounds like a miserable welcome to the country. When your unit was moved up to the front lines near the town of St...

H: We were in Germany. Schlausenbach, Germany.

T: And that's a little bit east of the town of Schonberg. You arrived there the middle of December.

H: December 4.

T: That's less than two weeks...

H: Two weeks.

T: The Germans actually attacked.

H: We replaced the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. Man for man. Position for position.

T: So they pulled out, literally, and you just moved into the same spots.

H: Right. It was supposed to be a quiet sector. We were there just to get accustomed to being on the front lines but there was supposed to be no action.

T: You were a Jeep driver?

H: Yes.

T: You didn't do it for very many weeks, but typically what would your duty entail?

H: When the troops were moving in, I would be with some scouts at night making certain that the Germans were not in the area. A couple of times we saw Tiger tanks and had to hide in the shadows and let them go by. My duties there primarily were taking people closer to the front lines or parallel to the front lines to see what kind of action was going on.

T: You were transporting people from one place to the other.

H: That's right.

T: Let me ask you, how did you get a job as a Jeep driver?

H: I lucked out.

T: In what way?

H: They had an opening and I took it.

T: So there was an opening for a Jeep driver and you volunteered? What day was it that the Germans attacked?

H: December 16.

T: Twelve days after you arrived there. Talk about the attack that morning, because the reading I've done suggests the German came pretty quickly.

H: We had heard them for a couple of days. We had heard noises but our intelligence said that it was our nerves. We didn't really know because we were assigned to guard duty off and on while we were there.

T: So you weren't supposed to be concerned about the noises you heard.

H: No.

T: For you was there an increase in the apprehension before December 16 or were you too unaccustomed to this?

**(1, A, 282)**

H: Too unaccustomed to it to really know what it was until the sixteenth when the sky lit up with the searchlights that they put on the clouds. Then the shells began coming in, the 88s and the artillery. We were right in the middle.

T: If you can, just talk about, or walk us through, that day from your perspective, from your location and what you saw and observed.

H: That day I was awakened by the shelling and after I was up I was asked to get a Jeep to take Lieutenant Crowell into Division Headquarters to report that we were being shelled.

T: This is back in St. Vith, is that right?

H: Had me take him to St. Vith.

T: So you'd be traveling west some miles here in order to report this.

H: Yes. Yes. And he asked me to get a Jeep. I got a Jeep and brought it up in front of the house and went in to get him, and while I was in there the Jeep was hit by an 88 and destroyed. So I got another Jeep and we made the trip in to St. Vith, which was about a fifteen, twenty mile trip, as I recall, and made the report to the general and the staff in there. There was a great deal of confusion as you may imagine.

T: Sure.

H: Then when we started to go back we were stopped by an MP and he said that the Germans had infiltrated and we said we just came through here a short time ago.

T: On your way to St. Vith.

H: Yes. And we were going back to our unit. We agreed to do that. We got about halfway back to our unit when we were fired on from the gullies beside the road by Germans, and decided to floor it to see if we could run the gamut.

T: So they were on either side of you. That's not very far away.

H: They were on either side of us, and that point ahead of us we could see one of our two and half ton trucks and an ambulance, and we thought that they were our lines and if we made them we'd be there. When we reached them we were surrounded by Germans and found that the drivers of both those vehicles had been shot and killed and those vehicles were a roadblock. At this point we were captured.

T: So on the morning of the sixteenth...

H: The morning of the sixteenth.

T: As an interjection here, did you know a priest, chaplain, named Father Cavanaugh?

H: Yes.

T: *(pause in tape)* Thanks for the little aside on Father Cavanaugh. You were then captured pretty quickly on the morning of the sixteenth by the Germans, but you mentioned earlier you didn't stay a prisoner very long.

H: It seemed like a long time, because we were captured in the morning, probably about nine o'clock or nine thirty, and the Germans were digging in on top of this hill where they marched us to. They placed us between themselves and our troops, and we were lying there in the snow, and it's winter in Germany. Cold weather. And we were lying in the snow the entire day. They didn't take us back to be interrogated, and we asked them to do that and they ignored us, because they were busy digging in. We, among ourselves—by this time they were eight of us. There were others that they had captured in the same manner.

T: A small group of prisoners here.

H: And we were moving around a little bit and kind of whispering to each other, and we decided that one of two things were going to happen, because our artillery was zeroing in on us. And during that time I was hit by some shrapnel but not seriously injured. We decided that we could either freeze to death there or we'd be killed by the [American] artillery.

**(1, A, 327)**

T: By American artillery.

H: Yes. So as dusk came we seemed to all understand each other and we got up and started to run. The lieutenant who was with us was killed in this operation, because we would run, fall, turn, roll, do whatever. They would use the burp guns, which if they didn't hit you the first time, they would kind of rise up and go over you. We were running down a hill. We got down into the shadows in the trees, and the first thing we did was take turns lying on top of each other to get body heat to try and get our frostbitten bodies to move.

T: So you were chilled after a day laying there.

H: Yes. Then we had to make our way back to our own unit.

T: How did you decide which direction to go?

H: I had driven it. I knew geographically where I was headed, and I was kind of the leader from that standpoint. But we had no ammunition, we had no guns, and we decided that if we were challenged by anyone we would be surrendering. The other thing we didn't know was the password to get through our own lines.

T: Which could be dangerous.

H: Oh, yes.

T: Can I ask you when, even this first time, when you were first captured, when you first really encountered the Germans taking you prisoner, what went through your mind?

H: We thought it was all over for us. We didn't know how long we'd live but we didn't know that we'd be lucky enough to get away from them.

T: So did you fear at that first moment that they might kill you?

H: Yes. Yes. And they didn't know that we were Americans really. They were SS troops, and they saw the star on the Jeep and they thought they were fighting Russians. So they had less sympathy for them than they did Americans.

T: So you expected at that moment that it may over. They may kill you.

H: Yes.

T: How long did it take before you realized that wasn't going to happen? Or did you fear that could happen at any moment?

H: I feared that either we would be hit by artillery or we'd freeze. I never thought about them shooting us after that until we started to escape.

T: Once that first encounter was done you realized... At that moment when they captured you, were you searched or frisked at all?

H: No. They took our ammunition and our rifles. That's all.

T: As a Jeep driver did you carry a sidearm or a rifle?

H: A rifle.

T: This rather brazen escape—in a sense, you said there was no other option. It was either try to escape or... [The escape] cost you one person.

H: He was killed.

T: And the other seven got away?

H: Made it.

T: And you did get back to American lines.

H: Yes. But not until about ten thirty or eleven o'clock at night.

T: Can you talk about that, because you mentioned you don't have a weapon, you don't have a password, and it's dark.

H: We followed the shadows. We went through the woods and stayed in the shadows, and were concerned with any noise that we heard. Our hands went up immediately in surrendering and we were not challenged in getting through our own lines. How we did that, I don't know. But when we got there we didn't know if our troops were still there, and we were staying in houses. There were a couple of dead Germans on the porch of the house.

**(1, A, 367)**

T: Where you had been staying?

H: Yes. So we hid in the bushes there until we saw an American walking. Then we made contact. That's how we got in.

T: So that was...

H: We were kind of heroes, you know.

T: Because you escaped. You got back out.

H: Yes.

T: How long did you stay not a prisoner until you were captured again?

H: Three days. And I was a wreck. I mean, I was no good for guard duty, but they were putting me out on guard duty, and my nerves were shot.

T: What had happened that your nerves were shot?

H: What I'd been through.

T: This capture and laying there...

H: And losing the officer that I had been driving for. The whole thing. Yes.

T: You said your nerves were shot. How would you describe more closely your own condition during those days?

H: I was a nervous wreck. I was frightened by anything.

T: How did the situation of the American forces deteriorate in those three days? Because by the nineteenth you were captured again, you said.

H: They were fighting all around us. There was fighting going on all around us. And in the meantime we ran out of ammunition and food. So there was nothing left for us. Then by that time the front lines were fifteen miles beyond us. We were behind the front lines.

T: Surrounded and bypassed.

H: Yes.

T: The decision was made to surrender. For you, to surrender again. How did you deal with that decision that you were going to be essentially a POW again?

H: Well, we rounded up all the vehicles. We thought we could make a run for it. And it didn't work because we were, as I mentioned before, in the Siegfried Line area, and the Germans knew it like the back of your hand and they had --

**End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 386.**

T: So escaping, or getting back through the Germans back to American lines was...

H: Was impossible. We were down in the valley, and they were shooting these 88s at us. It was sudden death. And then the Germans took over our equipment and took over our Jeeps and the vehicles. We tried to destroy as much as we could before leaving, but we could see them changing into American uniforms. From the stuff that was in the duffel bags. Some people had duffel bags on their vehicles, and they were outfitting themselves in that.

T: This is right after you had surrendered?

H: Yes. When we were surrendering.

T: How many of you surrendered at one time here?

H: The whole regiment.

T: Had there been casualties by this time?

H: Oh, yes. Yes. There were casualties, but the regiment surrendered. I can't tell you how many casualties there were.

T: Again, a regiment is about how many people?

H: Three thousand.

T: So this is a large scale surrender.



H: And there were two regiments, ultimately, that they marched into a barbed wire enclosed field with gun turrets on each of the corners. We spent the night there, sleeping in the snow and on the ground. The next day then they marched us to a railroad. But each time we got to a rail station it had been blown up the night before, and we walked about thirty-five kilometers.

T: So from the capture there you walked through—do you know what towns you walked through?

H: Yes. Prum and Gerolstein. In Germany.

T: Yes.

H: Anybody that couldn't keep up—when the last man passed, they shot them.

T: Did you observe that happening or was this something that you sort of suspected?

H: No. I observed it happening and the injury that I had received on the sixteenth was bothering me. If it hadn't been for two of the men in my group that pulled me along for the last couple miles, I wouldn't have made it.

T: So you knew the Germans were getting rid of stragglers at the back of the line.

H: That's correct.

T: You mentioned you were already a bit of a nervous wreck before this happened. How would you describe yourself at this point?

H: I think I was reconciled to it. Come what may. Here I am. I made it once. I don't know if I'll make it again or not.

T: Did you spend the first night in that enclosure?

H: Yes.

T: And then you were marched through Prum and Gerolstein. Did you get on a train ultimately, or not?

H: Yes. We got on a train, and we were locked in for four days.

T: Where did you get on the train?

H: I don't know.

T: There were little boxcars?

H: Yes. Forty and eight cars. And they put more on there than could sit down at the same time, so theoretically you took turns whether you sat down or you stood up.

T: So these boxcars were packed...

H: Overcrowded.

T: Overcrowded with people.

**(1, B, 450)**

H: Like "Schindler's List," if you saw how they did that thing. Concentration camps. And there were no toilet facilities. There was no water. Nothing on there. If you had to relieve yourself you did it in your helmet and threw it out the vent at the top.

T: How did people deal with this situation? Did some handle it better than others?

H: Yes. Yes.

T: Those who did handle it, what did it take to sort of stay solid during a time like this?

H: Will to live, because those who didn't take it too well got rather belligerent. They were rather difficult to deal with. It almost felt like the survival of the fittest. And one night while we were on the train we were bombed by the RAF, and the cars were jumping up and down on the tracks.

T: So the train had stopped and it's being bombed by British planes.

H: Yes.

T: What goes through your mind because you're locked in this car, right?

H: You pray. You get religion in the foxhole. If you didn't have it before, you get it then.

T: Was that your experience as well?

H: Yes.

T: If I can ask, were you a religious person before you went in the service?

H: Reasonably so. Like all young people, when I was in college I didn't attend church regular or anything. I had grown up going to Sunday School and doing those things. After that no.

T: Was there a chaplain on board the car that you were on?

H: No. I was amused by some of the Catholic boys trying to find the right prayer in their Bible. They never did find the one that they needed.

T: I guess any prayer would do in a situation like that.

H: That's what I thought.

T: Now this four days on the train—the train did move occasionally, right?

H: Yes. It did. Stopped and started. At one point after about two days, two and a half days, they opened it up and gave us some bread and some cheese.

T: That was the only food you had during that journey.

H: That was the only food we had during that.

T: Was there drinking water at all?

H: No.

T: How do you pass the time? In a sense there's little things happening, but how do you pass the time and keep yourself busy? What do you do on a train like this in this situation?

H: I don't know. I can't remember. I blocked it out. I blocked it out. I didn't want to remember any of that.

T: This is one of those things that you put aside.

H: Sorry. That's the way it was.

T: No. That's important to know that. That's how the mind works sometimes. We don't want to deal, we can't deal with things like that.

H: We arrived at [IX-B] Bad Orb on Christmas Day. Christmas evening we marched up to the camp.

**(1, B, 500)**

T: The train dropped you at...

H: [Bad Orb] Station.

T: At Bad Orb there and then you marched from there...

H: Marched up a hill. It was probably a mile or so from the train station.

T: People got off the train. Was everyone able to walk off the train? Or were some people...

H: We all made it somehow. I mentioned that I had my buddies that helped me, and I'm certain that they helped me at that point too. But we all made it up there to the best of my knowledge.

T: Had the noncommissioned officers and officers been separated out by now?

H: Oh, no. No. We were all together.

T: So you're all together at this point. This is Christmas Day, my goodness! Did that, the irony of that cross your mind that this was Christmas Day?

H: Oh, yes. They told us they were giving us Christmas dinner, and that was a boiled potato and a sixth of a loaf of bread.

T: I take it by this time you're already pretty hungry.

H: Indeed.

T: I guess boiled potato looked pretty good at that time.

H: Anything (*chuckles*).

T: Now Bad Orb is the camp that you stayed in until you were liberated I think on April 2, is that correct?

H: I think you're about right. I was liberated, but I wasn't released from the camp.

T: You stayed in Bad Orb.

H: The camp was liberated, in effect, by troops that were fighting their way through. But they kept us in camp because we were so emaciated and so unable to care for ourselves. We had to stay there until they removed us. I went out in an ambulance about a week later.

T: So guys were in pretty tough shape here.

H: Oh, yes. They had no food for us. The first food I got was at the garbage pails. I put a shovel over my shoulder and told them I was going on a work detail and then I got into the garbage pail and ate what they were throwing away.

T: What the Germans were throwing away.

H: No. No. The Americans.

T: When the Americans arrived there...

H: Yes.

T: So it was Americans that came to the camp.

H: Yes.

T: So it sounds like you got there Christmas Day [and] you were there only a little over three months...

H: [I was there from] Christmas to Easter. One hundred eight days.

T: And in those hundred eight days your condition...

H: I weighed ninety-eight pounds when I got out.

T: Let's talk about food, then, because before we started talking you shared a number of, just a multitude of small pieces of paper or cards that had everything to do with food. Recipes, restaurants, food items, ethnic foods, by category—suggesting that food was indeed the main topic of conversation.

**(1, B, 542)**

H: That's correct.

T: That makes me think that the food you were getting from the Germans was wholly insufficient.

H: The only thing we got was a cup of soup and a sixth of a loaf of bread a day. That's what we lived on.

T: Was it the same every day?

H: Yes. And the brown bread you know was made out of part sawdust. John Kline has a recipe for it if you need it.

T: Talk about the food and describe the bread if you would, the consistency and the taste of that stuff, from your perspective.

H: It was a brown, dark brown bread. Hard, heavy bread. You know, when you're that hungry it tastes pretty good. I haven't eaten anything like it since.

T: You haven't gone looking for it.

H: (*chuckles*) If I saw it, I wouldn't eat it.

T: Now were you given loaves and then it was up to you to...

H: Yes. They gave us the loaves and we had to split them up. Now the thing that you ran into there was that people would give up their food for cigarettes. Cigarettes were diminishing in supply as people smoked them. Once they gave up, they lived about a week and then they died. So the last month we were having a funeral every day.

T: People were dying with regularity. Let me ask you first about the conditions in the camp, and we can start with barracks.

H: All right.

T: Describe the barracks you were in and how many people were there.

H: The barracks were three tiered. The mattresses were burlap bags with excelsior in and bugs. From the day we got in we were lousy. We never had our clothes off. The whole time.

T: So you wore what you arrived in the whole time.

H: We had to sleep two in a bunk to keep warm. The body heat. Because they only gave us a half a blanket. There were no lights in the barracks. We got one or two logs a day to put in a potbelly stove, the only heat. At night they patrolled the outside with police dogs and guards. The toilet facilities during the daytime were a slit trench, a big trench outside with tree limbs that you used like a seat that you could lean against. At night it was a hole in the floor. Nobody could hit it, and it was one of those things...

We also had kangaroo courts, because if you heard somebody walking in the aisle between your bunks you'd ask who they were. You didn't recognize the voice. They were there to steal something off you. You kept your shoes on too. If you talk them off, they might steal them and trade them with a guard for cigarettes.

T: Was that a problem?

H: Yes. To that extent. You wouldn't leave anything. If you left something it would be stolen.

T: Does that create people grouping together for protection, or any sense of hostility among fellow prisoners, or not?

H: Of course. But you don't really know who the thieves are always. Only if you catch them in the kangaroo court at night do you know who they are.

T: Were people occasionally caught, or was most of it simply unsolved?

H: No. They were caught.

**(1, B, 593)**

T: Were they fellow American POWs?

H: Oh, yes. Sure. They were the only ones in the camp. They just kind of beat them up a little bit, you know.

T: So people must have been prepared to take the risk. What kind of things would be stolen?

H: Anything of clothing that you might have taken off. Particularly shoes.

T: Now did you have your shoes at this time?

H: Yes. Did I then?

T: Yes.

H: Yes. I kept them [my shoes] on all the time. Otherwise I may not have had them.

T: What other things would be popular among thieves?

H: There wasn't much else that they could take. The only other thing would be the time we got the Red Cross package, if we didn't eat it all and tried to save it. That might disappear. Or bread if you were trying to save your bread.

T: Even if you put it in your pocket or on your person?

H: If you had it on your person, then they couldn't take it. No. If you leave it unattended, it isn't going to be there.

T: These barracks you were in, how many people were in each one of these?

H: It seems to me like hundreds.

T: So they were large buildings.

H: Yes. Yes. I think I have a picture of it here.

T: And they were overcrowded as well, you said.

H: Yes. They were three tiers high and two in each bunk, so that's six people in eight feet by ten feet.

T: There were Germans as the camp staff, or were they in uniform? Were they local police? Who comprised the guards here at this camp?

H: Germans. Old men primarily. I recall one that I visited with at one point, and he had worked for Goodyear in this country.

T: In the States.

H: Yes. And he'd gone back to be with his family during the war and never got out again.

T: So he got drafted into being a prison guard.

H: Yes.

T: So these Germans that you saw were a little older than average soldier age.

H: Yes. Yes.

T: How would you describe the treatment of Americans, the POWs, by these Germans?

H: They didn't really mistreat us. They didn't rough us up particularly, although one day, one of the prisoners was trying to get food out of the kitchen that they had there, and he was caught and he killed the person [German guard] who caught him or saw him doing it.

T: The German who caught him?

H: No. It was one of our prisoners, but a German caught him. And he killed the German. So then they took us all out of the barracks. Lined us up and had us stand there and were asking who did it. And no one confessed, and we stood out there a whole afternoon, but as time wore on they decided they were going to shoot a man every fifteen minutes until they got it. And they did take some people away. Whether they shot them or not, I don't know. That's when we froze our feet a second time.



*NOTE: Accounts by several GIs place the killing on 27 Jan 1945, and the subsequent hours-long assembly of prisoners on 28 Jan 1945. Two POWs were taken away; their fate unknown. (Cohen, Soldiers and Slaves, 85)*

T: Did this person confess or not?

H: Must have at some point, but I don't know how that happened. You just know that finally they let us go back in the barracks.

T: So, again I hear you saying the treatment by the guards was not necessarily bad.

H: No. No. They gave us their news. They made up the news. It was the first time I'd ever seen a jet. They told us that those are the new German planes and they're bombing New York.

T: They really told you stuff like that?

H: Yes. Yes. They gave us so much propaganda we had no idea how the war was going. They were winning as far as...

T: They controlled the news media.

H: Yes.

T: What was the daily routine like? You weren't working at all in this camp, right?

H: No. Only a couple of times they walked us out into the woods to bring back logs. We'd bring them on our shoulder. We were very weak and we didn't have salt in our diet, and it made us dizzy. If you'd stand up quickly you'd be dizzy to begin with, so you were not in physical shape to do anything. We just sat around and talked about food, and talked about menus, and talked about good places to eat. Tried to think of our families and think more of how concerned our family may be about us.

T: How tough was that? Did you figure they had gotten news about you or not?

**(1, B, 654)**

H: We didn't know. We didn't know. We had no way and they didn't tell us. It wasn't until they passed a postcard that we could write to send home.

T: The POW postcard.

H: Yes.

T: So you had to worry about... You were married by this time too.

H: Married. Yes.

T: So what your wife knew. What your folks knew. For all you knew, they might not know anything other than you were missing.

H: That's right.

T: How did you deal with that? Was that a tough thing that kept recurring in your mind, or did you sort of not worry about it?

H: We were concerned about it. Very concerned. And it did keep recurring in our mind, but there was nothing we could do about it.

T: Was that sense of powerlessness difficult for you, or because you were powerless it wasn't difficult?

H: I think it was difficult. I think it was difficult.

T: Sense of frustration.

H: Frustration.

T: You can't communicate.

H: You don't know what's going on outside. You don't know how they are. You worry about them too, you know.

T: Because they don't know anything about... So the daily routine was a lot of...

H: Nothing.

T: Nothing. Sitting around. Now in a sense, luckily, you were weak, so sitting or laying might have been okay. But there was no...

H: We had no things to entertain ourselves with. No reading material. The writing material that I showed you I used was given to me as toilet paper.

T: Little scraps of paper.

H: Yes.

T: And you had some kind of writing implement.

H: I had a pen with me that they didn't take away.

T: Were other people taking notes or writing things down like you were, or were you one of the rare ones doing that?

H: Oh, I think many of them were. I think many of them were. Not all of them had a pen. Not all of them had something to write with. I was reluctant to lend mine out, because I didn't know how long the ink would last.

T: Once the ink ran out you couldn't replace it, of course.

H: Yes.

T: So you had a lot of days of...

H: Just sitting around. And we didn't have chairs or comfortable lounges. What we had were the bunks. It was too cold to be outside.

T: Were you allowed to go outside if you wanted to?

**(1, B, 682)**

H: When the weather warmed up they let us go out in the enclosure, yes. That was not until the end of March. We had a warm day and then we went out and peeled down as much as we could and picked the bugs out of our clothes to try and get rid of the bites.

T: Because you had...

H: We were lousy all the time. Crawling on you.

T: Describe that feeling of having lice.

H: Oh, it's horrible. It's horrible. It was all welts and itched. You scratch. You dig yourself raw.

T: Because they bite or itch.

H: They bite.

T: You scratch them out or try.

H: You keep scratching. Yes. And they keep breeding in the seams of your pants and in your shirt. There's really no way... We had long johns on, you know. It was winter. The Army uniforms.

T: So this was something that you constantly were dealing with.

H: Yes. And the best thing was, when after we were liberated, they brought in some powder that killed them and you'd dump it down your shirt and you'd feel them come up and drop dead. That was a wonderful feeling.

T: So you could feel them leaving?

H: Yes (*laughs*).

T: That sounds kind of creepy. Crawling on your skin, right?

H: Yes.

T: The daily routine. The food was pretty predictable you said.

H: Yes.

T: The same every day?

H: You're going to get a cup of soup and a sixth of a loaf of bread. Yes. Every day.

T: How often did you get the soup, once a day, twice?

H: At noon. The bread at night. They brought in what they called coffee in the morning, but it was an ersatz tea. It was hot water with some leaves in it. It wasn't even worth drinking.

T: So there was a midday portion of soup and this evening portion of bread.

H: That's it.

T: Now the bread, you mentioned earlier, had to be divided up by the prisoners.

H: Yes.

T: How was that done to ensure that there were no hard feelings?

H: It just seemed to happen. You'd have your group, and you'd get your bread and you'd divide it up. I don't know how it worked.

T: Do you remember hard feelings about the way bread was divided or food was divided?

H: No. But I can remember getting a Red Cross package, and we only got three in the whole time I was there. And one of them had raisins in, and we had to split it twelve ways and we made twelve piles of raisins.

**(1, B, 707)**

T: Really. One, one, one, one, one and then two, two, two, two, two.

H: Yes.

T: Oh, my goodness. So there was really a desire to split things evenly.

H: In your own group.

T: How were these groups formed?

H: I guess they were buddies that you had developed through training and through serving with them.

T: And being captured with your unit you knew people going into this, didn't you?

H: Yes. Yes.

T: How important was the group or were friends in this situation?

H: I think it was very important. The fellow that I slept with was a Jeep driver also, so we knew each other and had worked together. We kept our friendship up until he died. He lived in Detroit and we kept in constant contact.

T: So this built very close relationships from this experience.

H: Yes.

T: Of what value was having a group of friends? In other words, how did this benefit you in your daily life here in the camp?

H: It gave you the opportunity to talk to somebody and to talk about various things. Such as the food and the menus and that type of thing. And you were not alone. That was the big thing about it.

T: Health must have been a problem in a place like this where the calories are almost nonexistent, the conditions are poor. It's overcrowded.

H: I had two experience in the health line. One, I got an infection on my lip from my wound.

T: You were wounded on buttocks.

H: Yes. But apparently there was blood or something that caused the lip to become—it was like a boil type of thing. And fortunately there was a doctor that

had stayed with us at the point that I had that problem. They had what they called a sickbay there, which was just a room that had the same kind of bunks, but it had a potbelly stove with more wood and they kept it warm. He collected penicillin from the ammunition belts that we had and treated me with that, and lanced it, and I still have a scar, but I lived through that. And when I was liberated I had jaundice. So I came home with jaundice.

T: And how long does it take to recover from that?

H: I was on the ship two weeks, I think, coming home. Ten days or something like that. Then I was in the hospital for a week in Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. So a couple of weeks.

T: You survived, I guess, comparatively in fairly okay shape. You mentioned earlier that not all people survived this camp.

H: That's right.

T: What was the leading cause of death from your perspective? What were guys dying from?

H: The major reason was giving up the will to live. You had to believe that there was a future for you outside of that camp. That you were going to get out and you were going to get home. As soon as you gave up that feeling and you thought it was hopeless, then you stopped eating and malnutrition and you were gone.

T: Did you see guys do that?

H: Oh, yes. Definitely.

**(1, B, 743)**

T: Was it almost a conscious thing, you think, on their part that they just said I can't do this anymore?

H: Almost. I don't think that they admitted it. That they'd say it. But you could see it and you could see it happening, and you knew it was going to happen toward the end.

T: I think you mentioned, also, over there that you were burying people regularly in that last month.

H: Yes. That's right. Ten o'clock in the morning we'd have a formation, and they'd put them in a burlap sack and drag them to the hole in the ground.

T: Was that outside the camp?

H: No. Within the enclosure.

T: Was there a lot of getting into formation and being counted? This kind of stuff. Was that done regularly?

H: No. No.

T: This place was almost a collecting center as opposed to an organized camp where you...

H: Yes. And we had big fences around us. Barbed wire and so forth. And in other parts of the camp were other nationalities. I mean there were Indians in a unit over here, and there were Serbs over here. It was what they call an *Arbeitskommando* [work detail] camp. In other words, people who had been captured for long periods of time were put there when they weren't out in the fields. They were the work details. But they didn't use us for work details. It was too close to the end of the war.

T: Some guys had been at Bad Orb then a lot longer than you.

H: But not in the American part.

T: Right. Other nationalities part.

H: Yes.

T: When you think back to your three months plus at Bad Orb, what would you say was the most difficult part of that existence for you?

H: Worrying about home. Worrying about my wife and worrying about my family.

T: And being as you said earlier, powerless to affect anything.

H: Yes. But I didn't lose the will to live.

T: How did you keep yourself up, in a sense?

H: That's a good question. I guess by keeping my mind on those recipes and those menus and those things that I showed you, and talking about food, and looking forward to making those and putting them together, and to eating in some of those restaurants that these people had told me were good in other cities.

T: So conversation, community in a sense, and keeping your mind occupied.

H: Yes.

T: How important was religion to you in keeping this will to live?

H: Oh, I prayed daily and we were there during Lent. During Lent we had a couple of people in the barracks --

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

T: You mentioned religion being important and being there during Lent.

H: During Lent we had ecumenical services so to speak. Somebody'd recite the rosary. That's where I learned the rosary. From those recitations. And we'd sing hymns occasionally. At night. "The Old Rugged Cross," you know, the ones that everybody knows.

T: Yes. Were the Germans hostile, accepting, or passive in a sense...

H: Passive. At this point. Don't forget this is almost the end of the war in March.

T: Yes. Did the staff, the camp guard staff, change at all? Did you see new people towards the end or...

H: We didn't see many of them at all.

T: I guess they were leaving as well. To recap, the most difficult thing you said was this worrying about those people back home who were your loved ones who were worrying about you.

H: Yes. Yes.

T: Unable to help them. In the small group that you were with, how many people were you close to when you were in the camp?

H: Oh, I'd say thirty or forty that I knew well and could visit with. That would be the larger circle of friends. Then of course, you were asking about how often we saw the guards and so forth. Prior to our being liberated, for about a week we could hear the battles.

T: So you knew things were happening.

H: We knew things were happening, but the other thing that I haven't mentioned to you is that they were launching the buzz bombs just beyond our camp and they'd go over our camp every night to go into England. They were firing them into England. So we had that to think about too.



T: So you could hear the approach of the war before you could actually... You knew what was happening. When you heard that noise, did you know what that meant? That the Americans were coming?

H: We knew they were fighting but we didn't know that it was going to liberate us necessarily.

**(2, A, 47)**

T: Sure. Now you were not walked out of this camp on one of these walks like some other POWs of the Germans.

H: No. I went out in an ambulance, and they were taking what they called ill people first. Because I had jaundice, I qualified as an ill person. But they also were careful that they took other nationalities from the other parts of the camp at the same rate of time they did us. In other words, if they took an ambulance of Americans, they'd take an ambulance of Indians, or Serbs, or...

T: I see. So they were seen to make sure these other nationalities weren't feeling disadvantaged.

H: Yes.

T: That's interesting. I didn't know that. I think you told me the day was April 2 that the Americans entered the camp.

H: I think so.

T: Can you, from your perspective, talk about that day?

H: It was a very exciting day to know that we were going to be free. And that's the day I told you where I pretended to be on a work detail, put a shovel on my shoulder, and went out to where they were having mess, and when they were emptying their mess kits I would eat their garbage and it was like a banquet. Then they were unable to change our diet for about a week. They weren't getting food in. They only had enough for themselves. But later they brought in C rations. We had beans and spaghetti and that kind of stuff. And our eyes were bigger than our stomachs. Our stomachs had shrunk, and we couldn't eat them all, but we did. And then we'd get sick.

T: Did that happen to a lot of guys? Eating too much and...

H: Oh, yes. Sure.

T: To you as well?

H: Oh, certainly.

T: In a sense, from having, of course, almost no food at all, here's what must look like a cornucopia of goods. Before that I wanted to get clear on this. When the Americans came to the camp, the prisoners were kept inside the camp.

H: Oh, yes. For our own protection.

T: Protection from what?

H: Well, they were still fighting outside.

T: So this was a safe place to be, in a sense, once the Americans were in control of the camp.

H: That's right. That's right. The Americans were fighting their way. That's how they came to us.

T: When they arrived, did they, in a sense, come through the front door as the Germans were leaving?

H: The Germans left about the same time they came. Yes. Yes.

T: Did American units, if you remember, did they just literally roll into the camp?

H: No. A unit rolled into the camp, and they were amazed to see us in our emaciated conditions. Upset by that.

T: So they were not really prepared, from what you observed...

H: No.

**(2, A, 98)**

T: For the condition that the Americans were in here.

H: No. No. Nor were they prepared really to liberate the camp. I don't think they knew we were there until they got there.

T: I see. So they insisted the people stay there. Now it was a week or so, you said, before you actually left the camp. What changed and what didn't in that first week there?

H: We were on our own, but we were living the same way. Nothing much changed. We were eating more after we got the rations. We were getting sick more. We knew

that they were going to get us out of there. We didn't know how. We enjoyed that bug killer.

T: Was that pretty quick that that happened?

H: That came in with the food. Yes. The cans of that. And we were able to shake it down in our clothes. But we were still sleeping on the same mattresses, so we were still getting infected again.

T: That cycle I guess wouldn't be broken until you got out of those beds and...

H: Well, no. They took us to a town where they had showers set up and deloused us and gave us showers and uniforms that they had collected. Then put us on C-47s that were flying in supplies and the gasoline to the troops and took us back. We went to Rheims, France.

T: So this was within a week you're leaving the camp and going by airplane to France.

H: Yes.

T: Were you in any better physical condition a week later?

H: You mean when I got to Rheims?

**(2, A, 124)**

T: Yes.

H: No. There was nothing. How could it improve?

T: I think you mentioned a little bit of extra food.

H: Eating. Yes. But I had jaundice. Your eyes are brown. You're urine's brown.

T: So when you got to Rheims were you ambulatory or were you carried?

H: No, I was ambulatory. And I got no attention there. I didn't get attention, medical attention, until I got on the ship.

T: How long did you stay at Rheims?

H: Oh, I don't know. It was when Roosevelt died. I know that.

T: April 12 he died.

H: And I got back on May 7 or something. V-E Day. So between there, the trip home and Rheims.

T: So what was the purpose of being at Rheims? You said you got no medical attention there really?

H: It was a tent city. The big tents. And they were just waiting for ships to send us home.

T: Were these staffed by medical personnel? These camps?

H: No. No. I was in sickbay.

T: You were just basically laying there? Boy, were you expecting something more at this point?

H: No. By this time I'd learned to live with my jaundice. You're ambulatory. You can get around. I just lived with it. That's all. Then they, of course, changed my diet when I got in sickbay and they gave me chicken and fruit juices and things like that, which was good medicine.

T: Could you handle that stuff? At that point.

H: Yes. In small quantities. They don't give it to you the same way you get it out of a can.

T: Would you say you slowly gained strength by eating better now or did the jaundice really keep you in pretty bad shape?

H: It kept me in pretty bad shape. That's why I was in the hospital at Kilmer. They had to clear that up before they'd let me go.

T: Right.

H: Then they put me on a train by myself and sent me out to Indianapolis.

T: The ship back, was that a hospital ship or a troop ship?

H: No. A troop ship. It was a banana boat. More McCormick line. I can't think of the name of it.

T: Were these all types of troops being shipped back or just people who had been moved from hospitals or sickbays?

H: Oh, no. They were all, they were guys from the prison camps. They were prisoners.

T: So they were equipped to handle the medical needs and requirements of these POWs, ex-POWs, on this ship here?

H: You know, because I was in sickbay I can't tell you. I really don't know. I really don't know. It wasn't a hospital ship. I know that. It was a troop ship basically.

**(2, A, 168)**

T: Now you got more—or a higher level—of medical attention then at Camp Kilmer, New Jersey?

H: Yes. It was a hospital. I was in the hospital.

T: What did they do at that point for your physical condition? Did they deal with the jaundice finally?

H: They dealt with the jaundice, yes. They did that on the ship. When I was going home in sickbay. Then they said it was cleared up and permitted me to go to Atterbury. Then I was to get a sixty day furlough. Of course it was during that furlough I got a potbelly from eating.

T: I was going to ask you, when you got the furlough, did you go back to Ohio?

H: Yes. I went home. And then at the end of the furlough I went to Miami Beach for R and R for a week with my wife. That's where I met a friend that said, hey, they need company clerks, and so I was a company clerk. That's my MOS.

T: It sounds like once you had the sixty day furlough and began to eat more, that your physical condition started to improve.

H: It did, but I had a nervous condition then and I went to my own physician and I was taking something to calm my nerves. I don't know what it was.

T: Was that something that had been with you since you were captured? This nervous condition. Or not?

H: Both. I had it after the first capture, and then I kind of had it under control I guess when I was in prison camp, but then when I got home and everybody wanted to know about it, you know... The war was still going on and we were rarities, and our mothers and our wives had been a big group in Cleveland because there were a number of people who were captured and were prisoners.

T: So they were waiting for you.

H: They were trying to find out... They'd read about the Battle of the Bulge and they knew that we were in Europe. They were waiting for us to come home.

T: Let me ask you. You were home for sixty days then. Were you also at home when the war against Japan ended?

H: No.

T: You were back at Atterbury?

H: No. I was down in Florida.

T: In Florida. That's right. You went for a week to Florida.

H: Let me ask about the sixty days, because one of the things in sort of transitioning out of this POW phase is really family and friends and civilian life. Your family, you mentioned you thought they were worried about you here. When they saw you, how did they ask you about your POW experiences?

H: The first thing they did, they were so happy to see me home, that we really didn't talk much about that. I probably asked them more questions than they asked me.

T: Really?

H: Yes. My concerns about them and what had happened in the meantime and all of these other...

T: That's right. They hadn't heard anything for months and months.

H: And when they started telling me that we sent you cookies, and that box came back, and then we had a letter come back. It was singed. We got off on those topics.

**(2, A, 215)**

T: Did it come to the topic of what you had been through in the prison camp?

H: Yes. And that's why I wrote this. I took the notes and everybody wanted to know what it was about and I said, hey, I'll write it and you read it.

T: So, did you discuss it with any family members before you wrote that down or was that...

H: Probably so. Probably so. I didn't do that the first day I got home, you know. Probably several weeks after I got home I started typing it up, and that was probably therapeutic in a way.

T: What do you mean by that?

H: I could kind of relive the experience and yet now it's behind me.

T: By putting it on paper.

H: Yes.

T: If you remember, when family, your wife or your parents, and you had a sister, right? When they asked you questions about your POW experience, how did you filter that information for them? In other words, did you modify or limit what you told them about your experiences in any way?

H: I think I answered their questions honestly without trying to color it one way or the other, but I didn't go into elaborate discussions of it unless I was asked more questions.

T: So in a sense, you were happy to tell them, can I put it this way, a general version of what had happened...

H: Yes.

T: Did that satisfy them do you think?

H: No. That's why I wrote this.

T: Because they wanted more details...

H: Yes. So I put this together, and I said, I think this will help you. Yes. They wanted more detail. And they asked about others. I told you that the wives and the mothers were together and then they'd asked about your son or their son or how did he come out?

T: So a support group really.

H: Oh, yes. Yes.

T: Did your mother, or your wife, or your dad, or your sister ever mention how important that support group structure was?

H: Yes. Both my mother and my wife did. And how much they enjoyed making new friends as a result of it. People that they hadn't known before. But they got to know them. That they heard anything on the news or something one would call the other and they'd discuss it and kind of a grapevine type thing.

T: That sounds like a way of keeping informed but also finding support in others in the same situation.

H: Yes.

T: Just to follow the same train of thought. You were at the University of Michigan after your discharge the end of '45. You went to the University of Michigan. Your fellow students at that time, lots of veterans I suppose in college in those days. How much did your fellow students or faculty members know about your POW experience?

H: Nothing. I never talked about it. As a matter of fact, Jeanne, my wife now, didn't know about it, and she worked with me in Cleveland in two different stores. I never talked about it. It wasn't until recently when the State decided to give us free license plates.

**(2, A, 260)**

T: The Ex-POW plates?

H: The Ex-POW plates are free, and I applied for those when that came in and my former wife said, "Don't put those on the car. We don't want anybody to know that." But I said, hey, a couple hundred bucks for the plates, we're going to have it on there. Then people did stop and ask you sometimes about which war and that kind of thing. But until then I never talked about it.

T: Was it that you didn't talk, or people didn't ask, or...?

H: What you have to realize, Tom, is when you're captured and when you're marching to this train, you see many, many dead soldiers and you feel that those people gave their lives for the country and you're alive... coward. You feel like you're a coward, and you don't mention it. I'm sure if you talk to the others like John, they'll tell you the same thing. We never talked about it. People asked me where I was. I was in Europe. I was in the infantry.

T: What you're describing sounds like a sense of guilt, or shame, in a sense.

H: It is.

T: So you had co-workers for many years that if military service came up, that's what you would tell them. You were in the infantry in Europe.

H: Yes.



T: We're sitting here having this interview right now. What brought you to the point where when you get a mailing from someone like me, as an historian, that you say yes?

H: Because I realize, as I read the paper today and as I listen to some of these kooky college professors like the guy in Colorado that don't think the Holocaust happened, our children don't know anything about it. My children and grandchildren have read this and they're very fascinated by it. But as far as talking about it prior to recent years, nothing. I guess underneath it, it is a feeling of guilt so to speak. I'm alive. They were dead.

T: Did that feeling of guilt, has it ebbed over time or always been there?

H: It's always been there.

T: On the subject of interviewing—this is connected. Was it something that turned the corner for you, that allowed you to say yes to a request like mine, when it sounds like you wouldn't have for many years?

H: Well, I've had several experiences where I've talked to groups about it recently. I mentioned that my current wife was in the WAVES.

T: Yes.

H: And prior to our getting married, she ran a WAVES convention in Cleveland for five hundred people. When she came up here she got into the WAVES units and it was pretty dull when they weren't having anything, and the unit she was in, in Cleveland, had speakers and so forth. So she said, you ought to have speakers, and they said we can't get any. She said I'll give you my husband.

T: So she volunteered you.

H: *(laughs)* Yes. So I talked about my prison experience. That broke some things up. Then here on two occasions, one a men's group and the other after talking to the men's group about it, the women said, we want to hear this story and so forth. So I gave a speech here. I'm not hesitant about talking about it as a result of those experiences. Then when you asked, it fit right in. I said, "What do you think, Jeanne?" and she said, "By all means."

T: How difficult was it that first time?

H: I guess that was after the license plates and so forth. It wasn't too difficult. It was recalling and trying to tell the story in a half hour or forty-five minutes is the thing. People were asking questions and you realize you didn't tell them about that. I forgot that. Good question. As you're doing to some extent.

T: On the question of remembering, the Veterans Administration, the VA, were they helpful after the war in any kind of psychological...

H: No! Not at all. I got a ten percent disability for frozen feet, and I mentioned that I was nervous, and they said that's normal. You were a prisoner and you'll get out of it. You'll outgrow it.

T: They really blew you off.

H: Yes. Yes. And that wasn't corrected until very recently, when I went over to the VA here [in Minneapolis].

T: That's to Dr. Engdahl. How did that treatment by the VA after the war make you feel?

H: I ignored them. I wouldn't go to a VA facility for anything. They called me in for a physical once or twice after that ten percent disability, and I just stayed clear of them and took my ten bucks a month and paid no attention to them. And I had a lot of dental work to be done when I got home and I went to my own dentist. I didn't go to a VA.

T: Really? So you just stayed clear of them.

H: You bet.

T: Has the stance of the VA, or the acceptance of the VA for the POWs, has that changed over the years, from your perspective?

H: Yes. Recently. Very recently. The last three or four years it's changed.

T: It took them fifty years it sounds like or more.

H: Yes.

T: This group that you're with, with Dr. Engdahl, how does that help you?

H: Oh, I don't know that it really helps me. I'm with a group of people who were both in Europe and in Japan. The Bataan Death March and so forth. And I guess that I get comfort out of the fact that they had it rougher than I did, because all we do is kind of sit around like you and I are now. Each person talks about something, and we're not really reliving the war necessarily. We're talking about anything that comes up.

T: So other subjects outside of your POW experience may come up.

H: Yes. And they tease each other.

T: Yes. They do (*laughing*). Great group of guys actually.

H: Your group. You meet with...

T: Yes. I see them once a month. Every second Wednesday we meet in Richfield there.

H: Have some jokes maybe.

T: When you say the ones that made it back are those who were accepting, or flexible, or upbeat, in a sense; does that mean the people you observed who didn't make it in the camp, [are] those who gave up, but also those who couldn't adjust to new surroundings, to the situation as it was?

H: To a degree I think that's a correct statement. Yes. They didn't have a will to live is the way I express it. And you had to have a tremendous desire when you were hearing about how the Germans were winning the war and how little you were eating. You had no idea when the day would come when you would no longer be a prisoner.

**(2, A, 346)**

T: That's right. It was only April 2 but you didn't know...

H: Even six days. Try it.

T: You didn't know that day was coming, did you?

H: That's right.

T: So it could have been...

H: That's right.

T: Let me ask about adjusting to civilian life. You were back in college in a sense. By 1946, in college living a completely different existence than in 1945 when you were a POW. What was your initial reaction to being back into the civilian world?

H: My main desire was to catch up. I felt I'd lost two or three years. Remember I was married before I went over. I still had college ahead of me and I just was ready to get out on the road...

T: So you were focused on schoolwork.

H: I wanted to get my degree and get a job and support my family.

T: When was your first child born?

H: 1947.

T: So within a year.

H: January 1947.

T: So you had a family now by '47, the time you finished school. So you felt a need in a sense to get on the fast track of life...

H: Yes. I'd lost a couple years.

T: You were old, in a sense, in a way...

H: Yes. But not for many of the guys around me. There were a lot of people coming back from the war.

T: In that sense, those veterans...

H: We were all going on the GI Bill.

T: So you used the GI Bill for...

H: I used the disability. I had a disability, so I got ten bucks more a month or something, medical. But I did go at the government's expense for my last two years.

T: Were a lot of guys using those GI Bill benefits, or disability payments, to get through school?

H: Oh, sure. Most of the ones I knew.

T: So it was a good deal for you.

H: Oh, wonderful. I paid my own way before. I could not afford it when I got back.

T: How did you pick the University of Michigan, by the way?

H: I went back to Miami, and I guess I was upset that they didn't fall all over me. They were going to put me in line and see if they could work me in and all this stuff, and I said I don't need that. Then I was looking for a good school, and I told you I was originally planning to go to work when I found that the curriculums were the opposite. I chose Michigan. It was close and it was well rated.

T: So that was a good fit for you.

H: Yes.

T: When you were a civilian again, how much were you bothered by recurring images, either during the day or dreams at night?

H: Quite a bit. I can remember my wife complaining about my taking the whole bed or taking all of the covers, because I was used to fighting for my share of that little bunk.

T: Did that diminish over time?

H: I think so. I think that I learned to adjust to it.

T: How hard was it for, from your perspective, how hard was it for your wife to adjust to an ex-POW husband when you got back?

H: I think she had difficulty for a while. I don't know why. We hadn't been together that much before I went overseas. We were married in September and I went over in October.

T: That's right. So it wasn't really a readjustment but --

**End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.**

T: So those images or those memories or dreams diminished over time, from what you said earlier.

H: Yes.

T: When you did have images or dreams, was it typically the same thing or things that came back to you?

H: I think so. I think basically they were the same types of things. They were the horror of the thing. You know I might be dreaming about riding that darn boxcar one night, or having bombs drop on the tracks while we were in the boxcar, and things of that nature.

T: That boxcar image that you bring up, you described a lot of really awful things, but that might be the worst that you described here. Not only powerlessness, but horror of the bombs falling around you and there's nothing you can do. I can't even imagine that.

H: *(nods)*

T: When you think about your experience as a soldier, and you were in the Army for how long, two and a half years altogether, what do you think is the most important way that the war changed your life?

H: I always refer to my prison experience as a maturing experience.

T: What do you mean by that?

H: I went in a little boy, and I came out a man.

T: In a sense in talking to veterans who were not POWs, sometimes I'll hear the same thing, that the military life and regimentation kind of brought maturity much faster. Did your experience as a POW modify that statement at all or not?

H: No, I don't think it modified it. I don't think it modified it. I always said when I was working, I said nothing's tough. If they're not fooling with my life, it's not tough.

T: So that experience in a way...

H: That's where they really fooled with my life. Yes.

T: Did that make it easier to accept other setbacks or other minor irritants over the years?

H: Oh, either that, or it made me more hard-nosed. I think it was the latter.

T: More hard-nosed?

H: I think so.

T: Did you notice that about yourself? When you say hard-nosed, what do you mean exactly? Like in personal relations or on business or...

H: I just didn't want anybody to take advantage of me. Didn't want anybody take advantage of me.

T: Because you'd been taken advantage of.

**(2, B, 442)**

H: Right.

T: Did your wife, the person who was closest to you, did she notice that too, that change in your character?

H: I think so.

T: Did she ever say anything to you to that extent, or that you seemed to be a different person?

H: She was very tolerant, but I think that she implied it at times. Yes. You know, this is not your nature or something like that.

T: Couching it in a way but...

H: Yes.

T: But getting the point across.

H: Yes.

T: You had two children, right?

H: Yes.

T: How much did your children know growing up about this, about your POW experience?

H: Very little.

T: Much like what you told your co-workers, that you were in the Army.

H: Yes. Yes. Very little. My son went to Michigan and was in ROTC. Then he was commissioned and so forth, and I think then we started talking about it. There was no need to talk to them about it. The war was over. They were grown. How much did you learn from your dad about the war?

T: He wasn't in it. He was just too young. He was only thirteen then. Kids ask questions. I remember when I was growing up, a number of kids, my friends whose dads had been in the war, and one guy had been a sub crewman in the Pacific and he did models and stuff and little things hanging around. I remember we would ask him questions and sometimes as a kid somebody tells you something and you think okay, and you kind of move on. You're happy. And I'm often wondering if it was my dad, because it was in such close proximity, would I have asked more questions? I don't know that.

H: I don't think we talked about it.

T: That's the last question I had and I wanted to ask you if there's something you wanted to add at the end, or something that I didn't ask or didn't get to?

H: I think we've covered the war front pretty well. I can't think of anything. If you have any questions, call me up.

T: On the record, let me thank you at the end of this for your time this evening and being very candid and very open in a lot of the things. Thank you very much.

H: Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW**