

Interviewee: Arnold Sprong

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 26 March 2005

Location: by telephone to the Sprong residence, Cass Lake, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, April 2005

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, April 2005

Arnold Spring was born 3 February 1925 in Michigan City, Indiana, and grew up there. After completing high school, he was inducted into the US Army in August 1943.

After the Allied invasion of France in June 1944, Arnold was among the troops sent to France. He served with 2nd Battalion Intelligence, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division.

On 11 July 1944, near the French city of St Lo, Arnold and two other GIs were captured by the Germans. Arnold was held for very brief times at several locations in German-occupied France, but within a few weeks was at a permanent POW camp location in Germany, IV-B Muhlberg. He remained here for just a few weeks, though, before being sent in August on a work detail to the small town of Adorf, in south central Germany near the Czech border. Arnold remained here until late April 1945, at which time the Germans evacuated all prisoners due to the advance of Soviet forces. The men were marched south for several weeks, until liberated by American forces in the first days of May 1945.

Arnold and other Americans were evacuated, eventually back to the United States. He spent some time recovering from his POW experience, then in November 1945 was discharged. Again a civilian, Arnold was married and raised a family, and used GI Bill benefits to attend college. He spent a career in the field of engineering.

Interview Key:

T = Thomas Saylor

A = Arnold Sprong

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 26 March 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. This morning I'm speaking by telephone with Mr. Arnold Sprong, to his house in Cass Lake, Minnesota. First, Mr. Sprong, on the record this time, thanks very much for taking time this morning to participate in this project.

A: You're welcome.

T: Now we know, for the record now, you were born on February 3, 1925, in beautiful Michigan City, Indiana. Another Midwesterner.

A: On the shores of Lake Michigan.

T: Beautiful Lake Michigan. As someone who grew up near beautiful Lake Erie [interviewer was raised in Akron, Ohio], I'll add these adjectives there (*both laugh*). And you've been in Minnesota since about 1989 or 1990, you said.

A: Yes.

T: You were inducted into service in August of 1943, and on the other end of it, as it were, you were discharged from service November of 1945. By 1944 you were in Europe; you were trained with 2nd Battalion Intelligence, or S-2, and in France you were a replacement and were made a scout, I think you said.

A: Yes.

T: Let's go back to 11 July 1944, because on that particular day your life is going to take a change. That's the day you became a prisoner of war. And I'm wondering if you could describe the circumstances by which you became a prisoner of the Germans.

A: Yes. We were having trouble getting through the hedgerows, and we were probably stalemated in that position for a week or two. This was the morning, July 11, was the big attack on hill 192, which was our objective, which overlooked St. Lo, the city of St. Lo, which was a very primary objective to take to help our way along the war and make our way into Germany.

T: Now, as a scout, what was your particular duty in that activity that day?

A: I was the second scout, and the first scout, he's the number one man who starts piercing the enemy. We had gone back and—we had trained. They were trying to find ways to get through the hedgerows, because the hedgerows were very defensive, being squares of actually growing material around the edge, like a fence. The plan was, which didn't work out, but the plan was—we actually had gone back to train for this—was that a demolition team would come up and blow a hole in the hedgerow with explosives. They would move out. A tank would move into that opening, would fire a round from its cannon into the two distant corners, and at the same time a man in the top would spray the trees for snipers. Then they would move out and the infantry then would move through that hole along the sides of the hedgerow up to the next hedgerow. The number one scout would be the first man through the hole, through the opening, and the number two scout would be the next one.

T: So you would follow behind him, in a way.

A: Right.

T: What happened there? How did this transpire—was he captured as well? Let me ask it that way.

A: No, he wasn't. What had happened, our sergeant came up behind. He was actually just a couple men behind us. Our platoon sergeant. We were quite a ways up the hill and the number one scout, the fellow's name was Gene, Gene Davidson from Whitewater, Wisconsin, he pointed across the hedgerow and he says, "There's Germans talking on the other side." So we're looking at, like, we're about four or five feet apart. We had not received—other than some small arms fire. Our artillery was supposed to have, and did, pretty well bombard it.

So they were pretty well pummeled, and then the artillery was supposed to move ahead of us as we moved up the hill and through the hedgerows. The plan was... Let me move back a minute. The plan was, as I mentioned, was for the demolition team to blow a hole in the hedgerow and the tanks to move up. We were given hand grenades and armor piercing, two bandoleers of armor piercing ammunition. They said that if we needed more hand grenades there would be hand grenades on the back of the tank. Well, there was a creek that we had gone through just after we jumped off, and our tanks were in the creek and they weren't moving. They were bogged in. I thought tanks could go almost anyplace. Apparently what had happened, if you get the front edge of the tank going up and the back edge digging in, they just sit there and churn and dig themselves into a hole.

(1, A, 66)

T: And that's what they had done.

A: That's what they had done. So we just passed up our tanks. You don't call the war off because you lost your tanks. So we moved on past the tanks and a couple of hedgerows up the hill. So we forgot about the tanks at that point. Now, I'll move back to Gene saying, "There's Germans talking on the other side." About that time our sergeant came up alongside of us and he said, "Throw your hand grenade." We took our hand grenades and threw a hand grenade, and our hand grenades, the three of us who were there, our hand grenades came back.

T: After you threw them, the Germans threw them back?

A: Right. Exactly. So my sergeant—and when I think back at this...but you don't think about it at the time—my sergeant, whose name was Armond Bayless, he says, "Count two and throw them!" Well, hand grenades, as I recall anyhow, were three second grenades. So we counted two and threw them and they didn't come back. But now we're out of hand grenades, and our hand grenades were on the tanks down in the—they called it Purple Heart Draw, I found out later—where this creek was. That term is used quite a bit in quite a bit of the military excerpts of that particular day. There were a lot of people killed back there because the Germans had artillery zeroed in on that.

Back to this. So our hand grenades came back. We didn't have any more. Our sergeant said to us, he says, "Let's get out of here!" Now we're on a hill, and you don't have any cover going back. So Gene and I looked at each other and we sort of, like...this looks like a better spot than running down the hill, because we're completely exposed, and at least we're up close to these guys and they have trouble shooting us. So Armond, our sergeant, says, "I'm getting out of here!" And he started running back down the hill along the side. That part bothered me a little bit. I wondered years afterwards whether this was considered insubordination or not, but I don't think it was. We stayed there. He just, like, if you guys aren't going, I'm going back or follow me or whatever. Anyhow, he started running back.

There was an opening kind of where the farmers could get from one hedgerow to the other, and usually they didn't have these openings, but there was one there where you could almost drag a cart over the top of it. We were fighting German paratroopers. Very experienced people. Much more so than we were. A German paratrooper jumped up on that opening and shot at our sergeant as he's running back down the hill. Both Gene and I shot at him, but by that time he was already...jumped back. And of course, he had a German machine gun, a Schmeiser zip gun as they were called then. They hit Sergeant Bayless, and there was kind of a bush along the hedgerow and he kind of dove into that bush. That paratrooper must have seen him or something, because he jumped back up there and sprayed the bush again. I read later where Sergeant Bayless was killed at that time.

T: So at this point, had you followed Sergeant Bayless, you'd have been in bigger trouble than you were.

A: I think so. Yes. Yes, I think we would have.

T: Now this whole turn of events has left the two of you up close to the Germans though.

A: Yes. Yes. This continued. They tried getting our help. And it kind of surprised me. Some of that help that they were sending up was coming up the middle of the hedgerow rather than the edges. Us being so close, whenever we saw somebody we'd shoot at them, but being so close of course, we couldn't give the guys running up that much cover.

(1, A, 117)

T: Are you aware of the passage of time in this situation?

A: It's very difficult. We were captured somewhere about noon or shortly after, and of course, we jumped off about six or seven o'clock I think it was. So, yes. With the guys coming up it was fairly close to the time that we had got stopped there. So I would say probably we had only been there maybe like a half hour at that point.

T: What's going through your mind in that situation? I mean, were you aware at the time of how close the situation was as far as your own safety?

A: I didn't think a whole lot about it but it was just, what should I do? What could I do to? Should I stay here or should I also start running back? I had noticed at this point, after Sergeant Bayless had gotten shot, [that] the sleeve of my field jacket was like puffs of smoke was hitting it or something. I kept looking off to the left to see what that was. Now Gene was off to my left too, but he was maybe like four or five feet away. I suddenly realized they had a gun port in the hedgerow and that puffing that I was feeling was somebody shooting through that gun port at the guys trying to come up and give us some help.

I've got an M-1 rifle, which isn't real easy to move around in a case like that. But I waited until a shot had come out of that gun port again, and I quickly moved my rifle, with my left thumb in the trigger and my hand on the barrel, and put a few shots into that gun port. There wasn't any more action coming out of that gun port after that, but shortly after that then Gene got shot in the upper shoulder-neck area and I went over to help him, to get out his first aid pack, and he told me, "No! No! Leave me alone!"

This bothered me for years afterward. What I should have done at that point? Should I have continued? Was he saying no, you're the only guy protecting us here, or was he hurting and thought he was going to die, or just what his thoughts were too. But anyhow, I never got a bandage or anything on him. I got my gun back and I'm shooting over towards that opening again where there is quite a few people still jumping up every once in a while. In that opening. After the time I started to give him some first aid, there was a pile of wood, stacked wood, corded wood alongside the hedgerow with a space of maybe just like a couple feet. I glanced over there, and there was one of the fellows in our squad who had been demoted from an anti-tank—apparently he had left his post on an anti-tank platoon and they put him

in our infantry group—and he was cowering in between the cord of wood and the hedgerow. I have no idea where he came from. I never saw him up until that point.

T: He may have been there quite a while?

A: He might have been, yes. So at that point, and again, I don't have a good realization of time, but I'm beginning to think—we're getting fire from the sides. The Germans are moving down our sides now and they're beginning to move our own artillery back on us. I glanced off to that opening in the hedgerow and I'm all set to start shooting again, and here comes two GIs from the second squad. A fellow named James Ginn and a Mexican fellow named Garcia I think it was, or something like that. Now these fellows just came in. They came up that side on the right of it. They came over and they both had Thompson submachine guns and I thought man, are we in business here. We've got firepower galore. They no more than got there and the Germans started throwing concussion grenades, which I thought were nothing. They were gray and about the size of an egg, a little bit bigger. Smooth. It seemed like nothing. I watched them go off. And they didn't seem to cause any problem at all. Now I don't know why that's the case, but that's the way that I remember it. But then they started throwing these potato mashers, which you're probably familiar with.

T: Yes. The standard German grenade.

A: Yes. And then they have a jacket that they can slip...I guess it's also a concussion grenade, but with a jacket that they can slip over which makes it a shrapnel-type of thing. And they were throwing those. They threw one and the Mexican fellow was to my right. I could probably hold out my arm and touch him. They threw one and I bumped him on the shoulder and pointed because the thing is laying on the ground right in front of him. And it went off. He fell backwards, pulled his helmet off, and started fanning his ear. I didn't get hit by this at all. A chunk of that grenade went through the center of his helmet, tore up his helmet liner going around the right side of his head, tore a chunk out of his ear and went out the back of his helmet. When he tore it off he was fanning his ear because he lost a chunk out of his ear. That seemed like an exceptional thing to me, that something like that could happen and that's all he got was, he lost a chunk of his ear. Went in dead center on the top, the front and center, dead center in the back. **(1, A, 204)**

At that point, the two...and of course, here's some more time had passed, because these two fellows ran out of ammunition, and so we're back to my M-1. I think about this later, why we didn't grab another rifle. Gene's rifle. The guy behind the woodpile. There were guys coming up trying to get to us that were laying on the hill. They were too far away. We couldn't go pick up their piece. But we had one closer to us. Why we didn't, why these two fellows didn't go get those—I didn't think of it and neither did they, I guess. But a paratrooper jumped up. The [American] artillery now was coming in on us. We're getting small arms fire from both sides, behind this, off to the sides. Not totally behind us. A German paratrooper jumped up on the hedgerow and wiggled his finger at us like, come on

over. We looked at each other and wondered what to do. We didn't really have much of a conference of any kind, but we decided this was a bad spot we were in, and maybe we better quit. So we did. They took us back—

T: How many of you? Just for clarification.

A: Three.

T: You and two other guys.

A: Me and the two guys with the Thompsons.

T: Where is the first scout, Gene?

A: Gene's laying on the ground with a bullet in his either shoulder or neck area.

T: Did the Germans leave him there?

A: Yes. I talked to him after I got back.

T: Was he taken prisoner?

A: No, he was left there.

T: You guys that could walk, they took.

A: Right. The guy behind the woodpile, maybe they never saw him. He stayed there too. I don't know whatever happened to him.

T: He's just kind of...he's come up in your description a couple times, but he hasn't played any role in anything.

A: No role at all. He was scared to death.

T: So he was just kind of frozen into sitting there.

A: Right. Exactly.

T: Did you kind of just go on the other side of this hedgerow now, to where the Germans were?

A: Yes.

T: And let me ask...and this is kind of our approach to this. As a new POW now, what's going through your mind there? You've had these Germans, you've fought

them for a while, suddenly you have them as your captors. What's going through your mind?

A: We're not real happy about the thing, and we figure they are going to shoot us.

T: Was that your first thought, really?

A: Yes.

T: Why did you think that?

(1, A, 243)

A: I thought they would probably try to get some information out of us, then shoot us. Probably not the first thing. They took us back to a little concrete building in the middle of a hedgerow, and left us in there for a while. They were just outside. Then all of a sudden we started getting .50 caliber fire. American. And had we been able to delay this whole thing... They got us out of this little building and they started running. We're standing there. They're not telling us necessarily, but we're getting .50 caliber fire and it's a little difficult to start running towards .50 caliber fire.

T: So your options...let me see if I get this. Your options are to run toward your own lines—

A: Right.

T: —which are now shooting at you, or to run with the Germans.

A: Exactly.

T: What a situation.

A: Yes. So we decided to run with the Germans, because the nearest cover was another hedgerow. I ran as hard as I could for that next hedgerow and dove through an opening and over the top. It was almost like I was suspended in air, because when I looked down, I found that I was in a sunken lane that went down about twelve feet rather than three or four feet like I expected. Down below was mortar casing and all kinds of debris that you would normally find in a place like that. A storage sort of place.

T: In a sense, you're kind of retreating with these Germans here.

A: Yes.

T: And all three of you Americans still together?

A: Yes. That sounds like a bad situation. Almost like you joined up or something.

T: Obviously the Americans shooting don't know that other Americans are over there.

A: Exactly. We probably didn't look much different than they did, from a distance.

T: You couldn't see the Americans.

A: No.

T: Did you get to a place that was what we might call stable, or out of the range of fire?

A: Yes. They took us back to a...we walked back along a road. Now we're away from the action right now. We had two bullets go over our head. Of course, (*chuckles*) the three of us hit the ground, but the Germans stood straight up. This was a signal from somebody who was watching that road to find out whether these were Americans or Germans that were coming back. Since the Germans stayed vertical they didn't put any rounds into the people. So this was kind of a signal, I think, from whoever it was that was shooting. They took us back to a colonel in a sunken CP [command post] and he interviewed the three of us together, and he got very upset because I had these armor piercing bandoleers around my neck still, and they were black tipped. He got very violent about the whole thing and about ready to hit me and so on and so forth.

T: Was he speaking English to you?

A: Yes. Very good English.

T: Was he asking questions or just talking?

A: No. He was asking questions too. But he was very upset. He wanted to know who we were and what group—I think they knew what group we were. Of course we weren't telling him anything. But he got very upset about my ammunition. I wonder sometimes if he thought they were dum-dums or something.

(1, A, 308)

T: Which are what?

A: Dum-dums are, they spread out and cause an awful lot of damage when they hit a person. They just tear a person up.

T: And they weren't those kind of rounds.

A: They weren't. They were armor piercing. They were for tanks actually. They were to pierce armor for tanks.

T: It's amazing you had those still around your neck.

A: Yes, it is. I think we had one of that and one of the regular ammunition. But he wasn't concerned about the other. Yes. At that point, since we didn't have weapons, I guess they didn't worry about the ammunition. Taking it away from us. But of course, we were pretty active. That whole time. Maybe the Germans weren't thinking any more about what was going on than we were.

T: Say, what kind of things did this German officer want to know from the three of you?

A: He didn't really go into a lot of interrogation. I think he was leaving that up to people further back.

T: I see. Were you threatened at all, any of you?

A: I was getting up to that point. We left the colonel and we went out into a field. The Germans offered us cigarettes, and I think I smoked at that time. I know I did. Offered us cigarettes, and we looked at each other and we thought, "This is the end." We figured they took us out there and were going to shoot us. They hadn't found out anything but they had found out, I guess, what they wanted. They wanted prisoners, but maybe they were ready to get rid of us. Didn't need us anymore, and especially since they had to start retreating at this time. And I think that's what the German soldiers wanted us to think too.

T: Had you, before this day, had you heard stories or rumors that the Germans shot their prisoners sometimes? Because this is obviously in your mind on this particular day that this might happen to you.

A: Yes. And of course, we had guys right in our own outfit that shot prisoners too. But the paratroopers, our own paratroopers weren't too well liked by the Germans for that same reason.

T: Because they shot prisoners.

A: Yes.

T: That's something that I think most of the American public doesn't know much about. That prisoners were shot on both sides.

A: Yes.

T: So you had a definite concern, a real concern for your life here.

A: Oh, *yes (emphatically)*. I thought this was the end. Yes. They had given us a cigarette, and they were in the middle of a field, and we figured this was it. But of course it wasn't, and they moved us back [away from the front]. I forget some of the details on how we picked up other prisoners and so on, but the first place that I can remember is a town in France called Alençon [in Normandy, on the Orne River]. That's where they had picked up prisoners from other divisions and they were beginning to gather them.

T: So your group of three is growing in size.

A: Yes. Right. This is where you start getting the interrogation. They wanted to know where we had taken our training, with what divisions or whatever. What kind of training we had had and so on and so forth.

T: Were you questioned individually or—

A: Yes. Yes. Individually.

T: And were the questions more specific this time?

A: Yes. Oh, yes. These guys were like intelligence. They wanted to know who they were up against. What kind of training the people had.

T: Were you threatened at this point at all, or was it simply question and answer?

A: The threatening part at this point was just strictly: do you want some good food or—

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

T: —more of a carrot than a stick.

A: Yes. Yes. Right. Yes. There was no, to my knowledge, there was no browbeating or anything like that. We had more problems with the citizens than we did with the military really, as far as that was concerned.

T: Ones in Germany, or here in France.

A: Germany.

T: At this point you're still in France. Did the Germans keep you in France for a while or were you quickly moved out?

A: We were moved pretty fast. We were moved at night. By truck. They were very afraid of the air cover, our air cover. So they did almost all the moving at night. We

were moved from Alençon in France to Chartres [forty miles southwest of Paris], and then to the Metz-Nancy area, which was along the Rhine or someplace.

T: It's in eastern France, heading toward the German border.

A: Moving toward the German border.

T: Up in northeast France.

A: Right. I think I moved too far ahead, because we got to Paris, and when we got to Paris I think we stayed one night. We stayed in places that were kind of like...one place was even on the second floor. I think it was in Paris. It was like a ballroom or something. Completely empty. Of course, you just go in there and you sleep on the floor and they get you up in the morning and you go. In Paris they took us to the railroad station, and I still remember, I never had seen a railroad station like this except in the movies, where they have them completely covered in glass and the trains come in under the glass canopy.

T: They have several big train stations, right.

A: That's the first time I'd ever seen anything like that. So they put us in boxcars. The forty and eight boxcars. We had around sixty [men in ours], I think it was. I forget the exact number. Sixty or eighty in a boxcar, but it was to a point where nobody could lay down or even sit. You almost had to all stand. We were out in the yard. They put us on the trains there, but then they moved us out into the yard into the hot sun. Now this is July. I lucked out and happened to be near one of the little two by two windows, which had barbed wire over the window. But I was getting air. Some of the other guys weren't getting air. They wouldn't give us water. Eventually they did, but you didn't get as much as you wanted. Then they started moving us, and we got to the area of Chateau Thierry, which is very famous in World War I [as a battle site].

T: It sure is.

A: The train stopped. Of course, we were all locked in. I don't remember just how many cars we were. The guards opened our doors and went running for the woods, and we got strafed by our own airplanes. This was probably the most terrifying experience, on my part, of the whole war.

T: You know, I'll tell you Mr. Sprong, that says a lot, because you've just described being captured there as being pretty harrowing, and you had some experiences I think we're going to get to that were also. Describe that—why was it so frightening?

A: It was completely dark, of course, in the car because you only had two openings, high openings. The two were diagonally across the boxcar. They started their strafing runs and you're in the dark and the bullets are coming through the wood

and the metal. There's tracers. It's almost like explosions within the boxcar. You can't avoid anything, because you're packed in there like sardines. I don't have the exact figure. I started recording my information about 1972, to get some numbers down. I'd have to go back into my stuff here to see what the numbers were. But I think our car had fourteen dead. But there were some other boxcars that were much, much worse. They left the boxcars there. They opened them up. They took the bodies out.

(1, B, 437)

T: How long did the strafing last? I mean, was it over fairly quickly?

A: They only made two runs. I think there were two airplanes. Now of course, we couldn't see. But the first run, they strafed the first run and he peeled off and I don't think it was the same one coming back. I think it was his partner coming through and strafed again. I think, since nothing exploded, I think they were looking for ammunition, bombs, things of that nature. Had something exploded, had there been something else on that train that would have exploded, we would have probably been annihilated there.

T: It could have blown up. Sure.

A: But they took two runs and quit. Peeled off and left.

T: And you're left with the remnants of this attack, which are wounded and dead people around you.

A: Yes. It was several hours later that a nurse and a doctor came down from the French—whatever the nearest French town was, I don't know—and started tending the wounded and dead. One harrowing experience I have difficulty talking about is there was one fellow laying on the ground. We were fairly free at this moment. I walked up and down the rows of dead and dying, and there was one fellow who had...I could see his brains. He was thrashing somewhat. I looked at him and left, and I've thought after that if I could have given him a hand or something, to give him some connection to reality. He was probably completely out of it anyway, but I've thought about that one.

T: Have you second-guessed yourself? I mean, are you upset with yourself that you didn't do something?

A: Yes. Yes. I think I could have made his leaving this life a little easier maybe. And it was that particular one, because he was so bad and he was moving. He was thrashing. I think he was out of it. That's the part that relieves me a little bit of the responsibility but... *(trails off)*

T: So the train doesn't move for a number of hours you say.

A: Yes. It sat there for quite a while. In fact, it was probably at least an hour before the nurse and the doctor came down and started tending. Then they got us...they had given us at Paris a can of Argentine beef in some kind of juice. We were supposed to share this with your buddy, who in my case happened to be James Ginn. So we had this one can of beef between us and the two of us, even though this was such a harrowing experience, maybe it was the thought of, you might as well eat the beef. You may not be here tomorrow. So we finished off our ration that was supposed to last us to the end of the train ride which, we didn't know how long it was. It ended up being two and a half days. So we didn't have anything to eat for two and a half days. But they piled us back on the train, and I had a terrible fear of being strafed again.

T: As well you might. Yes. The doors of the train are locked from the outside, aren't they?

A: Yes. There was no way of getting out.

T: So this experience of having been strafed, now becomes: this could happen again.

A: Yes.

T: Did this train take you, this journey, all the way to the first camp you were at, which was at Muhlberg [in Germany]?

A: Yes.

T: And how much time, by the time you get to Muhlberg, the first camp, which is IV-B, how many days have gone by, would you estimate, since you've been captured?

A: I would say probably four or five. There was at least a day in between when we were captured in Alençon, and another day to Chartres, and another day to Paris, and another day to Metz-Nancy. Now I'm thinking back a little bit on just what you just said, and I keep thinking of the Metz-Nancy. Maybe the Paris train took us to Metz-Nancy and we stayed a night or two there and then went to Muhlberg. I'm not real sure about that.

T: No. The specifics aren't the most important thing. It's really, in this case, to gauge the passage of time. Sometimes we have trouble keeping that straight. In situations like this.

A: Yes.

T: When you got to Muhlberg, did you stay in the same boxcar as part of the same train all the way there?

A: Yes. When we got in the boxcar in Paris I'm pretty sure we were in the same boxcar when we got out at Muhlberg.

T: When you got out there, is that the first time you actually got out of the train in Germany?

A: Except for when the people were...yes, in Germany. That's true. Except for when the people were strafed. We got out of the train then. But otherwise we never got out of the train.

T: When you got out in Muhlberg, how close was the train station to the camp that you went to?

A: I would say probably just a block, city block or two.

T: So it was very close.

A: Very close.

T: Did you encounter German civilians there at all?

A: No. I don't recall any German civilians. No. There was one incident—going back to the train again. One incident that comes to mind. A fellow from the other end of the boxcar—now this is after the strafing—worked his way up to us in the corner of the—why up to us, I don't know. But he was French. He was not American. And I don't know why he was there, how he got there. He was a little guy. Real small. Probably only one hundred pounds. Maybe he was inspecting the floor of the boxcar. But he got up to our point and he took one of the cans from the bully-beef that we had, and started digging into the floor and got a space open enough to drop out, but the train never slowed up. Never came to a stop. And I remember—we were sleeping like standing up—and I remember waking up in the morning and he was gone. I think it was in Muhlberg, through the grapevine, we had gotten word that he was killed. He was run over by the train. But his purpose was to drop out of the train and get into the French underground.

T: Did it occur to you at that time to try to get away from the train or try to escape from the train?

A: We could have maybe enlarged the hole, but that was fairly late in the story, in the trip. I couldn't think of any way that we could get out of there. There was barbed wire over the window and even getting up and out of the window...I suppose—it seems to me there was more than just barbed wire over the window. There was barbed wire over the window. And of course, it was quite small too.

T: Talk about arriving at Muhlberg, because this is the first permanent camp location you've arrived at.

A: Yes. They gave us...this is our first Red Cross parcel. I think it was a Canadian parcel. I think we split it between the two of us. This is the most and the best food that we had had for quite a while.

T: The two guys with whom you were captured, are you still together with them at this point?

(1, B, 534)

A: I lost the Mexican, Garcia. I don't know what happened to him, but Ginn and I stayed together throughout the whole—I was going to say right up to the very end, but... Yes, I think we did. I think he went on the march too. Because our camp broke up, and we'll get into that.

T: Yes. Here's one of these guys. You and he are together the whole time.

A: Yes, two of us were together the whole time. Yes.

T: Now just to clarify something. You were at Muhlberg, I think you said, several weeks, but that's all.

A: Yes. Short time. Yes. In Muhlberg were Serbs, quite a few different nationalities. I picked up a cigarette case that a Serb had made out of aluminum from a German fighter plane. I bought this with cigarettes from my Red Cross parcel. Cigarettes were better than money. I got a stainless steel ring that was made by a Serb or one of the people that I bought with.

T: This camp when you got there, describe—sort of paint a panorama of this camp. What does it look like to you as a young man coming into this place?

A: Extremely large. It was a very large camp. As I recall there were barracks off the ground. But they could have been on the ground, but strictly open from one end to the other. The inside was stacked bunks. You were allowed to go outside during the day, but after about six o'clock or something, anybody caught outside would be shot. Cigarettes were the bartering thing. They said that you could get a .45 automatic [pistol] in that camp if you had enough cigarettes to buy it.

T: And the cigarettes would be something you'd have to have from the Red Cross parcels.

A: Yes. That would be our only access. The Germans loved American cigarettes.

T: So these were something you could trade to the Germans as well?

A: Yes.

T: What about the German guards here? You've experienced German paratroopers. You've had German guards on the train.

A: I didn't have much experience with the guards here. We were really not in contact very much. Now, we fell out every day and had to be counted. They were up in front of us. But as far as personal contact, there was no personal contact. I don't think I ever talked to one of them.

T: Did you notice them mistreating prisoners at all or was it that they just kind of kept their distance?

A: No. If they were mistreated, it was done someplace else.

T: I see. So the daily kind of contact was nothing to worry about.

A: Yes. They were kind of away.

T: What about the barracks here? Were you assigned to a barracks when you arrived?

A: Yes. Yes. They were small. They were long. But you were tightly quartered in there. They weren't very clean.

T: Were there rooms within a larger building or just one large building?

A: I don't recall. The buildings, as I recall, from the outside were long and large. But from the inside it seemed like I was living in my own little world. So I don't know whether there were partitions in there or if they were just one long building. I have a feeling they were just one long building, but my memory leaves me there.

T: What kind of sleeping facilities? Were there bunk beds, something like that?

(1, B, 586)

A: Yes. They were very close bunk beds. Yes.

T: Do you remember how many tall? Two, three, four?

A: Four.

T: Four tall. And did you just sort of grab an open bunk or were you assigned to a place?

A: No. I think we just grabbed one. They turned you in there and you found a place, and hopefully you didn't run out of places to sleep.

T: Now you mentioned this place not being particularly clean. Is that to do with things like lice, fleas, those kind of things?

A: Yes. Yes. That was about our first experience with that.

T: How much of a problem was that from your perspective?

A: Not a whole lot. In the work camp it was more of a problem than it was in this large camp. Maybe they hadn't infested us quite yet. Of course, they cause typhus, and we were told about typhus, you could die from it. And of course, you would get bit and you did have lice, and they were very hard to get rid of. I'm moving ahead a little bit. Somebody had said kerosene would get rid of the lice so we...I came upon some kerosene and I put some around my private parts, and this was in the winter. It started burning and I ended up going outside and trying to cool things off in the snow and wash that off. It wasn't a good idea.

T: Speaking one man to another, I can kind of feel your pain there (*laughs*).

A: (*laughing*) That wasn't a good idea at all.

T: It must have bothered you enough to where you were willing to try something like that.

A: Yes. Yes. Right.

T: At Muhlberg were there work details while you were there or not?

A: No. And that was one of the problems—nothing to do.

T: Literally nothing to do.

A: Literally nothing to do. Right.

T: Were there any things provided, games, books, anything like that to pass you time?

A: Not that I recall at all. No.

T: It sounds like you had time to sit around, to kill.

A: Yes. Yes. And of course, it gave you too much time to think, which was very bad at that particular time. You really wanted some activity of some kind. And you got better food as you went out. The food in the big camp was much less than in a work camp.

T: Now, did you know that at the time or only learn that later?

A: No. I learned that later.

T: You mentioned having time on your hands leaves you time to think. What kind of thoughts were in your mind at this time?

A: Whether you were going to make it out. Whether you were going to get well. As long as you were in the big camp you were probably pretty safe from strafing. Strafing bothered me even long after I got out. I could hear an airplane long before anybody else could, I think.

T: So that one experience...

A: It was a psychological thing.

(1, B, 632)

T: Did you feel fairly safe in the camp there?

A: Yes. Yes. We felt safe in the camp. The short time that we were there we really weren't intimidated by the guards as long as you followed their rules. They said stay in; don't go out after six; you'll be shot. And you would be shot. So as long as you did what you were told at that time...but the main thing was you constantly thought of food and your family back home, and whether you would make it out or not.

T: And you are—I'm just checking the date. You are only nineteen years old now.

A: Yes. I'm nineteen.

T: Did you have a chance to write back to the States to anyone at this point?

A: Yes. I'm not sure whether we did in the big camp [IV-B], but later the Red Cross came through and they had a form letter of some type that you could write and it went back to the family through the Red Cross. Although my parents had been told that I was missing in action, and later were told through the Red Cross that I had been captured, I would say it was probably two to three months before we got to the point where we could maybe exchange letters.

T: So they didn't know anything right away.

A: Right. Yes, it took quite a while. It was probably a month after they received the missing thing before they were told I was captured. So they didn't know whether I was alive or dead.

T: Did you get any mail while you were a POW?

A: Yes. Yes, I got a couple letters. A few. I would say five or less.

T: And these were at the work camp location?

A: Yes.

T: The work camp location is your next stop and the place that you spent the most time.

A: Yes.

T: Did you volunteer for that or was that simply a selection?

A: No. [At IV-B] One morning they woke us up about four or five o'clock in the morning. It was still dark. In fact, I had made a few new friends in the short time we were there in camp, and one happened to be Jewish. We fell out in the morning, and the first thing they asked was anybody who was Jew take a step forward. My friend did, and that's the last I ever heard of him. I have no idea. I often wondered what happened to, what they did to American Jews.

T: But he was the only person taken at that time.

A: There were other Jews that stepped forward.

Then they took the remaining of us and loaded us on the train and headed us towards [the town of] Adorf [in southern Saxony, near the present day border with the Czech Republic].

T: How many of you were selected for this?

A: My mind says eighty.

T: So a fairly large group.

A: Yes. Within that camp there was two railroad gangs of something like twenty people, and then there were two factory gangs of approximately twenty people. So I remember it as being something like eighty.

T: The group that went from Muhlberg, that made up the entirety of this work camp's population?

A: Yes.

T: And did anybody come to the camp after this? Or the group that started was the group that was?

(1, B, 694)

A: No. I recall no new attendees.

T: Was it very far from the camp to the work camp location?

A: Yes. I'd have to check the map, but I would guess one hundred miles.

T: Within one day?

A: Yes. I don't think we were overnight in the train. I think we did it in one day.

T: You have to get back in a train now.

A: I hated that! Yes. My thoughts go back immediately to being strafed again.

T: And of course, you're kind of powerless.

A: Right. Yes. There's nothing you can do. At least when you're fighting on the front you can defend yourself and you have your own decisions to make.

T: I guess you can react.

A: Right. And in this case you had no control.

T: I hear you saying that's the most difficult part of this. You're kind of...you're just out there and at the mercy of what happens.

A: Yes. And these bullets coming through. I can still picture these bullets coming through these wood and metal boxcars and popping inside. And of course, you've got...just humanity inside.

T: Packed in there the way you describe it.

A: Packed. Yes. It's like shooting fish in a barrel.

T: The train wasn't strafed, I take it, on the way to Adorf.

A: No. No, it was fine. But the worry I'm sure was—not only with me but with the rest of them—was there.

T: Anybody who had traveled by train or experienced that I suppose had that in their mind. The work camp, just eighty of you. So is it a smaller physical space as well?

A: Yes. We had—I called them parlors. The camp was in a U shape. On the one side of the U, the one leg of the U, were the two railroad gangs. These guys went out and repaired rail where our bombers had tore them up. The other side was the two factory gangs, one of which I was in, which went to work in town in a textile factory. Supposedly nonmilitary involved textile factory.

T: And this was in the city of Adorf, or the town.

A: The city of Adorf. Yes.

T: That's a small place.

A: Very small. Yes. Not a large town at all. Or at least then.

T: It's not now. It's a dot on the map.

A: It is. It's right on the tip of Czechoslovakia. Right on the nose.

T: Talk about the kind of work you were doing. It's a regular factory.

A: The first thing they did—there were two factories. We had like a railway express baggage cart with four wheels that we would come out of the camp. The two groups who worked in the factory, we would drop the other group off and then we would continue on with the car to the next factory. Drop the cart off at the front. They took us in, and the first thing they had us doing was they had gondolas of coal cars. Chunk coal.

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

A: —and they gave us shovels and told us to climb to the top of the car and shovel the coal out. They didn't have dumpers for the coal. They were just...the bottom of the car was flat, and wood, and the shoveling wasn't too good until you got to the bottom. Then you could get your shovel on the floor and do pretty well. But trying to dig coal from the top of a gondola car, by hand, is very difficult. They gave you a shovel, but the shovel didn't help a whole lot.

T: You had no machines to help you. It was all hand work.

A: All hand. So that was our first job, and we had a fellow that looked like a bulldog. He was the *Hofmeister*, [German] the yardmaster. He kind of picked on me because I was rather obstinate. He kept telling me I was not a good coal shoveler, and I didn't want to be a coal shoveler (*chuckles*). So he would take me off to the side and take the shovel, and he would shovel a few scoops of coal and tell me, "This is how you're supposed to do it," and I'd go back to the old way that I was doing it, which wasn't very good, and he would just shake his head and walk away. Some of the other fellows worked a little bit harder, I guess. Ginn, my buddy, luckily got a pretty good

job. His job was inside the plant, and he would move baskets of spools of thread and so on, on rails. Push them from one side of the building to the other side of the building. And he would take old crates and pull the nails out and straighten nails and things of this nature.

T: It sounds like slightly, physically, easier work.

A: Oh, yes. It was a gravy job. Ginn, my buddy, got sick. So since I was not a good coal shoveler, the *Hofmeister* got rid of me. He sent me to the inside of the plant, which was fine with me. The only thing was, I felt bad when [my buddy] Ginn came back. I thought I'd go back to my old job and the *Hofmeister* says no, no, no. You stay where you are. So I didn't have any choice in the thing. So I stayed where I was, which was a much easier job, and not only that—this is winter in the lower mountains of Saxony, and it's cold. There was a spot inside where I could go and sit down next to a boiler of hot air. That's all the room was, a boiler and a wall on each side. I could go in there and sit and warm up a little bit.

I had a boss who was a fellow named Paul Schappus, who was in charge of all the ladies who were running the spooling machines, the textile machines inside. We got to be fairly good friends. Whenever he needed me or wanted me to do something, he knew where he could find me. He kept me pretty busy and he would job me out to other people who needed somebody to give them a hand from time to time.

T: Did you learn to speak German at all while you were there?

A: I learned a little bit [of German]. Enough that I could make my way through. I've gone back to Germany and can make myself understood, but I never got real good at it.

T: But you learned enough to sort of make your way.

A: Yes.

T: The kind of relationship you're describing with the Germans isn't antagonist or difficult, really.

A: No. It depends on...this person, this Paul Schappus, was really about the only person that I had somewhat relations with. He was not in the service, although he was probably, at this time, in his forties. He had a bad heart and apparently he—maybe there were other reasons too—but otherwise he would have been in the service. We eventually struck up a little black market thing going with us. His girls would bring bread or whatever, and we would trade cigarettes, and I was the go between from the camp to him. We would smuggle stuff back into the camp along with the food cart. We would take the food cart at the end of the day and pull it to the railroad station, who would give us canisters of soup and bread. The big round loaves of bread. Then we would drag the cart along the railroad back to the camp.

Camp was situated along the railroad next to a roundhouse. *(pauses three seconds)* That was another group that we had. I missed that. We had about five or six guys who worked in the roundhouse. They were guys from Pennsylvania that had some locomotive experience or something.

T: So they could work in the rail yard.

(2, A, 58)

A: Yes. It was actually the roundhouse. There was a lot of sabotage going on in there.

T: But this kind of black market deal, what could you supply for the Germans that they wanted?

A: Cigarettes. From our—we didn't get a lot of parcels, but the ones we got—[they had] cigarettes and coffee. They [the Germans] loved coffee.

T: So you had some things to trade to them.

A: Yes.

T: And what could they provide for you?

A: Bread. Totally, totally bread. Yes. Cigarettes and coffee, for bread.

T: How did this...I can understand how it would work, but who took the first step to get this going? Them or you?

A: I guess I did.

T: How did that work? How did you do that?

A: I got to be pretty good friends with this Paul, and we were probably talking about—Paul smoked. It might have been a case of me giving him a cigarette, or him asking for a cigarette. I'm not exactly sure how it was initiated. But we struck up the deal and I would...I don't remember the bartering numbers, but let's say twenty cigarettes for a loaf of bread and maybe I'd get three cigarettes out of it or something.

T: As kind of a commission.

A: Right. Since I was taking the risk. If you get caught you go to the *Straflager* [German: penal camp] in [the nearby city of] Plauen, which was the next northern city, and that was a prison. Solitary.

T: So there was a risk involved for you.

A: Yes. No heat. One blanket, and that was it. Food was nil. Usually you ended up with frozen feet or fingers or something.

T: How did you know about the Plauen *Straflager*?

A: We had one guy who...we were in [the town of] Marklichtkirchen, which was in Czechoslovakia. It was very near Adorf. They had sent a bunch of us up there to unload a truck or a boxcar. I don't remember which. The whole thing was all blue and white herringbone suits. All the suits were exactly the same. So we're unloading these and I thought, gee, all I got on are these khakis...I get cold. So I took my khakis off and swiped a pair of pants and put them on and put my khakis over the top. So one of the other guys, he did the same thing. Another guy did the same thing. Pretty soon everybody had a pair of pants but this one fellow, who lives out in Washington now, his name is Silvester Bartell. He was a little late in getting in on the action, and he got caught. He was sent up to the *Straflager* and he got frozen feet out of it.

T: Did he then come back?

A: He came back.

T: So he could report to you what this place was like.

A: Yes. He's the one that told us, (*chuckles*) don't go there.

T: And then if a threat was made about the *Straflager*, you had an image in your mind of what it was.

A: Yes. Never been there, but I knew it wasn't good.

T: By the way, did you go to work every day from the camp?

A: Yes. Sundays, Sundays we didn't.

(2, A, 100)

T: Sunday, was that an every week rest day?

A: Yes. Once in a while we would get out on Sunday, but usually Sunday we were there. One Sunday afternoon we were sitting in our parlor...by the way our parlor, we had what we called Klim cans. We all had a cigar box. Keep the mice from eating our food. Although nobody really saved food, because you'd lose it either to the mice or something. Plus you were hungry. But this parlor had tables and chairs and

a window. Then at nine o'clock they would take you out of there and take you to the other rooms which adjoined, which were bunks.

Now these were two or three, I think two high bunks. The mattress was like a burlap, big burlap sack with shredded paper in it. And then wood slats in the bottom. It was a good place for the lice to breed, plus it got very hard. It never gave any softness. Within that was a potbelly stove and a thunder bucket for those who had to go to the bathroom during the night. Anybody out of there would be shot too. Then they would open it up about six o'clock in the morning and you'd go back. They had a washroom at the end of the U, the very bottom of the U. Washroom and a bathroom. A ten-holer [toilet] or something. Of course, the water would be froze back there in the flush pans. Strictly cold water. There was no hot water.

T: Did you have meals at the camp in the morning, for example, before you went to work?

A: No. Only at night. You would get a bowl of soup and your portion of bread, which originally started out like four to a loaf and then later it became as high as eight to a loaf as things got worse.

T: So the food situation, for what the Germans were supplying deteriorated.

A: Yes. Things got worse. The closer to the end of the war, the worse things got as far as food.

T: And you remember them supplying, was it one meal a day at the camp?

A: Yes.

T: Were you fed at the factory at all?

A: No.

T: So you had one meal a day and anything else you got was on your own.

A: That was it. Yes. We ate cat once. One group, a small group of us, went to a neighboring town. And this surprised us: there were French prisoners. The French prisoners lived in an apartment. A guard dropped in once a week. This demolished us. We couldn't understand how you could be a prisoner and have the guard drop in once a week to see if you were still there. But anyhow, we were working in this town doing something with the French. They needed some help for something. There was only maybe a half a dozen French. We ate there. This is probably one of the few, if ever, times that we...and we had rabbit. And it was delicious. I'd never eaten anything so great. It ended up that the cat had come up missing in the neighborhood. But they did a beautiful job. I'm telling you, it tastes just like rabbit.

T: Now with the lack of food at least, did your weight decline as you were working here?

A: Yes. I don't have a real good figure, but I went from about 180 down to about 130. We had some guys...our diet had a lot of potato in it. Our soup. Our soups had potato in it. Some of the guys seemed to get something from the potato, and they got kind of like pot bellies and that which appeared to be—they were thin otherwise, but it seemed like the potatoes did something to them.

We started out with a quarter of a loaf. I think they were one and a half kilo loaves of bread, or one and a quarter kilos. That was the other thing—the weight of the bread got smaller too. Once a week you would get a little pad of jam. You would usually get some of their imitation butter or margarine or whatever it was, which was very waxy. No meat. We maybe got a small slice of sausage once a week, but generally no meat unless they might throw something in the soup.

T: Was the soup made...now you picked this up from the railway station, is that right?

(2, A, 158)

A: The railway station. Yes.

T: Was that picked up by the same people all the time?

A: Yes. That was us. We picked it up with our railway express cart. In these insulated canisters.

T: How far from the camp to where you picked the soup up or the food?

A: Probably a mile and a half. Two miles.

T: A bit of a walk there.

A: Oh, yes. And dragging the cart. And along the railroad, of course, it was all stones.

T: Now you encountered German civilians, you mentioned already, at the factory. Regular workers there too, or civilians on the street, did you see them very often?

A: Yes. One of the surprising things, a lot of people carried briefcases. We would see them (*chuckles*) on their way home from work with the same briefcases that they had their lunch in, in the morning. They would stop and pick up horse manure that was along the streets. Apparently for the gardens or something, I guess. Maybe they had a bag inside their briefcases or something. Because they were very sanitary. But it seemed strange to be putting horse manure, horse apples, in your briefcase.

T: Did you have any contact with these civilians? When you went into town, came back, went to work. I mean, what kind of relations did you have?

A: Not much. No. No. Probably the *Hofmeister*... There was one guy named Franz who had one of these pipes that hang out of your mouth about a foot with chains on it as he worked. He was one of the workers. We met...maybe the contact would be one or two of these workers who worked also for the *Hofmeister*. We were working with this foreman from inside the plant and I would see the ladies inside, but everybody kind of avoided talking to us. And even Paul, the foreman, when you were in private he was very friendly. But if there was anybody else around it was all the Heil Hitler, and so on and so forth.

T: Two personalities almost.

A: Yes.

T: And yet they were quite okay trading food for cigarettes with you.

A: Yes. Right. Yes. Like the women inside. I didn't know for quite a while that quite a few of these transactions were for the women that were working inside.

T: So there were a number of intermediaries here.

A: Yes.

T: You were the intermediary for the Americans and on the other side, the same system kind of.

A: Yes. And it all went through this foreman. And this foreman could have gotten into a lot of trouble had some of the Nazi coworkers of his found out about it.

T: Right. Let me ask you now, you're here from mid-1944 through the winter and into 1945. How possible was it for you on the inside here to have any news about how the war was going?

A: Most of it came from the railroad gang. The railroad gang would have contact with other prisoners from time to time. Sometimes the French. So we would get it through them of how the war was going. But as far as me personally, I really didn't get...maybe Paul might, the foreman who I talked to, might say something, but he was generally...tried to avoid that situation. So it came from the railroad guys.

(2, A, 207)

T: And that was more rumor or hearsay, kind of this and that.

A: Yes. It was grapevine. Strictly grapevine. Yes. There were no radios. The big camp had radios.

T: But you were in a small camp with just a few men.

A: It was a small camp. We didn't. No.

T: Did you find that you made close friendships at the work camp?

A: Yes. Only in our close group. To give you an example of how we didn't make friendships: I have met two to three people who were in the same camp with me in the railroad gang that I never knew their name or had even knew they existed until I found their names in the ex-POW bulletin or something like that.

T: So among this eighty, there were really sort of subgroups.

A: Right. Exactly. There was no fraternization across...they wouldn't allow us to fraternize with...the only way you would see these guys would be in the washroom.

T: So who were your, who was your circle, so to speak? Guys you worked with?

A: My circle was the two factory groups, because we pulled the carts. We were in the same parlor. And the roundhouse gang. Because we were all in the parlor. We would play cards. We were paid German marks. I don't remember what it was, but we would play blackjack then with German marks. Because it meant nothing to us.

T: Sure. You couldn't spend them, right?

A: No. No. There was no way we could spend them. It only happened once. At Christmastime we gave the guard marks and this was through the goodness of their heart. The guard went into town and bought some *Zuckerbier*, which is sugar beer. It's kind of like a bock beer, but it's nonalcoholic. And brought it back and we had beer. That happened once.

T: These guards in camp, were they the same ones throughout, or did they change from time to time?

A: Yes. No. They pretty much stayed the same ones. We had some good and bad guards. Some of them, they would almost lay their rifle down and you could pick it up if you wanted. And then of course, there were others that were just pains in the butt.

T: How could a guard be a pain in the butt? What do you mean by that?

A: He would just be obstinate. Make sure that you went to bed early. Inspecting when you came in with food. I almost got caught one night, and this was a case of a

guard—this isn't answering your question, but is the reverse. A case of a guard, as we were coming back, I had a burlap sack with a rope on it and they had given us—we didn't have overcoats, since we were captured in the summer—they gave us green overcoats. I think they were Serbs or Russian or something. I'm not sure. We had a big triangle, red triangle, on the back which showed you were a prisoner. Red triangle. Underneath I would wear this burlap, which a loaf of bread fit in there real nice with a rope over the thing over my shoulder and then my coat over the top. It's really kind of hard to see it because the coat was baggy. We were dragging the cart back from the railroad station and this one good guard, Karl was his name, big guy, but nice guy. He was *Volksturm* [German: home guard, of elderly men] and he'd rather be home playing with his grandkids.

T: So he was an older fellow.

A: They were all *Volksturm*. Yes. They were all sixty plus.

T: So from your perspective they could have been your grandfather.

A: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Even the *Unteroffizier*, who was like a staff sergeant or something in charge of the camp, they were all in their sixties. They were all *Volksturm*.

(2, A, 272)

T: These guys are older, then.

A: They're all old, yes. He mentioned to one of the fellows who passed the word up to me that they were going to have an inspection. They had suspicion that somebody was bringing extra food into the camp.

T: And one of the Germans tipped you off about this.

A: Yes. So I'm thinking, oh, my gosh! What am I going to do? I've got this loaf of bread hanging on me. So I took the loaf...now we had loaves of bread on the cart in bags. So I took my loaf of bread and put it on the cart. We got into camp. They inspected all of us. My loaf of bread was on the cart rather than being on me, and I don't recall, but I would assume that whoever was supposed to get the loaf of bread, got their loaf of bread. I don't remember. But it was a close call. I would have been caught had that guard not said something.

T: Yes. So in a sense, some of the Germans you could trust to really do the right thing or be friendly towards you.

A: Right. Probably the worst was the *Unteroffizier* who—for the main part we thought that they stole our Red Cross parcels. Because we didn't get them very often, but enough to keep the black market going.

T: But you felt there were more of them than you were actually getting.

A: Yes. There was a storage room next to his office, and they kept it locked up and we had no way of knowing how many were in there.

T: In a situation like this, at this work camp going out to different details, did anybody, to the best of your knowledge, try to escape from there?

A: Yes. We had a fellow named Harold Hiller. He escaped twice and was caught each time and brought back, because we were in Germany and he finally said it was no use. As long as we're in Germany the people will report you and you stood out like a sore thumb.

T: What happened to Hiller for his attempted escape?

A: He went to *Straflager* for a week or two and then he would be back with us.

T: He wasn't physically punished at all.

A: No. Well, no, unless...like I said, most of the physical punishment came from like when they were marching us through the towns or something. One place to the next. Quite often somebody would jump out from the citizenry and pop somebody in the jaw.

T: This was after you left your work camp, right?

A: This was actually before we got there. It didn't happen in Adorf. But it happened in some of the other towns. Say like when they were marching us to the railroad station or something like that.

T: Before you got to Adorf even.

A: Yes. Before we got there. No, the only incident that I experienced in Adorf—and this is partially my own fault—one of the jobs that I had during the winter at night was the evening before we left to go back to the camp they had skylights in the factory. They made somebody...somebody had made wooden frames with tarpaper over it that they could lean up against the skylight so that bombers at night couldn't see the lights and bomb them. So this happened every night and I was designated as one of the guys to help. One guy who was kind of a brute of a guy, I don't remember what his name was, but he was very vocal and boisterous and a real pain in the butt. I didn't like him. Then there was another little guy up there. He was a nice guy. Then there was one more and I don't remember who he was. But there were four of us whose job it was to go up on the roof, slish through the water, and of course, we didn't have boots so your feet were all wet for the rest of the evening. Dry your boots out by the stove when you got back. And we would go up on top, two men to

each skylight and lean these tarpaper frames against the skylight so the lights wouldn't show.

T: Got it.

(2, A, 361)

A: The guy, this one boisterous guy, now this is what got me into trouble. I knew a little bit of German. The four of us are standing around talking after doing this and the boisterous one is saying, "In my mind this fellow here, he looks like a Jew to me." Germans talked a lot about Jews. How bad they were. How they had hurt their country and all this and that. I, in German, said back to him (*chuckles*), and maybe it didn't come out right, "I am no more Jewish than you are." Well, I got a five finger fist right in the jaw, and he knocked me flat on my back in the water and slush that was—

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

A:—don't go after this guy. But my thought was that would be a dumb thing to do, because I was on the short end of this thing. I think he misunderstood me and I maybe didn't do a good job of explaining really what I meant. That's the only time I got popped. But it was enough. He knocked me down.

T: It stands out in your mind as being the exception and not the rule.

A: Yes.

T: Now can you estimate when, it was in springtime, that the work camp was evacuated?

A: I have a little difficulty with it. It was April [1945], and I have trouble with the dates at this time. Again, Karl came around and he said that they were going to move us. That's about all he said. They're going to take us out of the camp, and he felt very bad because they were going to take these *Volksturm* guys and put them on the Russian front. These are guys are in their sixties and they're putting them on the Russian front, which is sudden death.

T: Yes, it is.

A: Aw, I mean, this is it. So everybody in the camp has to make a decision. Do you want to escape or do you want to go along with that?

T: Because you've been tipped off by Karl at the factory that something is going to happen.

A: Yes. Karl was one of the guards.

T: Karl tells you something is going to happen.

A: Karl was one of the guards. So one of my good friends, who is down in Mississippi, he asked me. He says, "Let's the two of us escape." And I said, "No, I haven't made up my mind yet whether I want to escape or if I want to go along with the whole thing."

T: They didn't tell you where they were going to take you.

A: No. No. In fact, they didn't even tell us we were going to go. Only Karl said they were going to move us. That's all we knew.

T: And that started the rumor mills going.

A: Right. Yes. It was all over camp real quick.

T: I'm sure it would be.

A: So the toilets in the back had a trap door which came out. It was for cleaning, taking the crap out of the toilet. There was space between that and the two lines of barbed wire fence that we had around the place. That was the other thing. The only way out was to go out through the toilet, which didn't sound like a great idea to me either. But I would say about half the camp, a third to a half of the camp, went out through the toilet. The rest of us...and to my knowledge they never really put out an alarm. It was almost like these guys escaped. They'll either catch them or they won't. They didn't seem too worried about it. They still got us together, and I decided to go along with them.

T: So there was this...the rumor flew through camp and some guys made the call, it sounds like, to try to escape, and others didn't.

(2, B, 417)

A: Right. I decided to stay with the group. Now the group that escaped, and I have several friends that reported back to me, one of them was one of the guys in the railroad group who I met long after camp. I didn't even know he was in there. He's in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The guys who escaped had a rougher time, I think, than the ones who went along with the march. One thing, we got liberated quicker, I think.

T: This is something, of course, you couldn't know at the time.

A: No. The guys who escaped lived in the woods for a while and it was still cold. April is still pretty chilly up there.

T: Yes. You had this kind of tip off that something was going to happen. How soon after that did something actually happen?

A: Within a day I think. You didn't have a lot of time. Yes, I would say it happened within a day or two. Two at the most.

T: When they said that they were going to move you, what did that turn out to mean? Did they literally just march you out of camp?

A: Yes. They didn't tell us where we were going or anything. And that was another thing. Marching. Now I go back to strafing again. Marching is a good way to be strafed. You're much better off escaping and being in the woods and being on your own rather than being controlled.

T: Did you, at the time, do you remember second guessing that decision not to go?

A: I thought very seriously about it, but decided to go the other way.

T: As you leave now, what kind of guards do you have with you?

A: Still the *Volksturm*. We marched east. To [the city of] Karlsbad.

T: That's currently in the Czech Republic.

A: Yes. Right. In Karlsbad they [the Germans] take our guards away from us. I don't know how far the Russian front was, but it wasn't that far away. They take our guards away from us and give us *Luftwaffe* [German: Air Force] pilots who have been shot down, injured, and don't have airplanes anymore. Now you don't take a *Luftwaffe* guy, or an Air Force guy, and make an infantryman out of them (*chuckles*). Which entailed marching.

T: How many days were you underway to get to Karlsbad? It's not that far on the map.

A: Yes. I'm guessing...you know, we should have been able to make probably eight or ten miles a day I would think. So I'm not sure.

T: Is the group that left the camp pretty much sticking together or guys leaving this column as well?

A: No. They split up. A few of them made new acquaintances. The one fellow that I knew from Mississippi, he got together with a guy from the railroad group and they kind of paired off.

T: And how about yourself?

A: I stuck with the marching group. Went to Karlsbad. They gave us the *Luftwaffe* people to be in charge of us. Now these are young guys. These aren't old guys anymore. These are guys in their twenties.

T: More like yourself suddenly.

A: Yes. But they're kind of limping along. They're not great on this marching thing. Now we had trouble getting food. We would go to a town and the person in charge, the *Luftwaffe* guy who was probably a lieutenant or a captain, would go to the town officials and try to get us food and sometimes he was successful and sometimes he wasn't.

(2, B, 461)

T: How many of the original eighty are still with the group here?

A: I'm guessing about forty. I'm guessing that.

T: Approximately half the guys are gone.

A: Half of the guys. Yes.

T: Was there a destination to which you marched or did this march just kind of—

A: We didn't know until quite some time afterwards. Actually after we had sort of taken over our guards, we heard that we were heading for Munich.

T: That would have taken you forever to get there.

A: Oh, yes.

T: We talked about this on our first conversation, that literally, the prisoners kind of took over the guards.

A: Yes.

T: How did that happen, because I haven't heard that before

A: Yes. This was the case. Like I say, they didn't like marching for number one. We're having trouble finding food also. Also the guards were having trouble finding food for them. Of course, they were doing better. They would get fed when we might not. Did I tell you about the beet field?

T: No.

A: Okay (*chuckles*). One of the days as we were marching we came across a beet field. We took a break and we all went into the beet field. We still had our little burlap things with us. So we filled our little burlap things with beets. Ate the raw beets. Next day we start peeing red.

T: You would from beets, sure.

A: I thought I was bleeding to death until the other guys were peeing red also. So that was the beet story (*laughs*).

T: So you were scrounging in fields for food, is what it tells me.

A: Right. Right. Yes. Whatever we could find along the way in the fields or whatever, we would eat. Anything that was edible.

T: Did you link up with other groups of prisoners or was it really this kind of dwindling number of Americans?

A: No. No. Never saw anybody else. No. But what happened, we would be stopped from time to time by a superior officer in a car or in a town. He would ask the lieutenant or captain who was in charge of us to see the papers. Then we would go on. We got to talking to the...these guys were kind of hurting. We got to talking to them. We said, look, you know the war is over. They knew the war was over. You know the war is over. Let's head toward the American lines and we will, when we are liberated, we will put in a word for you. We will get you medication, medical help, for your ailments and we'll tell them that you guys were good to us and we'll turn you over, and if this doesn't happen, you might end up with the Russians. Who knows what?

T: So there were kind of negotiations?

A: It was a negotiation. Exactly. And they said, okay. So we changed directions. Instead of heading toward Munich we started heading west. And we were stopped a couple times and we thought, oh, oh, we're in trouble. Some of these big officers in these big convertible four door cars would stop and check his papers and they'd kind of like say, if you're heading for Munich you're going the wrong direction. But they would drop it there. So we would just continue on. So we got to a little town of, I think it was called Plana. It was just a farm town. Everybody split off. I got into somebody's hayloft.

During the night we had an artillery attack. The American artillery attacked. They had tile roofs, and the shrapnel was breaking through the roofs and dropping down on us. I woke up. Couldn't find...you wake up in the top of a haymow and you don't know which direction is out. In a strange place. I finally made my way out and down and headed for the farmer's house, which had walls about two or three feet thick, but in the back of the house is where they kept their cattle. So we went in and

lay down with the cattle and every once in a while you'd have to kind of move over. Didn't know what the cattle might be doing. We spent the night there.

The next morning we sent a contingent. We thought well, this is no good. The Americans should be coming in here and rescuing us and it's not happening. I think we stayed there two days. I'm not real sure. It was probably the next morning. But the farmers gave us some soup to eat for breakfast and we sent a contingent of both German and Americans across the line, and pretty soon a Jeep with a .50 caliber on it...a bunch of Germans went running down in front of the house. This Jeep pulled up and it had a squad of GIs along with it. We followed them back, and that's how we got liberated.

(2, B, 427)

T: Almost anti-climactic at the end.

A: Yes. Yes. Well, the artillery attack was bad, but the next morning it was almost like it was kind of easy.

T: Can you estimate how much time has gone by between leaving the work camp and being located by the Americans?

A: Yes, it's hard, but I would guess a couple weeks.

T: That must make it the first part of May that the Americans find you.

A: My memory says it was May 2.

T: That would be about right. That's when the Americans were in that area there.

A: Yes. And I have trouble. I'm not sure, and I've tried to find out several times what group liberated us. That bothers me too, because I don't remember who liberated us.

T: You know they were Americans and not Russians though. You remember that.

A: Exactly (*chuckles*), yes.

T: In a sense, they found you, this small group of Americans, in a kind of out of the way location. What happened to you then?

A: Yes. We just went back. Walked back with them into a town. I don't know what town it was. They put us up. They apparently had already previously kicked these people out of their house. They put us up in a house. Nice house. They then took us from there and trucked us to a Focke-Wulf [German aircraft manufacturer] plant in Regensburg. The plant was just completely demolished. We slept where we could in this plant, and then the next morning they put us on a C-47 [American two-engine

transport] paratrooper plane, which still had shrapnel holes in it that they never bothered patching up, and they flew us to one of the cigarette camps. It was Lucky Strike or someplace.

T: Yes. That was collecting point for a lot of POWs [at the city of Le Havre, France].

A: And the first we were in these eight man tents or whatever they were. We got no medical attention. This bothered us, because we should have. We heard, somebody came and said the Red Cross is giving out eggnog. So they gave us a canteen cup. We didn't have any supplies. Gave us a canteen cup. I went up and got a cup of eggnog. Oh! It was just delicious. So I went back and I got another one. And talk about sick.

T: I was going to ask you how your stomach handled that.

A: Oh! My stomach! I couldn't tolerate normal food for weeks. Might even be a month or so before I could eat heavy food.

(2, B, 465)

T: What did you end up doing then for eating? A little bit at a time or different things?

A: Yes. Had to eat small amounts and try to keep it more on the liquid side. Nothing heavy. Go for digestible stuff.

T: It sounds like you had to learn that the hard way, unfortunately.

A: I did, yes. And some guys, now some of the guys who escaped and eventually got liberated, got some medical attention. They actually, the Medical Corps, says hey, these guys have malnutrition and so on. They can't just start eating. They got some medical attention and we didn't. We were a pretty good size group, but nobody thought of it, I guess. No one knew what to do.

T: Yes. Giving someone who's been on a starvation diet for a year a bunch of eggnog is...no wonder you threw up.

A: Bad idea.

T: Yes. I suppose their thoughts were in the right place, but...

A: Yes. Right.

T: Were you debriefed at all about your POW experience at this point? People ask you questions?

A: I think there was. I think they asked if we wanted to file a claim. I think I filed a claim. I think somebody stole—right after we were captured—one of the soldiers took my watch. I think I filed a claim for that and a couple other things. That was kind of part of the debriefing, I think. But it wasn't very thorough. For the most part I think everybody just wanted to get it over with.

T: Yourself included?

A: Yes. We came home on recuperation furlough. By the way, our ship, as we came back, hit an iceberg and it was in the New York paper. There was a picture of the ship. It was called the *Monticello*. It had a bent bow. I remember being practically knocked out of bed when it hit. But anyhow, we had a recuperation furlough. Then they sent us down to Florida for more recuperation. Then Camp Lee, Virginia. Then Camp McCoy [Wisconsin]. Then discharge. We were waiting for points. You had to have so many points before you could be discharged. I was waiting for points and when I finally got up to being discharged—by the way, there were three of us that were wounded at the time we were captured. Three of us were hit in the arm with our own artillery shrapnel. None of us got any medication of any kind. But getting back then, when we were discharged, as far as getting all of the data into our discharge papers and that, we were just anxious to be discharged, and then I had to rebuild part of my records.

T: After the fact.

A: On the computer. Yes. After the fact. And also my records burned up in St. Louis.

T: In that big fire in the early 1970s.

A: That fire.

T: Let me ask you, when you got back to the States, both your folks were still alive, right?

A: Yes.

T: How soon was it before you were able to see your folks?

A: Quite quick, because when we came into New York I think they sent us to Fort Meade or one of the camps that was close there. Then immediately we got on a train and went home, and I think we were home for two weeks. So it was rather quick. Then we went to Florida as a recuperation, kind of a bonus for what you'd been through. In Miami. We were all in Miami having a great time.

T: Now you weren't married at the time, were you?

(2, B, 622)

A: No. I was single.

T: Now, when you first saw your folks, how much did your folks ask you about your POW experience?

A: Practically nothing. In fact, it was quite...it wouldn't be like it is today. People were more close-mouthed. I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't talk about it until 1972, which is quite a few years. That's when I saw that I was beginning to forget a lot of the stuff, and I started writing it down for my kids.

T: But your folks didn't ask really, and you didn't tell?

A: No.

T: You know I'm trying to sort of imagine, here you are, you've been away for a couple years, I guess, from home. Here's a major event in your life and both parties kind of avoiding it?

A: Yes. Yes. There wasn't much discussion at all. Part of that might have been the media at the time. I think it was kind of advised that...don't dig into the stuff with the GIs when they come back. They've had a tough experience and they don't want to talk about it.

T: So your folks may have thought they were doing you a favor.

A: Yes.

T: Did that change over the years, Mr. Sprong, as you got older and your folks got older? Did it ever come up in conversation?

A: My dad died probably five or six years after I got back, so I don't think that there was much if any discussion with him. My mother, she lived to be ninety, so I think I probably didn't go into a lot of detail, but probably discussed it to some extent, I would think.

T: When you started to write down your own war experiences, was your POW experience any easier or more difficult to write down or to remember than your combat experiences?

A: Hmmm. Probably my POW experiences were more difficult.

T: And why was that would you say?

A: I don't know. Things in combat happen so fast. Like I was saying about the grenade. When I stop and think back, I wouldn't do that!

T: In real life, yes, if you thought about it.

A: But you are disciplined. Number one you are disciplined. Although the sergeant says let's get out of here, but he didn't say get out of here. It was a suggestion. We were disciplined, and I think if he would have said that, we would have gone. Or I would have anyhow. So maybe that's part of it. But your age has something to do with it too. You're nineteen.

T: You were nineteen years old, weren't you?

A: Yes.

T: One thing I wanted to ask you too. When you got married—now what year were you married?

A: 1947.

T: And your wife was Delores?

A: No. She's my second wife. My first wife died in '87.

T: I'm sorry.

A: We were married thirty-nine years. Something like that.

(2, B, 681)

T: With your first wife, when you got married in 1947, did she know you had been a POW?

A: Yes. But I really didn't discuss it with her until probably in the '70s. Late '70s.

T: So it was just something you didn't bring up with anybody?

A: Right.

T: Do you have kids as well?

A: Yes.

T: What did they know as they were growing up?

A: They knew I was a POW. But they probably didn't get any details at all. They probably didn't have a real good thought of what it meant.

T: And did they not ask, or did they ask and you not tell?

A: They probably didn't ask. Although I wasn't very good about talking about it either until rather later in life.

T: Yes. I must say that, first of all, you have a very good memory for things and our conversation today has been very open. I think I've asked you a number of questions. You've had no problem responding.

A: Part of it is I've done a—for my kids—and I don't exploit it. I did a thing I called *The War is Over*. This is one of the things the Germans told us quite a few times. "For you, the war is over." And I kept saying, no, the war isn't over. I was just going to comment. I've been writing and gathering information off the internet and put it together on a CD, so I'm probably on top of it a little bit more so. I would have forgotten about it. Had I not started in '72, this conversation would have been over in about a half hour I suspect. But I've refreshed my memory from time to time, and there's things that I definitely would have forgotten completely had I not started writing it down.

T: So in a sense, you've kind of kept your own experiences alive by thinking about them.

A: Yes. Right.

T: When you got back to the States, or really anytime after you were released as a POW, did you have any images from your POW experience that came back to you in dreams later?

A: Yes. The main thing is with airplanes. Being strafed has come back. For several months, maybe even several years, the sound of an airplane... Now I fly. It doesn't bother me a bit as far as that's concerned. But for quite some time afterwards the sound of an airplane, the thing that came into my mind first is being strafed again. And of course, your mind says, no, that's not possible. But I've had airplane dreams. Still occur occasionally, but it's pretty well gone now.

T: But from your experiences then, it was the incident in the railway cars and the strafing, the boxcars, that's the most prominent.

A: Yes.

T: Something else that you mentioned earlier is that you've been back to Germany since the war.

A: Yes.

T: When did you go back, and why did you do it?

A: Here in northern Minnesota we had a teacher who took their students back to Germany. She actually had been bombed. She lived in the Westphalia area of Germany and had actually been bombed by a plane who had some bombs leftover, and they were in a farmland community and dropped them. She was taking her classes, her German classes, back and she decided to take a group of adults back—

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

T: Was this pretty soon after the war?

A: This was 1996.

T: Not that many years ago.

A: And it was a fine trip. I enjoyed the trip and even managed to talk a little bit of German and make myself understood. But we had a good time. I have a bad feeling about Nazis, and so on and so forth. But the German people, they got caught up in something. A lot of it wasn't really their fault, I think. They just...they were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and they were in trouble, and some guy was going to give them what they thought they needed and it ended up being a bad thing.

T: Did you go back to any of the places you had been as a POW?

A: I tried to. I made some phone calls, but I couldn't latch up with anybody. Our trip didn't take us to any of those...let me back up a little bit more. I made two trips. One trip was in 1984, and I went back to Normandy and Saint Georges d'Elle, which is the town where I spent some time and was captured near there. In fact, I did a thing for a French historian, a guy named Lamblat, about two years ago.

T: What was that about?

A: He was asking me a few questions. He was doing a thing on hill 192 and was asking me questions about the attack. Mainly he was interested in the attack. Not the POW part.

T: Right. So a very different focus.

A: Yes.

T: So you've been back to Germany twice then.

A: Yes. 1984 and I think it was 1996, 1995, something like that. I enjoyed the trips back there. I enjoyed the food and the beer.

T: Yes. Both are very good, actually.

A: Yes.

T: We're getting toward the end of the interview here and I'm wondering, one of the final questions, when you think about your POW experience, really what happened to you as a young man of nineteen years old, how would you describe the way that that experience changed you as a person?

A: It's probably drawn me more solitary. Harder to make friends. Less of a people person. Very cautious.

T: Were you not that way before, do you think?

A: I don't think I was, no. One of the things that bothered me, not so much in prison camp and that, but making friends and then being moved or those friends being transferred. It seemed like all during my service life, close friends that I had made suddenly were someplace else. So you tend to try not to get too close to somebody.

T: And that's kind of stuck with you in civilian life then.

A: It has. Yes.

T: What line of work did you go into when you got out of the service?

A: As I mentioned to you, when I was in high school I was welding glider noses. I went back to my old job as a welder and decided this isn't what I want to do the rest of my life. I had a good friend who wanted to become a state trooper radio operator or something. He was into radio and he says, "You know, Arnie, you've got the GI Bill. Why don't you get into it?" I said, "I don't know what to do." He said, "What do you like to do?" I said, "I don't know." He said, "What did you like in school?" I said, "I liked drafting, drawing." "So why don't you go to school for that?" So I went to college and took machine design and got into engineering, and spent twenty-three years in engineering and then another thirteen in engineering sales.

T: Did you stay in the Michigan City area?

A: Yes. Up until 1990.

(3, A, 49)

T: One other thing I wanted to ask. You're a member of American ex-POWs?

A: Yes.

T: When did you join that organization?

A: I'm a life member and probably joined in 1980 or so. I'm not real sure.

T: What do you think that organization has...how has that been important for you?

A: I like to read their magazines. I think that it's done a lot for veterans and ex-POWs. I had stomach problems which I blamed on being a POW for years, and I went to the Veterans Administration and tried to get help with my stomach problems. Sort of an IBS sort of thing. They ignored me. I started going to them right after I got out. Maybe like 1950. Regularly went to the VA trying to get some help, and they still ignored me up until, I'd say probably, the last five or six years. I don't know whether you can blame it on going to Washington and what they're doing for POWs in Washington or not, but I think you can. Now I have presumptives. Some of my ailments they presume are the cause of that, and I'm getting compensation.

T: The VA really has done an about face.

A: Yes. Absolutely. Now I couldn't say more. They've been just fine.

T: That's the final question as far as the interview. Let me ask if there's anything at this point that you want to add that we didn't perhaps cover.

A: No. I got real talkative here with you. You must be a good interviewer, because you've opened me up.

T: Well, thank you very much. I hope I do a good job by people. That's my goal.

A: You do a good job.

T: On the record, let me thank you again, Mr. Sprong, very much for your time today.

END OF INTERVIEW