

Interviewee: Reuben Weber
Interviewer: Thomas Saylor
Date of interview: 15 June 2004
Location: Weber residence, Little Falls, MN
Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, July 2004
Edited by: Thomas Saylor, September 2004

Reuben Weber was born 16 February 1925, in Hillsboro, North Dakota, a Red River Valley farming community. He graduated from Hillsboro High School in 1942, and was drafted into the US Army in 1943.

Reuben served as a rifleman in 112th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division. By the summer of 1944 his unit had joined the fighting in France, in the aftermath of the Allied D-Day invasion in June 1944.

In November 1944, during a skirmish near the French-German border, Reuben was captured along with several others in his squad. He was sent to Camp II-A, Neubrandenburg, and later to a work detail at a small village on the Baltic Sea. After a failed escape attempt from this work detail, Reuben was sent back to Camp II-A.

Advancing Soviet forces liberated II-A on 28 April 1945. Freed POWs, Reuben among them, hiked west towards British forces and reached their lines after seven to ten days.

After his discharge from the military in 1946, Reuben returned to Hillsboro and worked locally before taking a job with Bell Telephone, a position he held until his retirement in 1987. Reuben was married in 1948 (wife Adeline). He was interviewed in June 2004 at his home in Little Falls, Minnesota.

Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

R = Reuben Weber

[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 15 June 2004 and this an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm speaking with Mr. Reuben Weber at his home here in Little Falls, Minnesota. First, on the record, Mr. Weber, thanks very much for taking time this afternoon to sit down with me.

R: Thank you.

T: For the record I have the following information, and please correct me if any of this is wrong. You were born on 16 February 1925, in Hillsboro, North Dakota. That's a Red River Valley farming community, isn't it?

R: Right.

T: You had three brothers, and no sisters. You graduated from Hillsboro High School, class of 1942. You're an Army draftee in 1943, and by the middle of 1944 you were on your way to Europe as a rifleman in the 112th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division. Let me start by asking you about a trip across the Atlantic Ocean in this combat soldier piece of the interview. Was that the first time you had been on the ocean?

R: Yes. It was.

T: What do you remember about the ship going across the Atlantic?

R: It was big and it was loaded with an awful lot of soldiers. So we had to sleep in bunks that were so close to one another on a vertical plane that you would touch each other if you moved over. Going over too, it was in June. It was so cold that we had to wear overcoats when we were up on deck. So we were in convoy and taking a northern route to escape the German submarines, hopefully. We did hear a few underwater bursts of something on our trip but that was about as much of that as we had. Get over to England and there we find out that we don't know too much about the English language because it's very hard to understand those folks (*laughing*).

T: How was that to hear, in a sense, a different type of English for the first time?

R: It was different. It took a lot of doing because you'd ask a question and they'd rattle something off and the last thing that you could understand is, "You can't miss it." But we sure could (*laughs*).

T: Had you arrived in England after suffering from any seasickness on board that ship?

R: No. I didn't get seasick aboard that ship. That one was a pretty large ship and so it wasn't too hard to handle. Some of the other guys did of course. When we were enroute, we got news that the D-Day Invasion had taken place.

T: So you can date the trip across the Atlantic and know exactly...

R: We were thankful for that because we were afraid we would be in on it.

T: Were there rumors to that effect that you figured you were going over to be part of that?

R: Yes. Because it was due any time. It sounded like we would be. But we landed in England, thank goodness, and stayed there for a while before they finally shipped us across the [English] Channel. When we did, we went on a merchant marine boat from the British Isles and it was very unstable in the water.

T: So it was a smaller ship and...

R: Yes, it was a smaller ship. And then we had to eat the British food on board and it made me sick. I think it was the food that made me sick more than anything else. I remember I went to sickbay and the doc gave me a pill and he said to head up topside. Now I know why too, because as soon as I got up there I had to woof my cookies. But then I felt a little bit better. Then we came across the Channel there. We unloaded onto—used these rope ladders down onto a landing ship. Infantry. The waves were quite high and you'd be ready to step on and some guys would step off and the thing would be way down and they'd fall. Ten or fifteen feet.

(1, A, 48)

T: The big ship was stationary but the little one was not.

R: Yes. Right. That's how it was.

T: You had to kind of time your...

R: Yes. You had to time yourself. So I observed that and some guy's lose their rifles. Fall down in the ocean and everything else. But managed to make it okay. Then there were some guys on board there that were vomiting right next to me, but I'd already woofed mine out, so I was pretty good that way.

T: Now you're heading for the beach. The battles for the beaches were over by this time.

R: Yes.

T: Was there still a sense of being nervous about suddenly being pretty close to the action?

R: Oh, sure. Not only that, but then when we got up close to the beach then they'd drop the opening...

T: The front. The front comes down.

R: You're not on the beach yet. You're still in the water, so you've got to walk in the water for a ways, so your shoes and everything get all full of water. Then when you get on land, you've got to keep on going because you're afraid of bombing. A lot of the material and stuff piled on the beach was a good target for the Germans.

T: So you didn't stop once you got ashore.

R: No. But we did observe that there were some German prisoners of war fishing bodies out of the water yet when we came on shore.

T: This is several weeks after the invasion, right?

R: Yes. But there was a mess out there in the ocean. Sunken ships and...

T: You could see all this stuff as you approached.

R: Yes. Then we finally got up, I don't know, probably climbed it seemed like miles. Finally got up on level ground before evening and we dug little slit trench for ourselves to sleep in. That's how it went from there on.

T: I'm thinking about, as you go to Europe, you're a part of the war against Germany now. How did you perceive the enemy? That is, the Germans. Did you have an image in your mind of what these people were like?

R: Yes. I felt that they were well-trained soldiers because they had been in many battles before. They were very successful in most of their battles. We knew we were up against a tough one. When we landed there, then I was taken into the 112th Division, our infantry regiment. That's the first I ever heard of that. It was a Pennsylvania National Guard Outfit originally. The oldest outfit in the United States Army, I guess.

T: Really?

R: Yes. The sergeant, there was a sergeant and a corporal. They were the only ones left out of their squad. So we were replacements.

T: For the whole squad? Basically.

R: Yes. The whole squad. That's about ten men to a squad. So about eight of them had been killed or wounded or whatever. Then we started marching after that. Trying to run down the Germans. They were trying to keep ahead of us. We went through St. Lo. I remember it was very badly damaged. And we were ordered to keep moving, keep moving, keep moving. If a sniper shoots at you, don't stop, because that's delaying tactics. So that's the kind of operation we had going through France.

(1, A, 87)

T: So, it's...

R: And my sergeant, he hated Germans with a passion. And we couldn't quite figure that one out, because we felt like we were there because we had to be there and the same with German soldiers. Most of them were there because they had to be there. But the sergeant had a very hateful attitude toward the Germans.

Finally found out what had happened. The unit had been up on one of the hills. I forget the number now. It was like hill 210 or whatever. But had been driven off by the Germans and they lost some of their men and some of them were captured; and then a day or two later they retook that hill and here the SS troopers had been up there and they had taken the prisoners, some of his own squad, tied their hands. Backed them up to a tree and tied their hands behind the tree with barbed wire and used them for bayonet practice. So that explains why he had such a fierce hatred.

T: Did he tell you this?

R: He finally did, yes. Then he was real hard to get along with. But turned out to be an excellent sergeant. When it comes to combat, boy, he was there. I think too, the reason he was a little hard to get along with, he didn't want to become close friends because you lose close friends, it's tough on you. If you lose somebody you don't feel so close to it isn't quite as bad.

T: Was he captured along with you? This guy?

R: No. He was killed. One of the last things I ever thought of was [that] I would ever be a prisoner. I wasn't going to take a chance on that.

T: Did the kind of experience that he related to you, did that—that stuck in your mind it sounds like.

R: Oh, yes.

T: So is that the first time you really, that the concept of POW kind of crossed your mind? Of gee, what if it ever happens to me?

R: Yes. That was the first. Then I thought, no way will I ever be a POW. But the way circumstances turned out, there's no alternative.

T: This pursuing the Germans and there was kind of a steady movement. The Germans were heading back for Germany and the Americans and British who came in were pushing them. How long for you was it before you encountered what we might call a combat situation?

R: It was several weeks. First of all I remember something a little bit comical when we took Paris. The French actually kind of took Paris. When it got close. So it wasn't too tough. But they were still running Germans out of manholes and whatnot when we made our parade through Paris. We had a parade.

T: You were part of that parade?

R: Yes. I was in that parade. The night before, we stayed in a park there and this one guy in my outfit was always kind of a funny guy. Anyhow, we set up tents that night. We didn't always do that. But that night he said we could sleep in tents. Set up a tent. Then this one guy wouldn't go into his tent. He said, "There's a German in there." Here he had set his tent over a dead German soldier in the dark (*laughs*).

T: You'd think he would have noticed that.

R: Yes. But he was that kind of a guy. He was funny.

T: What was that parade through Paris like?

R: It was really spectacular. We were forty abreast.

T: The avenues are broad. That's right.

(1, A, 134)

R: And went past the Arc de Triomphe and kept on marching. As far as we were concerned... I was quite tall so I was kind of toward the front. Made it look nice you know. Some of the guys that were on the outer edges, the girls would come up and give them kisses. But I wasn't far enough out for that (*laughs*).

T: Bad luck. Did you begin to get the feeling that the war might be ending or coming to a close soon?

R: Yes. Yes. And we talked to the Frenchmen you know, and they'd say oh, another month. Another three weeks. Because the Germans were being pushed back rapidly. We had one combat experience I remember when our group was supposedly in reserves. We were going past a ravine and in here the Germans attacked us. We were down in this ravine. I remember we had a replacement officer. Had a second lieutenant come and join our outfit. He always walked around with a rifle grenade on top of his rifle. When we were attacked, we hit the dirt and he was just a little away from where I was and we started firing of course. The grenades were flying and what have you, and our machine gunner was killed. The machine gunner from our outfit was dead even though we couldn't see any obvious wounds.

My sergeant was busy telling us where to shoot. He says, "Shoot over there! Shoot over there!" And I shot over there and the guy over there, it was an American and oh, gee, I felt bad. Then when we finally got near the end of that skirmish here a German jumps up with his hands in the air and my buddy shoots him right through the stomach. He felt so bad because here that German was trying to surrender. But his reflexes were such as soon as he saw him he fired. I told him, "I know you didn't do it on purpose."

Then after it was over with, then we looked at the machine gunner and you couldn't see a wound on him. There was a German soldier laying there with his whole face blown off. His nose was gone. His upper jaw was gone. His lower jaw was gone. It was just his tongue hanging there and an opening from the brains and he was perfectly wide awake and he was looking up. The sergeant came over and was going to shoot him. Of course we begged him not to, so he didn't. He could see the pain in the guy's eyes when he was going to be shot.

T: Half his face was gone it sounds like.

R: Yes. It was the weirdest thing. It's terrible. Then I talked to this guy that I shot at. "Aw, that's nothing," he says. "I know what happened." He said, "You just shot the strap off my rifle. That's all it was."

T: Close call though.

R: Yes. It was a close call.

T: Is it possible, from your experience, to prepare yourself as a young man for an experience like that as a combat soldier?

R: Not really, because things don't go according to plan in combat.

T: What does it go like? How would you describe it?

R: Everything is turmoil. You think you line up and you all move forward. It doesn't go that way at all. You fight to preserve your own life is what it boils down to. Hope that you can do the enemy in before you get done in.

T: That's a pretty simple equation the way you describe it.

R: Yes.

T: How much does luck come into play to surviving and not surviving?

R: It must be quite a lot I suppose, because I don't know how I was so lucky. I know the day before I was captured... Well, for instance before that even. We went to Compiègne, which is where the World War I armistice was signed.

T: To the railroad car.

R: East of that town and took it in the evening and I was one of the scouts. First one in town. I could hear the rumbling of the German wagons as they were pulling out ahead of me, so I walked a little slower (*laughs*). My sergeant caught up with me when I was right in town, near the center of town, and says, "This is far enough for tonight. Bed down right here on the sidewalks." So I slept on the sidewalk that night.

I'd no sooner laid down to rest and a terrible explosion took place about a block away. Here the Germans blew up the bridge across the river. So that's how close we were. If I had kept on going, if the sergeant hadn't stopped me, I would probably been blown up on that bridge.

(1, A, 204)

T: Did you, in the situations you were in, get close enough to actually see the Germans?

R: Oh, yes. Yes. There were times. One of the strange things about it. After we took Compiègne I remember they took some of the girls who had slept with the German soldiers and shaved their heads...

T: The civilians did this.

R: The French did. They marched those girls right down the center of the street and people spit on them and everything. I felt kind of sorry for them.

T: For the girls.

R: Yes. I noticed one other thing too. They had these outdoor latrines there. And they just have a barrier around where you stand up against the wall. Your lower

part of your body shows and the upper part sticks up above it. Girls would walk by and say, "Bon jour, Monsieur." It kind of cut your water off (*laughs*).

T: Did you find the French civilians approachable as an American soldier, or what kind of relations...

R: Oh, yes. They thought we were okay. Then of course, we used to give them a little candy or gum. They'd say "chocolate for baby" or something. They'd ask for it. When we got to Germany, first we went up to the Siegfried Line there and we were going to figure out how to blast our way through that, but then they decided to move on. Went up to Luxembourg and there we were able to cross the border without incident. All they had up there was a sign in German and one of the guys from Pennsylvania had taken German. He could read that. He said, "That says death to all who enter here."

T: Quite a welcome.

R: We went in and took the towns of Kommerscheidt, Vossenack, and Schmidt. Schmidt is where we spent the night and I could hear some tanks revving up in the forests around us there. In the Hürtgen Forest. I told my sergeant, "It's good to hear that our tanks caught up with us now." He'd look at me and never answered. I think he recognized the sound as being German tanks. I didn't know the difference. And sure enough, it was. So in the morning we had chow brought to us. Usually we just got K rations, but this time we had warm breakfast.

Some of the guys left to go do a job, dropped their drawers and a machine gun fired. They pulled up their drawers and came back. The Germans could see us. We were under observation. So then we took our positions and then it wasn't long after that they attacked. Some of the guys, the tanks would come and they'd fire their bazookas at them and just ricochet right off those Tiger tanks. So then they'd take off across the field and the tanks would follow them and run them right over. Wouldn't even shoot them. They'd ride over them.

T: You could see this from...

R: Yes. From my location there. Because we were right on the edge of town in charge of keeping anybody off that road that was coming in there.

T: What circumstances led to your being captured?

R: Our sergeant told us to defend that road. Stay right there. We were right next to a small barn with a concrete and rock foundation. So I was laying right along there and peeking around the corner and whenever I would see a German come out of the woods I would fire at him even though it was almost half a mile away. Drive them back. I wanted to keep them away from us. More than anything. Then they'd race off and the tank would come rumbling out of the woods and go after somebody. There were tanks coming into town from further back. They would circle around

and all of a sudden there was a... I was around the corner firing and then a little ways behind me was a conscientious objector. He was that funny guy I was telling you about.

T: Which one?

(1, A, 280)

R: The one that found that dead German.

T: In his tent.

R: He laid behind me there and I said, "You watch behind me then so they don't come from the other direction." A little while later a German tank—could hear him snorting around behind us there. He must have seen us and cut loose. The shell went right through that concrete about that far, a couple feet behind my feet. This guy that was behind me, it hit his rifle. Smashed that all to pieces. Knocked a nice round hole in the foundation. I was very fortunate that I didn't get clobbered by that. And of course every time I would fire around the corner there they would start dropping in the...

T: Mortars.

R: Mortars. Mortar fire. Yes. After a while I realized that if I wouldn't fire for a while they would let up on that mortar business. There were holes all around me. They never hit me though. Then after a while I jumped into those holes to use that for protection. Just about everybody pulled out of there and then they started bombing. The Americans were coming over I guess, and trying to get those tanks and whatnot. Of course, they were bombing right where we were. So we found kind of a root cellar. Stayed in there for a while.

T: How many of you?

R: I would say about three or four of us. Yes. There were about four of us counting myself. Then when the bombing let up, we came back out again and a couple guys had a couple German prisoners, so we started heading back. But we knew enough not to go around on that open field, because everybody that was heading that way was getting clobbered by those tanks. We stayed in kind of a tree-lined roadway. Kept in the ditch down below.

I remember we came to an intersection. We had to cross the roadway and machine gun fire would cut loose there across the road. The German prisoner he thought they'd be all right, because they were Germans, so they just walked across. Boy, they cut loose at them too! So they had to take a dive too.

Then when the airplanes came over, it was a British Spitfire. Came flying in. The German soldier runs out and he waves to that Spitfire. He says, "Spitfire! Spitfire!" He knew that much. The boys hollered, "Shoot him! Shoot him!" because

he'll just draw fire from them. You don't know the difference between a German and an American. But he came back and nobody shot him. He was unarmed. Somebody else would have to do it. I wasn't going to. Then we finally made our way along until we got to a pillbox that was in the side of a hill. Inside this pillbox was a whole bunch of wounded and medics were working in there.

T: Americans or Germans?

R: American medics, but a lot of German wounded in there as well as American wounded. There was an attached room with nothing in it. So we went in there. There was just a constant artillery fire going on. I don't know. It was just turmoil all the time.

T: You've used that reference of turmoil, kind of chaotic surroundings...

R: Oh, yes. Before we got there, this one guy had his rifle shot out of his hands and we were going to find a rifle for him. So there were a lot of dead Americans laying around there and so we went to one of them to get his rifle and one of the guys was getting kind of hungry too, so he thought he could get some rations off of the body. Here it was our sergeant.

T: The guy you've been talking about.

R: Yes. And he was already stiff. That's why he never came back to give us orders to move. So we were left behind.

T: Unknowingly.

R: Yes. We stayed in that German pillbox all night. Yes. The rest of the day and all the next night. I remember we couldn't even go outside. They had a machine gun up on that hill there. Any movement they could nail them. I remember we --

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 380.

T: Is this pillbox location where you were ultimately taken as a prisoner?

R: Yes.

T: I hear you say that you were there for a day and a night anyway.

R: Yes.

T: And it was tough to figure out who or what was outside.

R: Yes. It was to some degree. But during the day then we could see the German infantry moving along in single file, just like we used to do. So we knew we were

behind enemy lines. Like I was saying, we had to go to the bathroom, the guy would take his helmet off and we went in his helmet. That was right there by the metal door of the pillbox, so it was still blocked. In order to get out we had to go through another doorway into that other room to get out. So we were pretty secluded there. The artillery fire was so severe it just about ripped that steel door right off of there. It would agitate the fecal stuff in the helmet. Would stink. I know we got thirsty, and then in the morning we tried to scrape some moisture off the ceiling but it tasted like... isshh... you couldn't drink it. We'd given all of our water to the wounded in the other room.

T: Was there concern on your part now that you might become a prisoner at this point?

R: Yes. But what we had decided we were going to do that evening when it got dark, we were going to take off, because we knew we couldn't do it in the daylight because of the machine gunner there. But we thought after dark, we'll see if we can't get back. We saw which direction the Germans were marching, so we thought that must be toward the front. So we thought we'd go that direction. Just shortly before dark a German walked in, rifle on his shoulder, and said that we were supposed to surrender. It was almost dark then when this happened. It wasn't quite yet. We weren't about to do that. There was about ten of us now in this location.

T: As well as the wounded guys.

R: They were in another room.

T: Got it.

R: We peeked out. The sergeant, he peeked out and he said, "Smash your weapons." He said, "We'll have to give up. Smash your weapons." I remember I had a little difficulty smashing my M-1, but I did the best I could anyhow.

T: What was going through your mind at that time? You've talked about learning from this sergeant of yours what had happened to POWs of the Germans. What's going through your mind right now when POW status is staring you right in the face?

R: I was just hoping it wasn't SS troopers. I didn't know what would happen. But what was going to happen was going to happen. There's nothing, I had no control over it. I walked out of there. There was a German tank right in front of us there. That's why the sergeant said we have to give up. It seemed so strange to have the German soldiers come in there with their rifles on their shoulders, because we never did that when we took prisoners. We had ours ready to fire. But they evidently realized that we were in a helpless position there anyhow. They didn't even bother with that.

T: How many of you, healthy soldiers, were taken as POWs here?

R: There was about ten of us.

T: About ten. Guys from your company?

R: There was four of us from our squad. Then we were marched back to where those tanks were lined up back there in the Hürtgen Forest area on the other side of that open field. Even though it was late at night. Dark. It was still light out because of the artillery fire. It just lit up the whole sky. It was just constant. We went by a German tank and the guys came out of the tank to look at the American prisoners, I guess, as we walked by. We weren't passed them more than about twenty-five, fifty yards and we could hear a shell coming in. You can tell when an artillery shell is coming right at you, because it sounds like a freight train coming right at you. Jumped into the ditch. Didn't ask for permission or nothing. We just jumped. We knew it was close.

By golly if I didn't land right on top of my guards. I could feel their legs trembling. I thought well, these guys are more scared than we are (*laughs*). The shell hit the tank that we'd just walked past and killed some of the guys in the tank. The tank commander was a little ways off and he saw what happened. He came after us and he had his thirty-eight caliber pistol out and he was pointing it right at me and he was going to start shooting us guys. Then...

(1, B, 440)

T: You're almost living what you heard described by your sergeant earlier. Germans killing...

R: Yes. I fully expected him to kill us then. That's what he was aiming to do, but this German guard who was probably a private, stepped between us. He said something about being soldiers and he finally talked this officer out of killing us. So he said, "Raus!" Let's get going. So we got out of there as fast as we could.

T: That was a close call, Mr. Weber.

R: Yes. Then they walked us, marched us back until we finally get to another German pillbox.

T: Still the ten of you together?

R: Yes.

T: You're marched to another pillbox now. Is that right?

R: Yes. And this was under German control, and I think that's where they had their officers. They set up a machine gun and they marched us right along this pillbox,

concrete pillbox wall, and I thought, well, now they're going to shoot us. I'd seen movies of them doing that very thing. And I remember how frightened I was and I thought to myself it isn't going to make any difference what I do. They're going to do what they're going to do. I might as well pretend I'm brave, and stand there.

T: How hard was that?

R: That was quite difficult, but then they started taking us one by one, to interrogate us, into the pillbox. For interrogation purposes. And the only reason they had the machine gun up there was to have one guy guarding the whole works rather than have a bunch of guys doing it. That was all there was to that. We didn't know that.

T: What kind of interrogation did you get inside?

R: It wasn't too bad. They realized, first of all I suppose, that I was a buck private so I wouldn't be in the know of what the plans were.

T: Sure.

R: I remember they asked how old I was. I thought that can't be too big of a military secret, so I told them I was nineteen. He says, "You're too young to die." I said, "I agree." *(laughs)*

T: It's a moment of almost humor.

R: Yes.

T: Was the questioning you got intimidating in any way or not?

R: No. Well, of course, it's intimidating because you know it's the enemy asking the questions. You don't know anything. It simplifies it. The blessing of being a buck private.

T: It is really. They must have known you didn't know anything.

R: Right.

T: How long did they keep your group there before you were moved on?

R: I think we were moved on the very, yes, it would be the very next day. We marched to another town and they put us in a warehouse. I remember sleeping on that concrete floor in the warehouse, and thinking how nice and luxurious that was to have a roof over my head because we had been so used to digging our own little trench and sleeping out in the open.

(1, B, 478)

T: Were just the ten of you still together?

R: No. By this time there was a large group. That's when I realized that we weren't the only ones taken prisoner. Then when we saw the colonel was captured too.

T: The colonel from your unit?

R: Yes. Then we felt a little better about it.

T: Did you begin to feel at all more or less scared that you were going to be killed when you got to this point?

R: Yes. I was a little less scared by that time. But then the front line troops treated us quite good. In comparison to what we were treated in prison camp.

T: You got better treatment from them you say, from the front line troops.

R: I think so.

T: This warehouse. Did they keep you at this warehouse for very long? Or was this just a collection point?

R: Just a collection point. I think it was one or two days and that was it. Then we were marched out again. I remember helping a guy that had been shot right through the middle of himself. The bullet had come out the back. All they had done is put some tape over the openings and I was helping him and we were falling further back and further back and they said, if you fall back you'll be shot. I thought why am I taking a chance? This guy is going to die anyhow.

T: The Germans told you that? Or the Americans told you that?

R: The Germans. They wanted us to keep going fast. Then the Germans did call somebody else back to help this guy, so he could keep up. The funniest thing was, I was so sure that guy was going to be dead in a short time and when I got to Newport News after we got back from the war I was going through a chow line and here is this guy. Handing out chow.

T: Handing out the chow.

R: Yes. I looked at him and he looked at me, and we recognized each other and he opened his shirt up. He showed me the scars. He was okay.

T: No kidding. He got back before you.

R: Evidently. Yes.

T: He was serving the chow.

R: Yes.

T: How long did you march, or were you eventually put onto trains?

R: Yes. We marched for several days, but then we were put on trains. On the train, that was the worst experience I think that I have there.

T: Why is that?

R: As I remember I was on board that boxcar—they weren't very big boxcars. They'd run about forty guys in there or so. So that you didn't have room to sit down. You had standing room only, so to speak. No latrine. No food. No water. They locked the doors, and anybody that tried to escape would be shot of course. We were on there for many days.

T: From the place you were captured to Neubrandenburg is a long way.

R: Yes. Actually it is. And then of course we didn't have priority. We probably were as low a priority of any movement there, because I'm sure that the military stuff went long before ours. They'd shove us off to a siding, and then of course the Americans and British would come and bomb the railroad yards.

(1, B, 520)

T: I was going to ask you if your train was ever strafed or bombed while you were in it?

R: The yards were. I don't know. You couldn't see out worth a darn. But, yes, the bombing would shake the cars and whatnot.

T: How do you get through something like that? Locked in a railroad car.

R: You're so miserable that you get to the point where you don't much care anymore. Almost wish it would come to an end.

T: Really?

R: Yes.

T: Were there some guys in the car you were in that handled the stressful situation like that better than others?

R: Oh, yes. There always is, you know. Some guys went bananas. Banged their head against the wall and everything else. Eventually we did get out of the cars. I remember we were hollering for water. "Wasser!" That's German for water. And we'd do it in unison. And you get a whole trainload of prisoners doing that... They finally did bring us a bucket of water. Slide the door open and set it up there and the first thing you know—you're lucky if you got a sip.

T: It sounds like the order in the car... Was it easy to keep order in the car like that? In a situation like that? Or did that get chaotic too?

R: Well, we were all pretty good about that. Yes. It was pretty well done. Then there's always a few noncommissioned officers, sergeants and so forth, around. That helped. Finally got off the cars, and the Red Cross gave us food.

T: The first real food you've had.

R: Yes.

T: It's been a number of days now that you've talked about.

R: Yes.

T: It must have felt good to get off the cars. Off those railroad cars.

R: Yes. It was. Then we finally got over to our camp there. It was a couple mile walk I suppose from town to the camp.

T: Marching, before you got on the trains or even from the railroad station to the camp, did you come into contact with German civilians at all?

R: No. What they did with us was this. They always told us, anybody from the Air Force walk in the middle. Infantry can be on the outside. Because the civilians don't like Air Force, because they bombed their places. So that's how we did it. We didn't have much harassment from the civilians. I think they had a lot of respect for their soldier, and they weren't encouraged to do that sort of thing.

T: So there was marching before. Then from the railroad station actually to the camp of II-A.

R: Yes.

T: When you got to II-A how many guys were in the group? Can you estimate? You were with that actually entered the camp.

R: As we came into camp?

T: Yes.

R: Probably 150 or so. It's hard for me to judge.

T: All Americans or mostly Americans?

R: Yes. Mostly all Americans.

T: And there were some Air Force guys in there too you mentioned. Is that right?

(1, B, 568)

R: Yes. There must have been a few. Basically it was our outfit.

T: I see.

R: The camp we came to was primarily where they kept the Russian prisoners. The vast majority was all Russian. They had a little area set off for Americans.

T: A separate compound?

R: Yes. A little separate. Not that you couldn't walk from one to the other. But it had a piece of wire around it so that you were supposed to stay in that one instead of the other one and so forth.

T: Did you get there during the day or at night?

R: It must have been during the day.

T: When you walked in that camp and obviously this is your first time in prison camp, when you looked around, describe the impression that camp made on you.

R: By that time anything was better than what we had it seemed like. After getting off those railroad cars.

T: Is it safe to say you felt safer or could relax a little now after the steps you've had along the way?

R: I would say so. Yes. Yes. We made it that far. Yes. Yes.

T: Let me ask you about the barracks that you actually were in. Talk about that space. How many men were in there and the kind of sleeping quarters you had.

R: We had a wooden barracks with wooden bunks. I don't think we had any straw in our mattresses. I think we just slept on the boards it seemed like. We may have had

a little straw in them. I can't recall now. There was one stove in each barracks and the stove was never lit while I was there. They were trying to conserve fuel.

T: How many men slept in a room?

R: Probably one hundred.

T: Was the barracks subdivided into rooms or just one large room?

R: It was basically one large room but then there was also one smaller room too. I don't know just why they had the smaller room.

T: Were you in the larger room?

R: Yes.

T: So the bunks were stacked against the wall or...

R: Yes. The end was against the wall.

T: So the head or the foot was against the wall and then...

R: Yes. Yes.

T: How many bunks high?

R: About three. Three or four. Something like that.

T: And one guy to a bunk?

R: Yes.

T: You just picked an open spot? Is that how it worked?

R: Yes.

T: They sent you in there? How long did you stay, just for reference, at II-A before you got moved out on the work detail?

(1, B, 607)

R: I would say I probably stayed there maybe three or four weeks. Something like that.

T: Were you still there at Christmas 1944?

R: No.

T: Okay. You'd already moved out.

R: Yes.

T: That's good to know. So you spent what looks like from mid-November to mid-December approximately at II-A.

R: Yes.

T: At the camp there was there a daily routine as far as how things were ordered?

R: No. For breakfast you'd have a cup of coffee made out of burned barley or something like that. A loaf of bread that you had to divide up between five or six guys. That was breakfast. Then for supper... You didn't have three meals. You only had two meals a day. For supper you'd have soup.

T: What did you put your soup in? You got the soup. Did you have a container to eat out of or how did you eat that?

R: The container we got from the Red Cross when we got off the train. They said to keep that, and a good thing you did. That was it.

T: Did you have a spoon as well or not?

R: I had a spoon that had a broken handle. I remember I took a piece of wood and made a slot in there and made a handle for that spoon. That's what I used all the rest of my POW time.

T: So you kept that spoon and that serving container.

R: That was something you kept.

T: When you got to the camp and the Red Cross gave you that, did they sort of sign you up so they knew who you were and everything at that point as well?

R: Yes. Took our picture. Got our number [POW dog tag, issued by Germans]. I remember my number, too, yet.

T: What's your number?

R: *Null sieben sieben acht einundzwanzig*, which in English would be 077821.

T: *Neunundzwanzig* or *einundzwanzig*?

R: *Einundzwanzig*. 821.

T: Yes. 077821, right? *Null sieben sieben acht einundzwanzig*. So you had your picture taken and did you get a German set of POW dog tags as well with your number on?

R: No.

T: Did they take your picture with your number and you had your number?

R: Yes.

T: So then for the meals, two meals a day, pretty consistent? Same thing every day that you remember at II-A?

R: Yes.

T: Did the day start with a roll call that you remember?

(1, B, 647)

R: Yes. They had roll call. I don't recall if it was in the morning or evening or when it would be. Sometimes in between too. You never knew.

T: How did the roll call go? How do you remember that actually working?

R: You'd stand in formation, and then they'd count off the number of lines and so forth.

T: Literally. *Ein, zwei, drei...* and make sure everybody from a particular barracks was there.

R: If there's supposed to be six in a row sometimes the guys would shift over and screw them up.

T: That just meant you stood there longer though, right?

R: Yes (*laughs*).

T: But from what you're saying, it doesn't sound like there's a whole lot else to do at the camp here. Was there anything really to fill your time with during the day?

R: No. No. There wasn't. I remember I'd go on sick call. I had the runs and whatnot, you know. Dysentery. All they would do on sick call, they'd give you a pill. It was a big dry pill. I could chew on it. Chew it up. So I'd go there just to get something to eat (*laughs*).

T: And that sounds like what the Germans were providing food-wise wasn't quite enough.

R: No. No. Definitely wasn't enough. That's all you did was dream about food and talk about food. It was just terrible. That's one of the reasons I went on that work detail. They promised us more food if we went on the work detail.

T: So it didn't take you even a month to figure out that the food situation at the camp was not going to work as far as the amount.

R: Right.

T: Did you remember seeing any Red Cross packages while you were at II-A?

R: Let me see. There might have been one but I'm not sure. I remember getting one; we must have gotten a couple when I was on the work detail.

T: So if you got them at II-A it was few and far between.

R: Yes. Right. Like the whole time I was a prisoner, which was about six months, I only got two or three.

T: So they were a rare occurrence.

R: They were, and they were lifesavers.

T: In what way?

R: Well, they had good food in them. Your body needs that.

T: Were you splitting the packages with another guy or guys or was it your package?

R: Sometimes I'd split them. Yes, we had to split them.

T: Either at II-A or on the work detail, it sounds like food was a precious item. Does that mean that there were problems with food being stolen from one prisoner by another?

R: Oh, yes. You had to guard your food. You bet. You couldn't really blame them for stealing it, because there was just such a fierce desire for food.

T: So you had to watch your stuff.

R: Yes [you had to watch your stuff]. You bet. Yes.

(1, B, 701)

T: Was it safe to leave your stuff anywhere or if it was valuable did you have to keep it on you?

R: Best keep it right on you because... They usually didn't have anything left over to save anyhow.

T: Did you, either at camp or on the work detail, have a friend or friends that you sort of had a good relationship with that you kind of looked out for each other and helped each other, or were you a person who more stuck by yourself?

R: No. I had friends. Guys from my squad.

T: So guys you knew before that you could trust.

R: Yes.

T: Who were those guys? Remember their names still?

R: One of them was Earl King. Another one was Smitty. I remember Smitty. Another one was... Can't think of the name.

T: As guys who sort of were a group, how could you help each other either in the camp or on the work detail? What could friends do for each other?

R: Moral support more than anything I guess. Then to make sure that some big idiot doesn't come and steal your stuff or something. You've got somebody to back you up.

T: Kind of looking out for each other almost. Protection thing.

R: Yes. I remember one occasion where when we first got on this work detail. We were assigned to work on a farm there. My job was to turn a [machine] that cut up rutabagas for the animals. I reached down and pick up a piece once in a while and eat it until the German guard caught me doing that.

T: Eating the rutabagas.

R: Yes. "Verboten. That's for the animals." So I couldn't even eat that. I was thinking of the prodigal son. He could eat animal food, but I wasn't allowed to.

T: Just reduced to that and now the reason that you considered the work detail you said earlier was because... Did they tell you the food would be better? Is that what they...

R: Yes. And I don't know, maybe it was a little better. But far from sufficient. And then of course, you have to work. That makes it more difficult.

T: You're burning calories anyway. In camp you wouldn't have burned those, so...

R: Yes.

T: You may be getting more but you're burning more.

R: Yes.

T: Did a number of you make the decision to go? Was it a group decision or...

R: Yes. It was my buddies that were in my squad that decided to do that [go on the work detail].

T: Was there a discussion among you about to take it or not to take it?

R: Yes. I wasn't in favor of it at first, because I figured they'd work the hell out of us. But being they went, I went.

T: Because if your friends are going—otherwise you'd be by yourself back there.

R: Right.

T: Now you moved there before Christmas of 1944.

R: Yes.

T: How did they transport you from the camp to the location of the work detail?

R: By train. By rail.

T: So you were back to town, to Neubrandenburg --

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

T: Let's pick the story up. You've made the decision with your friends, after some discussion it sounds like, to take the Germans up on the offer of this work detail and to leave II-A. How many of you went in this group? Do you remember?

R: There was in our group, I would say probably, about thirty guys.

T: All Americans?

R: Almost. I remember one was Canadian.

T: All English-speakers. There were no Russians in this particular group that were going?

R: No. No. They didn't mix us with the Russians. We weren't allowed to mingle with them.

T: Did you mingle at camp at all or was it kind of two separate worlds?

R: No. They kept us separated. The only time we'd get to speak with the Russians was like if you were on sick call or something and there happened to be some there.

T: You'd see them in the same location.

R: Yes.

T: Then you had to have some kind of language I suppose.

R: Yes. A lot of them couldn't understand, but once in a while they'd get something through.

T: How far on the train? Was it a one day journey to the work detail location?

R: Yes. Then we went first class.

T: No boxcars?

R: No. Not boxcars.

T: Was that a bit of a shock? I mean here you've had a bad train trip...

R: Yes. That was nice. Yes.

T: So you're sitting in real chairs. Were there German civilians on this train too?

R: Yes.

T: Was that a bit odd at all?

R: Not really. They had us well under guard. I suppose that's where the train went, and it was going there anyhow.

T: Did you change trains at all or just one train to this location?

R: It seems like it was just one train.

T: And do you remember the name of the station when you got off?

R: I don't know. It was Bad zutsi [sp?] or something like that, but I'm not sure.

T: But it only took one day as you remember.

R: Yes.

(2, A, 20)

T: Describe the location of the work detail. I mean, in a sense, this is the great unknown. You've gambled. What kind of place had they sent you to?

R: The barracks was smaller—we filled up the barracks. Had a stove in it, and that stove we could light a fire in.

T: It's December now, so you get some heat.

R: Yes. So we gained that. We would work six days a week.

T: Doing what kind of work?

R: After we got off that farm—they didn't let us stay on the farm very long, because we were stealing eggs and whatnot.

T: I see. So the first place you were working was on this farm.

R: Yes.

T: And that didn't work out too well, at least from the German farmer's perspective.

R: No. No. No. That's right. Then they had us working out in the woods after that. We were cutting up wood.

T: Like timber? With saws or axes and things like this?

R: Yes. Yes.

T: Is that the, description-wise, is that the work you did from then until the end of the war at this location?

R: Yes.

T: So I'm trying to imagine. You're harvesting timber or larger or smaller trees...

R: Yes. It was pretty large trees, and it was beechnut trees, and they have a white wood in them. I think they used that—they grind it up and use it to make bread. They used a lot of sawdust for bread and that would make nice clean stuff. Because I know if there was any knots in there that were discolored they'd chuck them out. We'd cut them up into four foot lengths or one meter lengths and stack them in ricks. The larger ones, we'd have to split them too. Split them. We used wedges and whatnot for splitting. Everything was done by hand.

T: Yes. My next question. If you had power tools. And the answer is no.

R: No.

T: Was it physically hard labor?

R: Yes. It was very hard labor. Even today, if you go out in the woods and do that sort of thing you find out it's very hard. We used the old hand crosscuts and axes.

T: So any extra calories you were getting, like we mentioned a moment ago, you're using them up in this kind of work.

R: Oh, yes. That's for sure.

T: Did everyone go out to the work detail every day?

R: Yes.

T: And marched all the guys out there and...

R: The only time you wouldn't go would be if you were sick or something like that. You had to have a fever. You couldn't be sick without a fever.

T: So you'd be demonstrably ill. Almost prove it in a sense.

R: Yes.

T: Did guards go with you out on this work detail?

R: Yes.

(2, A, 49)

T: And was it the same guards every day?

R: Yes.

T: How many of them? Do you remember?

R: There was probably about—one, two, three—probably about four. Then they had a sergeant who was in charge. He didn't go out with us. But he was in charge.

T: These younger guards or older guards?

R: Older.

T: What kind of people were they? Were they aggressive or sympathetic? What kind of people were they from your perspective?

R: Most of them were business-like. Not the kind of guys you want to push around or anything, because they'd slip a bullet in the chamber and you knew they meant business. They for the most part were pretty decent.

But there was one guy there that was definitely an ornery bugger. He wore a Hitler mustache, and he would walk up behind you and hit you with his gun butt or whatnot if you weren't looking. I sure hated his guts.

T: So he did physically abuse prisoners. This one guy.

R: Oh, yes. After I was captured—recaptured—he was one of them came and got me. Went on bicycles, and we had to run. And this was about a twenty mile trip. Started collapsing before we made it back. He'd get off his bicycle and kick us with his hobnail boots. Not very good deal.

T: And you saw the same guys every day.

R: Yes.

T: So it sounds like they were there just to stand around and watch you, I guess, and make sure you didn't try to escape.

R: Yes.

T: How did the food differ here at the work detail location from camp?

R: Food... I would say the soup had a little more stuff in it. And we got a little larger amount. Other than that I guess it was pretty much the same.

T: Get the bread in the morning as well?

R: Yes.

T: So bread and then soup at the end of the day. Is that right?

R: Yes.

T: Did you doubt your decision to go out there at all once you were there, or did you think it was the right decision?

R: A lot of times I felt I would have been smart if I'd stayed in camp instead.

T: Really?

R: Yes. But maybe not either. Who knows? Because to be inactive for a long period of time and everything, maybe I would have wasted away.

T: Yes. At a remote location like that, I mean north Germany is pretty sparsely populated. What kind of news did you get about how the war was going?

R: Only about what our guards would give us I guess. That was about it. Then we could see the anti-aircraft and we'd see evidence of planes having gone over and dropping their blue ribbons and whatnot.

T: The tin foil stuff.

(2, A, 85)

R: Yes. I think that confused the radar or whatever.

T: Yes. That's right. Supposed to anyway.

R: Once in a blue moon we'd see a jet airplane. The first jets we'd ever seen. We knew things were still on the move and it was just a matter of time, because we had heard that the Russians, somehow or other, we heard the Russians were making good progress. So we just couldn't wait.

T: Would you say that you were, and the men around you, were fairly optimistic about surviving the whole thing by this point?

R: I think so. Yes.

T: In the very beginning you mentioned you were scared and uncertain.

R: Yes. That's right. Yes. I think we felt it was just a matter of time. Time didn't go very fast for us (*chuckles*).

T: Yes. And the same thing every day.

R: Yes.

T: One day off you said a week.

R: Yes.

T: How did you spend your day off?

R: Spent the day off cutting wood for our stove.

T: For your own use.

R: Yes. And let's see. There wasn't a whole lot of things we could do. Of course we were so tired out all the time that it was nice to rest.

T: Yes.

R: Try to clean up a little bit.

T: Were there bathing facilities at all there or running water?

R: No. They carried water from the well.

T: You mentioned kind of waiting it out here and can sense that your survival chances are pretty good. That the Russians and/or the American/western Allies are coming, and yet you tried to escape. What thought process, or how did you process the whole situation that led you to attempt to escape?

R: First of all, Smitty had taken an axe and he had slipped it in his pants. Slipped the axe above his beltline, you know, under his overcoat, and was able to bring it into the barracks one night without them knowing about it. He put that in his bunk and slept on it. So now we had a tool where we could go through the wires. Then we were talking about escaping, and I didn't think it was a very good idea.

T: You didn't.

R: No. I didn't. We had one guy that could speak Polish, and the Russian sergeant in charge there could also speak Polish, so then he was the spokesman for our group. So he'd speak to the German sergeant and he said if we don't get any more food around here the men are talking about escaping. Of course the German says, don't they know they will be shot if they escape? He said, yes, they've been shot at before. That's how it stood. About a week later the guys, my buddies, all agreed that they would go, except for me. Well, then I didn't want to be the only one holdout. So I agreed to go along with them.

T: It sounds like you agreed reluctantly though.

R: Yes. I knew the dangers involved. Worked out good.

T: Time-wise how long had you been there before this escape attempt took place?

(2, A, 129)

R: I would say this was probably the end of February.

T: You had been there a couple months already.

R: Yes.

T: Describe the escape attempt. You made it out of camp. Or did you walk away from the work detail?

R: No. We made it out of camp. The way they operated there we would have our supper and then we'd have roll call. We'd all have to go outside and line up in rows and everything and they'd count off.

T: All forty of you or whatever it was.

R: Yes. Then right after that they'd say okay, go to the latrine and back into your barracks. That was a dumb way to do it, because we went to the latrine and... We had a little bit prior to that. We used to sing songs after supper before we went to bed at night. Like some of them were like our National Anthem. They would figure we could irritate the guards because there was just a thin wall between our barracks and where the guards slept. But they seemed to enjoy our music, our singing, so that went okay.

So that night, after roll call, four of us stayed right in the latrine. The rest went back into the barracks milling around. Pretty soon you could hear the guards say, they wanted to know if we're all in there. They said yes. They're all in there. They locked up the door, and we waited for a while.

T: You three were still outside.

R: We were still out in that latrine. So then we waited until they started singing songs. Boy, they were singing loud [context: explain]. Then we took the axe and cut the fence. Then Smitty there, he started taking off. He says, "Hold it!" He took the wire and poked it back together again. That way the guard, when he walks around every hour or whenever he's supposed to, he won't notice it. By golly, it worked. We took off across the field there, and it was a moonlit night.

T: Were you scared at all?

R: Yes. I was scared, but after we got away from the fence and started heading out without being detected, then I wasn't so scared anymore. Oh! It felt so wonderful to be free. To be able to run and do something on your own. The guys. We could hear

way back there. A mile or two later we could still them singing (*laughs*). They were really pouring it on.

T: What kind of plan did you three guys have?

R: We had a map of the area. A hand-drawn map of the area. I don't know how they had gotten a hold of it, but somehow they had. But we walked out of that map within several hours.

T: Then you were on your own.

R: Then we didn't know where we were. And what we would do, we would go down the road and pretty soon we'd hit a little village and everybody would be in bed, so we would just keep on going and the dogs would start barking behind us. We knew better than to turn around. So we'd just keep on going. Village after village. Here we thought we were entering another little village and it turned out to be a city and the dogs and that were barking behind us. We turned around they'd be awake there probably and (*sighs*) gosh, that thing was so big. We got way downtown.

T: What city was it? Do you know?

R: No. I don't [know what city it was]. By golly, the village cop caught us. Put us into prison. Real prison with walls.

T: With bars and everything?

R: Yes. That's how we spent the night.

T: How long were you actually out of the camp before they caught you?

R: I would say it probably was about three in the morning when they caught us.

T: A number of hours you managed to evade them or not get caught, anyway.

(2, A, 182)

R: So that would be [we were out] from probably eight o'clock [in the evening] until then.

T: How did they figure out who you were and where you belonged?

R: First we were trying to tell this guy we were on work detail, but we couldn't speak German worth a darn. Just knew a few words. *Arbeit* and so forth. That we were going back to where we belonged. But then he figured it out and we didn't add up.

T: Did guards from your camp come to get you then?

R: Yes.

T: Is this the one you alluded to earlier? The rather, not nice guard.

R: Right. Right. He was one of them.

T: How many came to get you?

R: I think there was two or three [guards that came to get us]. The bicycles.

T: Were you worried once you were in this jail cell what might happen to you now?

R: Yes. I thought they might take us out and shoot us in the morning.

T: Were you angry at yourself for trying to escape, or angry at the others for convincing you to go?

R: No. I just felt it was my duty to try to escape too. That was part of being a prisoner I guess.

T: The guards come to get you and don't treat you very well on the way back to camp you mentioned.

R: No. They were on bicycles and made us run. They didn't take the shortcut we took to get there. Went on the roadways. Good roads. I remember Smitty, he really collapsed. King and I were helping Smitty. I remember that. Just barely could walk when we got there. It was about twenty miles. [from p. 27: After I was recaptured...he was one of them came and got me. Went on bicycles, and we had to run. And this was about a twenty mile trip. Started collapsing before we made it back. He'd get off his bicycle and kick us with his hobnail boots. Not very good deal.]

T: Was there any punishment when you got back to camp as far as reduced rations or time in solitary confinement?

R: Yes. Yes. They sent us out to the latrines, and we dug a trench. Then we had to empty all the stuff from the latrine into that trench and bury it. And of course they called us a lot of dirty names while we were doing that. But we were so miserable by that time that that didn't even bother us that they were calling us...

I remember Smitty sat right down in the stuff. He was shot [completely exhausted]. Went to the well to wash off the shovels, they wouldn't even let us take a drink of water. Going without water is the most horrible thing there is. To go without food is bad, but without water it's much worse. Then we stopped. Then we were finally done. They let us go into the barracks and we thought, now we'll have

water to drink at least, because we always had a bucket of water in the barracks. Bring one in for nighttime. That night they wouldn't let the guys take in the bucket of water. Some of the guys were smart enough to figure out the reason they wouldn't let them take in water. They didn't want us to get water. So then they'd save a little water for us. They gave us a drink anyhow. But of course we didn't dare drink too much at one time. That's not good either.

T: Did you go back onto the work detail then the next day?

R: Yes.

T: Almost as if...

R: Yes.

T: As before.

R: Yes. Then I remember we were so sick and shot after all that that we had no strength at all. I remember me and Smitty were working together, and we were on a long crosscut and he didn't want to keep going. I said, "Just keep going real slow. As long as we keep moving a little bit they won't bother us." And that was true. If you stopped then they'd be after you.

(2, A, 242)

T: Just keep yourself in motion.

R: Yes. Just some kind of motion. Finally Smitty, he just couldn't and he sat down on a log. He says "krank," which means sick. This German that I was telling you about brings his rifle up and he puts a shell in the chamber and aimed right for his head. I was standing right behind Smitty. I remember I was getting out of the way because I didn't want his brains splattered all over my legs. Smitty didn't care. He thought, time to go. That's how bad he felt.

So then the other guy started hollering at this guard. He finally backed off, and didn't shoot him.

T: It sounds like you thought he was going to.

R: Oh, yes. I was certain he would [shoot him], and so was Smitty. Smitty didn't care. He'd rather be dead than keep on.

T: Did your daily existence here at the work detail pretty much follow the same pattern? Work six days a week until the camp was liberated? Working doing the same kind of work?

R: Yes. I guess so. But you see, then after a couple days, then they took us guys that had escaped and marched us over to another little village there.

T: Just the three of you.

R: Yes. Four of us actually. There was one Canadian too. There was a German officer there. Like a colonel. Elderly man. He interrogated us and wanted to know whose idea that was and so forth and so on. Before we left there was a guy in charge of our group there. He had said, "Rube, you be the one that will be in charge if you come to a point where you can't agree on something. Whatever you say, that's what going to be then." So I expected that said that I was in charge. They said no. They all stepped forward and said we were all in on this together. That was it. So that satisfied the German officer, so I was very thankful for that. Then he did a little more questioning on different things and why we escaped and so forth, and we told him the food situation. Then he called in the German guards that we escaped from, and boy did he give them a talking to.

T: In front of you?

R: Yes. Then we went back to camp and then the next day they marched us over to the railroad station and shipped us back to the Stalag.

T: Back to II-A.

R: Yes.

T: That was the end of your work detail career.

R: Yes. Then we were put in with sort of a solitary confinement thing. It wasn't really solitary, but it was behind bars. We were separated from the Americans. We weren't allowed to be anywhere near any other group. We were all bad guys, I guess. [from p. 37, who is in the cell with him: We were primarily mostly Americans. There was one Russian officer who was a pilot that was in there too. I would say probably maybe six or eight of us. Something like that.]

Most of us in this group now that I was in were Russian. I remember the guard would come in and take a Russian out of the cell and march him back to another room. You could hear him howling and whatnot, because they were torturing him. And they'd bring him back and he'd flop down on the floor. That sort of thing went on...

T: You were in the same cell area.

R: Yes. They were right across the hall from us, so we could see all this. I was always worried, when is my turn coming. Sometimes the guard would come right into the cell there and beat up on one of those guys too. The other Russians would

stand around and laugh about it. I couldn't understand that. I guess I do a little more now, because all Russians aren't from the same country really.

T: Yes. That's right.

R: It was crazy.

T: Were you questioned any more or just kept in this cell?

(2, A, 313)

R: No. I was just kept in that cell. Then I had to go to work every day too. Sawing some more wood. But that was inside of a warehouse now.

T: Inside of II-A.

R: Yes.

T: Right.

R: It was a lot easier. A lot nicer.

T: So ironically, the punishment was [that you now had] easier work.

R: Easier than the work details. Yes.

T: Was that where you had to spend the nights then, in this cell area?

R: Yes.

T: So no more regular barracks.

R: No. And that's where I was when the Russians finally came.

T: Describe that. The arrival of the Russians. Do you feel like you had much advance warning that this was going to happen or was it rather sudden?

R: Yes. We noticed in the afternoon there was airplane coming over. It looked like a P-39, [Airacobra] I think. At least that's what I thought it was. A couple of them came flying right over camp. You could just sense a different attitude that the guards had and everything. You just knew something was afoot. Then later in the day, then you could hear gunfire in the distance, and the guards threw the machine guns down from the tower. Then we knew something was afoot. But then we got locked up in our place, which we were thankful for, because we thought we'd be safer right there than any other place.

T: Good thinking.

R: During the night then is when the real action got going. You could hear the machine gun fire and everything. Then it got to the point where you could hear them yelling and they'd blow a bugle and a yell and fire and come wave after wave...

T: So you could hear this but you couldn't see it.

R: No. And you could just sense what was happening because you could tell they were getting closer, and they were fortunately coming toward the Russian end of the camp, which we were thankful for because if they had come to ours we wouldn't have been able to let them know who we were or anything. Of course I suppose they would recognize that as a prison camp, but nonetheless I was glad they hit the Russian side first.

T: Sure.

R: That's how they kept on coming. You could just tell... The Russians, you know, used a lot of manpower when they advanced. Then there's some die down, and pretty soon they'd throw some people together and they'd yell and they'd come closer yet. Keep on coming. Then some shells were flying around too, so I crawled under the bunk for a while. Pretty soon I could hear a tank, so I climbed back up and there was a window with barbed wire across it. It was a small opening. I could peek out of there if I crawled up on the bunk. Then I see this tank come smashing through the fence.

T: Literally.

R: Yes. Right close to where I was. I didn't know, so I dived down under the bunk again because he might start spraying around. Machine gun fire or whatnot. But it was okay. Boy, in the morning...

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

T: How many people were in this particular cell with you?

R: We were primarily mostly Americans. There was one Russian officer who was a pilot that was in there too. I would say probably maybe six or eight of us. Something like that.

T: And was the cell door open then. Did you get out through the door or...

R: Yes. I think to me it was opened. Although the cell was made out of wood. Wooden bars. We could have busted our way out of it if we had to.

T: When the Russians came, how long did you stay at the camp before you actually departed from the camp?

R: I would say about two or three days.

T: What was that period like? I mean the German guards are gone, but you're still in this camp.

R: It was nice, but then no food. Even the food schedule was off then. And the Russians didn't carry any food with them. There was nothing set up for us so we didn't think that was such a bright idea. So then a few of us got together and thought, why don't we hike on into town. Because by that time they had already taken the town. We should be able to scrounge something up. So that's what we did.

T: Did you go into town with guys from your squad? The same guys again?

R: Let me think. No, I don't think so.

T: So different guys.

R: Yes. There were about four of us I suppose. Something like that.

T: What did the town of Neubrandenburg look like? Now this is after the battle for the town, right?

R: The town wasn't too badly shot up then, but I guess what happened later on was they found a big grave where there were over five thousand buried that had been starved to death in that camp.

T: The camp you were in.

R: Yes. So then the Russians set up their guns and blasted the town.

T: That was after you departed.

R: Yes.

T: How did you finally get out of the camp?

R: I had a few cigarettes that I'd saved from a Red Cross parcel, and so I offered cigarettes to the Russian guard at the gate so he looked the other way and we went on through.

T: Literally just walked out?

R: Yes.

T: Did you know where you were going?

R: Did we know?

T: Yes.

R: Yes. We knew we were going to town. We knew there was a town right over there.

T: And from town did you go back to camp then, or just make your way towards the west?

R: No. We didn't want to go back to camp because there was no food there. So we headed on out. We thought we'll see if we can't find the front lines and get across that way.

(2, B, 413)

T: And from what you told me earlier, you were successful doing that after a while.

R: Yes.

T: How long did that take before you actually found friendly faces?

R: I would say about a week.

T: And it's just about four of you traveling together now?

R: Yes.

T: How did you feed yourself along the way or find places to sleep?

R: That first night we wound up in a house. We found a house and we went in there. The people weren't living there. So we went down the cellar and found some canned goods down in the basement and ate that. The next day we decided we'd head down the road. We saw this weapons carrier coming by and different vehicles, six by sixes and what have you. We thought maybe we could hitch a ride.

T: Was it Russian?

R: Yes. These are Russians. One of them stopped and they had room in their weapons carrier there and we crawled back and took off. I had my pack of cigarettes, so I handed them the pack of cigarettes so he could have one. He took it and put it in his pocket.

T: The whole pack?

R: Yes. What was left of it. I thought, oh well. We're getting a ride so that's okay. Then we were trying to figure out—there was two of them. There was a driver and an assistant driver. They finally figured out we were American. Oh! Then he said, "This is Studebaker!"

T: It probably was too.

R: Yes. It was a Studebaker. We knew that. So then he reaches in his pocket and gives me my cigarettes back. Then we were okay. We were friends. They were flying American airplanes. They were driving American vehicles. We were both fighting Germans, so we were comrades in arms.

From that time on we had not a worry in the world, because we'd come into a town and we were hungry, why they'd find a nice looking house and go in there and get food and we'd eat. The place to sleep would be one of the nicest houses in town too. They roused the people out of there and we'd take over.

T: No kidding. Did you stay with the same couple of Russians for a while then?

R: Yes. We didn't stay in that first group very long. We got onto a bigger truck. A six by six. They were hauling barrels of fuel up to the front lines. So we rode with them. That turned out to be a good deal too, because those guys treated us wonderfully well.

T: You had a good experience with the Russians it sounds like.

R: Yes. I did have. It was like a party. In the evening. After all day. The Russians would find some liquor and bring it up there and celebrate. I remember this Russian officer taking off his tunic. He said he had silk underwear. So he took off his tunic so we could feel his underwear. Sure enough, it was silk underwear. Then one of the guys in his outfit took and poured some alcohol right over his head. I thought oh, oh, now he's going to be in trouble. No. The officer just laughed. As long as we were off duty it was okay.

T: What did you make of those Russians? This is a culture on the other side of the world, right?

R: Yes.

T: What did you make of them?

(2, B, 452)

R: They were a little different. They carried musical instruments. I saw six by sixes filled with Russian soldiers, and some of them even had women in them. They'd play their accordions and singing songs. Making the best of it.

T: Interesting cultural experience it sounds like.

R: Yes. And one of the strangest things I saw too is—there were a lot of dead soldiers laying around yet. And they'd pick up a dead Russian and bring him over to a real nice home, and they'd have the people [German civilians] dig a trench.

T: Get the people out of the house you mean.

R: Yes. And they'd have to bury that Russian right there in their front yard. I was still curious today. I wonder if there's any of them left there yet.

T: Makes you wonder. As these Russians are going through towns, [did you see] any kind of abuse of the civilians? Civilian populations. Or were they fairly decent to the civilians?

R: I'd say they were fairly decent to the civilians. I'm sure they had no love for them, because we'd chase them out of the house and take over the house. I know one time they needed a spare tire and the Germans—there were a lot of displaced Germans. Wagons with rubber tires. They pulled one over and found a tire just the right size but instead of taking it off with a lug wrench they took a sledge hammer and broke it off. Knocked off the nuts with a sledge hammer, which would of course spoil it for the German.

T: Yes. As far as physical abuse of German civilians...

R: No. I can't say that I did see that.

T: You got back to the British lines actually, as opposed to Americans. [Let's] move the story forward here, actually, to a concluding question about the POW experience and to ask you, when you consider the time from when you were captured to when you were liberated, what do you think was the most difficult aspect of your POW experience for you personally? What was toughest for you?

R: Being hungry. Starving. Actual starvation. I was nineteen years old. I did turn twenty when I was liberated. At that time in your life you're still growing, and it just wasn't there.

T: How much weight did you lose during your POW time? Can you estimate?

R: Yes. I know at one time I weighed 135 pounds. I weigh 220 now and I'm not exactly fat. You can imagine I was just skin and bones.

T: You lost a bunch of weight then.

R: Right.

T: You mentioned starvation. You didn't talk about getting much food ever at all. In camp or out. You got back to the States. Were your folks both still alive at this time?

R: No. My mother had died when I was in high school. Just starting high school.

T: When you got back, how soon did you see your dad and any of your brothers once you got back to the States?

R: It was a little while. I had to spend a little time at Camp Shanks—not Camp Shanks but Camp...

T: Kilmer? One of those?

R: I don't know. Anyway. On the East Coast for a little bit. Then finally got a train ride to Hillsboro.

T: When you saw your dad, and how many of your brothers were still around?

(2, B, 499)

R: I had one brother in the service by that time. I had two brothers.

T: Dad and two brothers were home.

R: Yes.

T: When you saw them for the first time, how much did they want to know about your POW experience?

R: They didn't bother me about it. I think had told them that guys that were actually in combat in World War I—he had a brother that had been—don't like to talk about it. And that was true. I didn't. I wanted to forget about it if I possibly could.

T: You're both. You're a combat soldier and a POW. Does that go for both parts of that?

R: Yes.

T: You didn't want to talk about either one of them.

R: That's right.

T: And for your dad and your brothers, was it the same? They didn't ask questions about either one of those?

R: No. They didn't.

T: It seems, in a sense, odd that you come home after a couple of years with this experience and that almost seems like it would be a natural topic of conversation. Where have you been? What have you been doing? How was it that that was avoided in a way?

R: I really don't know. But Dad wasn't a very talkative person. So I suppose that helped.

T: So he wasn't a real talkative person anyway. The fact that he didn't say much wasn't really out of character.

R: Right.

T: You spent some time in R and R before you were discharged in late 1945. Did the Army do any kind of debriefing? Asking you about your POW experience or trying to figure out...

R: No. I don't recall that they did. They sent me to a camp in [Hot Springs] Arkansas. There almost no duties. Just a rest camp.

T: A lot of ex-POWs were there, weren't they?

R: Yes. I remember every other building was a liquor store it seemed like. That's what most of the guys wound up doing, drinking.

T: Yourself too?

R: A little bit.

T: More than, say, you might have done before you went in the service?

R: Oh, yes. Yes.

T: Was there any kind of psychologist, Army psychologist, asking you about your POW experience or sort of trying to help you get through all that or put it behind you, or not?

R: No. I never had one.

T: And when you got back to Hillsboro, you were discharged late 1945, you spent a couple years living in Hillsboro there, didn't you?

R: Yes.

T: Hillsboro is not a very big place. I found it on the map. People knew you around town. You knew people around town. How much was what you had been through as a POW a topic of conversation?

(2, B, 536)

R: Not much. Just the fact that I was a POW I guess.

T: People knew that about you.

R: Yes.

T: Was it that people didn't ask you questions or that you didn't really give answers?

R: They'd ask how it was, and I would say it was no good. It was bad. I was hungry all the time. Starving all the time. That would pretty much do it.

T: So brief exchanges.

R: Yes.

T: I've been in towns in North Dakota and know some North Dakotans. Fine people. They're not always real conversational.

R: No. That's true (*both chuckle*).

T: Was it stiff conversation? Was it uncomfortable or just kind of matter of fact, that's the way it was?

R: About the way it was. Of course I [would] always change the subject.

T: Would you?

R: Yes.

T: In the years after the war, did you find it easier to talk about your combat experience or your POW experience?

R: I was never proud of the fact that I had been a POW. Who wants to be a prisoner, you know?

T: Did you feel guilty or ashamed of that in a way?

R: Well, in a way, because you always wish you were a winner. It's not really winning.

T: Did you carry that around with you, that you kind of felt bad about how your service career had gone?

R: Yes, I did. I did up until here in Little Falls. I finally started getting a group together of ex-POWs.

T: When was that, Reuben?

R: That was quite a few years ago now. I can't remember just when it was.

T: After you retired or before?

R: It was before. So, yes, it would probably be in the 1970s. Somewhere in there.

T: So you went a number of decades kind of holding this inside you.

R: Yes. Yes. In fact the next door neighbor here was a POW. I never knew it.

T: The guy right across the street?

R: Yes. Never knew he was. He didn't know I was.

T: You guys live right across the street.

R: He died before I ever knew he was one. So he never did know I was one. Then there was another guy. I was a scoutmaster and he was a scoutmaster. We would go to Camp Breeze together.

T: Boy Scout stuff.

R: Yes. He was a prisoner of war and I was. We didn't know it.

T: Didn't even know it about each other.

(2, B, 567)

R: We knew each other well, but we never discussed that. And that's how it went. Everybody that I've talked to has never mentioned the fact they were prisoners. You don't go around blabbing that.

T: You've been married since 1948, right?

R: Yes.

T: Your wife, when you were dating or as you were married, what did she know about your POW experience?

R: Very little.

T: Did she know you were one?

R: She probably did. I can't recall now. That was one of the least of our worries.

T: As the years went by you had a couple of sons. In your family how much did you ultimately share with your wife or with your sons about being a POW?

R: Very little. I finally started getting together with a group of ex-POWs.

T: Did that change after you joined the American ex-POWs organization?

R: Yes. That helped change it. But it didn't change a whole lot, but it helped me. I know that.

T: How would you describe the way that the organization has helped you?

R: It made me feel that we were good soldiers, but unfortunate insofar that we were captured. Fortunate insofar that we lived through it. There you go.

T: Does it help having guys with shared experiences who can listen to you and say, I know what you're talking about?

R: Yes. It certainly does. You don't talk to people about hunger. I think they think of it as going without one meal or something like that. You get real hungry before you eat or something. It's so much different than that.

T: How would you describe the kind of hunger you had?

R: Oh, man, it affects your whole body. You have a terrific craving for food. You get done eating and you still have that terrific craving for food because you didn't get enough to satisfy it.

T: When you came back did you have trouble adjusting to eating normally again?

R: Yes.

T: Did you really?

R: *(laughing)* Yes. I thought three times a day! How can people eat three times a day? And then all that food on top of the deal.

T: Interesting.

R: That seemed so strange at first. Then we were prisoners we'd talk about, boy, when I get back I'm going to eat a whole pie, a whole pie. One slice of pie and take about two bites and I couldn't eat any more because my stomach wouldn't handle that rich stuff.

T: Yes. It sure couldn't. But you'd been thinking of food for so long.

R: Yes. Yes.

T: Food is one thing. Memories. I'm wondering what kind of nightmares or dreams you've had over the years, specifically about your POW experience.

R: I'll tell you one thing. Like telling about the mean guard of mine. When I got back home—this is daytime. I was out cultivating corn with a single row cultivator, team of horses. I was out there in the field all by myself and I got to thinking about this guy and it made me so angry that I started slapping horses. Then I realized, hey, those poor horses are working hard. That's no way to treat them. Then I thought, what am I going to do? Am I going to go over to Germany and see if I can prosecute this clown or what? I thought that wouldn't sound like a very smart idea either. Then I realized I'd have to do something to get him off my mind. So I forgave him.

(2, B, 623)

T: How do you do that?

R: I got to the end of the row and I said the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." And that did it.

T: It really did?

R: Yes.

T: You really were able to forgive?

R: Yes. After that. Didn't bother me then. I gave a talk about it, oh, about...

T: Really? So you've been talking about that and really since then it's felt like a weight off your shoulders almost.

R: Right.

T: That's a pretty good story, Mr. Weber. To let that go like that because I can imagine it just eating at you otherwise and just kind of...

R: Yes.

T: Do you or have you had dreams at night about images that come back to you?

R: I have had. Usually it was battles and so forth.

T: That's important for our project. You say you've had more combat-related dreams or nightmares than POW experience-related ones.

R: Yes.

T: Can you identify any POW images? Boxcars, guards, anything that has come back to you in dreams?

R: I think I used to, but lately haven't.

T: So they have decreased over time, or stopped.

R: Yes.

T: If you think back, what things did you dream about from your POW time?

R: It was the boxcar mostly. Working in the woods. That wasn't all that bad, I guess. Mostly the boxcars.

T: I'll tell you, that's what I hear from a lot of guys. That was probably the worst. That time in there.

R: Yes.

T: The last thing I want to ask you is this: If you think about Reuben Weber and the POW experience, how would you describe the most important way that that experience maybe changed you as a person?

R: I know this that I have all the patience in the world.

T: You're a more patient person now than you were?

R: Oh, yes. More easy-going. Patience and easy-going, I guess.

T: And is that something that your dad or people who knew you would have noticed when you got back from overseas, that Reuben seems like a different fellow?

R: I suppose. I suppose.

(2, B, 665)

T: Have you found talking about this POW experience easy since 1945 or easier in recent years?

R: Easier?

T: Easier to talk about.

R: Oh, yes.

T: We've had a really detailed conversation today.

R: In recent years. Yes. This would have been very difficult for me earlier on.

T: Ten or twenty years ago even?

R: Yes.

T: Well, I thank you for doing it today. On the record, again, I'll thank you for your time, and ask if there's anything else you want to add before we conclude?

R: Let's see. I've got a few things. In the outdoor latrines we never had no paper. No paper in the latrines. There must have been a paper shortage or something (*chuckles*).

T: Was it just reach for the nearest leaf?

R: If you were lucky enough.

T: That would take some adjusting.

R: Well, I think I covered everything pretty well.

T: Let me thank you again for your time here today.

END OF INTERVIEW