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An Interview with Darwin Gidel

An Oral History Conducted by Claytee D. White

The Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project

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The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the Boyer Early Las Vegas Oral History Project. Additional transcripts may be found under that series title.

Claytee D. White, Project Director
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Table of Contents

Description of early life in Rockwell City, Iowa; moving to Minnesota as a teenager; work history in local theaters; joining the military after graduation, 1942; details of basic training; discussion of patriotic fervor.....1-5

Observations on leadership during WWII; comments on the USO and the general public's appreciation for servicemen; discussion on availability of cigarettes; airplane mechanics school in Lincoln, Nebraska; further B-25 specialist training in Inglewood, CA; anecdotes regarding interaction with civilians.....6-10

Aerial gunnery training at Tyndall Field in Panama City, FL; attempt at pilot training in Columbia, SC; mention of Capt. Dean Davenport and the Tokyo B-25 raid; further anecdotal stories about Dean Davenport; B-17 training in Spokane, WA; overseas assignment in London; memories of being in combat; first mention of POW experience; description of bombing raids.....11-15

Continued explanation of bombing raids, warning systems, flack attacks; details on being shot down and captured over Belgium, March 24, 1944; experiences in POW hospital care; details and anecdotes about caregivers.....16-20

Further details of capture, including interrogation, isolation, health care, and meals; mention of escapes, aid from Belgium people; moved to Stalag Luft IV in Germany; relationships among captured Americans; description of prison in Germany.....21-25

Organization among prisoners; repatriation after 11 months in captivity; comments on why German POWs didn't want to leave America; sent to Battle Creek, MI, military hospital; discharged in August, 1945; mention of Tuskegee Airmen; moving to L.A. with mother and sister; enrolling in USC on the GI Bill, majoring in accounting; worked for state as junior accounting auditor, then moved into budgeting and finally general administration.....26-30

Married in '47, four children; first wife passed away in late '70s; urged by friend to come to Las Vegas, 1983; met and married 2nd wife; description of Las Vegas in 1983; memories of inexpensive social events at local casinos; opinions on corporate bottom line and how it impacts locals; comparisons between Las Vegas then and now; closing comments on landscaping around home, VA care at widespread clinics, new VA central facility under construction, and psychological torture of POWs.....31-38

Preface

Darwin Gidel, born in 1924, grew up in Rockwell City, Iowa. He describes his childhood activities, schooling, and the jobs he held as a teenager. After graduating from high school in June of '42, Darwin immediately joined the military. His basic training took him from Minneapolis to Missouri, after which he was stationed in Nebraska, California, Florida, and South Carolina for further training.

As he recalls his early military training, Darwin also evokes the patriotic fervor that gripped the country. He shares stories about the kindnesses he and many other enlistees received from individuals and families, ranging from rides to dinners to overnights.

Darwin's overseas assignment was in London, England, beginning in November of 1943. He vividly recalls the bombing raids he flew and describes them from beginning to end. His B-17 was shot down over Belgium in March of 1944, and he and eight other crew members were held as POWs for eleven months.

Much of Darwin's incarceration was in a Luftwaffe Hospital in Brussels, where his injured leg was removed. His memories include hospital personnel, solitary confinement, interrogation, and later being moved around to many different prisons in Germany. He clearly recalls relationships among prisoners, the configuration of German prisons, types of food served to inmates, and finally his repatriation from Annenberg Castle in Germany.

After the war, Darwin earned a degree in accounting on the GI Bill, which eventually led to general administration work in Sacramento. Along the way he married and had four children. After his wife passed away in the late seventies, Darwin eventually relocated to Las Vegas and remarried. He describes the city, recalls the small-town atmosphere, and compares the impersonal bottom-line attitude of modern casinos to the folksy, welcoming feel of those establishments in the early eighties.

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DARWIN GIDEL

Name of Interviewer:

CLAYTEE D. WHITE

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Claytee D. White 10/21/2009
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This is Claytee White. And I'm with Mr. Darren Gidel.

Darwin.

Darwin, D-A-R-W-I-N. The last name is capital G-I-D-E-L. We're in his home in Henderson. And it is October 21st, 2009.

So how are you today?

I'm just fine, thanks.

Great. What I want to start talking about is your early life. So where did you grow up and what was that place like?

I grew up in a small town in Iowa where I was born. It's called Rockwell City. It had a population of about 2500 people. As typical in small towns, everybody knew everybody and the kids all played together and this sort of thing. Everything was pretty much a normal childhood except that I lost my father when I was six years old. I have two siblings, an older brother and sister, who just passed away. I went to school in this little town up to and through the seventh grade.

We had a small lake about five miles from town which provided us with a lot of summer activity. We would hitchhike out to the lake and go swimming and then hitchhike back home. It was no problem because in those days the first car that came by would always stop and pick you up. People weren't reluctant to pick up people or kids for that matter.

We've come a long ways.

And we didn't have all these safety measures. As a matter of fact, the cars in the mid 30s still had running boards. So when someone stopped and picked you up, you usually just hopped up on the running board and held on and they took off. And that's the way you rode into town or out to the lake, whichever direction you were going.

Which year were you born?

What year? January 28th of 1924.

And go ahead and tell me more about the lake.

Oh, the lake was great. It was a small lake. We would go swimming. When school was out the next thing is how soon is the ice going to be cleared so we can go swimming? And it was always a dare game to see who would dive in first, usually breaking the last of the ice to do it. To say the least, you didn't stay in long the first time.

But it was a lot of fun. It was a nice childhood. I got my first paper route when I was 11 years old and bought my own bicycle with the proceeds from my paper route. Kids usually in those days in the mid-Depression had to earn what they had. Parents for the most part didn't have money enough to buy them all these things. So if they wanted them they had to work for them and get themselves. And I was no different. Matter of fact, I had less than most. As I say, that's the way I lived until the summer of seventh grade.

We moved to another small town in Iowa at that time, near Des Moines. I lived there for a year and went to school in the eighth grade in that town. Then the next summer we moved to Minnesota, a small town in southern Minnesota just north of Lake Okoboji in Iowa. The big thing up there was to go down to Lake Okoboji. They had a dance hall and carnival-like permanent installation with rides and shows and all that sort of thing. So we'd go down there. I don't remember how far it was, 30 miles or something.

So the I went to high school in this little town in Minnesota. It had a population—it was a big town compared to what I had been in. it was four- or five-thousand people. And it was the county seat. So I went to high school there. And it was uneventful except being like most high schools at that time we enjoyed it as most kids do going to school. We had a lot more freedom and much less restriction and supervision and that sort of thing because it simply wasn't necessary in those days. This was from 1938 – 1942, the four years that I went to high school.

So why did you move from—you moved twice. Why was that?

Well, my mother was having all kinds of financial difficulties raising three children, me being the youngest. And at that time I was the last one. My sister had graduated from high school the year before we left the first little town in Iowa. So she was moving to be closer to relatives and this sort of thing so that she could have a little more contact with them and so that she could get some assistance from them, really.

So that's how high school went. Of course, I worked all the way through high school, too, which was necessary. As I say, if I wanted any spending money or anything at all—as a matter of fact during the last two years of high school I bought most of my own clothes also. And I started working out in the harvest fields, day labor when I was 14. But that, again, wasn't unusual for the time.

I worked in the local theaters in town. We had two. I did everything there. I supervised the ushers and was the doorman and took the tickets and supervised the cashier and ran the machines and did everything you do in a theater including taking the money to the bank every Saturday morning. I've always remembered that as something exceptional that you wouldn't even think of today. Here, the owner of the two theaters was so trusting. And, again, it wasn't that unusual. But he gave me, a 16-year-old kid, a combination to the safe. Of course, I had the keys to the theater. I usually opened it up and closed it. And then on Saturday morning he would have the deposit slip made up and I would go up to the bank. The banks were open on Saturday in those days. Saturday morning I would go to the theater, go up to the office, open the safe, get out the deposit and check it, take it over to the bank and deposit it and so forth and bring back the necessary papers. Nothing was thought of it.

How much money do you think you were depositing per week at that time in our history?

Oh, golly. It could vary a lot depending on the shows that you happened to be running. But it could be, oh, from a thousand to maybe a little more or a little less because you were talking about the entire receipts from two theaters.

Two theaters?

Two theaters. Right. We had two theaters in town. He owned both of them.

Oh, I see.

So I worked back and forth. But you figure a hundred to 140 seats in each theater and shows for a week. That's seven nights and two matinees. It's not difficult to get to a couple thousand dollars pretty quick.

So how much did it cost to go to a movie theater?

The highest -- the price raised, of course, during the years I worked there. But it got up to 50 cents.

Isn't that amazing?

And that was at the A house. We differentiated. We ran the A movies at the nicest theater and then we ran the B movies and the Saturday Roy Rogers matinees and so forth down at the B theater. It was a little cheaper. It was 35 cents to 40 cents unless it was a first-run movie.

That's interesting.

But as I say I always remembered it because in this day and age it's hard to image an employer, not a relative, not anybody that -- just an employer trusting a 16-year-old kid with the week's receipts from the business. You know, it just wouldn't be done and couldn't be done, unfortunately.

So have you been to a movie recently?

No, not recently. The wife and I don't get out much anymore. And so we haven't been to a movie for years. She can't really sit through a movie. She has physical difficulties. It's real difficult for her to go to a movie. So we just haven't gone. And with TV being what it is, there isn't really the need. It's like I haven't been to a football game for years, but I'm an avid fan. But I watch it on TV. You see it better there.

I was going to ask you to compare the prices.

Oh, I know. They're over ten dollars or up around ten dollars.

Yes, they are. And especially your local one would probably be Green Valley, yes, the Green Valley Ranch.

Oh, yeah. And God help you if you want a bag of popcorn.

Oh, yes. That's right.

Our popcorn used to be ten cents a bag. And you had these little bags, little sacks. And I always remember I would have the popcorn girl save me a couple of bags and put it down in the bottom of her case so when she closed up after the first show was over -- of course, I had to stay through the second show to close the theater -- I'd have something to munch on. So she'd put a couple bags down there for me and I'd have that. But it was ten cents a bag.

That's great. So when you finished high school, what happened at that point?

I joined the military. That was World War II. I graduated in June of 1942. Of course, the war had started December 7, '41. So I was just in that real ripe group of 18-year-olds to go in and be soldiers.

So where did you go for basic training?

Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. That's real close to St. Louis, outskirts of St. Louis actually. When we went to town, if we got to go to town during the basic training period, it was St. Louis that we would go to.

And what was that like? I mean we're already at war. So what was the training like?

Well, basic training is pretty much basic training anyplace, anytime. You learn all of the basic things about the military. You learn that they mean it when they say your shoes should be shined. You learn that the mess hall is open just the hours that it says it's open and if you don't get there then, you don't eat. You learn how to take care of your uniform. Of course, you learned how to live in a real close-barracks sleeping association with other people. So you learn to get along or you didn't stay too healthy.

Then, of course, you learned the other things. You got the military manual thing. You learned pretty much the basics of what was expected, the instilling of a feeling of responsibility for your military position, whatever you were assigned to. And, of course, you learned to do all the little "scut" jobs, everything from walking through fields picking up cigarette butts to more involved duties.

And, of course, the mainstay of everything was your learning to drill, to march, to keep time and to drill, spending hours drilling up and down the parade grounds. You learned to take 30-inch steps and you learned how fast you took them. If you didn't, you got either your toes or your heels stepped on. In my case I happened to have enlisted in June -- and I enlisted at Fort Snelling in Minneapolis --

Now, you volunteered?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I couldn't wait. My basic training was during July and August. And in Jefferson Barracks, Missouri - there is no place hotter or more humid or more miserable than living in a tent at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Our parade grounds where we used to drill were right on the banks of the Mississippi. And we'd be out there taking our salt tablets and sweating and drilling and so forth. And then here would come one of these pleasure boats floating down the Mississippi. And we'd look over and kind of think maybe we were in the wrong place.

What was the general attitude like where you were coming from and there in the basic training area? What was the attitude of our countrymen at that time?

Oh, it was all very patriotic. Almost without exception I would say that the guys, either enlisted voluntarily or drafted, had a positive attitude of acceptance if they were drafted, or a general positive attitude if they had enlisted, of course, and with a fair amount of enthusiasm. And, of

course, the country was very patriotic at the time. They felt seriously that they were going in to do something worthwhile, something that meant something and something that benefited the country and something that not only had to be done but was worth being done.

Totally different than what we've seen in the general attitude of much of the public toward the military in more recent years. Well, from Vietnam on. At that time, World War II of course, the military was totally supported by the civilian population. You didn't have any dissidence, screaming liberals putting on antimilitary demonstrations and making accusations about the military -- you know, all this sort of thing. That was unheard of. That didn't start until Vietnam.

Right.

You didn't have any of that.

And the cause was completely different.

Oh, yeah, totally different. Well, the situation was totally different.

Yes.

Politicians didn't take over the running of wars until Vietnam. They got involved a little with this 38th parallel bologna in Korea and so forth. But that was just the beginning. That was kind of an intrusion into the waging of the war by the politicians. But it went full swing in Vietnam and got just --

So you saw the war, World War II, being managed by the generals?

Oh, yeah. I mean the generals answered to the president. There's no question. But Roosevelt and Truman, as far as that goes, didn't get into directing the war. They left that to the generals. And their job was providing the necessary support and military and materials and manpower and all that. But the generals ran the war. They were the ones trained to do it and it was left to them.

We've only run into this later difficulty with the changing -- oh, what do you call it? -- the changing concept I guess of international relations where a group of politicians gets together and tells the general, oh, no, you can't do that; you can't advance to that next objective because that would make some other country mad and they might get involved and we don't want to alienate them. You didn't get into any of that. It was to win the war. The military did what they were trained to do in the best way they were trained to do it, the total objective being to conduct the war in such a way as to achieve the objectives with the least possible loss of life. And some of them

weren't too concerned about that latter. But that was really true. World War II was that way.

And when you were out in public, wherever you were in this country, you were totally supported.

You mean a person in uniform?

Yeah, a person in uniform. I remember the first time -- well, when I went to basic training. I take that back. We weren't allowed out in basic training enough. But the first place I was stationed was a school in Lincoln, Nebraska. We got there and one of the guys says, well, you want to go down to so-and-so park if you're on pass on the weekend. I said why? And they said, well, you get treated nice. Well, what they did at that time in Lincoln was that it was unwritten arrangement whereby the civilians, the people that wanted to do something for the military would go down to this park. I don't know if it was Lincoln Park or what. But anyway, they would go to that park. And there would be soldiers there and they would pick them up, take them home, feed them dinner and entertain them for the day, like on a Sunday afternoon. And this was typical of the sorts of things that went on and what they did.

If you went into town and wanted to go to a show and if it happened to be a popular show that was crowded and there was a line at the box office, chances are that civilians would drag you and shove you up to the front of the line. I mean just anything they could do to show their appreciation to the soldiers. There were exceptions, of course.

Of course.

But generally this was the attitude that pervaded the country.

Tell me about USOs.

USOs were great. They went all out. They provided different things depending on their facilities. Some of the better-prepared ones like the one down the street from the La Salle Street Station in Chicago provided showers. You could go there and take a shower and clean up. I mean after you had been riding those soot-spewing trains for a while, you were so dirty that believe me that was appreciated, being able to go take a shower and clean up.

But they would all have, of course, coffee, cigarettes. They really taught everybody to smoke. That was the smoking era. And it was good. It was a relief. I don't know if it was conditioning or chemical, but there was some relaxation that went with smoking.

Oh, yeah.

Have you ever smoked?

Oh, yes.

Yeah. Do you still?

No. Oh, no way.

But you still remember it, though?

Oh, yes.

And there are times when you think, gosh, that would taste good, pouring that smoke down. Anyway, every place you turned around people were giving you cigarettes at the USO or just organized groups doing something for soldiers. You'd be on a troop train someplace and if you happened to get off the train or sometimes even if you didn't they would come on the train with a bunch of little bags passing them out. And they would have cigarettes and maybe a toothbrush and some toothpaste, just little things, maybe shoestrings, whatever. But they would do this. This was common.

And, of course, the USOs provided a nice quiet place where you could go and sit down, write letters. That was a big thing. And as I say have coffee. Usually coffee and doughnuts or something were there. Of course, there were always the cigarettes and a place to go relax. Some of them would have maybe a little bit of recreational equipment like a pool table, table tennis set up or something where you could do that.

And they weren't the same at all. Little towns, and I mean little towns like the one I was born in, you'd go through. They were much too small I guess for an organized or assigned space for a USO. But they'd come down to the depot and set up a place over in the corner and build in a counter or two and serve coffee and doughnuts to the soldiers that would come and just have a layover of a half hour maybe. And they'd get off the train and they'd be right there to serve them with something. This was commonplace.

Wow. Now, what kind of training? Was Nebraska a training area of some type?

Yeah.

Okay. What kind of training?

Well, I went to airplane mechanics school in Lincoln, Nebraska. I was trained as what I became

eventually, which was a flight engineer in the air force. And so Lincoln, Nebraska was the first phase. That was a six-month school in airplane mechanics. That started in the fall of '42 and went through Christmas -- or to Christmas. Then we were sent to California -- at least I was -- to Inglewood, California. You know Los Angeles, Inglewood?

Yes.

You're familiar with it? Okay. The North American plant where they made B-25s was in Inglewood. So I went through their B-25 specialist school. And it was a good school. I was interested, as most were. There were a few guys that would goof off and not learn much, you know, as in any school. But I was serious about it. I knew every nut and bolt on a B-25.

I always remember we arrived there -- and, again, back to your citizenry attitude -- on Christmas Eve day of 1942. So we got there and they bused us out to North American and assigned us our barracks and all of that and said, okay, it's Christmas Eve; you're free. So we all took off, of course, for town. There were two of my buddies with me, three of us. We went into town to Inglewood. It wasn't ten minutes until some girls came driving by in a car, screeching their brakes and stopping, shouting come on, hey, come on, come on. Here were these two girls, eh, probably 20, 21. They said come on; spend Christmas Eve with us. And we pile in the car and they take us out to their house. Their mother and dad had sent them downtown to pick up some soldiers to bring home for Christmas Eve. Isn't that something?

Yes.

So we went out there. I wrote to those people as long as I was in the service. They were just the nicest, most accommodating people. They had these two older girls, another one my age and a couple younger and a son. They wanted some soldiers there with them to help them celebrate Christmas Eve. We spent Christmas Eve with them. We went back to our barracks for the night, of course, eventually. I don't know what time. The public transportation system in the Los Angeles area was very good at that time. You could get anywhere anytime almost. The buses covered everything, buses and streetcars and so on. But they didn't let us go until they had invited us back for Christmas dinner the next day.

That's great. So now, how long were you in Lincoln for your training?

About six months.

And then you went to Los Angeles. Okay.

Then I went to Inglewood. Right.

So Inglewood was for what reason?

Well, Inglewood was to go to this B-25 specialist school at North American.

So that was to specialize in a certain plane?

Yeah.

Okay, wonderful. How long were you in Inglewood?

We were there one month. It was a condensed course. If you dropped your pencil as they say, you missed a semester of math or something.

So where did you go after that?

Then I went to Tyndall Field at Panama City, Florida. That was to another school. That was to an aerial gunnery school where they taught us how to shoot machineguns out of airplanes. That was a lot of fun.

So how high up could you be to hit a target?

Oh, the altitude didn't really relate to the difficulty of hitting the target. It's how close you were to the target at that altitude. See, we weren't shooting at things on the ground.

Oh, okay. You're shooting at other planes.

Right. So you had -- well, of course, first you went through all the classes. You learned all about the machineguns. You learned to take them apart and put them together blindfolded with gloves on and all that kind of stuff. And then during the firing part of it, you had one plane pulling a target like a long sleeve about so big around. And then you came along in another plane and shot at it. Your bullets had paint on them. So that way a number of planes could come and shoot at the same target and they could still count the scores of each individual. So that's what you did. And how well you scored depended not entirely on your ability but rather on the pilot you had and how close he would put you into the target.

Okay. Yes.

And the hazardous job was the pilot flying the plane pulling the target.

Why?

Well, because some guys could miss quite a ways. And he wasn't that far ahead of the target he

was pulling.

Ooh. I see. So he had to be really brave.

Yeah.

So did you finally get to some foreign destinations?

Oh, yeah.

So where did you go?

Well, I went a couple more places first.

Here in the United States first?

Oh, yeah. I was a traveler. From Panama City they assigned me, along with others of course, to B-25s and we went to Columbia, South Carolina. That was a B-25 base. We were supposed to go through phase training in B-25s from there to go overseas. This started out fine. But then I got sidetracked because I decided that I would try pilot training. So I took the exam for pilot training school and passed it. But then when they gave me the physical they failed me on the physical because I had an enlarged heart.

Well, were you supposed to be in the military at all?

Oh, yeah. But not flying. I mean that's what they said. It's a condition that they used to call an athlete's heart because it can be caused by too much physical activity, you know, to the point of stress, but too much physical activity, strain and stuff at too young an age during the growing stages. And I was always athletic and played football and basketball in school and all that. So that's probably what caused it. But they have since determined it doesn't have any bearing. It's just that your heart is larger. But at that time that was one of the things that they could fail you on. So they did.

Then I was ready to go back into training. But by that time I had lost my group. They had gone ahead. This whole process had taken a couple of months. So I was behind and I didn't want to follow it up any further. I've been sorry sometimes that I didn't.

My squadron commanding officer was a captain at that time named Dean Davenport. And he's interesting because -- first of all, he was a character. But secondly, he was on the Tokyo B-25 raid, if you've ever heard of that.

At the beginning of the war -- boy, this does tell your age. At the beginning of the war

everything was doom because the Japanese were walking all over us. We didn't have anything anyplace. They were wiping us out everywhere. They captured all of our troops in the Philippines in Corregidor and so on. And so there was a real problem morale-wise. And the country needed a boost.

So the powers that be, Roosevelt and the generals, came up with this idea that we would devise a plan by which we could bomb Tokyo. And that early in the war it was unheard of. But they did and they put together a little group under Jimmy Doolittle, who was a colonel at the time and ultimately became a leading general of course. And they practiced and practiced landing B-25s in a distance equivalent -- and taking off. Not the landing -- I'm sorry -- just taking off in a distance that would be the size of a carrier. And then they loaded up those B-25s on one of our carriers that we still had and took off for Tokyo.

And when they got close enough, about 500 miles -- see, the range was too far. You couldn't just fly to Tokyo. You didn't have planes that could do that. When they got close -- I forget exactly how many miles, but four or 500 miles -- they took off from those carriers and flew the rest of the way into Tokyo and bombed Tokyo. That was right at the beginning of the war.

Okay. And we're not talking about the big bomb. We're talking about regular bombs.

Oh, no. These were just regular bombs. It was years later that the atom bomb came along.

Yes, because we're probably in 1943 by this time.

Well, no. We were in 1945 by the time the atom bomb came off.

Oh, no, no, no. Those original bombs were --

Oh, the original Tokyo raid was in '42.

Okay, so '42. So you were in the military at the time that this took place.

Right. But anyway, the crews -- they lost some crews, of course, over Tokyo. They lost a couple of crews. And they were supposed to fly back to China because they could just barely reach the China coast with the gas they had. And some of them made it; some of them didn't. Some of them crashed on the beach. One of them that crashed on the beach was the plane that this Dean Davenport was the copilot on. And his pilot wrote an article, which was published high and wide at the time, which was called "30 Seconds over Tokyo." So they were quite notorious people, these guys that pulled that raid. And it was a suicide raid.

Anyway, they sent Dean Davenport back and put him on different assignments. He had a foot that was screwed up from the crash, so he limped some. But he was my squadron CO in Columbia, South Carolina. And when he found out that I had failed the exam on the physical, he was furious. He says you appeal that; don't let them get away with that; appeal, appeal. And I say I don't want to bother with it. But he was a real interesting guy, a great guy. He had several pair of boxing gloves. And his favorite thing was in the evenings after everything closed down. He'd bring out his boxing gloves and the guys would gather around headquarters and take turns boxing each other and playing around. And he was right in there with all the enlisted men. He didn't know he was an officer. But anyway, that was that story. That's a different story.

But anyway, that explains why I got behind my group. So about the time this was happening they had a shortage of crews on B-17s because they were building up heavy bombardment instead of -- I mean more than medium. And what they were doing was building the Eighth Air Force in England to bomb Germany. So I volunteered to transfer to B-17s. And from Columbia, South Carolina I went to Spokane, Washington. They shipped me back and forth coast to coast a couple of times. So I went up to -- actually I went to Moses Lake, Washington first and then down to Spokane. And that's where I went through phase training on B-17s and then went overseas from there.

Wow. That's interesting. So where overseas was your first assignment?

In England. My total overseas was in England.

Oh, good. So you were stationed there for your entire time.

Yeah.

Were they still bombing London at the time?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, they bombed London all the time. While I was there they developed that -- oh, what did we call it? It wasn't a rocket. It was a flying bomb that they would just aim and they could hit something as big as London. It was timed on the fuel. So when it ran out of fuel, you go like this and bomb that area. They developed that and used it on London while I was there. But, yeah, I went overseas actually in November of 1943.

Now, what was that like, to be in a city that was being bombed? You were coming from here. We had had no activity on our soil. What was that like?

You know, I knew you were going to ask that or what something was like in combat. We talked about it. In growing up, we had all heard stories about the veterans from World War I and how so many of them who had been in serious combat didn't like it and oftentimes would even refuse to talk about it when they got home. And I had heard that. I had seen it. I had known people that were that way, older people. And I never understood it until I was in the service and in a similar situation. We talked about it. In discussing it we would ask each other, you know, well, if we live through this, which doesn't seem too likely, but if we should and you get home, all these people are going to say, oh, what was it like, what was it like? What are you going to tell them? Well, the answer was always you can't tell them anything because there is no way that you can use words to describe what the situation was and how you felt to someone who hasn't experienced it, just no way.

So when you ask what was it like, it was pretty scary. And you say something like that and that's about it. If you tried to -- and it varies depending on the combat situation. One thing I can say is that it bothers you much less when you're a participant, when you're shooting back rather than being in a situation where you can't shoot back, where you're totally exposed and being shot at. And that's I would think kind of like being lined up on a wall in front of a firing squad. You know it's going to happen. You can't shoot back. If you're shooting back and doing your thing, it occupies you a little bit and it's something of a distraction. But when you can't -- and bombing is -- I was never in London when it was bombed. So I can't say. But I have been in areas that were bombed. It's that helpless feeling. You're sitting there going, well, that one didn't get me. Well, the next one.

So what do you do? What are you instructed to do?

Well, whatever's reasonable under the circumstances. Of course, if you can, you get to a bomb shelter. But if you can't -- like one time I remember when I was a POW. I was being transferred from one area to another along with others. And we happened to be in the marshaling yards in Berlin. We pulled in there one afternoon and they parked the train and we were there all night. And, of course, they had us in boxcars. That's how you were transported. They threw a little straw in the bottom of a boxcar and loaded it up with prisoners. Well, it just happened that the English who flew night missions picked that night to bomb the marshaling yards in Berlin. And

so we were bombed by the British. And the guards, of course, all took off for the bomb shelter, but they locked the doors before they left. So when you say what were you instructed to do, there's nothing you can do. You're sitting in a locked boxcar being bombed.

But that was as a POW.

Yeah, right.

When you were --

The general rule, which is really all you can say, is get to any kind of protection you can. If it's a bomb shelter, you get to that. And that's assuming that you're not manning an antiaircraft gun or something that has something to do. But if you're just trying to protect yourself, you just find the best protection you can and wait it out. And that's all you can do.

Were there any kinds of warnings of the bombing raids?

Oh, in places like London, oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. There were always air raid warnings. They had developed quite an extensive and accurate air raid warning system.

What was your work like in England?

Well, in England I was flying bombing missions, bombing Germany. That was the job.

So tell me what a bombing raid is like from beginning to end, if you remember getting prepared.

Oh, yeah. Well, the thing starts the night before. Usually the last thing you do before you go to your barracks and go to bed is to check the headquarters' bulletin board to see if you're up for the next day. You're not scheduled every day. So you check to see if you're on the schedule for the following day. And if you are then you know what's coming. About three o'clock in the morning the company clerk comes through and shakes you and says it's time to get up. And you get up. And you go to the mess hall if you want to have breakfast before. There's time to go there and have a quick breakfast. Then you go to the flight line.

When you get out to the flight line, you get whatever briefing is appropriate for your position. The navigator goes for navigator briefing. The pilot goes for pilot briefing. The rest of us, the gunners and crewmembers, get briefed on the target and where you're going and this sort of thing.

Then you check out your extra equipment that you need -- your flight clothes; if it's winter,

your electric flying suit if they have them; your parachute; this sort of thing that you just use during flight you check out. They store and keep at the flight line and you check it out just at the time of the mission. If you get back, then you check it back in.

And after all this occurs it's time to get out to the flight line. And they have trucks running back and forth up and down the runways and all that because the planes are dispersed so that they're not all together so that if you get bombed somebody doesn't wipe out all your planes at once. They're spread out over a large area. So you ride the trucks and take your equipment and go out to your particular plane.

Again, depending on what you're doing, you get about it. The gunners load their guns; load their ammunition. I was the flight engineer. So I checked over the plane as much as I could, doing preflight inspections. Once in a while I'd fire up the engines because we had a quick takeoff and we wanted to warm them up a little bit before the pilot got out there. This sort of thing. And then the briefings for the pilot and the copilot and the navigator always took the longest. So we would have a little while to start doing these things. Then pretty soon they would come. It would be about time to load up and take off.

And then you would take off and you would go to whatever area you were being sent?

Well, no. It was a little more complicated than that. When you took off it was still way before daylight. And that was one of the scary parts of the mission because you had these hundreds and hundreds of planes in a small area taking off in total darkness trying to find their individual groups to join up with to form the formations. They used, oh, colored flares and this sort of thing for identification. But we didn't have radar that would warn you how close you were to another plane. You're all just up there flying around in the dark, joining up, finding your own groups and so forth. The pilots were fantastic at doing this. There were a few collisions and losses of planes that way, but not nearly as much as you would think. It was amazing how they could go up there in total darkness, with hundreds of them in the skies and formations of squadrons and groups and so forth going on everywhere. When you ended up there would be hundreds of planes in varying formations at different altitudes and so forth all heading for the target area.

Tell me what you mean by being in formation.

Well, you always flew in formation. You had first your squadron where you had --

That's the lead plane?

No. Each squadron had a lead plane. A squadron was made up of your first group of planes. You would have usually a lead plane here, a plane on each side of it, one up slightly above, the other one slightly below. Well, they went this way. Then behind that you would have another plane in the center of these two out here and then two more behind it. And then at the back you had one that was lower than the rest of the formation right in the middle of these last two. And there was a name for that position, which I won't repeat. It was the least desirable position because the German fighters would tend to try to attack it first because they normally would come from behind -- not always, but normally they would come from behind. So this little guy was at the bottom and the newest crew usually got that position for a while. If they lived through it, then they moved up in the formation.

Wow.

But anyway, there would be this squadron.

How many planes per squadron?

Well, it varied a little, but usually you had the three and three and one, which is seven. And then you had three or four squadrons per group. And you called that a group. One of our squadrons flew night missions dropping propaganda material. So normally we had just the three squadrons in our group. But then you would have groups stacked at different elevations. And that's how you filled up the sky.

By the time daylight came you would be approaching the English Channel and then on into Europe and Germany. But your formations were standard and they were designed to try to provide for the greatest firepower in any direction from which they might be attacked. And as I say sometimes you would get head-on attacks where they come at you head-on like this. But most often they were either from the back or from the sides.

So once you got over your target, you would just release the bombs that you had on the plane. When you would get to the target, did they have a warning that you were coming?

Oh, they had their warning systems just like London had theirs. Yeah. Then they had bomb shelters in Germany and all that sort of thing. Yeah. Oh, they knew you were coming. Sure. Everybody knew you were coming, including their fighter planes that came up and shot at you.

Yeah.

Wow.

Oh, yeah. They had welcoming committees all across Europe. The big difference in the target areas -- well, first flying -- yeah. Your intelligence tried to keep up with where they had their heaviest anti-aircraft batteries. And once in a while you would encounter those on the way in. But generally your plan was to miss as many of those as you could, fly around them. But always when you went over the target you had heavy flack from anti-aircraft guns. So if you were being attacked by their fighter planes -- and we had fighter planes defending us, also.

Yes. Right.

So there were all kinds of fights going on. But always when you hit the target area, went on your final run and dropped your targets and then got the hell out, your fighters would stay away. Your fighters would drop off because there was no point in their going in and getting shot down by flack, the anti-aircraft guns of course. So over the target you had solid anti-aircraft fire. And depending on which target you had more or less. When you'd bomb Berlin you'd have so much flack you'd look like you could get out and walk on it. And most of your major industrial centers like Frankfurt and Schweinfurt and Bocksburg and so forth -- Bremen -- all had real heavy flack installations.

Was there a lot of praying going on?

Well, I don't know that there was much time for it. But, yeah. It may not have been a stop-and-pray thing, but the praying may have been going on.

Constantly. Yes. So how were you captured?

Well, we were shot down.

Tell me about that experience.

Well, we lost two engines. A B-17 has four engines, two on each side. And we lost the two on the left side -- that's number one and number two engines -- over the target, just as we came off the target. And we had to shut them down. So then, of course, we had to drop out of formation because we couldn't keep up and whatnot. So we kept that flying and tried to get back to England on two engines, which is almost impossible. But we got all the way back to Belgium from Frankfurt, Germany. Then a squadron of enemy fighters found us and finished us off.

We had salvaged everything we could to lighten the plane because two engines -- you know, the lighter it is, the further it will go before it runs outside of gas and the better it will fly. It was extremely difficult for the pilot and copilot to even keep it in the air with one whole wing dead. If you had one engine on each side, it would be balanced and it would be okay. But we did everything we could. I transferred the gas from one side to the other. I dropped the ball turret. And the crew salvaged all the guns and ammunition and everything that wasn't tied down, their flack suits and so on.

And we got all the way back to Ghent, Belgium. And that's where the fighters from Abbeyville, a squadron of Volkwolf 190s, found us. And they, of course, shot us down then from there. They shot until they hit one of the last two engines. And then that was it. So we had to bail out. The navigator was dead. I was shot in the foot. So we bailed out. That's where I was taken prisoner.

Okay. So you were over Belgium?

Belgium, yeah.

And so what happened at that point? Where did they take you?

Well, I was shot up pretty good. So they took me to Brussels. It was close. They took me into Brussels. They had a Luftwaffe Hospital there, a German Air Force hospital. The Luftwaffe Hospital was the regular great big, huge (Saint Jalay), nice hospital for the time. Then they had a little Quonset hut that they had put out a little ways from it, maybe half a block or so, and put concertina wire around it and everything and that was the POW hospital. So that's where they took me.

And were you the only one taken there from the plane?

From our plane, yes.

And were there other survivors?

Yeah. Nine of us got out, nine out of ten. The navigator was the only one that was killed. It was unbelievable. The plane looked like it was more holes than it was anything else. But it was just one of those lucky things in which -- everybody in the squadron made a couple of passes shooting at us and they shot holes all through the plane, bullets flying all over the place. And only two of us got hit. But that's how I got to hospital in Brussels.

So what kind of treatment did you get?

In the hospital there in Brussels I'd have to say it was as good as you could expect under the circumstances. They didn't have everything, but they didn't have everything for their own people over in the other hospital either. Under the circumstances it was pretty good. And the doctor that took care of the POWs, in addition to other -- his big job was the regular hospital, of course. But he also made rounds and came over to the POW hospital. He's the one that finished taking my leg off.

It was interesting. He was a real good guy, real good guy. All he wanted to do was be a doctor. And he was a good one. He was an excellent doctor. First time I saw him he looked at my leg and whatnot and he's trying to talk. He spoke impeccable English, impeccable, no accent, nothing. But he spoke like an Englishman, not like an American. But we talked. He asked me various questions. And then he says you're from England; you're English. And I said no, I'm not English. And he says, ah, you're Canadian. I said no, I'm not Canadian; I'm American. He says American? Ooh, he says. He makes a face. He says, ooh, you speak better English than most of your countrymen.

That's funny.

And come to find out he had taken his internship in Boston at one of the big hospitals in Boston. So he was very familiar with the United States and everything. That's why he got such a kick out of it. You speak better English than most of your countrymen. He knew what he was talking about. He had been here.

Oh that's amazing. So once you were well enough -- and now it's what? You're in 1943 now?

No. I was shot down -- no. I flew combat for a while. I was shot down March 24th, 1944.

Okay. So March 24th, 1944.

Right. That's the day we were shot down. And I was in that little hospital there for -- I don't remember exactly how long, about the middle of June. I know I was still there when the invasion occurred June 6th.

We had -- well, we used to call them orderlies, a man, kind of nurse attendant. He wasn't an RN. He wasn't a real nurse. But he was the attendant that took care of the little prison hospital.

His name was Martín. The day of the invasion I'll never forget. He came in and he wasn't unhappy at all. The propaganda machine had come out already and had announced why they were letting the invasion occur and what their strategy was. He says they're doing it on purpose. He says they're letting as many come ashore as they can and, as soon as they get as many will come ashore, then they're going to crush them back against the English Channel. And, of course, that's what they did at Dunkirk with the English earlier. But he said that's the strategy; that's what they're going to do. Of course, when it didn't happen I guess he was pretty unhappy. But I always remember him.

He was trying to learn his English so he could communicate with the guys. I came in and he starts talking to me and asking me different things and so forth. I couldn't understand him. And I said no German, no German, English, only speak English. And he swelled up. He's kind of heavysset, gray-haired guy, light complexion. And he swelled up like a toad and he says, This is English (with German accent). He thought he had been speaking English to me all the time.

That's funny.

And then we had one nurse assigned that was a real nurse. We called her "Swister Linda." She was out of a religious order. And then later on there got to be so many guys there with more and more people being shot down that they assigned a second nurse. And she was "Swister Frieda." But they were nice. I mean they were good.

Linda -- well, I was in pretty bad shape for a while. I had gangrene, high fever, couldn't eat, the whole thing. And she was concerned. She was concerned. This went on for some little time and of all things, one day she comes in and she has a little package. She brings it over to me and I'm in bed there, of course. What she had done was she had gone out and bought a bottle of champagne, thinking that might help my appetite so I could eat something.

Did it help the appetite?

No. But the thought was appreciated.

Oh, yes. The thought was wonderful.

And I always remembered she'd say -- and I wasn't one to complain and this sort of thing. I didn't say anything. I just laid there. And she was impressed. And she came in. She'd shake her head and say, good soldier, Doctor; good soldier, Doctor; no complaint; good soldier, Doctor. But

these people were actually as good as they could be at the time under the circumstances. Now, that was in the hospital setting. Later on I was shipped out of the hospital back into Germany. Then things got a little rougher.

So where in Germany were you?

All over. They shipped me first down at -- it was funny actually. Before they shipped me out, they shipped me over to the (Saint Jalay) Prison in Brussels. They threw me in solitary confinement for a week and went through all the interrogation stuff. They'd take you in every morning and ask you questions. And then when you didn't answer, they'd take you and throw you back in your cell and tell you that you were going to be shot in the morning for a spy and so forth. And I'll tell you after -- you know it probably isn't true. But when you hear those hard-heeled boots coming down the hall at daybreak, you're not too sure. I'll tell you you're not quite sure if they meant it or not. But anyway, I went through that for a while.

Then they sent me back to Frankfurt to the overall Luftwaffe interrogation center. And there was no point in it. It had already been two months since I had been shot down. Anything I knew would have been outdated even if I would have told them. But the old German penchant for organization said a prisoner gets interrogated and, by God, I don't care how long it's been, he's going to get interrogated. So they sent me back to Frankfurt. And lo and behold, they sent me out to the Luftwaffe prison there, threw me back in solitary for another week and went through the whole process all over again.

Then after that they -- oh, I can't remember how many different places they sent me around Germany. They sent me to several different prisons and interrogation centers and so forth.

Did you see other American military men?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, at different times when I wasn't in solitary. But eventually I was sent to a little town in northern Germany, fairly near the Polish border, called Oberursel, up near Stettin, up in that area. That was Stalag Luft IV. That was a regular air force prison and I stayed there until I was shipped out to come home.

Okay. Wow. So we know now from POWs from Vietnam, we know that men were tortured.

Did you see any of that?

Not on the Vietnam scale. But, yeah, there were some guards who weren't above that. Personally

I was never physically tortured. Psychologically they worked on me, but physically I was never tortured. And that varied with different groups. One of my waist gunners they caught after he had gotten away for a couple of days and had gotten a hold of some civilian clothing and a bicycle. And they were really working on him because he had obviously had some civilian help.

But also part of the Old Prussian military mind-set comes into play. They had a grudging respect almost for somebody who was seriously wounded being a POW because they figured that was excusable. You had a reason to give up. But they had no respect for the able-bodied individual who had just given up.

What do you mean given up?

Surrendered.

Oh. But once they shoot the plane down, what are you supposed to do?

Fight. I'm not saying that they really expected that. But that was sort of the old Prussian mind-set that you don't surrender if you're still in one piece and able to do something, you know. So I probably got a little more consideration from that standpoint than some of the guys. But, yeah, I saw friends bayoneted for practice and all of this kind of thing. There was a certain amount of it. But it wasn't constant. It wasn't usually to the point of causing a death, sort of more masochistic or something.

And there are sacred rules. The Germans, of course, were always great for rules. In the German camp they had the barracks. Of course, the barracks had openings. They didn't have windows. They were where windows would be except there was no covering. But they had wooden shutters that would close at night to lock you in. But they had a rule that even though there was no obstruction when that was open during the day, you weren't allowed to leave or enter through the window. And one day one of the guys did. And one of the guards in the tower shot him and killed him. As in virtually all prisons, they had a warning wire before the fence about 20 feet out from the fence and you're not allowed to go past the warning wire. And it's just a little wire about that far off the ground. If you step over it, you get shot. So you were pretty careful. But things like that. Like I say they were insistent on their rules of that kind.

So some guards were like anybody that you'd meet here doing their job but not interested in hurting anybody or causing anybody any trouble or whatnot. So you just had various ones.

And it wasn't uncommon at all to run into guards who had gotten caught over there during the period of the war organization who had been living in this country or were from here and were serving, then, in the German Army. So that wasn't uncommon at all.

Okay. When the person had escaped for a few days and had gotten some civilian clothes, are you saying that some of the German civilians had helped him?

No, no, no. We were in Belgium.

Oh, that's right. Okay.

And the Belgium people would. As a matter of fact, one waist gunner hid in a haystack for several days. And the farmers knew he was in there. After several days, after the Germans had quit looking, they came out and got him and hid him in their house and kept him there until the invasion and the American troops overtook the area. So he never did become a prisoner.

Oh, that's great.

No. The civilians in Belgium were quite sympathetic.

But then they did move you into Germany, though, at some point?

Oh, yeah. And that was Stalag Luft IV. That's Kriegsgefangenen.

You're going to have to spell that.

It's number four. Well, it stood for Air Force prison number four. Kriegs is prisoner. Gefangenen I guess was the stockade, the prison, whatever you wanted to call it.

When you later on saw programs on TV like Hogan's Heroes, how did that make you feel?

Oh, I could look at that and laugh at the humor they built up even though it was not at all like things were. It was strictly an after-the-fact written-for-television. It had nothing to do with reality. Things were never like that anywhere.

Okay. Now, how did the American men in a prison get along together? What kind of relationships did you build?

Well, you build some awfully good friendships. I would say it's like any group of people that you would put together under those kinds of circumstances. And I guess you still would find all kinds of people, all different kinds. I would say basically it brought out the good in most people rather than the bad. They mostly were considerate and looked after each other and tried to help each other get along as well as they could, you know.

And would you help the ones who had been tortured?

Oh, well, sure. But it wasn't a common enough thing that you had torturees running around all the time. No. It would be an incident more than anything else. There was some organized torture on the arrival of each new group of prisoners. That was done to impress them and I guess try to dispel any ideas they might have about what they could get away with and things they could do. By and large, it was a general living condition. The food was neither good nor plentiful. But you lived with it and everybody shared. So this was pretty much the way things were.

Describe the place in Germany.

The place?

The prison in Germany where you were.

Well, how can you describe it? It was divided into four compounds. Each compound was surrounded by high-wire guard towers on the outside with the guards with rifles, of course. Guard dogs were turned loose inside the compound at night so that anybody that tried to go out of their barracks at night would get eaten by a dog. This is how prisons are run.

Inside they had these wooden barrack-type buildings that were divided into rooms or sections with so many in each section. And we had a section in one of the buildings for the group of us who were amputees and so forth. And the rest of them were just assigned as they came in. I guess the reason for dividing it into compounds was simply to make it more manageable on a numbers basis rather than trying to run the whole thing as one compound. I couldn't tell you how many were in the total. I know my crew members were there. They had trickled in and gotten sent there at different times. And one of them was in the same compound that I was. The others were in different compounds.

You couldn't go back and forth, of course, in the compounds. They were totally separate and guarded separately and so forth. But I guess the best description is just a lot of barbwire and fencing with these barracks buildings inside.

They would bring the food in. They would haul it in and then it would get dispensed out to the different buildings based on the number of people in that building for whatever they had. The mainstay, of course, was potatoes. In Japan it was rice. In Germany it was potatoes. So potatoes and bread was the normal ration. And you'd get maybe a boiled potato or half a boiled potato and

a slice of hard bread. And they would bring that into the compound in a cart. The loaves would be packed in sawdust and they were the hardest things you ever saw. The loaf was very hard all around it. It was a kind of black bread, dark brown bread. It wasn't that bad once you got used to it. It was filling.

Packed with sawdust, though?

Oh, yeah, it was packed in sawdust.

Why was that? Was that to keep it --

Well, keep it from becoming moist I guess and just preserving it in general. It was just plain old sawdust. It wouldn't meet our sanitation standards today.

I didn't think so.

You know, now that we have more women serving in the military, how do you think that would have worked with women in those camps?

Well, I think that they probably would have had to section them off separately. I can't see it working otherwise. You know, things are too difficult. It's like the old joke about the soldier who was threatened by his commanding officer saying you screwed up; if you don't do this, I'm going to write you up. And the guy says I've been out in the field for the last three weeks getting my ass shot off and you're going to write me up? Like this is going to scare me? Well, you know, it's kind of like that. You couldn't have women in a place like that. It just wouldn't work.

Did you see any kind of hierarchy building among the prisoners?

Well, yeah. We had an elected chairman for the compound and some organization. And they did a good job. They kind of kept a lid on things and kept things divided up equally and fairly and all of this kind of thing and kept it functioning as a controlled organization. Things weren't going wild with everybody doing whatever they wanted to do. Now, of course, people had to be willing to go along with this. They had no enforcement ability. But nevertheless, everybody realized that you had to have some organization in order to live and get along under these circumstances. It worked.

Okay. Oh, good.

Of course, the Germans I think actually asked for this kind of self-management organization also because it helped them. It made their jobs less in controlling the prisoners and so on.

Could a prisoner become an outcast among his friends, among his fellow --

I never saw it.

So how long were you in captivity?

I was in prison for a little over 11 months. I always say a year, but it was actually a little over 11 months. I came out of our disabled room -- along with most of the group that I described -- on a repatriation exchange. We left that camp in February of 1945 and were shipped down to Annenberg Castle. I'll always remember that. It was an old German castle, Annenberg. Well, you could see where it had been a castle, but it was used for housing to collect all these prisoners because it was quite an organizational thing to collect these almost all -- not all, but mostly disabled groups from all over Germany to put in this repatriation exchange. Of course, it was a prisoner exchange. They sent the Americans and English and whatever back -- these were all Americans -- and exchanged them for German prisoners, a like number and so forth I guess. And so it had to be organized. They had to have a collection point. Well, Annenberg Castle was at least one of the collection points. I don't know if it was the only one or not.

And they even took us down for a group picture at Annenberg. I don't know whatever happened to mine. One of the kids probably has it. But there was a group picture and you have a guard standing at the side. It was kind of like the coach with his picture with the football team, you know. And there was this large group of about 30 prisoners in each picture. But that was our collection point.

Then they finally got us loaded onto trains and shipped us south to Switzerland. And the exchange actually took place through Switzerland. And I always remember at the Swiss border when we went across, they had it organized to the point that our train was going this way and the German prisoner train was going this way. And we passed each other at a distance of not much more than from here to that wall and were yelling back and forth, of course, as guys do. The German prisoners wanted to know what we had to eat in our prison in Germany. We said, oh, damn potatoes, potatoes, potatoes. And they said, oh, (potatoes) in German, potatoes. That's good, that's good, that's good. Wish'd they had some. What did you guys eat? Beans, beans. But that group had not been prisoners in the United States. They had been prisoners in North Africa. And they got beans. And so they were complaining about their rations.

No, the prisoners in the United States wouldn't leave. They couldn't exchange them. They wouldn't leave. They didn't want to leave after the war. I mean --

Because the treatment had been so good here?

Oh, yeah. Oh, the German prisoners, some of them were sent to help with labor in the agricultural areas and were given passes. They'd go to town and go to the dances at night and one thing and another. And I know when we got back there was a lot of ill feeling for a while, but we got over it. When we got back, of course, we were sent to hospitals right away. We would find that the KP crew, the food crew passing out the food and washing the trays and all of that, were all German prisoners. And they were all fat. I mean they were loving it. They were eating like they'd never eaten in their lives, getting treated like kings. And we were a little bitter about it.

Some civilians were a little bitter about that as well, especially black people.

Yeah. They were just getting treated too good.

But anyway, this is how the exchange went. And then we went through Switzerland down by Lake Geneva. I always remember seeing Lake Geneva from the train and down through southern France where you go across from Switzerland and you go across southern France to Marçais. Well, that's the way we went. We were shipped out of Marçais.

What was that day like, when you realized that you were really free? At that point what was that like?

Oh, that was a good feeling. Of course, you'd been anticipating it for some time because you had been in the process of this exchange. And you went along just hoping something didn't happen to screw it up. But when it happened it was a good feeling when we climbed on those American ships in Marçais. Of course, we had to all be deloused and we were full of fleas and lice and all of that stuff that's expected. I used to be able to pop those fleas pretty good with my fingernails.

Wow. What we can get used to.

Oh, yeah.

So once you got back here you were saying that you were in a place where the food was being given to you by German prisoners themselves. So after that experience at that location, then what happened? Were you released from military service?

Eventually. I was sent to Battle Creek, Michigan. They sent everybody to as near where they

went into the service as they could, thinking they were sending them as close to home as possible. And I went in at Minneapolis. So they sent me back to Battle Creek, Michigan, which was the nearest military hospital. And it depended on your individual situation. Some of the guys could be let out pretty quick. In my case I had to be operated on again and everything. It took a couple of months before they could release me.

And I was finally discharged in August. And I was -- let's see. February we got back. I can't remember the exact date. Around the end of February, first of March we got back to this country and we landed in New York and were in a hospital there for, I don't know, a week. Then I was sent back to Battle Creek and was eventually released from there.

At any point were there parades?

Not for me. Oh, no. Oh, no. There were too many. At that point in the war there were thousands being released all the time.

So we didn't see the parades probably until the end.

Did you ever meet up with any Tuskegee Airmen?

No. Well, I probably did, but I didn't know it because the Tuskegee guys were flying B-51s. And we had B5-1 cover on some of our missions. And I know that on occasion it was the Tuskegee guys. But you couldn't tell at that altitude and at that distance. You just saw a B-51. You knew they were our guys, you know. But, no, I never met or up-close saw any of those guys.

So what did you do after your military service was over?

I went out to L.A. My mother and sister had moved out there before I was discharged because I had told them that I liked the area so well that I was going to go out there after the war. So they beat me to it. So I went out there and stayed with them for -- well, it was August. So it wasn't very long until I decided to go back to school on the GI Bill. So I enrolled in USC.

Wonderful.

And started the fall semester then at USC.

What was your major?

Accounting.

So then did you work as a CPA after that?

No. I never used it actually. No, I never took the CPA exam because I went to work for the state

right away.

California?

In California. I took the exams for both state and federal accounting. And I passed both of them and had a choice between the two. So I went to the state. They paid a little better at the time.

My first position with the state was as a junior accounting auditor, which would be normal with my major. But then one of the directors of the department of finance budget division found me and got me to transfer over there. So I went into budgeting, which is related to accounting. And then that was the first step. And then from there I went into general administration.

And the entire time you were living in the Los Angeles area?

Oh, no. When I went to work for the state, I moved to Sacramento.

Ah, okay. So you were in the capital.

And worked in the capital. Yeah, I worked in the old budget division there for, oh, five years in the capital. I used to say good morning to Earl Warren when we'd be going up the steps together in the morning to go to work. And we worked closely with the legislature in making and administering the budget each year and so on. So I did that for a while. Then from there I went out into general administration.

Great. So how did you get to Las Vegas, or Henderson I should say?

Well, I have four children by my first marriage.

And you got married after military?

Yeah, in '47. They're scattered around the country. I had one in Oklahoma, two in California, one in Idaho. So this was kind of a central location. But I also had a guy who had been my assistant for 13 years, had retired a year earlier and come down here. And he came down because he was quite the fisherman and he liked the Lake Mead thing. Once he got here he kind of changed and didn't use it. But when he came he had a boat and the whole thing. Anyway, he liked it down here so well that he talked me into coming down and trying it. So I came down and tried it and liked it.

Then I met Carolyn. My first wife had passed away five years before that. So then she and I got married. We've been married 24 years.

So when did you move here? Which year to Las Vegas?

I moved here in November of 1983.

Wow. What was Las Vegas like in 1983?

Oh, it was so nice. It was so different. It was almost small-town-ish. There were all kinds of things to do. Didn't cost much. It was a friendly town. It was small. You could get around easily. The end of town going west for all practical purposes was Decatur. Now, there were a few things, a few sprinkles beyond that. But for all practical purposes Decatur was the west side. And Nellis was the east side. And Tropicana was pretty much the south side. There was quite a bit of sprinkling between Tropicana and Russell especially of horse people. But beyond Russell there wasn't anything and going north, pretty much the same thing.

So what do you think about it today?

Oh, it's ruined. People ruin everything. They really do. And the commercial interests, of course, have taken over. They do their share of ruining because everything has to be costed out and be cost effective. It's the commercial interest.

When I first came here you could drive from the east side of Las Vegas to the west side, being Decatur, in ten minutes flat without any problem usually without making a stop at a signal if you drove correctly. I mean it was just a nice little town. You could get anyplace in a few minutes.

It was fun socially. I was single when I came here. The casinos and the hotels were the big social activity centers. But you could go to those, roam around from one to another or two or three or whatever in a given evening. You could go to shows that were reasonably priced. If you wanted to just hang out and kill time, you could go to a lounge, have a couple of drinks, see some free lounge shows and visit with your friends and have an evening for little or nothing if you wanted to have a good time.

We used to like to stop at -- it was the old Bingo Palace -- Palace Station. They had a special after 11:00 at night. You could get a breakfast consisting of two eggs, a couple slices of bacon, a piece of toast -- I think that was it -- for 49 cents. I mean things were like this.

Forty-nine cents.

So it used to be a favorite thing to stop by there for one of their breakfasts on the way home. Like I say it was just -- and there was no pressure. You could go into the hotels, the casinos wander around, hang out, talk to your friends, have a drink, play a game, if you wanted to, but with no

pressure.

So do you feel pressure today when you go into a place?

Oh, I don't even go to them anymore.

So when you say no pressure, what are you comparing that to?

Well, I'm comparing it to, well, pretty much today and the recent years where prices have gone up.

Oh, yes.

Ways have been found to charge for everything. Nothing is complimentary or free. And ways are devised to try to pressure you into playing the machines or gambling or doing something that pays the hotel or casino money while you're there. You're not being invited in to sit around and enjoy yourself. You're being invited in to lose your money. And then they'd rather say good night and make room for somebody else. I mean it's just a whole attitudinal change. It permeates the entire atmosphere and ruins it as far as having a good time. And, of course, the prices have become ridiculous. One time here -- and this is actually three or four years ago. The daughter you -- did you talk to my daughter?

No. She sent me a letter.

Okay. The one that wrote the letter.

And I spoke with her as well. Yes, I did. I spoke with her. I called her.

She had come down with one of her friends for something and they were over at the Bellagio. And it was a quick trip. So I just went over to meet her for lunch one day. We were just going to have lunch and visit for a while. And then she had to take off again. But I couldn't get over it.

We went in their little dining area, not their deluxe upscale dining room, just their little coffee shop place. And we each ordered a sandwich, a simple sandwich. I think it had three or four chips on the side, you know, the standard deal. Okay. And we had a Coke or something. And they brought the bill. It was \$50. Yeah. I'm serious.

You must have not have been in the coffee shop. You have to have been someplace else.

No. It was the one around where they have all the fancy gardens and everything.

Near the gardens. Yes. I know exactly where you were.

Yeah. That's where we were for lunch. And that was standard fare for their -- I mean this is how they have discouraged people who aren't ready and willing to either spend a lot or lose a lot.

Like I say that used to be the thing to do. But they were accessible. They all had large parking lots plus the valet parking. And Las Vegas Boulevard wasn't that crowded. You could drive down and go to any of them. And you didn't have to wait behind a lot of traffic. You just drive down and go in. There was always room, always accessibility. You always felt like you were welcome. True, they were still wanting you to gamble. But they didn't pressurize it the way they have in more recent years. It was just a much more friendly and comfortable atmosphere. You could go with your friends and feel comfortable doing this or doing that or whatever.

So now, do you feel a difference here in Henderson?

We like Henderson. But in those categories I don't really see much difference. It's all pervasive. You go to the Green Valley up here or any of them, this philosophy, if you want to call it that, operational philosophy I guess is contagious. And the reason it's contagious is because they've all gotten commercial. And I guess they've really been forced to one after the other because if you try to do different you're not competitive. You've got to be squeezing as much as the next guy. So, yeah, there's not that much difference.

We haven't for a long time, but we used to go down to Sunset Station. And it was a little better. It was certainly better than the Strip. Your neighborhood casinos are better than the Strip casinos and that's simply because they're dealing more exclusively with the public that they're not ever going to see again and they want to get all their money while they can and they don't really care. But even these places pretty much buy into that same general philosophy and attitude. Maybe I'm cynical.

So let's end this on a very positive note. So would you move to Las Vegas again today if you could --

If I -- that's a tough one. I had never thought of it that way because we own a home and we like it and we're here.

And it's a beautiful place.

Oh, thank you. We've done everything ourselves, all the landscaping and everything.

Well, you have done a fantastic job.

Well, we're happy with it. We're proud of it. I used to do a lot of cement work and all that kind of stuff, the heavy stuff in the landscaping. I put in all the irrigation systems and all of that stuff.

But I did that when I was much younger. I was only, oh, 72 or 73 when I did all that.

Ooh.

Now I've slowed up. And as you see my knee is gone. So if I sit very long and get up, it takes me awhile to get it going. But I don't always limp or gimp that badly.

But I would have to say if I knew what I know now and it were, you know, just like it is now, I would think twice. Now, I'm VA dependent for medical care and all of that. All of my medicals are VA because with my background and disabilities and POW status and all of that I qualify for full medical care at the VA, which is a great advantage, of course. And the clinic here is very good, the VA clinic. It's excellent.

Wonderful. And you have one here in Henderson?

They have one, but I don't use it. I go downtown. They have a little sub-clinic over on Green Valley. But it has a nurse and a doctor that does everything. And I've worked with the people over in the big clinic too long.

So the big one is located where?

Well, it's spread out right now. It used to be -- I've blocked on the name. But at Martin Luther King and Owens. It's the extension of Owens. What does Owens become when it gets out there?

Vegas Valley.

Vegas Valley. You're right. It's Vegas valley and Martin Luther King. The big facility that was out there, the one that hit the news for structural deficiencies. I don't think -- they found some cracks. I don't think they were serious enough to abandon it, but they had outgrown it and wanted an excuse to leave and get out from under the lease.

Anyway, when they moved from that they spread it out all over town. There's clinics -- east clinic, south clinic, west clinic. Then there are specialty clinics, like all the heart stuff is at a clinic down on Rancho. I go to the east clinic, which is on La Canada just north of Desert Inn. That big medical building there, well, the east clinic is in that. And they've got clinics all over. They've got north clinic. The pharmacy is out in North Las Vegas. They just took all of the services that they had in the big facility and spread them out and rented space and they've got them all over town. They are in the process of building a new facility.

Where?

North Las Vegas. I can't tell you the intersections. But it's quite a ways up there. It's north. It's going to be huge. And it is going to have hospital beds. It's going to be a hospital and a nursing home and specialty clinics. And Jan Skeeve, who runs the east clinic, was telling me just the other day that they're still going to maintain these community clinics. I thought and the original plan was that it would be a one-clinic thing again out there for everything. But she says no; that they're already deciding to maintain the community clinics.

Well, it's time for them to put money into that. That's really good.

Yeah. Well, it's under construction. The nursing home part of it is pretty well completed, but they're not going to open it as a nursing home until later on because they're using it now as offices for their construction people and all of this for the building of the rest of the place.

Well, that's going to be interesting and exciting when that happens.

Well, I really appreciate this so much.

Oh, well, I was a little dubious about being able to help you because I'm not really sure what you're going to try to organize.

We just wanted to know about the POW experience. And we're looking at the POW experience from -- most of it is from Vietnam, Korea, and World War II. So this is just a wonderful addition.

Well, the POW experience was not a fun thing and not something that you would want to volunteer for or do again. But most people survived it. There were a few who didn't, granted. But most people survived it.

I can't be too condemning. Always in a POW situation, first of all, you're going to have some mean-spirited people who enjoy causing suffering and so forth who are going to do torturing in various ways. And the psychological is very effective by the way. It isn't all physical torture.

I went through Berlin one time during the war when I was a prisoner. I was being moved from one camp to another. It was when I was being sent up to the camp in northern Germany. And we went right through Berlin. Of course, I had bombed Berlin several times. And I couldn't help being impressed. Berlin was rubble. I mean they had cleared the tracks. The train could go through. But you would see block after block and mile after mile of concrete rubble where buildings and houses and everything had been bombed to the ground. And you see this sort of

thing and you think, you know, you try to put yourself in somebody else's shoes and you start being able to understand people being a little upset.

Yeah. Of course.

It was a joke among the prisoners how some of the guys would have these bomber jackets with bomber insignias and so forth. Well, the first thing they did when they became a prisoner was get rid of those because when they were shipping you around guards would be taking you through train stations and everything, right among civilians. And they weren't too friendly if they saw you as a bomber person. And the standard joke was (fleeger pealot). That's fighter pilot. Everybody was a fighter pilot. Nobody was on those bombers. Well, it's because people there had been bombed and they felt strongly.

Bombed out of their homes.

And this is why it wasn't really that unusual for people to be killed when they bailed out of their planes by the civilians, farmers with pitchforks, the whole things. They've got all kinds of examples of that; people that were killed by the civilians because they were so outraged by the bombings. And they had all had relatives that were killed in the war and this sort of thing.

I'm sure we would have been the same way here.

Well, you develop a certain level of understanding. And people here have never and can never really understand those kinds of feelings because our country has never been attacked. We have never been in a war. This is like trying to describe the terror, the utter terror of a situation in which you're being killed and can do nothing or are being shot at and can do nothing in return and nothing to protect yourself and you're standing there. Yeah. You can't describe the terror. You tell, as an example, a housewife or try to explain the extent and the internal feeling of this kind of terror. And she'll say, oh, yeah, I know; a mouse ran across any kitchen once and I was terrorized. Well, you know, that's about as deep as the understanding goes.

Okay. Tell me an example of what you mean by psychological torture.

Oh, the bottom line of course is we're going to shoot you in the morning.

I see what you mean.

We've determined that you're a spy. We don't recognize the uniform you were in. And I was caught without my dog tags on. I had broken the chain on my dog tags the day before and I hadn't

gotten a new chain. So I didn't have any dog tags on or with me. That's a sure sign that you're a spy. You can't identify yourself. You can't identify yourself as a soldier. And we didn't have -- you know, you see these dress uniforms and you say, oh, anybody could recognize those. That isn't what we wore in combat. You wore a pair of old coveralls that looked like civilian coveralls. There were no military markings on them. So you were out of uniform. And you are a spy.

But as I say the psychological torture, the promise of what they're going to do to you, what they can do to you. My waist gunner that got caught after being a couple of days with civilian clothes on, he was in that same (Saint Jalay) prison at a different time than I was. One of the things they did to his group was to put them in a cell that had a ceiling about this high.

So you're talking about three feet from the floor, three or four?

Yeah.

Wow.

So they had to crawl around and squat and this sort of thing. I mean nobody was hitting them with a club. So there are all kinds of ways. But as I say when they promise that they're going to shoot you in the morning and you hear those hard-heel boots coming down the hall at daybreak, you begin to wonder.

Well, I really appreciate this time.

Oh, well, you're perfectly welcome.

And you'll get a copy of this. It's not going to be right away. We're processing lots and lots of interviews with lots and lots of different projects. But eventually we will be processing this one. One of the things that we like to have are some photographs so that we can put the photographs --

That you take you mean?

Uh-huh. You don't have to give them to me right now.

Oh, I don't have any. I thought you were going to take pictures.

Oh, okay. No.

You don't have a camera?

No, I don't have a camera.

No camera, no pictures.

We don't carry a camera with us. But if you have a picture in your military uniform --
You know what? I don't think I do because when my first wife passed away I was upset and disorganized understandably. One of the things I did was I took all the family pictures and I said, well, I'm probably not going to be around very long and I don't want these kids -- I have four as I told you -- squabbling over who gets what pictures and this sort of thing. So I took all the pictures, every one of them, all the family pictures. And I had four shoeboxes. And I went through all the pictures and gave them all away. I gave them to the kids.

Okay. Gave them all to the children?

Yeah.

Well, this daughter who wanted you to be interviewed probably has exactly what I need, then. And I'll just have her send me a photograph.

She might have one.

I'll ask her for a photograph.

Yeah, she might have one. I just don't recall having one. They took one, instead of a snapshot, a photo picture, just before we went overseas. And I look so young and nice.

Yeah. I'll just ask her.

You'd never recognize me. And the kids all have one of those I know.

Well, she can easily scan it for me and just send it to me by e-mail. Isn't that great we can do things like that today?

That's right. You can do anything with those computers.

That's right. So that's what I'll ask her to do.

That's real good.

So thank you so very much.

Well, you're welcome. You're welcome, Claytee.