

# **VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT**

Preserving Stories of Service for Future Generations

Interview with

## **Robert Atkins**

conducted by Martin W. Thomas

December 19, 2002

This project sponsored by the Indian Prairie Public Library  
in partnership with the Library of Congress

## **Part 1: Introduction:**

**This interview is being conducted on December 19, 2002 at the Indian Prairie Public Library in Darien, IL. My name is Martin Thomas. I am speaking with Robert F. Atkins. Mr. Atkins was born on July 2, 1919 in Chicago, IL and now lives in La Grange, IL.**

**Mr. Atkins learned of the Veterans History Project through Bill Schaefer, whom I interviewed previously, and whom he met through his son, who met Mr. Schaefer by chance on an elevator. Mr. Schaefer told the son about the project. Mr. Atkins has kindly volunteered to be interviewed for the project... Here is his story:**

## **Part 2: Entering the Military:**

**Mr. Atkins, when did you enter the service?**

October of 1941.

**Where were you living at the time?**

I lived in Chicago.

**What were you doing before you entered the service?**

I worked for Solace Valve Company as an assembler.

**Were you drafted, or did you enlist?**

I was drafted.

**What branch of service?**

Army. Assigned to the infantry.

**Where were you inducted?**

At Camp Grant.

**And where was Camp Grant?**

Rockford, IL.

**Does that location still exist today as a military facility?**

No, it's been closed. It's become Rockford Airport.

**What were your first days like after induction?**

Well, you were immediately homesick, and anticipating what you were going into. Concerned, of course, but not particularly worried.

**I take it you didn't volunteer for infantry?**

No. They just put you into wherever they needed men.

**After induction were you allowed to go home before you went on to basic training?**

No.

**Part 3: Basic and Infantry Training:**

**Where did you go for basic training?**

We went to Camp Robbers, CA.

**Tell me little bit about your basic training. What kind of training did you get, and how did you react to it?**

Well, we did typical army marching and learning how to obey orders. Then we went to the rifle range to learn to shoot the M-1, and then onto a pistol range, and did a lot of bayonet drill, so that we could soldier in the way that we were trained.

**So, you qualified with both the rifle and the pistol?**

Yes.

**What pistol did they train you with?**

A.38 revolver.

**Not the army colt .45?**

No, that came later.

**How long was bootcamp for you?**

It was about two months, because it was interrupted very quickly with the (event) at Pearl Harbor.

**How did Pearl Harbor affect basic training for you?**

Basic training at that point was pretty much over. They sent us to the coast, first to guard big coastal guns overlooking San Francisco Bay, and then to radio stations because they were halfway expecting the Japs to land and invade us.

**So, you're saying you were actually put on active duty very suddenly, and before your training was really complete. After that, did you go back to complete your basic training?**

After that we were quartered at Bay Meadows Race Track, and from there we would go off on training exercises. Map reading, learning how to sneak up on the enemy, that sort of thing. One day while we were crawling along on the ground, creeping up on the "enemy," someone spotted a rattlesnake in the grass. (both laugh) Everyone got pretty excited. And then someone saw another one. We fixed our bayonets onto our rifles and formed a big line and went through this whole area

and killed about 40 six-foot rattlesnakes.

**You killed these snakes and then went back to continue your infiltration training?**

Right. And we went on training this way for probably a month. And then we became a cannon company. We had our cannons mounted on half-tracks, so then we drove those down to Camp San Luis Obispo, CA, and went into further training.

**You saw you became a cannon company. Were you still considered infantry?**

Yes. A cannon company would be attached to an infantry regiment and would back up the infantry with heavy guns.

**Did you train for various duties with the cannon company, or just something like a driver or (artilleryman)?**

I drove half-tracks for a while, and then also learned artillery firing.

**You learned to load and fire the artillery piece?**

Yes. And after we got to San Luis Obispo, then it was kind of a toughening up process where they would send us on forced marches, starting with a 15 mile, 20 mile, 25, on up to 40 miles. Carrying 65 pounds of equipment.

**At the time, did that make sense to you, being that you were assigned to a half-track?**

Well, in that role you would have to do both. You'd have to do regular infantry soldiering as well as using your half-track. Then we were sent from this camp for a ten day desert maneuver on the Mojave Desert. And then back for more toughening up training. At which time I learned of the Air Force test, which I took on this infantry base.

**How did you find out about the test?**

I think I just saw it on the bulletin board. I had wanted to fly, and this test would enable you to take an equivalency test, which, if you passed, was equivalent to a two-year college graduate. If you passed that test, then you could be transferred into the Air Force.

**Generally, what type of topics were on that test?**

It was a lot of vocabulary, mathematics, physics. Luckily, I had taken all these subjects in a pretty deep manner in high school.

**How long did the testing take?**

Probably took about four hours.

**And how long did it take for you to find out the results of your test?**

They were given to us within another three or four hours. About half of the men who took the test passed it.

**And then what happened?**

Then you just had to wait for transfer orders from the Air Force, transferring you. But in the meantime the infantry, 7th Division, was sent on a three-month desert maneuver to the Mojave Desert.

**Where you had already been for a week.**

Right. Where we had encountered 120-degree weather. You would be so exhausted after maneuvering that half-track all day in the sun that you would just lie down on the ground when you were finally finished, and go to sleep. Then you would wake up in the middle of the night, freezing.

**What month would that have been?**

That would have been in about November of '42.

**Part 4: Transfer to Army Air Corps/Flight Training:**

**So, you've been in the service for a year and a month, and you're out on this desert maneuver, and then what?**

After I was on the desert for two weeks my orders came through to be transferred to the Air Force. I was sent back to San Luis Obispo to await final shipment to an air base.

**How did you react to that news?**

Oh, I was overjoyed. Especially to get out of that desert. Some of my buddies just cried when I left. They couldn't imagine someone being so lucky.

**So, your orders came and what happened next?**

We went to Santa Ana Induction Center where we went through extensive testing, both physical, mental, and even testing in pressure chambers to see if we could withstand the things that you withstand as a pilot at flying altitude.

**Did that test eliminate many candidates?**

All those tests were designed to pick out the men who would qualify for pilot training, and those who did not pass for pilot training had the choice of applying for navigator or bombardiers.

**What would happen to a candidate that disqualified from flying altogether? Say, because of the pressure test?**

Those who did not qualify for pilot, navigator or bombardier were sent back to regular Air Force, and most of them became gunners on bombers.

**They weren't sent back to the infantry?**

No. You were definitely Air Force from then on.

**At the time that you were in the service, how did the Air Force relate to the rest of the services? In other words, today it's a separate branch of the military. What was the**

**situation then? Was the Air Force still under the Army?**

Yes. It was a division of the Army. It was the US Army Air Corps.

**What happened next?**

Shortly after we were qualified for training we were sent for our primary flying experience. I was sent to Thunderbird Field in Phoenix, AZ.

**How long were you there?**

That was a three-month period where you learned to fly. Where you finally soloed. Where you got to be a pilot.

**In general terms, what did that training consist of?**

Our training was a half a day in school, ground school, and half a day in flying.

**What type of craft did you fly?**

Stearman PT-11s. These were open cockpit biplanes.

**How many hours would you be in the air before you actually took control?**

You were given control almost immediately because there was an instructor. He did the flying, but he would turn over the controls to you very early. Initially, he took you up and really wrung it out, with spins, rolls, loops and everything. That was practically the first day, and from the very first day I started vomiting and getting sick to my stomach (laughs) and this went on for probably a week. And my training pilot finally said, "You're either going to have to lick this, or I'm going to have to wash you out." I would try eating, I would try not eating, and nothing seemed to work. But when he told me I wouldn't make it if I didn't get over it, I did finally overcome it, I guess by sheer will. And then another milestone came along where you were supposed to be able to solo after eight hours of training. I got up to about nine and a half hours- these were civilian pilots- and he turned me over to an Air Force pilot for a test check. This was it. I either passed with him or I would have been washed out. Luckily, I had to make a landing by what they called "crabbing," where you would tilt it and use opposite rudder to straighten out. And I did a perfect landing, and those were kind of difficult maneuvers. He got out of the plane, and he said to my instructor, "He's fine. Send him up for a solo."

**The crabbing maneuver that you mentioned, is that practiced when there is a cross wind?**

Yes, it's a cross-wind maneuver.

**I've heard that the flight training can be very dangerous in itself. Were there any crashes?**

Yes. We lost several cadets.

**During your time there?**

Yes.

**Actually were killed?**

Yes. One was killed when he was flying upside down. He hadn't buckled his safety belt, and out he went. We were wearing parachutes, and usually when this happened they would pull their rip cord and they'd be all right. But some of them, when they were out on their own, pulled some stunt and crashed and killed themselves. This plane was a very difficult plane to land. It had a very narrow landing gear, and if you weren't on those controls and rudders as soon as you hit the ground, the thing would just do a ground loop. (makes spinning gesture)

**Spin around?**

Yes. I never did have any trouble with it, but it was a very difficult plane to land.

**Roughly, how many cadets would be going through training at the same time you did?**

We had a class of maybe 70 or 80. Divided into four groups.

**Of those 70 or 80, how many fatalities did you have?**

I don't think we had over two or three.

**And how many others didn't make it for other reasons?**

I'd say about half of them didn't make it because they weren't able to get onto it.

**So they never became aviators?**

No.

**After the three month training there, what happened next?**

From there, if you finished that training, which I did, then you were sent on to what they called basic school. That was (at) Tucson, AZ. For another three month training period. In a much larger and more powerful plane.

**What plane would that have been?**

That was a Vultee-15. V-U-L-T-double E. We called them a Vultee "vibrator" because as we would do maneuvers they would really shake and rattle.

**Now, you said that your initial training was with bi-plane. This Vultee, what was that?**

That was a single wing.

**Single engine?**

Single engine. And there we learned to do night flying, got into a little formation flying. Just basically doing all the maneuvers and putting in flying time, learning to handle a larger, more powerful ship.

**In that three-month training, what was the size of your class?**

About half of them (laughs).

**Oh, so these were the same people.**

Same people. We're down to 35 to 40.

**Did you have any training accidents there?**

Not that I recall. We may have had one. I know that one of my close friends died. I'm not sure whether it was in primary or basic training.

**How many washed out of this basic training?**

That was probably only about 10 to 15%.

**And after your basic training?**

Then we went to advanced training, back to Phoenix. Williams Field.

**What did advanced training entail?**

Advanced training, I flew twin engine planes.

**Was this your first experience with twin engines?**

Yes.

**What type of plane?**

That was a Curtis, AT-9. Probably about double the horsepower of the previous plane that we flew, the Vultee. One experience that stands out in my mind was, I was up flying with another cadet. We were training, and all of the sudden the floor of the cockpit was covered with oil. And (laughs) it was red, and right away I knew it was hydraulic fluid. So, in other words, our hydraulic system had sprung a leak. So then I had to worry about whether the landing gear would go down, and whether the brakes would work. But luckily we were able to stop the thing on the landing.

**Did you find out what the cause was?**

Just a malfunction.



**It wasn't improper maintenance?**

No. Just probably a fitting broke or something. During this training period of three months we were sent away to Aho, right on the Mexican border, for gunnery training.

**How do you spell Aho?**

A-H-O.

**Was that a town or a base?**

Just a base. I think it was a little town too. Arizona also. It was very hot. Right on the Mexican border. July.

**You said gunnery training. What was that?**

Well, we had guns on the ship. A plane would tow a target, and we would have to shoot at this target. But shooting with two engines, it was almost impossible to get that thing coordinated (laughs) and we were having real difficulty.

**Was this a fixed gun in the nose of the plane?**

Yes. So you had to aim the guns by aiming the plane in the right direction.

**At this time, were you already designated to be a bomber pilot?**

No.

**You didn't know if you were going to be a bomber pilot or a fighter pilot yet?**

Well, I was probably going to be a bomber pilot, but I had been seeking to fly a B-25, the twin engine bomber. But they were losing so many B-17s, you just automatically went in that direction. In addition to the air to air gunnery training, we got some ground strafing training, where we would dive at ground and fire at a target and then come up like this (gestures). They were really after me, because (laughs) I was diving too close to the ground before I pulled up. They warned me several times, but I just got a big kick out of that maneuver.

**What plane were you flying at this point?**

The same plane. But the plane that everyone wanted to fly was the AT-6. Single winged plane.

**Why was that?**

Well, it was just a hot ship. Probably about eight or nine hundred horsepower, and capable of some real maneuvering. We finally talked our instructor into checking us out and letting us fly that ship. So I did get to fly an AT-6 that everyone was anxious to try out.

**So, after your training including the gunnery training at Aho, what next?**

Then we went back for some additional flying, (with) the AT-9, and in September we had our graduation ceremony where we received our wings.

**And you received your wings in September of 19..?**

'43.

**When you receive your wings, that means you're qualified...?**

Then you became an officer, 2nd Lieutenant.

**That's when you got your commission. What rank did you hold while you were in training?**

Just a cadet. Aviation cadet, they called us.

**That's an enlisted grade?**

No, it's in between. Graduated in September.

**What next?**

Then I got leave.

**Was this the first leave you'd had?**

I had a leave while I was in the infantry of a week once. And then, when I got into Air Force training, there was a disease that was going around. It was called "valley fever." I got that, and they had to hospitalize you for that. So I was in the hospital for a week or ten days, and while that was happening my training class went on and I was missing the training, so they pushed me back a month. I should have graduated a month sooner, but I got into the next class. And then, since I was in the hospital about ten days, and I was a month behind, they let me go home for two weeks.

**So you had one week while you were in the infantry and two weeks while you were in cadet training, and then you had a third week when you graduated?**

When I graduated, umhm. And on that leave, I had a girlfriend, and we became engaged.

**So after you received your commission you went home and got engaged?**

Right. After that leave we were sent to Ephrata, WA.

**What did you do there?**

I did nothing, because the weather was so bad we couldn't fly at all. They transferred us to another base after about two weeks, to Walla Walla. The same thing, the weather was so bad we never got into a B-17. I did buy an engagement ring in Walla Walla. I hadn't had a chance to give her a ring.

**How did you present the ring then?**

Well, shortly after that they decided that they had to get us trained, so they put us on a troop train for Florida. So we spent seven days on a troop train being transferred to Florida, where the weather would permit us to fly. The train was scheduled to go through Chicago, and I was going to jump off (laughs) and see my fiancée and give her her ring, and then catch another train. Troop trains were slow. I knew I could spend a day or two there, catch a regular train and be there the same time that the troop train arrived in Avon Park, FL.

**Is that what you in fact did?**

No. It was sidelined to St. Louis, so I never got near Chicago.

**And then what happened with the ring?**

Well, we get to Florida for our first introduction to the B-17s, and went through about a two and half month training period to learn to fly B-17s in formation and everything else, and I finally had about a five day leave before I was scheduled to fly overseas. And I asked my fiancée if she could come down and get her ring. Which she did. We talked a little bit about getting married, but I decided it was more sensible to wait, as the future seemed very questionable.

**Did your fiancée know that this ring was waiting for her all this time?**

Yes, I had written her. I was surprised that her mother would allow her to come to Florida, because she came from a very straight-laced Christian family. But it was wartime, so her mother completely trusted us and gave her consent.

**So your fiancée came down to Florida, and you were able to spend some time there?**

About three or four days. I did have to put in some flying time, but parting was tearful, knowing where I was heading.

**And then what?**

Then we were sent to Hunter Field, GA.

**And your fiancée returned home?**

She returned home, along with other crewmembers' wives and girlfriends. We were to pick up a new B-17 to fly to England.

**You said "we" went to pick "our" new B-17. Were you formed together as a crew by this time?**

Oh, yes. We trained all along, from the time I went to Washington, we were formed into a crew, and did all of our training from then on as a ten man crew.

**Was the intent that this crew would stay together for the duration?**

Yes.

**When you picked up the B-17 as a crew, did you go try it out?**

Yes. We had a trial flight and had to set the compass properly.

**Well, from my standpoint I was trying to equate it to buying a new car. You take it out, try it out, and then you go back and tell them what doesn't seem right on it. Did you do that?**

We did that. And it was perfectly fine. From there, in a matter of a day or two, we flew to (refers to flight log) to Waller Field, FL, which was the jumping off point to go overseas.

## **Part5: Going Overseas:**

### **How long were you there?**

Just a matter of a day. And then we took off. And our first leg was to the island of Trinidad.

### **What month and year was that?**

That was (pauses to refer to logbook) February 2nd, 1944.

### **Bob, I see you're referring to a...**

My log.

### **A log book. And Mr. Schaefer had his logbook for his interview, too. That's the original entries that you were making at the time?**

Oh, yes. These are the entries made from the beginning of my flying time.

### **Just for a quick digression, what kind of information goes into your logbook?**

Well, during your training you had to have quite a large number of landings, instrument flying, high altitude formation flying, night flying, all of that.

### **And what are the individual columns? You have the date of the...**

Aircraft identification mark, make and model. And then whether it was dual flying or solo, day or night, instrument flying. You had so many hours of instrument flying.

### **And the page you're looking at has a stamp on it.**

Yes. "Certified Correct." That was when I finished my flying training. Where I had a total time there of 219 hours of training.

### **That's somebody signing off for you?**

Yes. And then Link trainer, where you learn instrument flying.

### **You say "Link" trainer. Is Link a brand name?**

A brand, yes. It was just like a cockpit, and they can enclose it so you had to be flying strictly on your instruments, and then they got readings on it.

**Is this a simulator?**

Simulator, yes.

**Now, these pages that we've looked at right there are your training?**

This is the finishing. Yes.

**Then after this are we going to see your actual missions, as well?**

Well, this is training to become a pilot and getting my commission. Now I'm training B-17s, where I started out in Washington and had to go to Florida, and arrived in Florida November 20th at Avon Park. And then you had to fly as a copilot to begin with.

**So, this log format here, is that strictly for training?**

All pilots log their time. Every day that they fly, they record it. Even the airline pilots will have a log.

**Would it look like this? The same categories of information?**

(nods head) Pilot logbook.

**(pointing to logbook) So, does this go on into your flying in combat?**

Yes, the whole works. Tells every mission. We landed first at the island of Trinidad. And then from Trinidad we flew to Brazil. Belem, Brazil. And then further southeast to Forteleza, Brazil.

**How do you spell that?**

Forteleza? F-O-R-T E-L-E-Z-A. And Belem is B-E-L-E-M. We'd just spend the night in those bases.

**Why were you flying south?**

Because we had to fly to Forteleza, Brazil where it was only about 2,000 miles across the Atlantic to Africa. With taking off about every five minutes 24 hours a day they had to establish a northern route from Newfoundland to England. The southern route alone would not have given the capacity to ferry all the planes that had to go over. Flying east from the US would have been over 5,000 miles- too long a trip for those planes.

**So that's 12 planes an hour. That's about 300 planes a day. How long did this go on?**

Oh, for a year. In fact, it started even before I did it, probably in October or so, '43, then '44, and all the way to the end of the war, 1945.

**So there's this continuous stream of planes...?**

Flying the southern route, and another like one flying the northern route.

**It would seem that these airfields in Trinidad and Brazil were jammed to capacity.**

Well, you would land there, it gets to be quite a lot of planes after a day of one coming in every five minutes.

**And a lot of airmen to feed and house?**

They had facilities for that.

**So, from Forteleza, Brazil, then where did you go?**

Over the Atlantic, to Dakar, Africa. We were flying at night. We started in the daylight but then at night, and after flying for five or six hours we got pretty tired. So, between the pilot and the copilot, we decided we would set it up on automatic pilot and then one of us would monitor the ship while the other would sleep. On my sleeping watch all of a sudden I woke up, and I looked over and we were both sleeping. (both laugh) And I said, "Hey, that's all of that; we're going to have to both stay awake and fly this thing."

**During this time are you in visual contact with other planes in your...?**

You could see them, but not many.

**Were you flying in any sort of a formation or just a stream?**

Just a stream. And there was always a lot of competition between B-24s and B-17s. They were a little faster than we were. But we spotted one up ahead of us, so we decided to give him a little lesson about B-17s. We climbed up about seven or eight thousand feet above him, and then dropped our nose and gained speed. When we got to that B-24, we just went zooming past him (both laugh).

**Were you in radio contact?**

No.

**He didn't respond or comment?**

No. But as we went flying by that B-24, our crew waved excitedly at them.

**So, from Dakar, Africa, then where did you go?**

Then we went to Marrakech, North Africa. What is that country it's in?

**Morocco?**

Morocco. And on that flight across the Sahara desert from Dakar, was where we encountered these mountains, and we had to go through or go over to get to Marrakech. As we were flying over the Sahara Desert we came to a mountain range and, in that we didn't have oxygen on the ship, we couldn't fly at the altitude we would have to fly to go over the mountains, so they had found a pass that we were supposed to go through and not have to try to go over. They had a radio shack on the ground that was supposed to guide us to this pass. We couldn't make contact with them so we just went along this range and saw what we thought was a pass. (end of tape A,side 1) We headed

down this pass and I noticed as we were flying along that the mountains were starting to close in on us from each side. And lo and behold, finally I see where it just ends altogether. So I said, "Hey, we can't go over this mountain, and if we don't make a 360 it will be narrowed down to where we can no longer make a 360, and we'll go into those mountains, head on." So at that point we were still able to make a 360 degree turn, which we did. Flew back out to where we had entered the mountains, and then flew south far enough so that the mountains started to get down to foothills, and then went around the mountain range instead of through it.

**Two questions. First one: were you the only plane flying that route at that time?**

Yes. Only one visible.

**And secondly, did you have any topographical maps or anything that would tell you where you were supposed to be going?**

No, our navigator kept us on track. Every ship had a navigator, and that was one of his functions.

**But there was no specific path you were supposed to take?**

No, the navigator knew at what specific point we were supposed to reach this mountain range, and he gave us a heading for that, and that's where we came to.

**After the flight is there any post flight debriefing you can give to tell other pilots not to take that same route?**

We weren't in radio contact, and we couldn't get radio contact with this ground control.

**Right, but after you're on the ground is there any sort of debriefing that others can benefit from?**

No, there wasn't anything like that.

**So you made your U-turn and came back and found a better route. How high can you fly without oxygen?**

When we were flying combat, we always went on oxygen at 10,000 feet. You could go a little higher, but to be safe you always went on at 10,000 feet. But we weren't equipped with oxygen at this point.

**The plane was fitted for it?**

Was fitted for it, but these planes had no oxygen aboard.

**Then where did you go?**

We landed at Marrakech, and then the plane had enough hours on it so that we had to do a 50-hour, check. So we spent about a week or ten days there, and the one crewmember was the engineer, so he guided us through changing oil and checking everything out. About a week was spent at Marrakech.

**Bob, at this time have you already been assigned to a unit?**

No. No. We're just ferrying a plane over. We turned it over to a modification center, because as they flew missions they kept feeding back information as to what modifications should be made. So we landed at Valley, Wales, and took a train to London. Incidentally, we might go back to when we left to fly to England from Marrakech. We had to fly to the coast, which wasn't far, and then head west so that we'd get out over the Atlantic Ocean. Because now we're flying adjacent to Portugal, Spain, and the Germans were aware of all these planes, unarmed B-17s flying. So they were sending fighters over to shoot them down. So we had to go pretty far out over the ocean, then fly the ocean, and then fly north to the British Isles.

**And your plane was refitted in Valley, Wales?**

We left, and that was no longer our plane.

**Do you know of any examples of the type of refitting they did on those planes?**

Not really.

**Now, you had a week in London?**

Yes.

**What was the atmosphere like in London while you were there?**

Well, it was wartime London- very, very busy. We got to look around a little bit. But it was cold. I had never been so cold in my life. Barely freezing, but it was so damp. And when we got to this place where we were waiting assignment, it was so cold that I was just miserable. So I went to the room where all of the baggage was stored, and I started rifling through the bags to see if I could find some long handled underwear (laughs). I finally found a pair. I stole them, but I left a pound note, which was worth \$4 at that time. I left it in the bag for the guy to make up for his missing (underwear). I needed them worse than he did.

**When you interacted with Londoners, how did they react to you, knowing that you were an American?**

There wasn't much reaction at that point. That comes later. I got quite well acquainted with a London family, and I visited their home several times.

**I see. After the week in London, then what happened?**

Then we were assigned our groups, and I was assigned to the 100th Bomb Group. Called the "Bloody 100th", because they had so many ships go down.



**I was going to ask you about the name, Bloody 100th, later, because we've already talked about it. But I'm going to ask you now. How did the 100th Bomb Group get the name Bloody100th?**

The Bloody 100th name was established when, on one mission a plane was in trouble and the crew was going to bail out. If you put your wheels down that was a sign that you were no longer in a fighting mode and you just wanted to get out alive. And this particular one mission where that happened, the German fighters were out there observing.

**On either side of the plane?**

All the way around. And the gunners on that plane, not knowing this "gentlemen's agreement," blasted these fighters. Knocked a couple of them down. And the rest of them found out that was the 100th Bomb Group because it was a square D on the tail, and that identified us as the 100th. So from then on the 100th was a marked group. If they had their choice of attacking a group, they would choose the 100th every time. And as a matter of fact, when I arrived at that base they had been to Berlin that day and out of 21 ships they lost 15. So that was a very, very somber place to come into, after they had lost 15 in one day.

**All told, about how many planes (were) in the 8th Air Force?**

Well, there were probably a couple thousand heavy bombers (B-17s and B-24s). We would have days where we would have to furnish a double group. In other words, instead of the usual eighteen ships going out as a group, they would say, "We want a double this day." So we'd send out two groups from the 100th. The days when we had to have maximum effort. So they finally got up to where there would be 1,000 ships in one day going out from the 8th Air Force. You never saw such a sight in your life. And I'll never see anything like it again, where you'd look out, and everywhere you'd look, bombers, many hundreds of bombers.

**I can imagine what that looked like from the ground. What was your group's mission?**

Strategic and tactical. To bomb their industry, their transportation, their refineries, and all of their production facilities. We concentrated on ball bearing works, Focke Wulfe plants, tank plants, truck plants, all kinds of important parts of their war machine. Submarine pens.

**Where was your group based?**

Thorp Abbott. T-H-O-R-P, A-B-B-O-T. It was a little town. They went out into the southeast part of England, and they built these bases right within the farms. Our base was right on a farm. The farmer was still farming the fields around us. And that whole section a big agricultural section of England, and they carved out hundreds of bases.

**What was your specific job on the plane?**

Co-pilot.

**And you mentioned that there were ten crewmen on the plane. What were the other positions on the plane, besides pilot and co-pilot?**

Navigator, bombardier, top gunner, radioman, two waist gunners, one ball turret gunner, and the tail gunner. Four officers and six enlisted men.

**And your aircraft was the B-17. Did you and the crew name your plane? Give it a nickname?**

No, but they were always named, the planes we flew. BTO was one, Big Time Operator, Squawkin' Hawk, etc.

**But yours didn't have a nickname or a logo painted on it?**

Well, it was painted on there, but we hadn't done it.

**And what was the name of your plane?**

Well, we would fly different ones.

**Oh, you weren't always in the same plane?**

Not always. We flew, well for instance, BTO (checks log) seven missions on BTO. So that was probably the one we flew the most. But then there was one named the Whitewall Willy (interviewer laughs) and the Squawkin' Hawk. Incidentally, the Squawkin' Hawk was really regaled by the fact that it had flown 100 missions, without being shot down. And everybody in the group were signing their names all over the ship, and it was then flown back to the United States and went on tour to raise money.

**So that was considered an accomplishment for a plane to survive 100 missions without being shot down?**

Oh, yes. Very unusual.

**Well, shortly we're going to be talking about your actual combat experiences. But I think before we get to that, it might be a good time to ask you some other questions. When you were not flying, what was life like for you?**

Well, they had an officers' club where you could play ping pong, cards, etc. Occasionally they would have a dance. They never had one while I was there, but they would have them once in a while. In fact, Glen Miller visited the base once.

**Glen Miller himself, or just his band?**

No. He, himself. As a matter of fact, I just heard the other day, finally they got the story straight. You know he was lost over the Channel. He was coming from France, and a group of British planes were returning from an uncompleted mission. It was impossible to land with those bombs on board, so they dropped them in the channel and one hit Glen Miller's plane.

**That's always been a mystery all those years, why he was lost over the channel.**

They figured out where these planes were, and they decided that's what happened.

**Besides Glen Miller, were there any other famous entertainers on your base?**

He wasn't there when I was. Yeah, we had quite a few Hollywood stars that visited.

**Any that you saw personally?**

No.

**How did you stay in touch with your family while you were stationed there?**

We wrote back and forth. Wrote a lot of letters. In fact, I probably wrote my fiancée every day.

**How long did the mail take to get from you to her, and vice versa?**

Oh, it would probably take ten days or so.

**Did you do any travel around England while you were stationed there?**

Yes, we would get weekend passes. I think I had maybe four while I was there. And one day we were eating in a restaurant and got to talking to an Englishman and his friend, and got into quite a conversation and he said he'd like to have me visit his home. So the next time I came to London I looked him up and visited his home and stayed overnight. In the morning I heard a tap on the door, and his wife brought in a cup of tea before I got up. They ran a restaurant in some plant, so they didn't have any problem with food. They were very hospitable. I kept in touch with them for quite a long time.

**This goes back to what we talked about earlier. I was asking what the atmosphere was like there. I was wondering how the English people related to you.**

Oh, they were wonderful.

**They appreciated the effort?**

Absolutely. Absolutely.

**Nobody, at least in your experience, acted resentful that you were there?**

No. As a matter of fact my wife and I visited England a couple of times, and we were in a town at a restaurant in a hotel. In the restaurant you would eat your meal and then for dessert you'd just go out into the sitting area and have dessert. So the couple that was next to us, we got to talking quite a bit. In fact, one of them had been in the British Air Force. So we sat there and talked, and pretty soon we finished and they left. And another couple nearby had overheard the conversation, she came up and excused herself and said, "I want to thank you. We never would have made it without you."

**Do you remember what year that was?**

That was probably in about 1978.

**About 1978 somebody finally got a chance to thank you.**

I thought that was real nice. You know, that long after the war was over.

## **Part 6: Combat**

**Well, Bob, now, with your permission I am ready to talk about your actual combat experiences. How many missions did you fly?**

Well, I was flying on the 18th when I was shot down. My first mission was to Augsburg, Germany, down near the Swiss border. And this was to bomb a German Messerschmidt plane factory. And, incidentally, that was a (refers to log) 9 3/4 hour mission. So that was a pretty mean one to start out. Nine and three quarters hours flying formation was a bad one to start out with. And we were attacked by fighters on that first mission. These were especially hot pilots. In fact, they came head on, rolled over on their backs and came in shooting at us upside down.

**Why would they do that?**

Just to show off. (both laugh) They were hot. They called them the Abbyville Boys. Their hubs on their planes were painted red, yellow, all different colors.

**A flying circus.**

They were quite impressive.

**Where did that attack occur?**

Somewhere over Germany.

**On your way in to the target?**

On the way in and on the way out both. And then flak along the way.

**How many planes were on that mission?**

I think there were the usual 18.

**Did any of them get shot down?**

Not to my knowledge.

**What were your emotions when you came under attack for the first time?**

Scared to death. But it was our job, and you were ready the next day to do it again.

**You all survived going in. Why did they break off the attack and let you continue on (to**

**your target)?**

They had limited range.

**Fuel range?**

Yes. They were only good for probably an hour's flight. So they'd come up and hit you, and sometimes another group would come in and hit you further along the way.

**So you reached your target, the Messerschmidt factory. Were you briefed on the results? Of what damage you inflicted?**

Yes. They would have stripped down fighters go over and take pictures after the mission. So they'd have actual pictures of the results of our bombings.

**Was that mission a success? Did you actually damage the factory?**

I'm sure we did. Yes. But you know you couldn't see because we were flying at 22-23,000 feet. You could see it was a city down there, but couldn't see any detail.

**It would seem it was predictable that this stripped down fighter would be coming through on a photo mission. Did they ever get attacked and shot down?**

Oh, they'd get attacked. But they were fast and stripped down top speed planes, so I don't think they got them very often. I'm sure they got some of them.

**So, besides your first mission, and then the last one which we'll be talking about in some detail, are there any other missions in there that had any memorable experiences?**

Yes. We were under flak attack almost constantly on every mission. And as a matter of fact, as they planned the mission our navigator's job was to locate these flak emplacements. So when they came back they were interviewed, and they gave all the information as to where the heavy flak was located. Then when they planned the missions they would plan around the known flak. The Germans had the flak guns on wheels, so they'd keep moving them on us. But on this one mission, all of a sudden something just went flying past my window. And it was a propeller from a plane that had lost their propeller above us. That thing must have cut within a foot of our plane's nose. If that had hit the top of our cockpit it would have gone through like butter, because there was no structure strength there that would have stopped it.

**The propellers were steel, I imagine.**

Yes. Three blades. They were probably nine or ten feet across. They would have just cut you in half. On another mission, whenever you'd have a mission, they'd always send up an extra plane because if some plane that was forming over England for the mission had engine trouble or something, then they could abort, and the plane that was following to replace any abortions would come up to the slot they had vacated. One day a plane in front of us aborted, so we moved into his position because we were further back, and then another plane moved into that element. Elements were three. Along the way, this plane that took up the spot we had been flying got a flak shell right in their bomb bay. And it was just a big flash. That means that if that guy hadn't aborted and we hadn't moved out of that spot that would have been us.

### **How close were you flying to each other?**

Close as you could possibly fly. Wing tip to wingtip. And it was a very difficult thing because you'd fly on his wing, and keep climbing up and you'd have to come back on the throttles so you'd quit creeping up on him. Or you'd get behind and you'd have to climb back closer to him. The idea of the formation was that you were a unit and you could bring hundreds of guns to play on the attacking fighters, and the closer you were, the more concentrated your fire was, so that was the whole theory of the formation flying, to have maximum protection. The Germans tried everything. They not only had machine guns, but some of them had cannons.

### **Mounted on the wings?**

Yes. Then they tried another thing. They tried to get above us and drop bombs on us. That wasn't too successful, but it was something they tried. So they were trying everything, and doing a pretty good job of it.

### **Any other specific recollections of the missions?**

Yes. The day before I was shot down I was on a mission. We were starting to run low on fuel. We watched our tanks as closely as we could and we finally spotted the channel. We spotted a fighter base, so we just shot off flares to let them know that we were coming in. And just went right in and landed. As we landed and were taxiing two engines died.

### **Because they were fuel starved?**

Fuel starved. And the others went shortly after. The British pilots came out to greet us, and one of them said, "You don't know how lucky you are, Yanks. That runway you landed on, there was a big ditch across it yesterday. They just filled it in." (both laugh) So, it was just one thing after another.

### **Well, speaking of one thing after another, when you mentioned just now that you were flying a mission the day before you were shot down, I realized that I hadn't asked you how frequently you were flying missions. You flew 18 missions over what period of time?**

Over about two and a half months. And if you weren't flying missions, they had you up there practicing. So you flew everyday. And I'm telling you, you were tired.

### **You mentioned, and I think it might have been off record, that it was very strenuous to fly the plane because of the pressure on the stick and the closeness of the formation.**

Well, there were no power assists to those controls. To pull the stick back or forward was about a 40 pound pull. That, and the ailerons were pretty heavy on the controls, too. So, as I was saying before, I got upset when McGovern said that the co-pilot was just a fixture. (laughs) We could fly that a half hour on formation flying, and that's about all you could stand. You would have to keep passing it back and forth between the two pilots.

### **You mentioned off record that that comment was made by McGovern, comparing it to being the VicePresident, with no real function. Where did you see that statement?**

In this Ambrose book.

**In one of Steven Ambrose's books?**

The new one, The Wild Blue. They're going to hear from me on that one. (both laugh) I talked to Bill Schaefer, and he had the same reaction.

**Of the 18 missions, how many of those involved attacks on your aircraft, either by anti-aircraft or by other fighters?**

Almost every mission you had flak. Fighter attack, at least 12.

**Was your plane ever hit before it was taken down?**

It was hit when these shells exploded. They'd explode right next to you. Our altitude was just perfect. As a matter of fact, we'd sometimes take evasive action, and those exploding shells would just follow you around the turn.

**So, some of them did damage your plane?**

Oh, yes. Much of the time we'd have damage from small shrapnel. They'd make holes in the ship. They didn't come close enough to knock us out, but they did spray us with shrapnel.

**Bob, before we talk about the day your plane was shot down, are there any other incidents or experiences that we should talk about? Any other memorable targets, for example?**

One, especially, was one to Brux, Czechoslovakia.

**Referring to your logbook, how many hours would that have been?**

That was a long one. That was a nine hour mission.

**What was the longest mission?**

Augsburgh. Nine and three quarters hours. And we had one to Belgium for five hours.

**What do you think the maximum flying time you could get out of your fuel tanks would be?**

About nine and a half to ten hours.

**With those planes, was air to air refueling an option?**

No. That came much later. (referring to logbook for data on mission when his engines quit for lack of fuel immediately after landing) Seven hours and 30 minutes. That was to Troyes, France. T-R-O-Y-E-S. You see, a lot depended upon how you were flying. In other words, if you had a lot of going around and a lot of tight formation, you'd use up a lot more gas than if you were going along without evasive action or that sort of thing. (END OF TAPE).

**Part 7: Shot down and captured/ POW Experiences:**

This mission was to Berlin. Instead of climbing over our base after take-off as we usually did to reach altitude, we headed east to the North Sea. We would now climb over the sea to gain our flying altitude of about 23,000 feet.

Unfortunately, the leader of our formation, a major who had just come from the States, was appointed to lead by virtue of his rank, not his experience. He climbed too slowly and by the time we reached landfall over Germany, we had only climbed to about 15,000 feet. At this time he put us into a steep climb and the group formation started to get separated and spread out; some of the older ships could not keep up. Our squadron of six ships were all alone. All of a sudden, I see a group of about 25 Focke Wulfe fighters heading toward us. They swing out to our front and proceed to make a frontal attack. At about the time they were within gun range of us, we dove our ship so that they didn't hit us but went flying over us instead. They then came around and attacked from the rear, just pouring shells into us. They had shot four of the six ships in our squadron on the first pass. I climbed up to the one other remaining ship in an attempt to defend ourselves. Shortly after, we had two engines on fire so we knew the battle was over. When we took evasive action (diving the ship), it jammed the ammunition into the gears that this ball (turret) ran on, and so (the ball turret gunner) was destined to go down with the ship because he would have had to have been on the ground for an hour to have disconnected everything and gotten him out that ship. There was a little hatch. The ball had to be in the exact position to open that hatch for him to get out.

**You're saying he couldn't move the ball turret?**

He couldn't rotate it, so he was going to go down with the ship.

**Were you all in radio contact with each other, within the ship?**

Yes . Oh, yes.

**Did you hear him say anything?**

He said what his problem was. He said, "I can't swing the ball." And he said, "How am I going to get out of here?" You know he was desperate. The waist gunners saw the tail gunner come crawling out of the tail, and he just collapsed on the floor covered with blood. He'd just been shot all to pieces. We then had notified the crew that they had to bail out. Some of them did. We couldn't understand why some of them didn't get out. We found out that the waist gunners, when they went into the radio room to get him to bail out, he froze. He couldn't get up. He just sat there, absolutely frozen in fear. So he was destined to go down with the ship. I rounded up parachutes for myself, the pilot and the engineer, because we were all in the cockpit. We didn't wear our chutes. They were called chest packs. We wore a harness, and we would just snap them in place when we needed to use them. So, as we took that evasive action, these chutes had rolled all over the cockpit. But I did round up three and gave two to the other two men. Then I went to the hatch, a hatch down at the bottom, and opened that up, and out I went. We always wondered why the other three never got out; the other waist gunner, the navigator and, well the radioman we found out afterward. But we wondered why two of them, especially the navigator and the one waist gunner hadn't gotten out. I learned years later that right after I got out the ship blew up. I talked to the bombardier and the pilot in prison camp, where we all ended up together. They both said, the bombardier and the pilot, all of the sudden they found themselves flying through the air. So when the ship blew up they got blown out. They were falling in the air and the pilot, when I had handed him his chute, he only got one ring attached to his harness. But sure enough, that one ring held when he pulled the ripcord. And the bombardier, as he was flying through the air, he pulled his ripcord, and got out. That accounts for all of us. Then when the ship crashed the other four men were all in close proximity to each other. But when I jumped I made a delayed jump because we



had been getting stories of the fact that German fighters were machine gunning the guys as they were floating down. So I had always made up my mind if I ever have to jump out of this thing I'm going to make a delayed jump. So I probably fell 16 or 17,000 feet before I opened my chute, and I just waited and waited. I couldn't see the ground because of the cloud cover, so I figured it's about time. I pulled it. I was in the air maybe 45 seconds before I hit the ground. So another three or four seconds later, if I had pulled it that much later, I never would have made it.

**Well, that was quite a bit of velocity when you pulled the chute. What did that do to you?**

Well, when the chute opened, you're falling that far, you're falling at what they call "terminal velocity"- 160 miles per hour. When that chute opened, the shock tore the ring right off my finger. My graduation ring and my goggles and everything else. We always had oxygen masks. That all just flew right off. I had an escape kit in the pocket of my gabardine flying suit, and that tore right through the material.

**And you're pointing to your knee when you say that. Was this something that was on your leg?**

Yes, it was on your leg, a little zippered pocket.

**And that ripped right out?**

Yes, that ripped right out.

**Did that shock injure you at all?**

The shock didn't injure me at all, but I did injure my back from hitting the ground so hard. I'm out in the country and, just before I landed, I did see a fellow along side the road. It looked like he was digging in a ditch. When I landed I hid my chute in some bushes, and thought, "Well, I'll try to walk out at night; hole up during the day". At about this time I notice that my hand is bleeding, and three of them, my fingernails are torn off my fingers, and I have a compound fracture of my index finger.

**How did that happen?**

To this day, I'll never know. It probably was a shell coming through the cockpit. They were coming through all over the place. I'll never know exactly what happened. I was very surprised. I knew I had to turn in. So I walked over to the fellow I had seen at the ditch. It turns out he was a Russian prisoner, working. So he walked into town with me, and they phoned headquarters. They came and picked me up and threw me into the local jail.

**You said they phoned headquarters. What headquarters was that?**

Well, German headquarters. Military headquarters. And they kept us there overnight, I think.

**You say us. Who were the others?**

The four others all ended up at the same jail, in spite of the fact that we were far apart when we landed. It was the closest town, I suppose, and that's where they put us in jail. But we were in solitary, so we didn't have any chance to communicate. I didn't know, even, that the others were

in the jail until they took us out and marched us down the street to the railroad depot.

**What happened next?**

They put us on a train bound for Frankfurt, Germany, where they had a very large interrogation center. This was right before D-Day. D-Day was the 7th of June, and this was the 25th (of May), and actually by the time we got to the interrogation center it was probably about the 27th or so. They put us all in cells, in very small cells. In the meantime, my hand was really bothering me. So, the first time a German came into interrogate me, he speaks perfect English. He's got my name, serial number, the group I'm with. They had all kinds of information. And he says, "Oh, Bob. I see you're from Chicago." I said "Yes." He said, "Do you know where Diversey and Western is?" I said "Sure." He said, "I lived in Chicago for about three years. Nice town." So, he starts to buddy up to me and starts asking questions, and I give him the usual, name rank and serial number. I won't give him anything. And they were really digging, because they knew the invasion was coming up. They were digging for any information they could get. If they could get you to talk a little bit, they'd think they could get you to talk more. They had so many coming through that if you just stood your ground and didn't talk they'd send you out to where the large group was. But then they sent another guy in to try me and I did the same thing. He finally threw up his hands and said, "Ach! So dumb to be an officer!" (both laugh) Incidentally, this is Frankfurt, and when we got off the train they put us on a streetcar to take us to the camp.

**Were there civilians on the streetcar?**

Sure.

**You prisoners and how many guards?**

Two. A couple, I think. There were only five of us. And anyhow, after we got out of there we went to kind of a secondary camp. We were then awaiting shipment to the main camp. While we were in that camp we saw a group of B-17s come over the camp, and it was quite a sight to see, looking up from the ground.

**Now, at this point, how long is this after you were shot down?**

This is probably three or four days.

### **Three or four days. Had your hand been tended to by this time?**

No. And that was the thing I kept after them when these interrogators came in. “We’ll get you something, we’ll get you something”. But they just delayed and delayed. They finally did, and all they did was bandage it up. So, when they put us on a train, that night that finger just started throbbing. I had to rip the bandage off, and here the finger was all black. I thought “Oh, boy. I’ll lose that finger for sure.” So, we go on to our prison camp, and when we arrive at the prison camp that was the first thing I asked for. They said, “Well, we have an American doctor.” Someone who was taken in North Africa. They sent me to him. He said, “Well, I don’t have very much in the way of medicines.” He said he had a little sulfa powder. He said, “I’ll see if that’ll do it.” And sure enough, that took care of it. Finally, it healed up. I think I mentioned about the Hamburg Station experience where we were transferring from one train to another to go to our prison camp. We were in this large station in Hamburg, and as we were walking through, the civilians spotted us and came after us with sticks and clubs, and they were spitting at us. The guards finally got them under control and got us out of there. We went on to the other train. And I could see why they were so bitter because, as we entered Hamburg there was just miles and miles of complete wreckage. You can’t imagine how much that city was damaged. In fact, the train had to be routed like this (makes S-shaped gesture) to get through the ruins. But anyhow, we made it, and got to our prison camp. As we were entering the camp the Kriegies, as they were called, were all standing around watching to see if they knew anybody coming in today.

### **What are Kriegies?**

Kriegefangen. And the short of it was Kriegies, so that’s what we were. We were Kriegies. Prisoners.

### **Oh, so that was a nickname for a German word that meant prisoners?**

Meant prisoners, yes. So anyhow, as soon as I get to the gate my name is called out, and here is another copilot that I went all through training with, that I saw go down about three or four weeks before I went down. He called out my name and he said, “Bob! I knew you would be coming along. I didn’t think it would take so long.” So anyhow, we get into camp and get established. A day or two later we’re the Kriegies at the gate, watching for a new batch coming in. We get to talking to them and we said that we had just come in the day before yesterday or something. They said, “Did you come through Hamburg?” “Yes”. “Did you see the American airmen that were strung up in the Hamburg station?” And I said “No.” He said “Well, it must have happened the day after you went through, and before we came through”. They’d get out of control and they had guards that didn’t care, or were unconcerned. They just let them go, and they hung them.

### **At that point, when you first entered the camp, besides your physical problem with your hand, what was your emotional state?**

Well, I just thought, “Well, this happens to a lot of people, and it’s happened to me, so I’m just going to have to make the best of it.”

**Was there any relief that you were alive and not...?**

First thing the Germans said to us when we were going through that first camp was, "For you da var is over." From that standpoint it was a relief, because we had been going through heck with the combat missions. So, you just begin to adapt yourself to the life you're going to lead in prison. This first prison was pretty well situated. They had kind of a large room for recreation. And some of the prisoners had been in entertainment, and we had instruments, so they would give little concerts, and they worked up a play once for entertainment.

**This POW camp was near Frankfurt?**

No, this was near Sagan, way over in east Prussia. Stalag Luft 3.

**Does Luft mean air force?**

Yes.

**Were there other than US prisoners?**

They had five compounds. Four around a center compound, and in the center compound there were British prisoners.

**British, US. Were there any other nationalities?**

I don't really know. I doubt it. I think it was mostly Americans and the British.

**And it was strictly for Air Force?**

All Air Force. We were Air Force prisoners, and Wermacht had nothing to do with us. And they had a strong sense of rank, so officers were in an officer camp. All the enlisted men were in enlisted men camps. They could be out on work details during the day, but they wouldn't work officers. So we were completely dependent upon what would be brought in to us. The ones that were on work detail, they could scrounge a little food now and then. But that wasn't possible for us. And, incidentally, this camp was where the movie The Great Escape was made. That episode had taken place about two months before I arrived. So there was certainly no talk of tunnels or escape.

**As a matter of fact, a little bit later I was going to ask you about escape attempts, because of the episode that was portrayed in the movie.**

They shot 50 of them.

**So there were no escape attempts while you were there.**

No.

**Bob, does that camp facility exist today?**

I doubt it. They were all just temporary camps. In fact, this camp had been built four or five months before we got there.

**Were these hard-sided buildings or tents?**

Hard-sided. But they were built on stilts so that they, we called them the ferrets, could go crawl under there to make sure that there was no activity going on underneath the building.

**These were guard personnel?**

Yes.

**So, you were living in barracks?**

Barracks. About 12 men to a room.

**In the officers' camp?**

This was all officers, yes.

**Do you know what living facilities were like in the enlisted camp?**

I think they would be similar.

**How many prisoners, altogether?**

There were 2,000 in our compound. I'm not certain that they were all from that compound. They might have been the other compound, because they put 2,000 of us out on the road. Whether that included the British or not, I'm not certain. Never saw any British.

**What would be your best guess as to the total number of prisoners, at its peak, at Stalag Luft 3?**

Well, we had always heard 10,000. But they only moved 2,000 of us out on that march. What they did with the rest of them, I don't know.

**Before we go to the march, just to get a little more description on the camp...?**

It was a series of barracks and kind of a perimeter all the way around, so during the day we walked around that perimeter, just for exercise, regularly. In the center there was kind of a parade ground where they sent us out to count us twice a day, or maybe four times a day if they decided. In there, the camp had some sporting equipment, baseballs, bats, volleyballs, and I have to give credit to the YMCA, who had sent all this equipment in to us. So, it wasn't too bad. The guards didn't beat us or anything like that. So, it wasn't too hard a life until we left that camp.

**Going back to the recreational facilities, you mentioned the YMCA donated equipment and got it to you?**

Yes, through the Red Cross. And we even had a little library with some books.

**Where did those come from?**

The Red Cross. And we had, of course, teachers among us. I renewed some of my Spanish education.

**You had some Spanish tutoring while you were there?**

Yes. See, we were at that camp from June until January, so we were there for six and a half months or so.

**What were the mess facilities like? What was the food like?**

We didn't get much from the Germans. You got a chunk of black bread once a day. Each building had a room where they had a stove, and they'd give us a bucket of coal a day. We would have to do any cooking we did on that stove. That's how we'd toast our bread, on top of it. When I first got there, we got one Red Cross parcel per man per week. That had powdered milk, cigarettes, Spam, and D bars and a few other assorted things. So we were doing fairly well as long as that went on, but it wasn't too long before they cut the parcels down to one for every two men per week. So you were getting just a half a parcel after that. We usually pooled our food, and take turns cooking. We got pretty inventive and would cook up some pretty good food. The parcels always included soda crackers, so we would grind those up to get flour. We would even bake cakes and get it to rise with this tooth powder which was baking soda. These powdered milk cans were about like that. (gestures with hands)

**You're showing something that looks about a- two quarts, maybe?**

No, about a quart. They were a pretty good piece of tin. So we would cut bottoms out, and the tops, and then flatten it out, and then form maybe three or four together, and form pans.

**Oh, to bake?**

To bake or for eating out of.

**You mentioned a minute ago that what the Germans gave you was one small piece of dark bread. That's not enough to live on. Would you have starved if you hadn't had the Red Cross...?**

With the Red Cross parcel, or a half a parcel, we managed to get along pretty well. When they cut it down to half, once a week they'd bring in some soup, vegetable mostly, and very often with worms floating around in it that had been cooked. Then on Saturday they'd give us a little allocation of blood sausage, and we'd have that once a week. But somebody found a fingernail in the blood sausage and then most of them wouldn't eat the blood sausage anymore. So I got to eat quite a bit of blood sausage (laughs) because I didn't care about what the origin was.

**As far as you know, were there food shortages for the Germans as well.**

Oh, yes, yes. They were very short. And as a matter of fact, our inmate doctor had figured our calorie intake and said, "Fellows, you are starving to death. It's just a matter of time." Even with what we were getting. It finally got down to no Red Cross parcels at all.

**Was he seeing signs of starvation other than just weight loss?**

Yes. We were getting very weak and emaciated and not able to function very well. In fact, you spent an awful lot of time just laying in your bed. It was cold, in the winter, so you'd have to sleep with your clothes on and try to keep warm.

**Did you personally feel hungry most of the time?**

Oh yes. As a matter of fact, hunger is a funny thing. Finally, you get so that it just feels like the sap is just draining out of your body. Just feels like a drain. The strangest feeling. We were starving. We would get a shower about every three weeks. And every time we would go to that shower you could see that the guys were skinnier than they were the last time. It was starvation.

**You mentioned showers. What about other sanitation? What were your latrine or sanitary facilities like?**

Just an outhouse. Just a row of holes. They would come and pump it out once a month or so. A tank pulled by a horse. We'd call it the "honey wagon." We heard that some prisoners even attempted to jump into that and ride out. I never had any thoughts of doing that.

**What was discipline like in the camp? Was it effected by your own people, or by the guards, or by both?**

The guards. The guards were around all the time. They were snooping underneath, and they'd come and look into your room every now and then to make sure you were in order.

**Were there ever disputes or dissension among the prisoners, that had to be handled?**

None that I ever saw. We did have an English Padre who would conduct a service for us on Sunday. He had been a prisoner, I think, for three and a half years.

**Anything else about daily life in that particular camp?**

This camp, like I said, had probably been built five or six months before we got there. And they must have just hewed it out of a forest. The stumps were all left around the camp, so we would take these powdered milk cans, and dig and dig, and finally get that stump loosened up enough so we could break it loose. We would get a little firewood that way. They let us use axes to cut up the stumps and get some fuel.

**You mentioned the escape incident that occurred...**

A couple of months prior to my getting there.

**Did you talk to any of the prisoners that had been there when that occurred?**

No. Never did. In fact, I don't think at that time we were even aware of it. And it certainly wasn't talked about in the camp among the older prisoners. But, actually, I believe it was the English compound that did that, not the Americans. So we didn't have any contact with it at all, because it was out of their compound.

**Were you given any briefings, either by the US or the Germans about escape attempts?**

**What would happen if you did?**

Yes. Yes. We had an American Colonel who had been shot down, and he was the senior officer. He was the one who would do any negotiating or talking to the German authorities. He kept things under control and he let us know that we had to behave and that if we didn't, it was to our own detriment.

**I know we are about to talk about the time you were moved and what happened there. And I don't want to make this sound like it's a "Hogan's Heroes" kind of thing, but during your time at this camp was there anything at all that lightened things for you? Anything that was even slightly amusing to you?**

Well, like I say, we had a small orchestra, and they'd give little concerts. Orchestra.

**Were there any anecdotes that you found amusing or funny?**

Uh (pauses to think), not really. Not really. It was just, one day was like the next and not much to look forward to.

**Were you able to have any communication back, through letters...**

Yes. They gave us a form letter and they let us send those out periodically. My fiancée said later that they were all three to three and a half months old when she received them. And, incidentally, when they got word that I was missing in action it took a whole six or seven weeks, I guess, before they found out that I wasn't killed, that I was a prisoner. So that was a great relief to my family and her.

**So there was a time when all they knew was that you were missing in action?**

Missing in action. Could have been killed or not. They just didn't know.

**How does the information get out that you are alive? Is that from the Germans saying, "We now have him?"**

Through the Red Cross. They would periodically communicate with the Germans or send people in to get lists of the prisoners.

**How is that notification made to your family? Is that directly from the Red Cross to your family or-?**

Yes. Well, I think the Red Cross gave it to the military and they in turn let the family know. We knew what was going on after the invasion because someone had been able to con a guard into giving us a radio. So we'd get the BBC news every night, and in fact, some of the artist guys had drawn a map of Europe, and they put pins in to show, after the invasion, where the line was. Keep moving it. The German guards would see that and they'd just scoff that we were dreaming. But we knew better than they did. We were pretty aware of what was happening outside.



**You mentioned the guard letting somebody have a radio, so you had some...**

Well somebody traded him some D bars or something like that, or cigarettes. Cigarettes are the big bartering thing.

**I meant to ask you and I forgot. You mentioned earlier, the Red Cross packages included Spam and D-bars. What's a D bar?**

Chocolate. An enriched chocolate bar. It was very common, and all the services used D bars because they were instant strength.

**Had Spam been a part of your diet before you were shot down?**

No. It was for ground soldiers when they were out and they couldn't get meals. They had Spam and D bars, but never in the Air Force.

**Did you appreciate the Spam that you were able to get?**

Oh, hey, you couldn't get enough of it (laughs). It tasted like steak.

**Well, there is a Spam museum in Minnesota, Austin, MN, that you might be interested in. It has quite a display about its role in World War II.**

I know they are a Minnesota firm.

**You mentioned the guards a couple of times. How did they treat you, and what kind of rapport did you have with them?**

We had very little to do with them

**Very little contact?**

Very little contact. However, you might make a remark or something, especially about the news, and they'd pooh pooh it. But they never got very friendly. At least I never did. Somebody did, to get that radio in.

**What happened to terminate your stay at Stalag Luft 3?**

Well, all of a sudden we started hearing artillery and bombs off to the east, and then German fighters coming over back and forth over the camp. So we knew there was fighting going on to the east of us, and it had to be the Russians. That went on for a week or so, a week or ten days. The artillery kept getting louder and louder, and so we knew that it was just a matter of time before they would come and liberate us or the Germans would move us. We talked to them and said, "Hey, why don't you let the Russians overrun us and release us?" That's when they told us "If we go down, you go down with us." So, we started preparing. We would take what food we could and compress it into kind of bars so that we could have concentrated food. We did as much, you couldn't spare much, but we did prepare a little bit, because they didn't give us any food before we left or anything else. They got us out at 10:30 at night, on the 27th of January. We knew it was coming. Put us out, started to march, in that bitter cold.

**You mentioned the food, compressing it into bars to take with you. And one question I**

**forgot to ask, why did your rations from the Red Cross get cut down? Was that food being pilfered by the...?**

The Germans were pilfering the boxcars, yes.

**Your march started at what time of day or night?**

About 10:30 at night. We marched all night long. About every hour or two they'd give you a ten minute break.

**What were you wearing?**

Well, just what I had when I got shot down.

**Nothing issued by the...?**

No. A-2 leather jacket and a sweater and a shirt, so it was not very much.

**The jacket was fairly insulated because of the altitude in the plane?**

No, it was just a leather jacket with a light lining.

**No sheep skin lining?**

No. No.

**What was the temperature, would you estimate?**

20 below.

**20 below zero Fahrenheit?**

Yes.

**And how long did you march?**

Before we really got to stop and rest, 44 hours.

**Do you know how much ground you covered?**

Yes, it's in here (refers to a handwritten manuscript; this has since been typed by Joe Popowitch, and a copy is attached to this interview). I think we covered in that period something like 25 miles, to Muskau.

**How many of you were marching?**

10,000.

**Do you have any idea how many didn't make that entire march?!**

I think the majority of us did. But, like I said, we heard a few shots during the night.

**And you'd mentioned that the orders were given down that if you didn't make it you'd be**

**shot?**

Yes. They warned us of that right as we left. You had to keep going.

**Were you marching on a road?**

Yes. Long roads. Just very secondary roads, because it was really out in the boonies. We'd come across a small town now and then but there was nothing to speak of. They kept us going. We finally came upon a brick plant. So they let some of us go in there, and, boy, that was marvelous to get into a warm place. It was filthy dirty but...

**You say they were firing bricks in there?**

Yes. So that was the first time I had any warmth at all, after the 44 hours. But, like I said before, many of them were just babbling. They were out of their heads. From exhaustion and cold.

So then you continued...(END OF TAPE)

**We ran out of tape, and Bob was telling me that after 44 hours they stopped to rest, and I had just asked him how long the rest was. And you said?**

About a day, day and a half.

**What was your destination?**

We were heading to Spremberg.

**This was in Germany?**

Oh, yes. Yes.

**Eastern Germany?**

East Prussia, they called it.

**This was an established POW camp?**

Oh, no. That was just a destination where we finally were put on trains.

**Oh. OK. You were put on trains to go where?**

To go to a prison camp at Wurenberg.

**Bob, one thing you'd mentioned off record was that all those forced marches you had when you were in the infantry helped you survive this march. Do you want to elaborate on that? How did some of the other people...?**

Well, as I said, after the 44 hours many of them were just going out of their minds. They were just babbling. In other words, when they'd speak you couldn't even make heads or tails out of it. And I said that I was dog-tired, but I wasn't to that state. But I attribute it to the fact that I had that infantry training and all that very, very rugged training, which practically no other prisoners had. So I was fortunate from that respect.

**Being Air Corps they didn't have that conditioning that you did?**

They came out of civilian life, went through the training. The Air Force didn't have any toughening up training whatsoever. Had a little gymnastics, but that was about it. And that didn't fortify you for this episode.

**So you boarded a train at Spremberg, and where did you go?**

To Nuremberg.

**How long was that train ride?**

Oh, probably three days.

**What happened when you arrived at Nuremberg?**

Well, they just put us in this camp that had been established as a prison camp at the edge of Nuremberg.

**What was that camp like?**

Oh, that was terrible. It had one faucet of cold water. And the sanitary conditions were just absolutely as primitive as you could imagine. The place was dirty. And, incidentally, when the British came over and bombed the railroad yards, those bombs broke windows in our barracks.

**It was that close?**

It was that close. So we went and got into holes we had dug in the ground for when it happened. That was the most scary thing. I don't know how the Germans could have stood all the bombing they went through, because it just scared you to death when those bombs went off.

**You said that you saw something of the bombing of the railroad yard. Would you describe that scene?**

The Americans bombed the railroad yard in the daytime, causing fires. The British targeted on the fires at night. In the daylight bombing I saw those railroad cars go flying up in the air a hundred feet high.

**You saw railroad cars go a hundred feet in the air?**

Yes. We weren't too far from the marshaling yards when we could see railroad cars flying into the air.

**Was that camp vacant when you arrived?**

Yes.

**How many of you were put into that camp?**

Pretty close to 2,000.

**What had that camp been used for before you arrived?**

We had heard that it had held Italian prisoners. What they did with them before we arrived, I don't know. They got rid of them somehow.

**Even though the Italian army had been fighting along with the Germans...?**

(laughs) Now they're prisoners. (both laugh)

**Did that camp have a name?**

No. Just Nuremberg.

**How long were you there?**

Probably seven weeks, eight weeks at the most. They were lenient, as the German situation was deteriorating. The Americans were approaching from the west, so again they got us out. When we marched this time, we didn't have near the number of guards with us, and they were as loose as a goose. So, as we'd go we'd stop at farms and sleep in their barns, and rifle through the place to see if there was any food. We'd find potatoes once in a while. And then we had our cigarettes, so we went off into the countryside and traded cigarettes for food with the farmers. (laughs) So we were starting to get food finally again, and we were having a great time. You could have escaped then; there was no problem. But if you ever ran into the Gestapo at the wrong place at the wrong time they were liable to shoot you, so we decided that it was better to stay with the numbers. We knew that the war couldn't last too much longer and so it would have been foolish to have gone off, which we could have done.

**Where were they marching you to?**

To Mooseburg. M-O-O-S-E-B-U-R-G. That was a camp where prisoners from all the camps in Germany were ending up. I think there were 60,000 prisoners there. There were Russian and French and you name it, Romanian, everything under the sun. It was really terrible. We were in tents there, and it was cold. And there we were tearing down the buildings and tearing boards off the buildings to build fires with.

**Part 8: Rescue, Repatriation and Discharge:**

**What month would this have been?**

This was in April. And all of a sudden we hear firing going on, and then we spot a tank spearhead coming through. They were fighting for a while, but pretty soon the Germans retreated and the tanks came right into our camp. And lo and behold, it was Patton. I did get to meet him and talk to him.

**Would you describe that encounter?**

Well, he came waltzing in with his very sharp and immaculate uniform with his pearl handled revolvers, and he came in and, boy, when he saw how we were living he swore, "To think that they were treating American officers like this, those son-of-a-bitches." He really raised hell.

**Did he actually talk to you directly?**

Yes, I talked to him directly.

**What was your conversation with him? What did he ask you?**

He just asked about how we were living and how we got there and all the rest of it, and then just thought it was terrible, the way we were living. We were just living like animals.

**How long were you at Mooseburg?**

Probably two or three weeks. But a lot of prisoners had been there for a long time, because they had been bringing them in from all over Germany, so that they accumulated about 60,000.

**What kind of rations did you have while you were at Mooseburg?**

Well, practically nothing. Just a little watery soup now and then, a little bread.

**Any Red Cross...?**

No. No. I hadn't seen a Red Cross parcel since I had left Stalag Luft 3. No Red Cross parcels at Nuremberg.

**So you're saying what you were being fed there was less than when that doctor had told you that you were starving?**

Oh, yes. There we still had Red Cross parcels, which now we didn't have. We're really starving now.

**When you were at Mooseburg were there any scales? Do you have any idea how much you weighed at that time?**

No, but the estimate was that I had lost about 40 pounds.

**40 pounds. Going from what to what?**

Going from about 165.

**To 125? How tall are you?**

Just under six foot.

**It might explain Patton's reaction. Are there any photographs taken at any time while you were captive?**

No. I never had any. There were some taken. As a matter of fact, one of my buddies from prison that I got pretty close to, he was from Montana, and I was out west one time and I looked him up. He was real young. He was probably only about 19. He had always said, "If I get home, I'm going to go home and go to law school." So when I got to this town in Montana I got some phone books and looked him up in two or three towns, and sure enough, he was listed as an attorney. So I looked him up. He was in a group that was kind of, you know, attuned to what was going on more than the whole crowd. These prisoners at Mooseburg, when we were liberated, there were some guards that had been obnoxious, and they had sworn they'd kill them if they ever had the chance. He brought out some pictures where at Mooseburg the Americans had killed these guards and they were laying on the ground when he took these pictures.

**When you said they were obnoxious, were they being sadistic? Were they actually abusing prisoners?**

No, but just being miserable.

**Making life worse than it was anyway?**

Making life worse than it was. There weren't too many of those, but there were a few always.

**During the two or three weeks that you were at Mooseburg you were living on almost no food. What was your daily life like besides sitting there being hungry?**

Well, it just was nothing. Just to try to rip down some boards and get a little heat, and try to get by with what food you had. But it was just really about like what you would expect the Jewish camps to be. Just absolutely nothing. So, from there, not long afterward, they took us by truck to a German airfield.

**These were US trucks?**

Yes. And DC-3 planes landed and flew us out, and I was one of the first ones to go. To a camp not too far from Paris, called Camp Lucky Strike. And there they probably had over 100,000 released prisoners. There they gave you the new clothes and started feeding you. But they kept us on a very soft diet, because our stomachs were in the shape that they wouldn't have tolerated solid food.

**What kind of food would you have?**

Oh, a lot of soups and soft things, cheese, etc. At this Camp Lucky Strike they said, "Now, you can have a choice of visiting Paris and seeing some of that if you want, or you can be lined up to go home." I said, "I don't want to see anything. I just want to go home." So, we finally came to Le Havre and were put on board an Italian liner. It was a real junker. We set sail. It was the last convoy, because there were still German submarines out there that hadn't gotten the word yet. They were afraid, so we were in this convoy. It took seven days to get home.

**When you were liberated from Mooseburg, when and how did the word get back to your family of your status?**

I don't think they got any official notification. I think they just read in the newspapers about, you know, this camp was liberated and so many American soldiers were released, that sort of thing.

**By the time that you were on the ship going home, had they been notified yet that you were on your way home?**

I think only from the standpoint of news items. But no official notification. And I landed at Boston. Camp Miles Standish. And the first thing I did was go to the PX and ate about two boxes of Salerno butter cookies (both laugh), and a couple of malted milks.

**They weren't feeding you very well on the ship?**

On the ship they had us on a soft diet. That was a real hardship because the ship's crew had a mess, but they had a big chicken wire fence between their mess and ours (both continue to laugh). You could see them eating good solid food and we had this soft stuff.

**So, at Camp Miles Standish...?**

Well, there you were just on your own, waiting to get on a train to go home. But it was about 10:00 in the evening or so, so the first thing I thought of was calling my fiancée. And I called her and I woke her up at about 3:00 in the morning, and said, "When are we going to get married?"

**What was her reaction?**

"Well, we'll talk about it." Very overjoyed but sleepy.

**Did she know that you were in the US when you called her?**

Oh, yes.

**How did she find out?**

Well, I told her. I said, "I'm calling from Boston. I'm home. I'm in the US."

**Was that the first that she knew you were in the US?**

Yes.

**Did you call your parents, too?**

Yes.

**What was their reaction?**

They were overjoyed, naturally.



**So then you went on a train to Chicago?**

Yes.

**When did you arrive back in Chicago, approximately?**

May 25.

**When you arrived back on May 25, 1945, what happened then? Were you discharged then?**

No. Because at about the same time I got my orders to report to North Carolina to start getting phased in to B-29s, to fly in the Japanese theater. However, first all repatriated prisoners of war were scheduled to report to Miami Beach, FL for a period of rest and recuperation. I was ordered to report on July 28. We were married on June 23 and purchased a car and drove to Florida in July.

**What kind of car did you buy?**

Chevrolet.

**What year?**

'39.

**Want to sell it?**

Funny, I found a real cream puff. At about Diversey and Western, the used car place there. It was really nice, low mileage. We took off, and it being so old, the vulcanizing of the valve stems was coming loose. So, I had to take and wrap wire around the valve stems to seal that tube up again. After we arrived in Florida, it wasn't too long before the atomic bomb was dropped, and that was the end of it.

**Did you actually do any training on the B-29?**

No. Never got to the base at all, because the war ended.

**When were you discharged?**

End of August or early September.

**Where were you discharged?**

Fort Sheridan, IL.

**What was your rank when you were discharged?**

Second Lieutenant. I was due for First Lieutenancy, but when I was shot down that ended that. So I remained a Second Lieutenant.

**I never heard about this repatriated prisoners of war leave in Miami. Do you know how many former POWs were down there?**

Oh, there must have been thousands.

**What was the atmosphere like? I mean, were these people releasing a lot of steam?**

A lot of them were. We just did a lot of fun things. Went deep sea fishing, enjoyed all the amenities of beach front first class hotels, and we were with others in the same circumstances as we were.

**The local people, when they knew that these were ex-POWs, how did they react or how did they treat you?**

Well, it was all military at all the beach front hotels. No civilians at all.

## **Part 9: After Service:**

**So you're discharged, you're married and you've acquired an apartment. Then what?**

Then I have to start looking for a job. (Mr. Atkins then details his working career. He took aptitude tests that determined that although he was qualified for college education, his interests lay in beginning a working career without delay. He began working in sales for an oil company and continued in increasingly responsible positions with that and other companies, finally assuming the duties of Acting General Manager. He then founded his own petroleum products wholesale business, which he dissolved during the 1974 oil crisis. Mr. Atkins then went into selling commercial real estate, and he invested in one office building which he managed until his retirement in 1985.

**Have you stayed in contact with any of your wartime buddies?**

My crew, I kept in touch with the pilot, who lived in Oklahoma. Kept in touch with him regularly, but didn't have any contact with any of the rest of them. Then all of a sudden, about 12 or 13 years ago, a letter comes to, my son took over my home, comes to me at his address. It was one of my crewmembers who had been trying to locate me for years, I guess. I called him right away. So we got together then in Buffalo, NY, three of us did. In the meantime the pilot had had an accident on a construction job in California and got killed. So that left four of us. The bombardier, they contacted him but he had just moved to Florida, so he wasn't interested in getting together, so there was just the three of us. But I correspond with him regularly now, both of them.

**Who are they?**

John Legg. L-E-G-G.

**What was his position in the plane?**

He was a waist gunner.

**And who was the other?**

George Kostologus. K-O-S-T-O-U-L-A-K-O-S. He was the engineer and top gunner.

**And which one of these two actually reached out and made contact?**

John Legg did, and because of his persistence over many years he located me. It was really wonderful to find each other.

**Do you have contact to this day?**

Yes, we write letters and telephone also. He and George both live in the East, as did the rest of my crew. Hopefully we will get together again.

**Bob, did you ever join any veteran's organizations?**

No, except for being a member of the 100th Bomb Group Association. I attended a 100th Bomb Group reunion in Cincinnati, OH a few years ago. Incidentally, John, George and I had a tearful reunion in Buffalo, NY with our wives after our initial contact.

**Part 10: Closing:**

**Well, I'm about ready to wrap up. Do you have any other experiences or feelings that you'd like to express that we haven't covered yet?**

Upon finishing this report of my four years of service, I can't help but reflect on the many experiences I had. Though it is some 62 years since it all began, much of it seems like yesterday. I thank God every day for the protection He afforded me, especially when I heard the Infantry outfit (7th Div.) I got out of had 100% casualties! How my loving wife, who was my fiancée while I was in prison, had to wait six weeks to learn that I was alive and a POW, after getting word that I was "MISSING IN ACTION." All in all, I must say I wouldn't care to go through it all again, but I also wouldn't have missed it for anything either. After all of this you are truly thankful to have been born an American and realize what a wonderful life we have. I pray that the future generations will fully realize this and properly appreciate being an American.

**Well, if you don't have anything else, we're ready to go off record.**

That's my life (laughs).

**Thank you. Thank you for sharing it.**