Earl W. Martin

(Recorded interview November 11, 2000)

I was born on October 13, 1920, in the desert of Arizona where my parents had homesteaded 13 miles from Casa Grande near what became Coolidge. Our address was Route 1, Casa Grande, Arizona. We were about half way between Tucson and Phoenix.

My father was Homer Martin and my mother was Rachel McGyver. She was from a Scottish family and grew up in Quebec, Canada. My great-grandparents had migrated from Scotland in the 1850s or '60s. My father's parents came from old established people in New England. They immigrated to the Boston area in 1650 or so. My father grew up in New Hampshire on a farm. When he became 21 he left New Hampshire and went as far as he could go in the United States – to southern California. He lived there for several years, probably eight or nine years, until after my mother came west and they were married.

My mother had been working in New Hampshire (as did a lot of the Scottish girls from Canada at that time) because there was not much work in Canada. I presume my father went back east on a trip and they then met. My mother's sister had married and lived in California and my mother moved out there. She and Father were married in California. My mother told my sister that when she was going west on the train they stopped within a few miles of where my parents eventually lived at what was a desert railroad station. She said, "I sure wouldn't want to live in that part of the country." Of course, she ended up living there and loved living there.

They were farming in southern California in the San Joaquin Valley. Arizona became a state in 1912 and with statehood came the possibility of homesteading. Most farmers at that time wanted land of their own which they didn't have in California. They were renting farming properties. My parents went to Arizona, explored the possibilities and settled on a piece of ground in what we call desert. I have two sisters and three brothers. My oldest sister and older brother were born in California. The rest of us were all born in Arizona.

When my parents homesteaded they had to live on the property a certain number of months of the year but they had to go someplace else and make a living – work where there was work. They moved back and forth. My second sister was born in a tent. My next brother was born in what we called the chicken house. They had built a lean-to sort of thing and when I was growing up our house had been built and the lean-to was used as a chicken house. My younger brother and I were born in the house.

The house my parents built was a three-room home out of adobe. Adobe is mud, caliche mud, which is prevalent there. It was made into large bricks. When I was probably 4 or 5 they built a much bigger addition. The house grew to two stories. It was one of the few plastered adobe houses. Most of the adobe houses were just adobe and eventually eroded away. It was a really big problem to keep them up. Ours was plastered and is still standing. It has been

modernized and is probably the only plastered house in that whole region outside of Florence. There are a number in Florence.

At that time the money crop in Arizona was cotton, and still is. They were able to grow long staple cotton in the dry climate. You can't grow it in this part of the country. In those days, farms were pretty self-sufficient. We had cattle, horses, pigs, and poultry of all kinds. We grew all of the feed for the livestock and a good part of the food for the family.

There were two sources of water. We had a well and pumped water. We had an electric pump when we got electricity but that wasn't until about 1925. Before that we used big gasoline engines to pump water. Also, they placed a diversion dam on the Gila River and diverted the water into canals. In fact, all of the water from the Gila River now goes into canals and reservoirs and is distributed throughout the valley to be used for farming.

When they began exploring what the Pima Indians had done in the Casa Grande ruins they discovered remnants of canals used for diverting the water out of the river. They farmed all along the valley.

My dad worked on building the canals and on the road going from Coolidge toward Tucson – the Pinal-Pioneer Parkway. He worked wherever he could find work. At one time they moved to Chandler up towards Phoenix. He worked there on farms and did whatever he could. I think after five years the homestead became their property and they owned it from then on.

If you see the farming area there now it is flat and irrigated. The land had to be flattened to irrigate and they did that with horses and horse machinery because it was rather hilly. It was covered with sagebrush, cactus and whatever. That had to be cleared by hand. They built ditches so they could get the water to wherever they needed it and started farming. The grit of those people is just amazing to me.

My father was interested in dairy cattle. He sent east and bought a herd of registered Holstein heifers. He established a Holstein herd and we milked about 20 cows for years. I grew up milking cows. The real money was the cream we separated from the milk. We shipped it to Phoenix on the railroad to the creamery. The Depression came in '27 and '28 and during that time and in the '30s it was very difficult for the whole country. I think we were fortunate living where we did and having the resources we had. We always had plenty of food. There wasn't much money, but nobody had any. Everybody else was in the same boat. I never felt neglected.

When people started coming into the area, my dad and two others built a small schoolhouse. The authorities said if they could get six students and build a building they would furnish teachers. My oldest brother and sister were two of the original six. When I started to school in 1925 or 1926 it was still a one-room schoolhouse. A bigger building had been built but there were about 30 students in one classroom. One teacher taught all eight classes. Later on they built another school which was two rooms and two teachers. The two schoolrooms were divided into four classes each and that is where I went through the eighth grade.

For high school we were bused to Florence 20 miles away. My older brothers and sisters went to Florence High School and graduated there. I went there one year and then a high school was built in Coolidge where I finished my three years. I was student body president my senior year. I think there were 29 in our graduating class.

I graduated from high school in 1938. My interest was airplanes. I can remember very well the Lindbergh flight. Lindbergh was my hero and still is to a certain degree. I became interested in airplanes and studied them as much as I could. They were very scarce then. You would see them go by every once in awhile but I had never been in one.

I wanted to go on to school. Of course in those days we didn't have much money, nobody did. They were the Depression years. I made an application to Curtis Wright Aviation School in Glendale, California. My parents and my older brother and sister who were working by that time scared up enough money for my tuition. I went to California, lived in a boarding house, worked to pay my board and went to school. I was studying to be an aircraft mechanic.

I graduated and was hired at Douglas Aircraft Company in Santa Monica, California. It was a giant plant. Douglas was one of the biggest aircraft manufacturers at that time. They were making DC3s for the Air Force. I was hired as a mechanic and spent two years building airplanes.

I started out making about 40 cents an hour. That was standard mechanics pay. I had small increases as time went on. Of course I was single and had no other responsibilities. I was able to buy an old car and I began to go to El Segundo Air Field (where Los Angeles International Airport is now) to take flying lessons. I soloed. I probably built up the grand total of 20 or 25 hours of flight time.

As 1941 progressed, I decided the war was coming our way and wanted to have an advantage of getting started. I wanted to fly but I could not get into the aviation cadet program because I had no college degree. At that time they required at least two years of college to apply. I left my job at Douglas.

My parents in the meantime had gone back to New Hampshire. My dad still owned the old farm. The hurricane of 1938 had gone through New England and knocked down huge trees and he was trying to clear them out before they became unsuitable to use as timber. My sister and I drove my old Model A Ford clear back to New Hampshire. My brother was living in Ohio at the time so we visited there and then went on to New Hampshire. I stayed there probably the best part of two months. My sister stayed a month or so and then went home to get married.

I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. I was sent to Biloxi, Mississippi, to Keesler Air Field which had just been established. I spent time there at mechanics' school. While I was there the Japanese attacked on December 7, 1941. Immediately, the authorities said they would knock out the two-year college requirement for aviation cadets. I applied and was accepted. The problem was that at that time there were so many things happening the United States didn't know what it was doing. We muddled around for quite awhile before we really got organized.

While waiting to go to aviation cadet training I was sent to McDill Field in Tampa, Florida, as a mechanic. All of my classmates at the mechanics' school were getting promotions. I didn't get one because I was frozen waiting for flight school. I remember my old master sergeant came out the day after promotions and said, "Where are your stripes?" I told him I didn't get any stripes. He took off and pretty soon came back cussing as old soldiers did pretty well. He said, "Why didn't you tell me you were frozen?" I said, "Well, you didn't ask me that."

I stayed at McDill until the fall of '42. There were about six of us in the group waiting. Then we were sent to Santa Ana, California, to begin our training and preflight school. I went to primary flying school at Tulare, California, Tex Rankin's school, then to basic flying school in the valley and finally to advanced flying school in Marfa, Texas. I graduated and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. I went from there to Hobbs, New Mexico, to the B-17 transition school to learn to fly B-17s.

We finished that school and then I was sent to Boise, Idaho. I arrived there and saw nothing but B-24s flying around. It scared me to death. It took them a week or so to straighten out the orders and then I went to Moses Lake, Washington, where B-17 crews were being put together in a training group. I picked up my crew there.

The B-17 was called the "Flying Fortress." It was actually first flown in 1935. It was improved through the years and was really the first practical four-engine bomber. It was a very beautiful airplane, was rugged and could take a lot of punishment as we found out later. It was crewed by 10 men, a pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier and six gunners. All of the pilots, the navigator and bombardier were commissioned officers as a general rule. The gunners were enlisted men with at least a rank of sergeant. They didn't send anybody into combat unless he was a noncommissioned officer or had some sort of rank.

The B-17 had 13 .50 caliber machine guns. The turret on top of the fuselage had two guns. There was a lower turret, what we call a ball turret, which stuck out the bottom of the airplane, with two guns. Two guns were in the tail and the later models had a turret in the nose, a chin turret we called it, with two guns. The two guns in each turret were coordinated. They fired together and were aimed together. All the turrets had gun sights and were the most effective of our guns. The other guns were free swinging and you just pointed them and shot them. The plane was very well armed and we always felt we had a lot of protection when we flew as a group.

We flew as tight a formation as we could when we were in the process of being attacked by enemy fighters. The gunners had to be careful not to hit the other planes in the formation but there were incidents. Also, the empty shells of the tail gun fell right out of the airplane. Somebody down below might get hit with the empties. It was a problem but I don't remember any case of anybody in our group shooting into somebody else.

We were assembled as a crew at Moses Lake. All of these individuals had been trained in their particular specialty. I was first pilot, or crew commander. We began our combat training. We always trained together in the airplane. We dropped practice bombs on the bombing range.

We practiced navigation and gunnery. We spent maybe a month at Moses Lake and then our group was moved to Tampa, Florida, to Drew Field which is now the International Airport at Tampa. The whole training group moved there and that is where we finished our training.

That is also where I met my wife. When we moved from Moses Lake to Tampa, my best friend, who was also a pilot, lucked out and was able to fly as a copilot on one of the airplanes. I had to go with my crew and almost everybody else on the train. He got to Tampa about a week ahead of me. We had always roomed together and he had a room for us. He had met the girl he eventually married. He kept after me to meet a lovely young lady that his girl knew. They worked in the same building in Tampa. Finally I gave in. It was the only blind date I ever had and she became my wife after the war.

We finished our training at Drew Field and then went by train to Hunter Field, Savannah, Georgia. That was our point of embarkation for overseas. We were processed. It took a couple of days to do all the paperwork and get all of the stuff we took with us and we were assigned an airplane. It was a brand new B-17G which had just been flown in from the West Coast. We took it up and worked to find out all about it. We came in, landed, parked and went into operations. They said, "You've got 10 days leave." That was totally unexpected. I went back to Arizona where some of my brothers and sisters were and visited. My crew scattered all over. They were from all over the country.

We reassembled in 10 days and our airplane was fueled and ready to go. We flew it down to Homestead Field, south of Miami, and spent a day or two there. Then we loaded up and headed south. We didn't know where we were going. They gave me a sealed envelope, "Top Secret" on it. "Don't open this until you are an hour out." You can imagine my crew coming up, "Lieutenant, let's open it. Let's see where we are going." Well, we did and we found out that we were assigned to the 15th Air Force which was then in Italy. We proceeded on to South America, flew across the Atlantic 2,100 miles straight to Africa, across northern Africa and then up to Italy. We landed at Foggia, Italy, which was the main base and found that we were assigned to the 2nd Bomb Group at Amendola 10 or 12 miles from Foggia.

We had flown alone from Miami to Italy. The Germans had been pretty cagey. They knew these airplanes were flying across the Atlantic from South America to Africa and they had established a submarine out there to put up a false radio compass signal. Halfway across the Atlantic we found the right radio compass signal and we were right on course. Of course, we had a navigator who could use celestial navigation so we knew right where we were.

The groups were based on landing strips around the area, not really at Foggia. The 15th Air Force Headquarters, was at Bari which was about 100 miles south. We flew from Foggia over to Amendola and landed. As soon as we landed, the line chief came out and said, "Get your stuff out of here we have got to get this airplane ready to fly tomorrow." We never saw it again. We were given an old clunker.

We were assigned to the 20th Squadron, 2nd Bomb Group which is the oldest bomb group in the Air Force. It was organized in 1917 and was established as the first aero group and

fought in World War I with single engine bombers. It has been active ever since then and is now based at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. They have participated in every Air Force action since their formation including the latest bombing in Yugoslavia.

We were inducted into the combat outfit. The 2nd Bomb Group was composed of four bomb squadrons of B-17s. They had suffered great losses in what they call "The Big Week" in February of 1944. The Big Week was a combination of attacks from the 8th Air Force in England, the 15th Air Force in Italy and the R.A.F. The R.A.F. bombed at night. We were trying to knock out Axis aircraft production facilities. During that time my group on one mission had lost 14 out of 28 airplanes. The German fighter organization had concentrated on the 2nd Bomb Group during that particular mission.

On the next mission, the next day of the Big Week, the group could only fly nine airplanes. The others were too shot up. They lost three of those. During those two days they lost 17 airplanes. That was 170 men gone in just two days. It was a difficult situation and they were really hurting for crews and airplanes to fly. As I recall, our first mission was the next day. Usually a new crew coming in would have some time to get settled.

We lived in tents. We were assigned a tent for the four officers. The enlisted men lived in a six-man tent just down the line. We had an outdoor shower and outdoor latrines.

There were four B-17 groups. A group was composed of four squadrons and all the ancillary stuff that went along with four combat squadrons. I think there also were four B-24 groups. Later on there were 15. They also added two B-17 groups. There were six fighter groups that were escorts. A lot of these groups came in after I was shot down.

When I was there the fighter escorts were P-38s and P-47s. I think there were probably three groups of P-47s and three groups of P-38s. P-38s were twin engine fighters. The problem the fighter groups had at that time was lack of range. They were excellent protection for us but they had such a short range that they couldn't go all the way with us. Later on P-51s came in. P-51s replaced most of these other groups because they had the range. They could stay with the bombers all day long.

Our first mission was to Sophia, Bulgaria. An experienced pilot went with me. My copilot stayed home. The pilot said, "Well, you just fly the airplane and if I need to tell you something, I will" – which he did. Since he was experienced, we led the second element. The squadron was made up of two elements. The first element consisted of three airplanes in a "V" and the second element had three airplanes in a "V" and then we had what we called a slot, one down behind. So there were seven airplanes. Our slot man and the wingman collided as we were turning into the target.

Occasionally we saw airplanes simply blow up. Others that had been hit would pull out of formation because of an engine out or a couple of engines out. Pretty soon we probably would see parachutes. Everybody always tried to count parachutes and tell what happened when we were debriefed back home.

On our second mission, we went deep into Germany to Styre. We were hit just as we turned away. We had dropped our bombs and turned from the target and were heading back to Italy. The whole group turned and we were hit from behind. I have never been sure if it was an antiaircraft shell that hit us or a rocket. My radio operator said he saw a rocket coming from the rear. Anyhow, something exploded just above the airplane. My navigator was killed, a piece of flack hit him in the neck just above his flack vest and killed him almost instantly. My copilot was hit in his left leg. I was hit in my hand but it really didn't do much damage. My hand wasn't put out of action. My copilot was wounded and couldn't fly so I had to fly all the way home.

One of the early missions I recall was to Ploesti. Ploesti, in Romania, was a source of oil for the Germans. The first mission against Ploesti had been flown by B-24s out of North Africa in August of '43. Out of 180 or so aircraft they lost about 50 planes but they were able to bomb the oil refineries. Our mission was April 5, 1944. It was the first high level mission to Ploesti. We went in at 25,000 feet. All told the United States lost over 200 heavy bombers from the 15th Air Force during 17 missions to Ploesti. Finally it was obliterated and was one of the things that beat Germany. We deprived them of their fuel.

We always had antiaircraft fire over the targets. Sometimes there were just a few shells. Sometimes the area was black with antiaircraft fire. When the antiaircraft fire was close and exploded you could feel it. It would shake the whole aircraft and even if they were 30 yards away you could hear the stuff rattle against the airplane. If it was close enough it would poke holes in the airplane.

I don't remember any mission that I flew when we didn't have fighter attacks of some sort. Sometimes they would just make one pass and be gone. Other times they stayed with us. The fighters could be any place. Mostly we saw the well-known ME-109 or the Folk Wolf 190. They were their main fighters. But there would be others. The Italians had a couple of fighters and you might see one of those. Or the Germans might be using JU-88s which was really a twin-engine bomber that was very maneuverable. But mainly it was ME-109s or FW-190s.

The fighters would come within 20 feet of us. If they made a nose attack they would come right at you and then duck underneath. Of course, our boys were shooting at them. Being a pilot, you are busy flying the airplanes, staying in formation and you don't see much of what is going on. The gunners would say, "I looked right in his eyes." Other times, they would come within 100 or 200 yards and peel off if they had enough of the tracers coming at them.

The thing that is hard to describe is what is happening with a fighter coming in head on at, say, 300 miles per hour with our plane going 150 miles per hour. The closing rate was tremendous. It will come in in just a matter of 2 or 3 seconds but it seems like an hour. It is hard to imagine the quickness of what is happening. If they made an attack from the rear, or course, it was a slower process. As a rule they just flashed by. Even though you were concentrating on flying the aircraft, you knew what was happening because you were talking to everybody on the intercom.

On April 13, 1944, we were shot down. That was an infamous day for us. My copilot didn't fly our first mission because the experienced pilot flew with us. The next mission was the one he was hit in the leg. He was in the hospital and out of action until this particular April 13. On his first mission he was wounded. His second mission he was shot down. Well, that was our 13th mission and it was April 13th.

The mission was to Gyor, Hungary, less than 100 miles east of Vienna, Austria. It was an aircraft manufacturing plant and it was called the Gyor Wagon Works. They were manufacturing airplanes, ME-109s.

We dropped our bombs and then the leader, group commander Colonel Rice, turned and dove a little bit to escape the flack by getting to a different altitude. We turned left and descended. About the time we come out of our descent of 1,000 feet or so we were attacked by fighters coming in from the back. They hit my airplane with a lot of firepower. There is some question about what kind of airplanes they were. My tail gunman said they were twin-engine. The group report said they were ME-109s but there were twin engine fighters too. At any rate, we were hit by a lot of firepower and I could see just a sheet of tracers out underneath us. The tail gunner said there were five of them. They knocked out our number four engine. Number three was still running but it wasn't putting out much power. We had to drop out of formation.

This was the first mission they had briefed us we would have fighter cover at the target. They wouldn't go with us but they would meet us there, a P-38 group – I think probably the 82nd fighter group. At any rate, as soon as we were hit and I got the aircraft under control I broke radio silence. (We didn't talk on the radio until after we dropped the bombs.) I said, "Where is that so and so fighter cover?" Just at that time, just as I said that, a flight of P-38s came diving past us down hopefully to hit those guys who hit us.

I called the Colonel and said we had been hit and that we couldn't keep up. He started an S-ing flight pattern of the whole group to slow it down so we could have a chance to stay closer and have some protection.

I said, "Is everybody alright?" The tail gunner said he had been hit and a couple of the others said they were okay. Everybody was still ticking. I said, "Well, we have got an engine out and another one we could probably use better at low altitude, but we will try. We can go home. We can get back if the fighters don't pick us off." We could see the group ahead of us. They were a couple of miles ahead and we couldn't keep up.

When a 20-mm cannon shell hit the wing it would knock a hole in it – maybe a foot across. We had several holes in our wing and the engineer tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Look there." The fuel tank had been blown open, there was gas coming out of it and it began to burn. I said, "Let's try to get back as far as Yugoslavia." We were maybe 100 miles from the border. Of course, the problem with this is if the airplane blows up, you don't have much chance of getting out. They all wanted to leave and I kept saying "Well, I think we will be alright. We will try."

The navigator was wounded. He was bleeding. The copilot and I practiced our navigation. When we thought we were back as far as Yugoslavia, I gave the order to bail out and we jumped.

I went out through the bomb bay. People ask me if I had a problem jumping out of an airplane and I tell them when the airplane is on fire and might blow up, you aren't going to worry about trying your parachute out. The airplane continued to fly. I made a mistake; I opened my parachute too high. You should drop away as far as you can get, but I didn't. I think I just wanted to be sure it worked. The airplane was above me and was circling around and looked like it was coming right at me. I had set the autopilot but with two engines out it couldn't maintain a straight line. It did gain some altitude and wasn't really near me. The last I saw of it, fire was clear back to the tail. It circled around, maybe 2,000 feet, and I heard it hit some place, probably 4 or 5 miles away and blow up.

I remembered to do what we were instructed before I jumped. We had two items of what were supposed to be secret pieces of equipment. One was the Norton bomb sight. Another was a radio unit, an IFF, Identification Friend or Foe. It would identify your airplane back home. They had destroying units in them and if you bail out you are supposed to destroy them. I punched the two buttons and could hear them go boom. I think it was some sort of device that would just melt the whole unit.

As I descended I did not see any of my crew. I didn't see any parachutes. They may have been on the ground by then. I am not sure. I could see I was coming down on the edge of a little village. I saw two brown clad soldiers come running out to about where they thought I was going to land and they were aiming rifles at me. I landed. The wind was blowing and the parachute billowed out. The proper procedure is to run towards your chute and collapse it. I started to do that and I heard a click, click from the soldiers. I stopped. They could have shot me right there if they thought I was trying to escape. They held me.

We had the option of carrying side arms but I never did. I felt like if I were ever captured I wasn't going to fight my way back. I don't think any of my crew ever carried weapons.

Pretty soon an officer came up and he must have thought he had captured Patton. He found my escape kit which had a little money in it. He opened it up and chuckled.

I didn't know who had captured me. We had been briefed that if we were down in Yugoslavia we had the possibility of being picked up by partisans, Tito partisans, and brought back. They said in our briefing to look for the red star on their cap the Tito Communists would wear. These guys had a white star on theirs. I didn't really know who they were. It turned out they were the people cooperating with the Germans but I didn't know that. I didn't, of course, know the officer's language. The only thing I knew was "Tito." I said, "Tito, Tito." He laughed and said, "*Nicht* Tito" and gave a name of the person who was the local commander.

They took me into town and bunked me in a room which was probably in the city hall or something with a guard. They brought in a little farmer who had lived in the United States. He

could speak English. He was probably the only one in the community who could speak English. He had a mason jar of milk he gave me. I didn't know it but that was the last fresh milk I would have for a long time. He interrogated me. They told him what to ask me. Of course I didn't tell him anything much but we talked. He said he was very sorry.

I was there awhile and they brought in one of my gunners who had been captured too. He had landed in another little village.

After awhile there was some disturbance outside and I looked out and they had brought my tail gunner on a stretcher. They had made a stretcher out of a ladder. They laid him down, opened the door and let me go out. He had been hit by a 20-mm shell, probably below the knee. It just destroyed his leg. He was in great pain. In our medical kits we had a little morphine and I gave him some. Then they took me back inside.

There was another disturbance and I looked out the window and there were German soldiers all over the place. They had sent to a little encampment about 3 miles away and the Germans had sent a whole platoon. There were 40 or more soldiers and they had weapons. There wasn't any doubt who they were. The Germans commandeered a wagon and a young teenager to drive it. They laid the wounded man in some straw in the back. They made the other gunner sit on the tailgate and made me sit with the driver. We went the 3 miles to the encampment. At first I wondered why they had all of the soldiers deployed like a fighting unit. I began to realize the Partisans were out in the woods watching and they thought they might attack.

Incidentally, the other seven of my crew were all picked up by the Partisans. They walked for about two or three weeks. They didn't know where they were or what was going on. Finally they came to the coast just opposite Italy and stayed there awhile. One night a couple of C-47s landed on the top of a hill and picked them up. They got back to the group about a month after we were shot down. The rule was that if you were shot down in enemy territory you could not fly combat anymore in that area. They were sent home. My copilot flew one mission and was wounded. On his second mission was shot down, and then went home.

The encampment was like a small fort. They kept us in a little enclosure. The gunner was really suffering with his leg injury. We had some morphine and that was about all. None of the Germans could speak English and I kept hounding them and hollering at them to get a doctor. They finally brought in someone about 9 that night. I don't think he was doctor. He looked at it and didn't do anything. The next day, about 3 in the afternoon, they put us on a train. The train came right by the little fort with a whole bunch of German soldiers and we went then to one of the larger towns. They then took the gunner to the hospital. I got word they amputated his leg at the knee. Later on he was repatriated in a prisoner exchange and went home. The other boy and I were put on a train with two guards on about a three-day journey up into Germany. We went to what is known as Dulag Luft which was the interrogation center. I was there nine days.

I never saw my gunner again. He was taken to a different place. In prison camps they separated the officers and enlisted men. I was interrogated. The interrogator was a German captain and was obviously very intelligent, very well spoken in my language and probably

several others. We just gave our name, rank and serial number as we were instructed. What he wanted to know was the name of the commander of my squadron who was leading the squadron that day. The commander was new. He had just been assigned to the squadron. When this interrogator finally turned me loose he laid out a sheet and said, "Well, I have all of this information." He had the names of every pilot in the squadron who were flying that day. I have no idea how he got them. But he didn't have this new guy, the squadron commander. That was what he wanted to know. Of course, I never told him.

They were persistent. They kept me in a little cell. I couldn't even see out. Every once in awhile they would send in another guy, a German sergeant or somebody, who would say I had to fill out a form or they would turn me over to the Gestapo.

In the morning they would bring in a little sandwich and in the evening a soup, kind of a vegetable soup. That was strictly illegal according to the Geneva Convention but that is what they did. If you needed to go to the bathroom, you rapped on the door and a soldier would open the door and take you down to the latrine just down the hall. My cell had an electric heater. It was cold. They would turn the heater off and it would freeze and then they would turn it way up and it would get hot. In the cell was a cot and that was all.

There were a lot of threats but nothing more. Mostly I knew they were bluffing. The interrogator was very nice. He wasn't obnoxious at all. He finally said, "Well, get out of here. I am through with you." He turned me out into a compound where there were about 200 prisoners. The first person I saw was a boy I had been with in preflight. He said, "Oh, Lord, you look terrible. Let me find you a razor." He did. I think that razor blade had probably shaved 200 people, but I got a shave. They took me in and we had plenty of food.

Some British and American officers were there. We were at the camp a day or two, I think and then they took 40 of us and put us on a train. It was a regular passenger train with compartments like they have in Europe. It took us three days, I believe, to Stalag Luft III about 90 miles southeast of Berlin. That was our prison camp. I stayed there until they moved us out in January of 1945.

I think we were fortunate. Field Marshall Herman Göring had tremendous power by that time. Other camps were run by the Gestapo or whoever. Göring had his own little kingdom and he didn't want anybody else to fool with it. He had a feeling, I think, toward protecting flyers from those vicious scoundrels in other parts of the German regime. All the time we were there we were under control of the Luftwaffe.

When we got to Stalag Luft III, they were just opening up a new compound. Stalag Luft III had been there for many years but they were opening the west compound. They had four other compounds. A compound was a separate unit fenced separately from the others. There was no communication between them. You could just see the other buildings.

The group of 40 I was with was the first ones into this compound. We were assigned barracks. The barracks were broken up into rooms and there were 12 people in each room. There

were about 140 people in each barracks which we called blocks. There were bunk beds, two high. We had a little stove.

We were organized as a military unit. The person in charge in our block was a major. Of course, we called him the blockhead. In each room the senior officer was in command. We lived in a communal situation. We took turns cooking whatever food we received. We took turns cleaning up and so forth. We ate together as a rule.

In each block one room was established for eight enlisted men. Of course, in our Army, in our military, we didn't have orderlies. The Germans insisted that we must have them so they put a certain number of enlisted men who were sergeants in the barracks. They were our crew members. We treated them just like we treated everybody else.

Every morning, around 8, and every afternoon, probably about 4, we had what was called an *Appell*. That was a German word. I don't know what it means but that was when they counted us. Twice a day we were counted. We had to assemble the whole compound. We assembled in blocks. If the count didn't come out right, they would count again. They would keep counting until they got it right. If someone was ill (and we had very little sickness) he could stay in the barracks and was counted there. That was done everyday even if it was snowing, raining or whatever. I think once or twice during my stay we were counted in the building because the weather was so deplorable.

We had a hard winter in Germany. One of the coldest in Europe on record that year. We had a certain amount of GI clothing available. Of course, all of us went down with what we were wearing, flying suit over our uniforms. I remember I had an old GI overcoat, wool overcoat, which was very warm, wool gloves and wool cap. I don't remember what I had for shoes.

The area where the camp was built had been a pine forest. The pine trees had been cut down but they left the stumps. Especially toward the last we had very little fuel. We got a little coal now and then but very little fuel, no wood. Those stumps didn't last long. They were chipped up for fuel. We didn't have much in the way of machines to pull the stumps but we dug them up.

There was no heat in the barracks. The walls were thin and there were cracks. The winter came right in with us. We had two blankets on our bed and all the clothes we had, we piled on top to try to stay warm.

As I recall, there was one electric light in each room hanging from the ceiling. It furnished pretty good light for the room. The windows had shutters which we had to keep closed at night. We had lights out at 12 midnight. The Germans just turned the electricity off. We could stay up that late, play cards and read or whatever.

The Germans would furnish a small amount of food – potatoes, vegetables, sometimes a little meat. We were supposed to get one Red Cross parcel a week each. It contained 11 pounds

of canned food. It was what we were used to – Spam, canned milk, dried milk (which was kind of new at that time), Nescafé coffee and dried fruit – prunes, dried apricots and so forth.

We were able to garden just outside of our buildings. Each room had a big double window and from there out to the road was a plot of ground probably 12-by-15 feet. We were allowed to grow anything we wanted there. I think the seeds probably came from the YMCA. We were able to grow some vegetables. We didn't grow much of what we ate but it was something. It was a help.

The Russian prisoners who pumped out the sewage from the latrines had a tank truck pulled by horses. If the horses dropped a little manure on the road everybody ran to get what they could for the garden. The ground wasn't very good for growing but it was a privilege the Germans allowed us.

At first we had a pretty adequate diet and, of course, we were all very healthy to begin with. As the war went on, toward the last of '44 and into '45, the Germans were put in a position of not being able to move. Their transportation system was in shambles. They couldn't move anything and we began to run short of our Red Cross parcels. One time we went on what was called 1/2 parcels. One parcel for two men. This got worse as we went into '45.

We had plenty of water. We had a washhouse where we had cold, running water. We didn't have hot water. We had a latrine, an open latrine.

Inside the camp we were on our own. We could mix with the other prisoners in our compound. At night we had to be in our room after 10 p.m. or so. All the rest of the time we could go wherever we wanted, do whatever we wanted as long as we didn't annoy the Germans.

There were no work details for officers. I will have to say the Germans, as far as we were concerned, tried most of the time to stay within the Geneva Convention. Officers and sergeants were not required to work. The foot soldiers who were captured were required to work and did work.

There were five compounds nestled all together. There was one German compound where the headquarters was located. There were fences between them and some space between the compounds. Around the outer perimeter, was the double fence. The fences were 10 feet high with barbwire on top and there were two fences probably 10 feet apart. Inside of that there was a warning wire probably 20 feet from the inside fence. You were not to cross that warning wire. That was dead man's country. About every 200 yards or so, maybe less than that, were Goon Towers (we called the Germans Goons). It was a watchtower and they had guards there with machine guns, rifles, and a big searchlight. We were next to the woods and we could see woods. The perimeter was lit up at night.

There were several guards at the gate. At the front of the compound was another small compound. There were double gates into that compound and double gates on the other side. There were guards there and in the towers all the time. They didn't mix with prisoners at all.

There were what we called Ferrets. The Ferrets were intelligence people. They were easy to identify because they wore a blue coverall. Under the buildings was space, maybe 3 feet. We knew that they would be under there. They might be in the attic. They would be around and they would talk with prisoners some. They weren't supposed to mingle with us but they would talk. They were always friendly but they were the only ones we had close contact with. They wanted to listen and see what prisoners were talking about. They were always there. We didn't have much intelligence. We were flying airplanes and doing what we were told to do and that was about it. They spied on the colonels and lieutenant colonels as much as they could because they may have had some information.

We had some prisoner doctors. Mainly, I would say, they were from the English side who had been captured. They were glad to have the opportunity to practice. I think when I bailed out I lost a filling. My tooth got bad and I asked to be taken to the dentist and they took me under guard around to another compound and there was a dentist who was an Australian prisoner. He said, "I am going to have to pull the tooth out. The bad part is I don't have anything to deaden the pain." That night it wouldn't stop bleeding. I had to go back to him. It eventually got alright. That was the only occasion I had to seek medical attention.

There were 10,000 prisoners in the camp. We had one person die. He had some sort of an infection. The Germans were cognizant of what was happening and if anybody had something, they would take him to the hospital. The Germans did a pretty good job of looking after us medically if we needed it.

The camp commandant was a German colonel. Under him there was probably a captain in each compound. The captain was in direct contact with our compound commander. Our compound commander was Colonel Elkier. They talked every day. There was good communication. If our compound commander wanted something, all he had to do was yell and somebody would come and talk to him.

Our folks back home could send us packages. I think every two months, they could send a package of food, clothing or whatever. They could send books. Over the years a considerable library had been built up at the camp. There were all kinds, all sorts of books – technical books, study, school books, novels, whatever. We had lots of reading material. We played cards, always played cards – played bridge. I haven't played bridge since. We had school set up. If you can imagine out of that many people, there were some very well educated people who were school-teachers. There were people who had been through seminary. They set up classes of all sorts and a lot of people studied and a lot of people got a good start on their education or helped their education. In fact, some of the classes they took were accepted by universities after the war. I always read a lot. And we talked.

We had athletics going all the time. We played volleyball and baseball. I have a picture that must have been from another compound of people playing ice hockey. We did have quite a lot of athletics.

We had several sources for knowing what was happening in the outside world. The Germans flooded us with their propaganda machine. They furnished us their magazines and one of their newspapers was in English. They gave us all kinds of stuff in German which few could read. We had people with the German stuff who would interpret it and write down some of it and post it on the bulletin board.

We weren't allowed to have radios but we had radios. That was one of the most interesting things I think about our confinement. There were, out of all of these people, some people who could do anything. We had a lot of intelligence in that sense. We had people who made radios.

They could find pieces and scraps of stuff they could use. Of course, they had to have vacuum tubes for radios. Certain individuals would get close to Germans, the Ferrets or whoever. The Germans didn't have anything. German soldiers didn't have cigarettes, didn't have chocolate candy, or anything. Once you got them to take a piece of candy then you kind of had them. We had operatives working with certain Germans. They were blackmailed. The prisoners would get them in a position where they would have to provide something to keep the prisoners quiet. They were able to get parts and make radios. The radios were broken down and hidden because the Germans would search the barracks every once in awhile. They would listen to the BBC and they would get the news that way.

Two or three guys would gather around the radio and get the news. Then they would spread it. Nobody really knew who had the radio. A person would come to our barracks and say, "Okay, this is the news." He would sit down and tell us.

The Red Cross people worked out of Switzerland and would go to all of the camps they were allowed to. They would come in and had free rein once they were in the camp. They could talk to anybody. I don't know if this was done in other camps but I know this happened in ours. They had no power to do anything but they would go back to Switzerland and report and tell our government what was going on.

We were allowed to write three letters and four postcards a month. They had a form for a letter and you could write whatever you wanted on it. They had regular postcards and you could write whatever you wanted on them. These of course were examined by our people before they went out and then the Germans had a whole group of people who examined them. There was no limit on letters coming from the States that our families could write. Most of the letters I got had half of it censored. I don't know if the Germans did it or the Americans did it. I think the letters went through the Swiss government and were transmitted that way.

Red Cross parcels are what kept us going but the YMCA was very active and you don't hear about that. They mainly furnished equipment. They brought us athletic equipment and books. All the athletic equipment came through the YMCA and was brought into the camp by them. They had a representative who traveled throughout the camps and helped. He was from Sweden. The Germans allowed him to roam around. He could report back to Sweden about what

was needed, and, if they could, they would get the stuff for us. Most of that was done through the German transportation system.

The *Great Escape*, incidentally, actually occurred in the compound next to our compound. It took place in March before I got there. We got there in April. The movie and the book pretty much are accurate on what happened. They did tunnel, they had three tunnels to start with. They finally tunneled out and were short of the fence just as the movie shows. Sixty-eight, I think, got out. Three of them actually succeeded. All the rest were captured. There were two Norwegians that escaped and one Dutchman whom I met at one of our meetings. He is dead now. He became a doctor later. He was a pilot during the war. He escaped and got back to England. Of course, it is accurate that 50 of them were murdered by the Gestapo. The story is that Hitler said to kill them all and Göring intervened and said he couldn't do that because the Allies have so many more prisoners than the Germans have. Hitler said he would kill 50 of them and did. I have been back there and all of those British guys who were killed are listed on a monument. The Polish forces keep an eternal flame burning.

There was always some escape being talked about or being worked on – especially among the British. They felt like they weren't doing their duty if they weren't working on an escape – tunneling or something. There were different schemes. Some people did get outside the camp.

Two guys got a ladder and somehow got German uniforms. They were going around changing light bulbs. They put the ladder up against the inner fence and worked there. Then they took it over to the other side and then on to the outer fence. They kept working until they got outside and then walked away. Of course, they were captured.

Those things were always being done but they were coordinated. Each compound had an "X," what they called Big X or something like that. He was the head of the escape council. Anybody who had an escape plan had to go through that council and be approved. This was a military organization and we were under the command of our commanding officer. If they thought you could do it they would approve it. I never was involved in an escape other than I did work on maps. Of course, we were forbidden to have maps but we would take maps and copy them. Other than that I was not privy to any escape procedure.

There generally was no way to communicate with the other compounds. Sometimes they would allow chaplains to go between the compounds. They would bring communication sometimes.

There was a German Luftwaffe station that was obviously not too far away because we saw lots of airplanes – fighters and bombers. In January of '45, the Russians were making their big push from the east and they came within about 20 miles of where we were. They came up to the Oder River. We thought they were going to continue to our place but they stopped there. We could hear artillery. With the cold air you could hear the artillery and there was a lot of air activity. We could see the Germans flying that way with the bombers so we knew about where they were. We also had a little information otherwise about where the lines were. In January, for

a period, we didn't know what was going to happen. There were lots of rumors that Germans were going to leave us there and let the Russians take over or we were going to move out.

On the 27th of January the Germans came into the buildings. "*Raus*!" – outside. We were moving. We are going to leave. We had anticipated this. We had worked on making packs. We would take an old pair of pants and make a backpack out of it. They lined us up outside and we stood there a couple of hours. Then we walked out of the camp in the coldest night of the whole winter. It was snowing and snow was several inches deep. We walked all night – all 10,000 soldiers. They evacuated the whole camp. We were separated; we didn't all go in one bunch.

In fact, our compound was separated from the others. We didn't know where the others were and still don't know how it was separated. We walked that night and the next day and the next night and then we came to a little town where we were put in a big brick factory building. It was warm. During the first night we were out, about 3 in the morning, it was dark and black and we were marching in columns of threes. All of a sudden shooting started. We didn't know what it was. My thought was well, the Germans have gotten us out here and they are going to shoot us. We all dove into the ditches on both sides of the road. There are several stories but what evidently happened was a German patrol out in the woods saw the column and started shooting assuming we were a bunch of Russians. It went on a little while and I think there might have been a person or two hit. I don't think anybody was killed. Then we went on through the night.

We went to a place called Spremburg and were loaded on trains. These were the famous old 40-and-8 boxcars. They were known as 40-and-8 from the World War I for 40 men and 8 horses. They were so crowded we could hardly sit down. We were on that for about three days. We ended up at Nuremberg in a prison camp. Facilities were terrible. It was a crowded place. We were there until April 4th.

The Germans were in a situation where they could not move any transportation. They couldn't move Red Cross parcels for instance. Eventually, the Swiss and the Red Cross recognized the problem. I think our government gave them some old 6-by-6 trucks, old GI trucks. They painted a big white cross on the top or big red cross. They got some prisoners and allowed them to drive the trucks. I heard they were Canadians. They would load the trucks with Red Cross parcels and just tell them to go into Germany as far as they could go and find the POWs. We were finally able to get some Red Cross parcels.

They were bombing Nuremberg. The railroad yards were maybe a mile from our camp. The British had a mosquito bomber, a twin engine bomber. They would fly these over at night just to wake the Germans up, keep them from sleeping. They would drop a cluster of flares from real high and that designated the bombing target. One night we recognized a mosquito coming and it must have had 4,000-pound bombs. We heard the first one, "KABOOM," way off. Then it got closer and closer. What was happening was these flares were drifting toward us. Finally there was one that hit just outside the camp and it rattled everything. We knew the next one would be right in the middle of us. Luckily, that was the last one. We escaped being killed by our own bombs. Our Air Force bombed almost every day. The British would be there every night.

We wanted to dig trenches outside and get out of our building. The Germans said we couldn't do it but we did it anyhow. They didn't shoot us. They knew the war was coming to a close. When we left Nuremberg we walked to Mooseberg 100 miles south of Nuremberg – close to Munich. It took us three weeks to get there because we just dallied along. Our commanders were able to talk the Germans into not pushing and so we took our time. On our way down we camped in fields and barns.

The Germans, as in most of Europe, have huge barns. Most of the farming communities are kind of clustered together. We would sleep in barns or sometimes in a haystack if the weather was good. Then, as I mentioned, we didn't usually go far each day. We would walk maybe 10 miles or so and hole up for the night. Sometimes we would stay in one place for a day or two. It was kind of a fun time. The Germans had plenty of food. They had fields stacked up with potatoes, stored through the winter. They couldn't move the food. People in the cities were starving and they had all this food in the country. We were able to get a lot of food and that was good.

We got to Mooseberg about a week before the 3rd Army came charging in. They were heading southeast down toward the Balkans. They liberated us there the 29th of April of '45. I remember very clearly the morning we were liberated. I was up early before daylight and kind of walking around the compound. As daylight came I could see back over the hilly country there were some vehicles burning. About that time a couple of P-51s came over. One of them went down straight at something, I could hear the guns and then all hell broke loose. The American forces were coming down the hill. They came to the camp. The Germans put up a little bit of resistance. Some of the Germans up in the Goon Towers started shooting at the Americans. They were obliterated. Some small arms fire came into the camp and we got down as low as we could. That didn't last long and the Americans swept past the camp on into town. The town was a mile away. That was it.

We had always said, "One of these days I want to see a Patton tank coming through that gate" and that is exactly what happened. I have pictures of the prisoners as this was happening, just great mobs of people. Everybody had a grin on his face. The tank came right down the street, the GIs on the tank just looking at these funny looking guys who had been prisoners for a year. After a little while, General George Patton came in. I remember very, very distinctly he came in his jeep and stood up in the back of the jeep. He had those pistols and his helmet and cussed a little while. Then he said, "Sure am glad to have you guys back with us." Then he left. We were liberated.

The Army was still at war. They asked us just to remain in camp but we could go out if we wanted. They said the best thing for us to do was to stay right where we were until they could take care of us. My buddy and I wandered out in the woods for awhile but we decided the advice was good and stayed in camp. They brought in plenty of food. We stayed about a week and they then put 40 of us in the back of a big truck. We could stand up, wave, and enjoy the freedom. They took us to an old German airport a few miles from where we were. They separated us into groups of 21 because that was what fit into a C-47. The C-47s were flying supplies down to

Patton's Army and on the way back, if they didn't have a load of wounded, they would stop at this little airport and pick up 21 guys to fly back to France.

The group I was in had to wait about three days. We just camped out on the side of airfield. They loaded us up in a C-47, took us to Rheims, France, where Eisenhower's headquarters was located. Ike came out and talked to us which, we thought, was real nice. That was probably about the day the war ended. We left there and went to Le Havre on the train. We waited there in a camp called Lucky Strike which was a big assembly camp. We were there about a month before we got transportation home. We could send a telegram home and that was about all. Our folks didn't really know where we were up to that point. Then we were on a ship, I think it was the first trip that was not in a convoy. We were going into New York but one engine broke down so they went into Newport News, Virginia. We were turned loose at Camp Patrick Henry in Virginia and given 60 days leave.

I went, of course, to find my young lady in Tampa. I went to visit my parents in Arizona. I came back and we were married on July 8, 1945. After we were married, we went to Arizona and spent some time because my wife had never met my folks. The war was still in progress at that time in the Pacific. We were there when the atomic bomb ended the war.

My original concept was to stay in the military but while I had been in prison for a year all of the people in my class, my age, had gotten promotions. When we became prisoners, that was it. I was a second lieutenant. I had no increase in rank. All these other guys were captains and majors and had built up a lot of flying time. I decided to get out. At the end of my leave I went to San Antonio and got separated. I stayed in the reserves until the Korean War and was recalled then. I spent two more years on active duty.

While in the reserve unit I was in Miami. I worked for Eastern Airlines in Miami. We had a troop carrier group in the reserves and they recalled the group. I had changed my primary MOS to maintenance officer. I was still flying of course but my primary was maintenance officer and I was the squadron maintenance officer until they needed a maintenance officer in the Philippines at Clark Air Force Base. I spent a couple of years, most of my tour, there. I was able to get my family to come over and we had a nice tour there. When the Korean War was winding down in '53 I resigned my commission and departed. I had spent six years on active duty and six years in the reserves.

I went back to Eastern Airlines as a mechanic. I didn't have enough flying time to even consider a job as a pilot. Later on I moved into a flight engineer position. In the large airplanes they have two pilots and a flight engineer. I didn't fly too much as a flight engineer. I was instructing most of the time – ground school and flight instruction. When the time of the strikes began in the late '50s and early '60s the airlines were having a difficult time. In fact, Eastern was eventually destroyed by personnel strikes.

A couple of other guys and I got interested in doing something else. The only thing we had ever known was airplanes. We looked around and decided we would try going into business and the business that appealed to us was the Burger King operation which was just growing in

the Miami area. It began in Miami. Jim McLamore, the head of Burger King said, "Where do you want to go? You can go any place you want to go." We finally decided we liked the Carolina area. We came to Greenville and built the first Burger King there. We built some others in the Greenville area and then I decided to terminate the partnership.

I came to Anderson and opened a Burger King on Main Street and expanded from there. I eventually had 12 Burger King stores in South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia. When my son came to the point that he was ready to handle the business in 1982, I retired. We sold all of our holdings in South Carolina and Georgia and he kept the ones on the coast of North Carolina. He eventually sold those stores. He had over 30 stores at one time.

I have always been active in church work, am an elder at First Presbyterian Church and have been for many years. Also, we have an organization of the 2nd Bomb Group, which I was part of during the war. We have quite an active organization. Anybody who has been in the 2nd Bomb Group (which is now the 2nd Bomb Wing) is eligible to be involved in the association. I have become the editor of the newsletter which we produce twice a year. It has general news about what is going on and old war stories. Most of the people in the organization are from World War II. That keeps me busy. I was also one of the authors of *Defenders of Liberty* a history of the 2nd Bombardment Group/Wing from 1918-1993.

We have about 700 members and it is decreasing very rapidly as you can imagine now. A lot of people who would be my age are not with us any more. Part of the reason I can recall some of this stuff is because several years ago my wife kept saying, "You need to write about your life and about the war for our children." I started by writing and got so interested I kept on going.