



Fort Smith Historical Society Oral History Center World War II Project Interview with Jim Champagne

AC: Full name is Alcide Jacques, first name A-l-c-i-d-e, middle name Jacques, J-a-c-q-u-e-s, Champagne, spelled like the drink, C-h-a-m-p-a-g-n-e.

JW: And when were you born?

AC: I was born (DELETED CONTENT)

JW: And where were you born?

AC: Southbridge, Massachusetts.

JW: And what were your parents' names?

AC: My father's name was Napoleon Champagne, I don't remember if he had a middle name or not. My mother's name was Alice Marie Lavigne. Both deceased.

JW: And did you have brothers and sisters?

AC: No, I was the only child.

JW: And what did your father do for a living?

AC: He worked in a mill, he was like a millwright. And come time for me to start school, she took me back to Southbridge where I was born in my great-grandfather's grandparents' home. And I started school in a one room school which had I believe it was five rows of desks, and each row was a grade, one teacher. She used to spend so many minutes with one row and then go to the next one and the others had to be in study. And then my mother was going to put me in an orphanage because she couldn't afford to pay somebody to take care of me and my great grandparents were

too old to do so. My great aunt and uncle took me in, which lived further up the street from where I was at the present time with my great grandparents. And I lived with them for the rest of the time and then changed school to the regular school where we had one grade in each room, normal schooling.

JW: So you went all through school in Southbridge?

AC: All through school in Southbridge, Massachusetts.

JW: Did you graduate from high school?

AC: Yeah, in 1939.

JW: What did you do when you graduated?

AC: Well, I had a bunch of jobs. At the time I was graduating, I think my first job, and I'm not sure whether this was while I was still in high school or my first job, was more or less a soda jerk at a fountain bar where they served sandwiches and ice cream for a Rexall Drug Store in Southbridge. Then a little later on, some time later on, I went to work in a cutlery shop, what they call a time clerk. I used to make records of all the people that used to grind their knives and make a record of how many they did and give them certain days for different model. After that, I believe I worked for a wholesale meat house where they delivered sides of beef and sheep and what not and pork and stuff like that and chicken. And eventually I ended up in a local woolen mill in Southbridge

JW: Woolen mill?

AC: A woolen mill, called the Hamilton Woolen Company. And then I started in the spinning department where they spun the cloth and I was a spool boy or a spool guy. I used to bring buckets of spools of thread to the different looms and help the loom runner put the spools on when they have to load up. Then some time later, at the time I entered the service, I was a weaver in another part of the shop. And I believe by that time, the name had changed to Ames Worsted and I went in the service.

JW: Were you drafted or did you join?

AC: I was drafted. I believe I entered the service on October 17th, 1942.

JW: Do you remember Pearl Harbor day?

AC: Yeah, I remember it.

JW: Do you remember how you found out, where you were?

AC: I believe it came over the radio or it was in the newspaper.

JW: Did you figure that day that you were going to wind up in the military?

AC: Well, when they started the draft, I figured eventually. Well, I tried to enlist in the service. I wanted to enlist in the Air Force as a mechanic. And the recruiter told me, well, I can't promise you that. You'll have to get into the service and then you have to take an aptitude test and then they put you in according to your tests. Well, I said I guess I'll wait until you draft me and they drafted me eventually. And ended up in the Air Force, but I ended up flying, which I didn't want to do, I wanted to be on the ground as a mechanic, I wanted to learn a trade.

JW: Well, you were drafted and where did they send you, where'd you go to boot camp?

AC: I was inducted in the service at Camp Fort Devon, Massachusetts, went through my aptitude tests and they assigned me to the Air Force, just Air Force, period. Then I was transferred to Miami Beach where I did my basic training, the marching here and there.

JW: What was the name of that place?

AC: I was in a hotel, I can't remember the name. It was on the beach but I can't remember the name.

JW: Okay.

AC: Only thing I remember about that, there was a hurricane warning, they boarded up the first floors of all the buildings down there. And all we got was a little bit of wind, we didn't get the hurricane. Course, a lot of coconuts fell from the palm trees.

JW: So you said that was your basic training?

AC: That was my basic training

JW: Then what did they do with you?

AC: Then they shipped me to Amarillo, Texas, for airplane engine mechanic school. And I was there quite awhile because I spent some time in the hospital. Thought I had the German measles, and I was looking at my discharge today and it says yellow fever. Maybe I was in there twice and I think I was in the hospital twice. Because the group that I went into went ahead of me because I fell back because I was in the hospital.

JW: Well, at that point, did you think that they were going to train you to be an airplane mechanic?

AC: I wasn't thinking, period, I was just flowing with the wind.

JW: Okay. That's all right. How long were you in Amarillo?

AC: Transferred in October, spent two three weeks down in Miami. Remember I was down there Thanksgiving, I remember. Probably close to two months or more.

JW: Do you remember what kind of training you were getting there?

AC: Well, we went to school and, well, they indoctrined us by taking us on B-17s. Actually, we were trained on B-17s. Took us on a B-17, showed us the different parts of it. Then we had schooling every day and we were on rotating shifts, sometimes days, sometimes middle shift, sometimes night shift. And I can remember, for example, they take a carburetor, teach you to take it all apart and put it back together. Course, there was other finer details of the training that I don't remember.

JW: Right, right. Well, after Amarillo, where did you go?

AC: I went to what they call a factory school for B-24s in San Diego, California. It was on the opposite side of Ryan Field from Consolidated Aircraft Company, which was on La Jolla Avenue, that made B-24s. We did visit the factory two, three times, to see how the production was going on and stuff like that. I don't know how long we were there, month, month and a half, two months. I can't tell you, memory's not that strong.

JW: Long time ago. Then where did you go?

AC: When we got through there, they had no place to send us where they wanted to send us, so we were sent up to Wendover, Utah, and parked there for a week or two, something like that. I don't remember what we did up there. I don't remember doing anything up there except just hanging around.

JW: Well, when in this process did you figure out that they were fixing to stick you in a B-17, because it doesn't sound like it started out that way.

AC: No, I ended up on a B-24.

JW: B-24, okay.

AC: Eventually I got shipped to Laredo, Texas, for aerial gunnery school. And which I trained down there, I couldn't tell you how long that was either, two, three weeks, something like that, I don't know. All I know it was awful hot, hundred and twenty in the shade, and you couldn't even touch the side of the airplane it was so hot.

JW: Okay. Then what happened?

AC: Then I got shipped to Davis Mountain Field in Tuscon, Arizona, and I was put in a flight crew of a B-24. And the flight crew consisted of ten people: a pilot, co-pilot, navigator and bombardier and nose gunner, flight engineer, which was me, which was also the top turret gunner, the radio

operator, which was also a waist gunner when we got into enemy territory, and another waist gunner, a tail gunner and a ball turret gunner, ten people.

JW: So they assembled the crew there?

AC: Yeah, we went through preliminary training there. One very sharp memory I have there is one day, my pilot, new to the plane, was taken up by a check pilot, skeleton screw, which included me and the radio operator and I don't know who else, I don't remember if there was anybody else or not. Went up for what they call a power stall. Well, we got up around thirteen thousand feet or a little higher, got into a power stall, the pilot corrected. The test pilot didn't think he corrected enough and he over-corrected and we fell nine thousand feet out of control. And I was standing behind the pilot, course there was a sheet of steel between me and the pilot. I couldn't move from the centrifugal force, I couldn't get out of the plane if I wanted to, I was just stuck there. Finally we came out somewhere around thirty-five hundred, four thousand feet. And when we landed, the tail appendage, with the twin rudders, instead of being even, it was twisted. That plane went to the junk yard. I don't know how we landed that way.

JW: Did you think you had bought the farm?

AC: I did at the time we were going down, I thought this was it.

JW: Yeah, I would have thought so, too.

AC: I forgot. We spent at least a month there, a little more, I don't remember. Then we got transferred to Alamogordo, New Mexico, for advanced training. But they give us a fifteen day delay en route to get to Alamogordo, so we all went home on leave. Course it was slow trains stopping at every watering stop. Spent most of our time on the train, didn't spend much time home. And then of course I went back and I believe I went back in late August '43. Our crew all showed up and we got assigned a plane and we went on these practice missions and practice bombing missions. And we practiced flying what they call a three point flight, like we go up to Denver, Colorado, go down to Flagstaff, New Mexico, and then back to Alamogordo, big triangle.

JW: And you were the flight engineer?

AC: I was the flight engineer.

JW: Tell me exactly, what was your job?

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AC: Well, I was supposed to be the fixer-upper when the plane was in flight.

JW: I see.

AC: And do a pre-flight, but we never did pre-flights, that was always done by the line mechanics before we got on before a mission. But you know, if the pilot had trouble, he always conferred with the flight engineer. Plus the one thing I did on every flight, was after an hour or hour and a half flight, might have been two hours, I don't remember the time amount right now, we had to transfer fuel from the auxiliary tanks back into the main tanks for the rest of the flight.

JW: That was your job?

AC: That was my job.

JW: Okay.

AC: Course we had four engines, and I think the plane carried something like twenty-two hundred gallons of gas.

JW: And those were in the wings, right?

AC: They were in the wings, yeah.

JW: And you also were the top turret?

AC: Top turret gunner. When we got into enemy territory, that was my station.

JW: I thought so. Did your plane have a name? Did y'all name it?

AC: No, we tried to put a name on the plane. Well, you're getting ahead of time, we haven't even gotten overseas yet.

JW: Well, I didn't know if you did that when you got the plane or later on.

AC: No, that was usually done overseas.

JW: I see, okay. Well, we've got you testing out the new airplane and practicing?

AC: Well, we didn't get the new plane until we finished our advanced training at Alamogordo. We trained there doing bombing missions and these flights to train the navigator and the bombing missions was to train the bombardier, and the flights were to train the pilot and the co-pilot. And I just was a passenger, more or less, except for transferring fuel, I didn't do much more. But if they had trouble feathering a propellor, if we lost an engine and the pilot couldn't do it, I was supposed to, he'd call me and I'd have to go down and help them. Some of the gauges didn't read right, he'd confer with me.

JW: Okay.

AC: And I believe some time in November, probably later November, I don't remember much more at Alamogordo except going through the training. And I couldn't even tell you the exact training we went through except what I just mentioned

JW: That was where the Manhattan Project was taking place? Wasn't that Alamogordo?

AC: Could be, I don't remember.

JW: But you wouldn't have known anything about that?

AC: I'm trying to think of the name. They gave that air base a field name and I can't remember what it is. I should have looked it up before you come. It's called Holloman Air Force Base now.

JW: I'll find out.

AC: All I know is after the war, the Germans came over here and trained there. Course, they were friends with us then. Strange, huh? And another strange thing is after all this time training on B-17s, only about a month on B-24s, I end up on B-24s.

JW: Well, as I understand it, the B-24 was the rarer airplane?

AC: Well, it wouldn't glide. It had to fly a hundred and seventeen miles an hour, you had to have the speed of a hundred and seventeen miles an hour just to stay in the air; otherwise, it would just drop. It was called a "Flying Coffin".

JW: Well, I've heard several people talk like they didn't like that airplane.

AC: Well, it was all right. You get used to it, it was okay. On paper, it wasn't supposed to fly, but then it did.

JW: And that, it's more or less in between a B-17 and a B-29, is that the right thing to say or not?

AC: Well, after the B-24 came the B-29. The B-29 is much larger.

JW: But the B-17 is smaller than a B-24?

AC: Smaller in fuselage, it was longer. Had a bigger wing, it could glide, it could glide without engines. And had a single tail versus twin tail for B-24. B-25 had twin tail, too, but they only had two engines, we had four engines.

JW: Okay. After you got through at Alamogordo, what happened next?

AC: Then they transferred us to Harrington, Kansas, for what they call a staging area. We went and got our shots, more clothing for overseas, and briefing and stuff like that. We didn't stay there too long. Then we took off supposedly for Morrison Field at West Palm Beach, Florida, which was supposed to be our point of leaving the country. Well, our co-pilot, William Parish, I don't remember whether it was his folks or what, had a farm down in Georgia. He asked the pilot, Bill Retzlaff, if he could fly down over there and we did, we flew down, scared a horse and it got stuck in the barbed wire fence. And then when we tried to continue south, I can't remember the exact reason why we did it, but the pilot decided to call in for a landing and we were guided into Memphis, Tennessee, and we landed in a fog, just barely missing the trees coming in. And we were fogged in for at least five days, couldn't move out of there. A few other planes, even some of these fighter planes, come in with these woman 7 ferry pilots, came in there and were held over. We finally did take off and got to West Palm Beach, Florida, where our place of leaving the country was. Course we got more briefing down there and I don't remember what else. We were supposed to leave on December 4th, but we went to starting the engines and the number four engine wouldn't start, starter wouldn't work. And they wouldn't let any of the Army fix it, course we were still part of the Army then, U.S. Army Air Force, didn't become an Air Force branch by itself until after the war. And they wouldn't let any of us work on the engine. Took them four days, where we could do it in four hours.

JW: They were waiting for somebody to come in to work on the engine?

AC: No, they had a bunch we called them feather merchants, but they were civilian mechanics. I guess they were busy on something, but took them four days and we didn't leave until December 8th.

JW: I was going to ask you where did you go, but let me stop and say did you know where you were going when you took off? Did they tell you ahead of time?

AC: I can't remember whether we were told before take-off or whether the pilot had an envelope to open after he took off. Seems to me the pilot had an envelope after he took off, with instructions, and he had instructions not to open it until he was in the air.

JW: Right, right.

AC: Either that, or he was told, no, it had to be that. We were supposed to go to British Trinidad, but we didn't get as far as Puerto Rico. We had some kind of radio trouble so we landed at Puerto Rico and we stayed there five days getting that thing fixed. Then after the fifth day, we eventually took off to British Trinidad, that's where we learned to drink Rum and Cola.

JW: Rum and Coke?

AC: Rum and Coke.

JW: Rum and Coca-Cola. I forgot what I was going to say. So where did you go from there?

AC: Well, we went to British Trinidad, we spent overnight there. We spent the night enoused in a barracks or shed, whatever you want to call them. To me, they were just sheds. They were up on ten, fifteen foot poles because of snakes and alligators and stuff like that.

JW: I know what I was going to ask you. Had you done any traveling before you entered the service? Had you been anywhere?

AC: No, nowhere except, well, yeah, I went to New York City, drove to New York City, that's about all.

JW: So all this--

AC: New York and New Hampshire, I was in New York and Connecticut.

JW: So all this Texas--

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AC: My cousin was a dirt track racer, and I went along as his mechanic helper.

JW: But all this traveling in Memphis and New Mexico and Florida and Texas--

AC: That was all new to me.

JW: I imagine that was quite a shock.

AC: Like when I was in Alamogordo, when we had leave, I'd go down to El Paso, Texas, sometimes Las Cruces, New Mexico, depending. And course when you go to El Paso, you went across the bridge into Juarez.

JW: Where anything and everything is possible.

AC: Yeah.

JW: Okay. I just figured, you know, I interview a lot of guys that were off the farm in Arkansas and had never been anywhere at all. And all of a sudden, they're all like that, it was quite a shock.

AC: I had been on short trips to neighboring states from where I lived and grew up in Massachusetts.

JW: Well, from British Trinidad, where did you go?

AC: Went to Belem, Brazil.

JW: Brazil?

AC: Brazil. And while we were there, we got hung up at least a week. And I heard two reasons why we were held up, so I don't know which one was the true one. One said was because there was a malaria outbreak in Dakar, Africa, which was supposed to be our next stop across the ocean. Or they were just too jammed up and didn't have room for us, one or the other, I couldn't tell you and I never did find the true reason. Then finally when we get the okay to go, we flew from there to another place in Brazil called Fortaleza. And from there, we took off and flew to Dakar, Africa, which was in Senegal, I think, Africa.

JW: And there was a base there?

AC: There was a base there, yeah. The first time we ever landed on steel mats. There was a few puddles from a rain storm. And between the plane stop and go, it'd kind of hit a puddle and the noise going on, I thought the plane was coming apart.

JW: I bet. Did you stay there long?

AC: Either one night or two nights, I can't be sure, one or two nights.

JW: And then you went on from there to where?

AC: Then we went north to Merrakech, which was a province in Morocco. And we got hung up there two weeks because we noticed we had a leak. Each brake had what they call a brake cylinder and they accumulate air pressure. We had one that was leaking and we had to wait two weeks for one to come from the United States. They didn't have one on 9 hand, had to be flown in. Between the yakkey-yak paperwork and everything else, it took two weeks to get it and installed.

JW: What would you do while you waited two weeks?

AC: Used to go into the town, city of Marrakech.

JW: They'd let you go then?

AC: Yeah. And we had very few minimal duties there, we slept in tents. I think there were four man tents, if I'm not mistaken. They had a USO building in the city at that time there. And they had adjoining the city, had a walled-in city, which was Arab, off limits, but we got in there. We paid a taxi driver, an Arab taxi driver to take us in there, visit some of the girls there.

JW: I see. So that lay-over was a pleasure, not a pain?

AC: No, it wasn't a pain. We had fun there.

JW: Okay, that's good. Okay. When you left there--

AC: In fact, I spent one night overnight in this walled-in city. And the rest of the crew came down the next day looking for me, thought something happened to me. Well, what happened, the night before, most of the enlisted men in my crew, after I spoke about this place, what went on in there, decided to come with me. We get in there, went in this house and there wasn't enough girls, so they called another girl that happened to be the girl I'd been with before. And she grabbed me and said come with me. I went with her and they got into some kind of a scuffle with some male Arabs. And they thought I got in trouble, too. And when I didn't show up, they came down with help looking for me. I was all right. I had a good time.

JW: You didn't spend--

AC: This girl took me in an upstairs area of this building. And I heard the MPs come in downstairs during the night looking for GIs and the Arabs said there was none around.

JW: I see. Well, that all sounds like a lot of fun.

AC: Oh, yeah.

JW: Well, good.

AC: That probably shouldn't be in the interview.

JW: Well, you know, we're seeking history and there's--

AC: Well, certain people don't like certain talk.

JW: Right; but you know, GIs are young men.

AC: And they're away from their normal friends, so they take what they can get.

JW: So, yeah. I don't think it's right to pretend that everybody, the minute they get off the plane, went searching for a church.

AC: Well, I've always said a lot of people aren't honest with themselves. That's the problem with today, they're not honest 0

JW: Well, I think young men have always acted like young men and to pretend otherwise is kind of looney.

AC: Well, if you would, they'd call you something else.

JW: Yeah, yeah. Well, after you left there, where did you go?

AC: Then we flew further north to Tunis, which was up on the Mediterranean Coast, think we spent two nights there. The first night I went into the city or town, I guess it was a city, looking for entertainment, and somebody guided me or directed me to a place where there was a show going on. Well, when I arrived there, the show was already on and all the lights were on the stage. So an usher with a flashlight guided me to a seat, saw the show, it was a good show, though I didn't understand, it was in French. Even though I'm French, I've lost my French. To go back a bit, before I started school, I could speak nothing but French; but after I got in school, I lost it. And I got in high school, I flunked French. Course, the French they taught in school was Parisian French, and I grew up on Canadian French, which was a different dialect altogether. Anyway, went to the show, and then when the lights come on, lo and behold, who's sitting next to me? A guy I went to school with. He ended up being a town assessor back home.

JW: The odds of that, that was sixteen million to one or something, I think.

AC: And then the second night, I went to town with my pilot and navigator. And about the only other place we could go was an officer's club and I wasn't an officer. And navigator said, "Well, I'll let you borrow some of my clothes." "No," I said, "I ain't going to do that." So none of us went to it. I tried to get them to go and I'd go on my own, but no.

JW: And up to this point, you hadn't been near a combat zone?

AC: No, no, no.

JW: All right. So you left?

AC: There was an old combat zone, but at the time, the war had gone out of Africa and was back in Europe.

JW: I was going to ask that at some point.

AC: At one time, North Africa was part of the war.

JW: Right, right, but this was after that?

AC: This was after that.

JW: After Tunis, where did you go?

AC: Then we flew to Manduria, Italy, which is in southern part of the boot of Italy, not too far away from a place called Taranto, which is a bigger part down there, it's close to the Mediterranean rather than the Adriatic, on the Mediterranean side. Not on the ocean, but it's close to it 1

JW: I see. Was that a combat zone?

AC: Well, they had a couple of German fighters to come down and did a little bit of damage, but there wasn't heavy combat, no. It was a fairly safe zone. Had to be, with all those planes and everything on the ground. Each squad had at least fifteen planes. Multiply that by four, that's a lot of equipment, and some even had more.

JW: Well, what did you think of Italy? Did you get to get out a little there?

AC: Like I say, I just flow with it. I went out on pass to different places. They had a USO somewhere down there I went to, I don't remember where. I don't remember whether it was-- I don't think it was in Manduria, I think it was a different town or city. Only place I remember going to in Italy was to eat in the town of Manduria. The airport was on the outskirts of Manduria. And the other one I

remember was Lecce. I don't remember any of the other places I went to, although I know I went to a couple other places, but I can't remember. Course we were always chasing girls and drinking.

JW: Those other places must not have had many girls or much to drink or you'd remember them.

AC: Well, depends where you were located. Some weren't as fortunate to have as many as others did.

JW: Well, after that little stop, where did you head?

AC: Well, that's our home base, that was our home base.

JW: Okay. Did you stay in barracks there?

AC: The air crews stayed in barracks that at one time belonged to the Italian Air Force. The ground crew, the mechanics and the armament fellows and everybody else that worked on the planes that didn't fly, slept in tents. It was a mighty wet place.

JW: And this is January of '44?

AC: I landed there January 8th of '44. I left December 8th, '43, and landed December 8th, '43, from Florida, and landed in Manduria on January 8th, 1944. Thirty-one days to go across. Some ground crews went across on boats and they got there in six or seven days.

JW: Right, right. Well, sounds like you all meandered your way?

AC: Well, sounded like we were on a tour. We weren't, we just had problems.

JW: Right, right.

AC: We had fun because of the problems.

JW: Well, and all of that is better than being shot at.

AC: No, there was no gun pointed at us, no.

JW: So you went on your first bombing mission from that base?

AC: Yeah. And I can't tell you which missions I was on. I was shot down on my fifteenth mission. The only two missions-- I remember 12 three missions. I remember others, but I don't remember the target area. I remember once flying over to Toulon, France, which was a long mission, to bomb some submarine pens over there. Some of the planes ran out of gas, but we made it, though, because I told the pilot to cut back on the power so we wouldn't use as much gas. I remember another mission, a low level mission, bombing mission, which you probably heard the guy at the presentation asking about who was on that mission. Well, I was on that mission, but I wasn't the bombardier. I was ordered to go and I had to go.

JW: Right, right. And that was Monte Cassino?

AC: Monte Cassino. That was right next to the Anzio beachhead. What happened, there was an invasion by the Allies on the Anzio beachhead that was trying to go on. And because these Germans were up there on top, they could shoot down there and pick them off like pigeons.

JW: Right. Well, that was quite a seige before they finally--

AC: And normally, we flew at high altitudes, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen thousand feet, but this one was low level.

JW: Why would that have been low level?

AC: To make sure you hit the target.

JW: To make sure you hit. I see.

AC: And coming up, I was on leave when that mission was called for and they sent MPs with trucks down to Lecce, where I was on leave, and picked up whatever air crews were on pass that they could pick up down there and brought them back so they could fly missions. I think we flew more than one mission that day, I'm not sure, I think we did, because it wasn't too far away from where home base was.

JW: Well, your first bombing mission, I would think your first bombing mission would stick in your head because it was the first.

AC: No. The only thing I remember, it was a gravy run, what we called a gravy run. I don't even know if we got any flak that first mission. I do remember one of our earlier missions that we went on and I can't tell you which one it was, we ran into flak. And our pilot decided all on his own to leave the formation and somebody hollered at him, called him a name and told him to get his damn ship back in formation. He got chewed off.

JW: Well, I've never been in any situation like that but watching the movies and seeing pictures, I'd think flying into flak would just scare the fire out of you.

AC: It's no fun.

JW: It just looks like suicide.

AC: It's no fun. If you don't get the actual shell come in and hit the plane, you get exploding near you, you got this peppering pieces of metal coming through.

JW: Well, it just looks like suicide to me 3

AC: Well--

JW: You weren't flying the plane, you had no choice?

AC: I had no choice. They tell you got to go, you got to go. Course, we had our flak vests, which is similar to bullet vests. I don't know how good that was because I never got hit there. I know one mission, I come home and had a hole in my pant leg where apparently it was down something like this and it went right through like that, but never touched me, I didn't even know it happened. But I remember our co-pilot getting flak in one part of his fanny. He missed three, four missions while he was getting healed up.

JW: So everything went along fine until your fifteenth mission?

AC: Well, I wouldn't say it was fine. Some of these missions, most of these missions, we didn't have any escorts at that time because the fighter planes didn't have the so-called belly tanks for longer missions and we flew long missions. So we were on our own, that's why we had to stay in formation so we could put all these guns at one time onto any plane coming in. No, they weren't all gravy. I remember another mission I went to, and I can't tell you which one. I had a stroke over New Year's '94, I've lost some of my thinking.

JW: Right, but I'm asking you to think about things that happened sixty-two or three years ago. That's got to be tough.

AC: Somewhere I got a list of the missions, but I can't put my hands on it right now.

JW: Right, right.

AC: I remember those things and then I remember my fourteenth and fifteenth missions. My fourteenth was on February 22nd, 1944, and that was a part of Regensburg. Without looking up on the-- there's a web page on the Internet, I can look and get the name of the mission. But it was some kind of a factory in one part of Regensburg, Germany, which is in southeastern part of Germany that we went on a bombing mission. We got peppered pretty bad, we got hit pretty bad. Came back with a damaged ship. We did get back and we landed, but our nose wheel wouldn't come down, it got damaged. And course when you're getting ready to land, we found out that it wouldn't come down so the pilot had everybody but the pilot and co-pilot go in the tail of the plane as far back to keep all that weight there. But as soon as the momentum slowed down, the thing nosed over and that whole nose turret fell right off. Something just came in my mind, I can't remember. Oh, the nose gunner got flak in his chest, waist gunner got damage to his face and I don't remember if that was that mission or another mission, our tail gunner, of course, if you sat in the tail gunner on the B-24, probably the same on a B-17 because I've never been in a tail gunner position, although I have flown one mission as a tail gunner in a B-24 when my crew wasn't flying, trying to build up my missions. You're lost, you can't see any other part of the plane, you think you're up there by yourself. Well, he

wouldn't sit there unless he left the doors open. Well, got a flak explosion right 14 near the turret and blew him right out of that turret all the way back to where the ball turret gunner frame, that dropped the ball turret down, so he ended up in the hospital and he didn't want to fly no more. So on February 25th, going to the same place, which was to a aircraft factory in Regensburg, Germany.

JW: Now, this is your fifteenth mission you're talking about now?

AC: Yeah, the last mission, aircraft factory, I can't say the name because it's in German. We had four gunners from a different crew that filled in for the ones of our crew that were either in the hospital or couldn't fly. The ball turret gunner couldn't fly because he had appendicitis or something like that. And the strange part was, at the time I didn't think that much of it, but since our plane was damaged, I think it ended up in the salvage depot, we were flying, we were sent to a plane-- I was in the 722nd Bomb Squad, we were sent to a plane in the 721st Squad. Didn't think much of it until after I got home and did some research and found out that-- I didn't even know it was the 721st Squad and plane at the time. And the ground crew told us, well, number four engine's only got thirty pounds oil pressure, where it should be sixty. And then we had two generators that were only putting out half the normal twenty-five amps that they should. And the pilot asked me, he said, "What do you think?" And I says, "We'll never make the target with it." But it was an all-out mission and he was a little bit of a chicken person, we flew. We never did get to the target. We lost number four engine because it blew a piston or something because of the lack of oil pressure. And the feathering of the plane, the propeller, we put the least resistance to the air, oncoming air. The hydraulic system was running the oil system and, course, when that blew, we lost the oil, we couldn't feather it. So we had this big pressure against this number four engine trying to make the plane go this way, instead of straight. Pilot decided to turn around. On this mission, as we did on the last few, flew up Yugoslavia up and then into Austria and then take a left turn into Regensburg, another left turn back home. We'd just crossed the north Yugoslavia border and the Austrian border when this happened and the pilot decided to turn around. We turned around and he told the bombardier to drop the bomb on some bare place, a river or brook or field or something, and he asked the navigator for a heading to go back home. We got back, and I forgot, we must have been near Zagreb. We got hit by flak real bad and our pilot was having trouble controlling the plane, he was losing one or two more engines he lost, couldn't keep it flying, couldn't keep it straight. Next thing we knew, we get hit with a flight of Me-109s, must have been three to five of them. I remember one coming head-on. Next thing I knew, the number four engine, the one that we'd had trouble with, was on fire, there was a fire in the wing. You know, get that much gasoline on fire, time to get out of there. So the pilot said bail out and we all bailed out.

JW: And this was over--

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AC: Northern Yugoslavia.

JW: Okay. Did everybody make it out?

AC: Everybody got out. And the strange part was three of us got captured, three of us, including me and two other gunners. And the other seven were fortunate enough to meet up with Tito's partisans and they followed them back south to an air base where the Allies used to fly in supplies for them and they'd pick up whichever air crews that made it back there, and bring them back to Bari, Italy. We weren't fortunate enough, we got captured.

JW: Well, did you have any trouble getting out of the plane?

AC: No, no. Had trouble getting one of the guys out of the plane, had to push him out.

JW: I can't imagine leaving willingly; but maybe looking at that wing on fire--

AC: Especially when you've never jumped before.

JW: Right, right. I just think it'd be terrifying.

AC: But you know, I free-fell. My first parachute jump, I free-fell because we had got stories back in the barracks where the Germans were shooting guys hanging in the plane and the parachutes, or they would fly right close to the top of it and create a vacuum and the parachute would collapse and they would just drop. I said that ain't gonna happen to me. Then to make matters worse, I'm coming down top of some kind of a house on this mountainside or hillside that I landed on. So I slipped my chute, to get off of that, away from there, and I hit the ground before it filled out again and I hit at an awful speed and that's why it damaged my left foot, the arch of my left foot. And I was landing on snow and I didn't realize I was landing on kind of a ledge area.

JW: So you landed. Was there anyone around you where you landed?

AC: Wasn't too far from this particular house. There was none of the other crew near me at the moment.

JW: And so you landed and got out of your chute?

AC: Got out of my chute and hid it and this and that. Course when we flew, we had what they call an escape kit, which included money, I forget whether it was fifty or a hundred dollars in ten dollar bills, something like that, a compass and there was like a handkerchief, but had a map on it of the area that you were flying in. And trying to talk to these Yugoslavians was like talking to a stone wall. Kept saying the word Zagreb, Zagreb, and I pointed to the map. Finally, a woman, I guess it was the wife of the family that lived there, pointed off in the direction where Zagreb was. And no sooner than that, the Germans that captured me came around the building and caught me. Course I couldn't move very good because I had trouble with-- and I was really trying to find a small, not a tree, but a shoot up that had a V that I could use for a crutch. I 16 couldn't. Oh, excuse me. Before the Germans captured me, the ball turret guy that filled in for us, came up, Ben Klinshaw. He came up the path and I told him, I said, "You better keep going." I said, "I can't walk very good." He said, "No, I'll stay." And then shortly thereafter, we got captured. Must have been four or five Germans. I think they were Germans, let me put it that way.

JW: Were they in uniform?

AC: They were in uniform. They had green uniforms on.

JW: Was that a pleasant experience? I don't know how to word it.

AC: No.

JW: Were they mean? What did they do? Did they just say--

AC: Well, they made us empty our pockets and stuff like that. I'm sure they didn't turn the money into their officers. And they went and they talked, questioned the family in the house there. And they looked around to see if there was anymore. I tried to tell them I had trouble with my foot, didn't bother them. So they walked us down the hill, took almost an hour to get down from where we were down to a road by a creek, there was like one of these Army trucks that we have, canvas covered backs, and they put us in there with more guards and took us to a local jail.

JW: But they didn't beat you?

AC: No, no, no.

JW: And they took you to a local jail in this town that you landed?

AC: Well, I don't know if I landed in this particular town or not, but the jail that I was in, I remember the name because it was on the railroad station. It was B-j-e-l-o-v-a-r, I can't pronounce it.

JW: How long did they hold you in that jail?

AC: The best way I can say it was two nights.

JW: And did they feed you?

AC: Stuff on a pie plate, ate a little bit of the bread, that's about all. I wouldn't touch the other stuff. It looked more like dog food.

JW: And then more soldiers came and picked you up from that jail?

AC: No, one guard came and picked us up. And course when they put us in that jail, they put us in separate cells, and not one next to each other, separated. And when they picked me and Ben Klinshaw up, I noticed the nose gunner was there, the third person that got captured. And I didn't hear him being taken in, so he must have been in the jail before we got there. They must have got him in jail before they got us there.

JW: Where did they take you from there?

AC: Well, then this Luftwaffe Air Force, German Air Force guard came down and was taking us to the railroad station. And I told him I wasn't getting any treatment for my foot, I'm having trouble walking, I couldn't walk fast enough. And I guess he was short of time so that's the only good German I ever met over there, he picked me up on his back and carried me to the railroad station. And we got on the train and we ended up in Linz, Austria, and spent the night in the jail up there. As we were walking towards the jail, went by some kind of an airfield and there was bomb holes, you know. And

the German guard could speak a little bit of English. He says, "Look what you Americans do." I said, "Did a good job, didn't they?" I don't remember what his answer was.

JW: Being a little brave there, aren't you?

AC: Well, I tend to be a little open mouth kind of.

JW: Well, then what did they do with you?

AC: Well, then the next day they put us on a train again and was a longer trip, almost a whole day. Went to Frankfurt, Germany, called Frankfurt-On-The-Main, a place called Dulag Luft, was an interrogation camp. I remember some pretty girls on the train with skis going skiing. Course we were down near the Alps there, so apparently were going on skiing trips. But they had us in a little room with two wooden bench seats that we were on.

JW: Did they have you handcuffed or anything?

AC: No, but they wouldn't let us talk to each other. Then we got to Frankfurt, we got off, and I think we rode a trolley for a little ways. Then we got off, we started walking, and a bunch-- this was early in the morning. I think it was an overnight trip because we got there in the morning. And there was some women on the street getting ready to go to work, I guess, waiting for transportation. They start throwing stones at us. The German guard hollered at them and they wouldn't stop, so he pulled his gun on them so they'd stop. That, I remember.

JW: And then they took you on into Dulag Luft?

AC: Yes.

JW: And what happened there?

AC: Well, when this happened, I don't know, they gave us a small box of stuff, mostly clothes and stuff like that. I remember they took our Army shoes, and there was a pair of cheap leather high shoes. What I mean high, above the ankles.

JW: High top?

AC: High tops. They weren't boot tops, just high tops. I think there might have been some pajamas in there, I'm not sure, maybe tooth brush or something like that, I don't remember. Was some kind of a Red Cross, International Red Cross parcel. And then we got interrogated one by one and they wanted to know where we were based, our bomb group and where we trained and this and that. And we were trained to say nothing but name, rank and serial number. And we gave them that, they put us in solitary confinement trying to get us to talk, then they'd bring us back for more questioning, but I never 18 went beyond my name, rank and serial number.

JW: And they never got rough with you?

AC: No. They weren't, I didn't get beat up or nothing, just got stuck in this solitary confinement with a window, little small window that was way above, you couldn't even look out of it. And the food, like I'd mentioned at the presentation, was basically a couple of black slices of bread in the morning with a cup of something called coffee, but they called it ersatz, and I read that it was basically made from acorns. And then at lunchtime, we got a watery soup, basically mostly a little bit of soup with a little piece of carrot.

JW: How long were you at Dulag Luft, you estimate?

AC: Best recollection was eight to ten days.

JW: I see. Did you get any medical treatment on your foot?

AC: Yeah, they put an ace bandage on it. That's the only medical treatment I got.

JW: And you were in solitary confinement the whole time you were there?

AC: The best of my recollection, yes.

JW: Okay. And then where did they send you and how?

AC: Then they took a bunch of us and they put us in box cars, quite a few of us in box cars, I mean we were quite packed in there. Then we went on a long trip, took good part of the week or the whole week. And went up to Luft VI, which at the time was in East Prussia of occupied Germany, but the location today is just over the border in Lithuania. And on the way, there was a couple of bombing missions where one time we were in the rail yard when there was an air warning come through, and the guards locked us up and they went to the bomb shelter, but they didn't bomb the railroad yard.

JW: That had to be a fairly tense moment?

AC: There was a few tense moments.

JW: I imagine so. And traveling by box car for a week is probably less than pleasant.

AC: Well, they let us off every once in a while. We'd take care of our toilet problems.

JW: They'd let you out of the box car, stop?

AC: Yeah, made stops somewhere along in a field.

JW: Fairly kind of them.

AC: Otherwise, there was just a pail in the box car.

JW: In the box car you were in, was everybody in there with you in fairly good shape?

AC: Good as could be. There was different variations 9

JW: Right. But there wasn't like anybody died in there with you?

AC: No, no, no.

JW: And they took you to Luft VI, is that what you said?

AC: Luft VI. Yeah, luft stands for air force.

JW: Right, right. Trying to remember, was it a fairly new camp?

AC: Yes, it was fairly new.

JW: I believe I've read that it was--

AC: It was fairly new. I can't tell you how many compounds, though. I think there was more than one because I seem to remember some Russians being inside of one fence. I think there was another compound there for Russians, but I'm not sure.

JW: I see. Were you there for awhile?

AC: Let's see, got shot down February 25th. Must have got up there, up there in March, early March, some time in early March. Mid-July, 1943, we could hear the guns and the Russians. We had our own hand built radio, some of the people knew how to put a radio together, had managed to put together with parts they could scrape and parts they could get from the guards, like trading cigarettes and stuff like candy with them. We knew what was going on, we were pretty well up to date on the news. We knew more than what the guards knew. And they took us, put us in box cars again for a trip less than a day up to the port of Memel, up on the Baltic Sea in Lithuania. And I don't remember how many was in that camp, be honest. Oh, while I was in Luft VI, guess what? I ran across a guy I went to school with.

JW: The same guy?

AC: Not the same guy, another guy, George Daniels. And then I ran across another fellow by the name of Francis Deary, which lives two towns away from where we came from. But his family

owned quite a dairy business in Dudley and they had couple of ice cream stands. And I remember going to the ice cream stand because they used to serve big scoops of ice cream there.

JW: Well, I was going to ask you, how was the treatment in Luft VI?

AC: Well, depends what you call treatment. You hardly ever get a chance to take a bath. We had louse crawling all over us. Only time they seemed to move is when we were trying to sleep at night. The food was no better. We were supposed to get Red Cross parcels once a week from the International Red Cross. I gave Carole a picture of what was in them. And we were lucky if we got them once a month. And sometimes when we got them, we had to split them among seven different POWs. And they locked us up at dusk, just after they counted us, and in the morning, they'd wake us up early at daybreak and count us again. At night when they locked us up, they had blinds, wooden blinds on the windows and they'd close them and lock them from outside. And then they would let police dogs roam around the compound at night. And the barracks were built about two feet off the ground, 20 dogs were running around sniffing and barking.

JW: What did you do all day?

AC: Mostly nothing, lot of guys played cards. After awhile we were there, International Red Cross came in to look the camp over to make a report on it. And they asked somebody what we wanted, so we ended up getting some musical instruments and we ended up getting some books. I did some reading. And the guys that could play musical instruments played by themselves or played in a little band. They did have a couple makeshift shows that they made up. I don't know which though. They played some kind of soccer or baseball. And playing ball one time, every POW camp had a rather high wall fence with a slanted barbed wire top on it. And eight or ten feet inside of that, there was another fence that was fifteen or so inches high, just a single wire, and we weren't supposed to get in that thing. And one day, one of the balls the guys were playing with, went a short ways in there. And a guy, without thinking, went in there to get it and the guard shot him without even asking a question, killed him.

JW: That's bad.

AC: And showers, we were lucky if we got one every two weeks. There was no bathroom facilities, we had like outhouse seats in back of the barracks.

JW: Well, let me ask you this strange question. Did showers affect lice at all? Could you take a shower and wash the lice off? Do lice come off in the shower?

AC: Not really.

JW: Okay. I just--

AC: Didn't give us enough time to clean them off.

JW: Well, they put you in box cars and moved you from Luft VI to where?

AC: Then we went up to Memel, on the Baltic Sea. We was put in the holds of two ships, stacked in there like sardines, you could barely move. No food, all they give us was a pail of water and another pail for toilet. You couldn't go up on the deck, although Warren Taylor over in Van Buren, says he went up, but I don't remember seeing anybody going up the ladder, course I wasn't watching the ladder all the time.

JW: Now, when did you meet Mr. Taylor? Did you meet him in Luft VI?

AC: I met him down here in Fort Smith about fifty years later.

JW: So you didn't ever--

AC: He keeps saying I never spoke to him, you know; but then I reminded him, I said, "You didn't speak to me until over fifty years later either, did you."

JW: So even though you had the same experience, you don't recall
21 meeting--

AC: Basically, he got shot down three or four days after I did.

JW: Do you recall the name of the ships in Memel? One of them was--

AC: If I looked on the computer, I could.

JW: One of them, I believe, was called the Insterberg.

AC: That's the one I was on.

JW: That's the one you were on.

AC: The other one was a different type ship. I forget the name, what type it was now, but it was a different type ship.

JW: Warren said the one he was on was an old coal carrier, and that it was real obvious that the hold had been full of coal recently.

AC: I couldn't tell you. I thought it was a coal boat, too.

JW: They may both have been for all I know.

AC: I know we were way down in the bottom. And that outside sheet of metal, that's what we were sitting on. I mean there was no false floor in there.

JW: And there was no benches or chairs or anything, you were just sitting on--

AC: No benches, no place to sit.

JW: Sitting on the bottom hull of the ship?

AC: Had to sit right on the bottom, yeah.

JW: And he witnessed mistreatment. Did you--

AC: What did he call mistreatment?

JW: Well, he said that six or seven guys had gone up the ladder and never came back. And he went up the ladder, and from the way he tells it, it implied that the guard grabbed him, trying to throw him overboard. There was a storm going on.

AC: Well, he was telling me the ship was rocking and he grabbed a small rope from going across and it came back, and I guess the guard forced him back down the ladder.

JW: Threw him through the hole and he fell on his shoulder and hurt his shoulder.

AC: I didn't see any of that, and if I did, I don't remember it.

JW: Right, right. Well--

AC: I tell you one thing happened. After I got home, I had so much trouble with the VA getting disability for the problems I had, I threw all my medals away and put a blank on it. And then 1985, I think it was '85 or thereabouts, I heard that the VA finally come out with a protocol examination for POWs for disabilities. And I had to fill out a form, I couldn't remember what bomb group I was in 2

JW: I can believe that.

AC: And that year, not that year, but about that time, I was a life member with the National Association of Ex-Prisoners of War. And the monthly magazine come out, and the guy I was captured with, his name was listed as just joining, and I wrote him and he filled me in.

JW: Well, I think that that had to happen a lot, I think there had to be a lot of guys come home--

AC: Some became alcoholics just trying to forget.

JW: Right. And I realize that I'm interviewing the people who could cope with all of it. The ones that couldn't cope have been gone.

AC: I've had days that I go in a shell and nobody can get near me.

JW: I'm not surprised. Well, Mr. Taylor implied that that boat trip was a real low point for him, he hated that.

AC: I remember it as three and a half days, but I can't say for sure if my memory's right or not. And I remember we didn't get any food, just water. And we finally got off the ship, place in Northern Germany called Swinemunde. I don't think it's called that today. Anyway, taken off the ship, they took our shoes, handcuffed us together and put us in box cars for a trip a short ways east into northern Poland to a place that was called Keifheid. We got off the train there and they gave us our shoes back, but still left us handcuffed together. And there was a bunch of angry young Marines there guided by a big red-headed German.

JW: Young German Marines?

AC: German Marines, with rifles and bayonettes. And they were led by a big redhead, which we gave him the name Big Stoop. And they also had police dogs. And they force run us, handcuffed together, up to Luft IV, which was some distance of about a mile or two miles from the railroad station outside a town called, at that time, called Grosstychow, it's northern Poland, about twenty-five miles south of the Baltic Sea.

JW: Well, I've read about this forced run.

AC: This is the forced run, this is not the big death march.

JW: No, but the forced run, which still infuriates Warren Taylor, he still gets mad when he describes that, he said these young kids with their bayonettes sticking everyone that came near them--

AC: As I mentioned at the presentation, one of the POWs ended up in Luft IV. And when we got up there, they put us temporary in tents. And one of the POWs had over fifty wounds on his body from punching marks from the bayonettes and from dog nips.

JW: Right. And--

AC: And not everybody was in the top of health.

JW: Right, right. Well, handcuffed--

AC: And handcuffed together 3

JW: --and barefooted.

AC: The guy I was handcuffed together was the nose gunner from Florida, he died in '81, Bill Booth, and I had to pull him along because he had a hard time making it.

JW: Well, you all had not just returned from the Riviera. It had been rough and then that happened. Well, that incident is written up fairly well.

AC: If you got a computer, I can give you a card with a web page site where you can get more information, and get pictures.

JW: I visited your web site.

AC: Have you?

JW: Yeah, I've already looked at that.

AC: Have you seen the pictures and the maps and everything on there?

JW: Yeah, yeah, that's good. Finally, you arrived not in style in Luft IV and that's up by the Baltic Sea?

AC: Uh-huh.

JW: And tell what happened when you got there.

AC: Well, like I say, we were housed in tents, sleeping on the ground. And I thought we may have-- almost a week in there because that was a fairly new camp, too. And then they assigned me and Warren, I think Warren Taylor, too, to Compound D, it was a four compound camp. Compound A was basically for sick people, people with injuries and stuff like that. And I remember the compound I was in, I think it was in Barracks 3 or 4, but I'm not sure, Warren said he was further around. But from my barracks looking down the length of the compound, there was some smaller buildings down there a little bigger than what we call sheds here, that they housed some Canadians in.

JW: Now, this is February or March of 1944?

AC: This is July, 1943.

JW: Okay. So the weather was not cold?

AC: Was not a problem, no.

JW: Okay, that's good. Good this wasn't happening in the middle of a winter.

AC: I just have a few memories of there. One was we had an electrical lightning storm, a heavy one. And one of the little buildings down there, we used to call them dog sheds but they were bigger than that, that housed the Canadians, and there was two, three Canadians that got electrocuted from the lightning storm. Another time I remember a German going up on a pole between a couple of compounds, trying to fix something up there, and he did something wrong and electrocuted himself, and we started clapping. And they forced us all back into our barracks. Another time I remember they set up a straw target in the middle of my compound. German guards were shooting at it with bullets ricking around and we all ran into the

barracks. And the food was no better, the Red Cross parcels didn't come any better. As far as communications back home, I got one package of cigarettes. The cigarette people had made up packages that they could be mailed. I only got one of them, they sent me more but I only got one. And I only got two or three letters, that's all, even though there was many more that were mailed. And the Red Cross parcels, I think the Germans were eating them themselves because of a food shortage. Another thing I remember, there was some kind of a practice dog fight. I think it was a practice dog fight, I don't remember seeing American allied planes up there, but at that distance you couldn't tell. But something happened to one plane and it crashed, the German plane crashed, you could hear explosions going on. But that wasn't in the camp, it was a ways away.

JW: Thank goodness for that. How long do you think you were at Luft IV?

AC: I was at Luft IV from July, about last half of July '43, until we were forced out when the Russians started moving again. And we moved out in different groups. My group, I thought, was around two thousand. Warren tells me his was about five hundred, so I may be wrong. Anyway, my group, the one I was in, we were warned a day or two before that. And what little possessions we had, some of us took a shirt, an extra shirt. We sewed the sleeves like straps, and we sewed the bottom of the shirt and then we tacked almost up to here so you could button a couple of buttons, put stuff in there, put that around our back. They did give us a Red Cross parcel when we left on that march, but that was February 6th, the middle of winter, snow on the ground. I remember sleeping on the ground a couple of times.

JW: In the snow?

AC: Yeah, under pine trees. Taking and breaking off boughs to put down and get a little protection, but lot of times we slept in barns. And the Germans over there, the farmers, they stored their vegetables in mounds, big long mounds. Oh, they must have been, I don't know, six feet high, something like that and about eight feet wide. And when we'd get a chance, we'd steal as much as we could, to eat them raw.

JW: Well, they weren't feeding you very well at all, if any?

AC: We had an American surgeon with us, doctor with us. And he wrote a story, his affidavit, which is on my web site, that on that march, we were lucky to get seven hundred and fifty calories a day. I remember getting potatoes and getting the standard black bread. I don't remember much more.

JW: And this was the start of that 81 day march?

AC: I say 81, but after recalculating, I think it was closer to around 79 for me.

JW: I've read 88, I've read 87, 81 5

AC: Some groups marched further, some marched almost down to Neuremburg.

JW: That could explain the difference of the dates.

AC: And they took different, some took different routes, too; but my particular one was from February 6th to April 26th, this was all 1945.

JW: That's a long time to be involved in something like that.

AC: And I've got a little booklet I printed here, the last one I have, I was going to give it to Carole because I thought she'd come today. It's got a listing of where we stop and go, and the total mileage, and it's over six hundred miles. But part of that total mileage was around a hundred and thirty-seven mile train trip from the Meulsen down to Altegrabow to Stalag XI-A where we had a break of a few days before we continued the march, but a long march. I can remember near the end of the march somewhere, I think it was in Praten, we were housed in a factory, some kind of a pottery factory. And twin engine American planes came over on a bombing mission. They came over our place, they opened up their bomb bay doors and we all scattered, everybody, the guards and everything. I ended up in a small cemetery nearby. And the Germans over there in the cemetery, every grave had a mound where somebody was buried. I laid down between two mounds until all the noise stopped, although there was a lot of noise because it was not too far away. And I understand it was either an ammo dump or a fuel dump they bombed, made an awful lot of noise. I think they were A-26s or B-26s.

JW: Did you think, like on that occasion, did you think about escaping in the melee that was going on?

AC: Where you gonna go, you don't know where to go, you don't know who to trust. We didn't know where the Americans were. Once we were on the march, we didn't know actually where the Americans were. It turned out they had stopped on the Elbe River and they were waiting for the Russians to catch up.

JW: Well, I know Warren Taylor escaped for like a number of hours and it didn't work out well for him, he didn't accomplish anything on his--

AC: He never told me that.

JW: He had a little bit of freedom and got recaptured.

AC: The only free time I had from them was during that bombing mission, which actually took them almost eight hours to get everybody back together again. I don't think anybody escaped, although there might have been some, I don't know. I haven't read of anybody that did.

JW: Well, that would just seem to me like if you were going to escape, there was the time to do it; but like you said, you don't know where you are, you don't know where to go.

AC: Don't know who to trust 6

JW: Don't know who to trust, so--

AC: Like when we were up first place up in Luft VI, where were we going to go? So far away.

JW: Right, right. And--

AC: Although some did try, from what I've read. Plus I've got two, three books written by Joseph O'Donnell from New Jersey that I bought from him. Got a couple of racks of books over there.

JW: Well--

AC: We finally convinced the Germans-- Like I say, we marched eastward from Luft VI, almost to Hamburg, that town called Uelzen, and we boarded box cars there and took a trip of about a hundred and thirty-seven miles, I think it was, according to the schedule made-- one of the guys in my group kept a record on back of cigarette packages. And then we got off at Altingrabau and there

was a stalag, which was an enlisted camp, and there was all kinds of POWs. There was some Indian people in there from India, and Gerkas and stuff like that. I remember they were strictly vegetarians. And we got one or two Red Cross parcels, and I remember exchanging things like butter with them for meat, because they don't eat meat. Anything that they could eat, I'd swap with them.

JW: Right, right. Well, were you liberated on the march or did you get to the destination?

AC: What happened was some of the fellows on the march started talking. This was latter part of April, started talking to the Germans and told them be better off to march to the Americans because they'd be treated better than they would by the Russians. I guess they convinced them because finally, April the 26th, the next thing I know, we're marching, the German guards don't have any guns. I said to somebody where's the guns, I don't know. And then we marched a ways, and then next thing you know, we're met by Americans in jeeps. And then jeeps, and then these canvas trucks, two ton trucks, two and a half ton trucks. And they come, they picked up the German guards, put them in there and took them off and some of the Americans gave us-- and this was on the eastern side of the Elbe River. I forget the name of that little town right now, there's a name for it, but I can't remember it, have to go through some of the records. And we crossed the river and it turned out to be the 104th Tank Division National Guard from Wisconsin, that fed us and they showed us their tanks and their equipment and this and that, yakketty-yak, and they asked us a lot of questions. Spent the night there at a school, what used to be a school at one time, and then next day, we were taken to a nearby town for delousing. Went into the shower, it smelled like kerosene. Took a good one of that, then they gave us a hot shower and they gave us all a new set of clothes. And some time later that day, we were taken and put on planes, C-46s, I think they were, twin engine planes and was taken to Rheims, France. I'm not sure how to spell Rheims, whether it's got an H in it or not. I always spelled it R-e-i-m-s, but it may 27 have an H in it, might be R-h-e-i-m, I'm not sure. And spent one place there and I can't tell you what kind of a place it was, I don't know, we had to go upstairs to it anyway. They allowed each POW fifteen minutes telephone call to somebody back home. And I don't remember whether we spent the night there or not. We got up, maybe not, then I think we were trucked to Camp Lucky Strike on the coast of France, not on the actual coast but in a little ways.

JW: Right, right.

AC: Some town called C-a-n-y, I can't find it on the map, but that's what I remember.

JW: Well, that had to be--

AC: But being free, that was the best thing I ever had in my life.

JW: I bet. And it seems to me, after talking to Warren Taylor, it seems to me like one minute you were a prisoner-of-war, and the next minute you're free and that had to be--

AC: Not totally free, but we weren't under guard.

JW: Right, right. But it just seemed, first of all, seems wonderful, I bet it was wonderful.

AC: It was a wonderful feeling, as compared to the time we were captured. Then you think, wow, what's going on now. And then we got to Lucky Strike, and they spent I don't know how long, couple of weeks, three weeks, that and maybe more, I don't know, fatten us up. I've lost track of time now. Because I, myself, had lost over a third of my weight and a lot of the others had, too. And we didn't do any labor like some of the enlisted men, the ground troops that were captured were in the ground troop camps, stalag camps, they had to do work. But we didn't do any, the only work we had was that march and lost a third of our weight, so you can imagine. And they wouldn't let us, we had to eat chicken without any condiments, no salt, no nothing, stuff like that, trying to refatten us up. And they had the Red Cross wagons there and I'd go over and try and get a frap with some donuts. And I remember, they had the names of the girls in the USO, there was one girl from East Woodstock, which is maybe a town away from where I come from. And I meant to look her up because I had a friend in East Woodstock, to see if they knew each other, and I never made it. But I didn't do that much except a lot of hanging around in Lucky Strike. And course, they eat whatever they fed us, but they fed us only certain foods, couldn't eat a lot of the other stuff that most people put on food. Basically, to fatten us up and I don't think they dared send us home the way we were.

JW: Right. Well, I'm sure that probably there was some people in such bad shape that they might have died if they'd have just jumped right in the middle of a buffet and ate everything.

AC: Well, yeah. Your stomach couldn't take it because your stomach has shrunk from that lack of food. You had to gradually get it back 28 to normal again.

JW: Well, what'd they do with you after Lucky Strike?

AC: Well, then on June 6, they trucked us down to the Port of LeHavre, France, put us in a liberty ship, at least my group, and we left the Port on June 6.

JW: Did that ship have a name or was it just--

AC: Must have had a name, but I don't remember if it was or not. At the time, it didn't interest me, I was just going home, that's all.

JW: That's all you cared about.

AC: I do remember two or three days out of port, we ran into some awful rough water. Didn't appear to be a storm, just be rough water. I think it's where the Gulf Stream and another stream comes up, they just twirled.

JW: Turbulent?

AC: And that ship was rolling like this. We had to stay in our own bunk room, basically leaning on our bunk and hanging on. And I was told that that ship rolled more than the safety limit. Lucky it didn't roll over it rolled so much. And if you tried to go to the latrine or the bathroom, you couldn't go in there. There was about a foot of water swooshing around in there. Finally after, I don't know, day, day and a half, two, woke up and it was nice, seemed nice and calm and everything. Got up and walked out on the deck and the water was almost smooth as glass, just little undulation, and there were porpoises jumping along the ship. It was pretty, was real pretty.

JW: I bet it was.

AC: Well, we hit New York Harbor on June 13th and we landed on the New Jersey side and they trucked us to Camp Kilmer. I remember going to a movie there, and I can't tell you what movie it was, but they did some kind of questioning there. Next thing I know, I was put on a train back to Massachusetts to Fort Devons, where I entered the service. Went through a mediocre physical exam which really didn't amount to much and given a little better bit of money. I think we got to Lucky Strike, we got fifty dollars. Might have got another fifty dollars when I got back in the States. They said we'd get the rest of our back money after we were home. And we were given a sixty day leave, and I got transportation, I think it was a train to Worcester, then I bought a ticket on a bus to Southbridge and came home. Sure nice to be back in my home area again. And as I said, my great aunt and uncle took me in there after my mother was going to put me in an orphanage, and I was still living with them. And got home with her, my uncle was still working, was at work, and she asked me about it. And I started telling her about it, she couldn't believe me. I just shut up. And then about forty years later, I ran across a book or two about prisoner-of-war experience. But sadly, they were all dead, I could have backed myself up with. That's when I started writing what I did 9

JW: Well, my father never talked about World War II.

AC: There's a lot of veterans that won't talk.

JW: He died at fifty-five. If he'd have lived to be eighty, I know I've interviewed guys that said that they didn't think about it until about ten years ago, and it started. It was all right then to examine that part of their life.

AC: Well, after I got that experience with my aunt, I could see it in her eyes, she didn't understand me. But people were brought up not to treat people that way. And unless you'd gone through it, you can't understand it. And even to this day, I will not say everything. It's a real bad experience. I wouldn't wish it on anybody.

JW: Well, the good thing is that you made it.

AC: I'm one of the lucky ones. That's the way I look at it, I was lucky. But I'll tell you one thing, it's made me a survivor. I don't wait for somebody to do something for me. I've learned to do it myself.

JW: Well, after you got back home, what did you do? I'm sure, I mean you rested, you partied, you had a good time.

AC: I wanted to get home. After I got home, I didn't want to leave the house. I was kind of ashamed to go out in the public. Took me almost about a week. And I had a girlfriend when I went in the service. Was almost a week or ten days before I went down to see her. She lived two towns away, two, three towns away, Putnam, Connecticut. And she said, "What took you so long?" I said, "I'm just trying to get used to being home." She couldn't understand. Anyway, that was the last time I saw her.

JW: Well, not that we live in the most understanding world now, but definitely in the last fifty or sixty years, we understand more about traumatic experiences.

AC: Well, you've had more wars since then to get, you know, the other war before that, 1918, was too far away for people to remember, they weren't even living in those periods. But then I got into

drinking and getting my days on and off, then I got my back-pay and I bought a car. And I visited some of the few friends that were around, mostly women folks because the men folks were all in the service, although a couple came home on leave while I was there, so we'd get together and have fun. And I was home V-J Day and was on leave during V-J Day and that's when everything stayed wide open all night long.

JW: I bet that was a hell of a party in every town.

AC: I slept at a married woman's house with couple of other guys and two other girls. We all got together and ended up there, spent the night there after we got done celebrating. The funny part, that night, another friend asked me to call this woman. She was married, he wanted a date. I called her up and she says, "Hi, Jim." I didn't even tell her who I was, she recognized me. I hadn't spoken to her since I got out of high school 0

JW: Some people can do that.

AC: Well, last December on the Internet, I got the address and phone numbers of four people that was in my high school class that were still living. Called them, they remembered me, and most of them I hadn't talked to since 1939.

JW: Amazing how that works. Well, did you want to go back to school or did you get a job or--

AC: Well, I was so mixed up. I passed up the opportunity to get free school and college. In retrospect, I wish I had but it's too late now. My mind was too befuddled, I didn't do that. I went back to my original job. The weaver and shuttles going back and forth, I couldn't stand the noise, and to this day, I can't stand noise. Everytime I hear a noise, I have to ask my wife where's that coming from because I have trouble pinpointing where the source is. So then I went around different jobs and I ended up as a steel-fitter. Kind of a noisy one, but wasn't as bad as being a weaver, and most of my life after that was one form of working with metal, except for couple of times when I was in business for myself for short periods of time. I had a Service Master franchise for awhile. And then before that, not too long after I got out of the service, I had one of these bread and pastry routes you go around house-to-house, but I had to give that up because it got so that they were only buying and charging me when they couldn't go to the stores and pay cash and gave that up. And then supermarkets started coming in and prices were cheaper. Went back working in the factory again. We were home on that sixty day leave and near the end of it I got a thick envelope from the War Department. I said, oh, boy, they're catching up with me with double-issue, because some of the stuff I got double-issues on. But turned out, they didn't have room for me, told me to take another thirteen days. I was home on leave so long that some of the guys had two leaves in the time I was

there and some people thought I was AWOL. And then I got sent to Atlantic City, New Jersey, on the Boardwalk in a hotel there for more de-briefing. I was there in September of '45 when they had the Miss America Pageant. I saw all of that except the last one on Saturday night when they actually gave out the prize. I had my car with me and I used to come home on Friday. After de-briefing, they shipped me to an air base in Fort Dix or near Fort Dix. And they tried to ask me to re-enlist for another three years, even giving me a thousand dollar bonus. I said no because I can't stand no more regimentation. So I was assigned as a chauffeur in a motor pool, driving doctors and officers around. Then I got assigned to New Jersey, a discharge base they had in New Jersey. I got discharged September 26th, 1945. The strange part is I got discharged, I only had three medals. As I told you, I had trouble with the VA, and after I got out of the service, I threw away a lot of the stuff I had. So back in the '80s, mid '80s or late '80s, I asked for a re-issue, which you're entitled to, I found out you're entitled to one re-issue, I ended up with seven medals 1

JW: Well, somewhere in there, I assume you got married and had some children?

AC: After I got discharged, got discharged September 26, 1945, got married February 16, 1946. Had one child, had a stillbirth after that and then she had all the baby works taken out because there was damage. The wrong woman, I was told not to marry her and I didn't listen. I was just trying to get away from my aunt and uncle and living more or less on our own. It didn't work out, it lasted about twenty-six, twenty-seven years, we got a divorce.

JW: You were married twenty-six or twenty-seven years? I see. I thought you were going to tell me two months, so I see.

AC: No, no, no. Then I got remarried again down here, 2004, the beginning of 2004.

JW: You had one child and now you have grandchildren--

AC: Got one child and I got five grandchildren and I got five great- grandchildren.

JW: Do they live around here?

AC: No, they're all spread out. My favorite grandchild lives at Van Buren and her son, my great-grandchild, he's twenty-two, he's in the college up in Fayetteville.

JW: How did you get to Fort Smith from Massachusetts?

AC: Well, I was living alone and I'd been living alone for a while, and I hadn't worked since March 31st, 1981. So I visited my granddaughter a few times down here, I'd fly down every summer and visit her. And then she had my first grandchild and next thing I know, I moved down here to be close to somebody that liked me.

JW: That's as good a reason as any. Well, have you attended reunions or anything like that?

AC: I went to one, my Bomb Group reunion. I had one in 1988 up in Massachusetts which was about thirty miles from where I lived at the time. Went that first night there, they had a banquet, didn't know anybody there and I went home and I didn't go back for the rest of it. After I moved down here and lived here for a while, I started going again in '97 and I've been going every year since then. We have one in a different city every year, last year was Reno.

JW: What kind of reunion is this?

AC: My World War II Bomb Group, my outfit, which consists of four Bomb Squads and their ground crews. But there ain't too many of us left. That's my air crew up there. There's only three of us living.

JW: Well, have you got any words of wisdom for the folks in the future? That's kind of a big question to ask you out of the blue.

AC: Well, it all depends what they're going to do. I don't know what to say. I don't believe we should be in Iraq, though. I think that's a losing proposition, that's a civil war. I mean we went over there first, supposedly because they had weapons of mass destruction, that 32 turned out to be false. Then we went over to get rid of Hussein; well, they've done that, he's been hung. What are they going to do now? They can't create a government because they can't get the factions together. It's up to them. It's my philosophy that this government, this country, is sticking their nose in too many other countries' business. They don't realize that they don't want them countries coming over here and telling us how to live, so why should we go over there and tell them how to live. We're creating more enemies.

JW: I said that myself. Do you think if any of our leaders at the moment had ever been in a war, that they might have--

AC: That's the problem, they haven't been.

JW: They might have--

AC: That's the problem, they haven't been. Oh, they might have been in one or two, but in the upper echelon, no, no. They're all big BS men, businessmen with bucks, and they take care of themselves. That is hard to understand. You got to be in their position to understand. A lot of people try to figure out things that they have no idea how to figure out. And unless you're in their exact situation, you can't get a true answer. I've learned that from being a prisoner-of-war. Nobody can really understand what being a prisoner-of-war is unless they have been one themselves. Oh, they can read books, but lot of times what they read, they don't believe anyway.

JW: Right. Well, that's why I've had men tell me that-- they'd tell me a little or they'd tell me a lot, and I've always told them that this is your deal and you control it and you say what you want and don't say what you don't want because I wasn't there. And as hard as I can try to imagine it, I know I can't even lift a hair on anybody's arm.

AC: That's as true as it can be.

JW: So people should understand that better.

AC: Can't be any truer than that. I'm a better writer than I am a talker. Like I got up Sunday to give a good speech and I cut it down to almost nothing. I had a cheat sheet and everything.

JW: I enjoyed that, but that was a hard-- there was something we haven't got the format down right yet on how to make that a better thing; but it's a good thing anyway.

AC: I was wondering, since there was so much lack of questions, whether a lot of those people just went for the refreshments.

JW: Well, I think a lot of the people--

AC: Are there that many members that went there?

JW: No, our membership doesn't really turn out for anything. I think a lot of those people in the audience were wives and children, and they didn't have any questions because they know, I know they've been--

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AC: Well, they know up to the point of what they were told. But it's a known fact that most veterans won't talk.

JW: Well, if we'd have had an audience of young people, then maybe they would have had a lot of questions, or maybe they would have set there totally confused, not understanding any of it. We're about to run out of tape, but something I found, fifty years ago, you didn't turn to somebody and say, oh, I was in World War II because everybody was in World War II. I mean there was something wrong if-- if my friend's father wasn't in World War II, you automatically thought, well, wonder what was wrong with him. And so the sheer numbers seem to make it not special. And finally, we've figured out that it was special and that guys like you deserve a little attention, a little pat on the back and a thank you for taking years of your youth, the best time to be alive, and spending it bombing people or being in a POW camp or something like that, that's special.

AC: It's just like everything else in World War II, it's always way too late. They were way late giving the prisoners-of-war their disabilities, owning up to it. Even today, they don't give the disabilities that they should. But I got lucky, and I just turned eighty-six this month, and I still get around without a crutch or a cane or a walker.

JW: Yeah, I think you got some more years left.

AC: Like I told the doctor, "I'm going to live to at least a hundred," and he said, "I think you are."