

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
William Crabb
B-17 Gunner and Prisoner of War, WWII
1994

OH
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Crabb, William, (1921-1998) Oral History Interview

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (54 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (54 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

William W. Crabb, a Madison, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a member of the 100th Bomb Group, 349th Bomb Squadron with the Army Air Corps and his experiences as a prisoner of war. He recalls training at Scott Field (Illinois) as a radio operator and attending mechanics school. He volunteered to be an aerial gunner and talks about his assignment to the 100th Bomb Group and several months of training in Idaho prior to landing in England. He provides a sketch of military life in England, and details a typical mission. He relates his experience as a German POW in Stalag XIIA and XVII (Austria), food shortages, role of the Red Cross, experiences with other allied prisoners, healthcare, and successful and unsuccessful escape attempts. He describes the march from prison camp to Brunow (Austria) where the prisoners were abandoned by the German guards, return to England, and eventual return to the States where he was discharged. Crabb did not use any aspects of the GI Bill and because he was unhappy with civilian life, reinlisted in the military ultimately serving a 20-year career. Crabb mentions his second venture into the military including flying support for the Berlin Airlift, and the Korean War.

Biographical Sketch

Crabb, (December 12, 1921-1998) served with the Air Force in World War II, and later during the Berlin Airlift and Korean War. His highest rank was a Master Sergeant and he retired from service in 1964.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1997.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2001-2002.

Today's date is December 20, 1994. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. William Crabb, of Madison, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force in World War II.

Mark: Good morning, Mr. Crabb.

Crabb: Good morning.

Mark: How are you doing this morning?

Crabb: Very good, Mark.

Mark: Let's start from the very beginning I guess. Perhaps you can tell me about where you were born and a little bit about your upbringing.

Crabb: I was born in Hamilton, Ohio and raised in Madison.

Mark: When did you come to Madison?

Crabb: Well, I don't really know when we came to Madison. I was just a baby. I think we stayed in Hamilton, Ohio maybe a month or two. And my mother is from Wisconsin.

Mark: You were born in--

Crabb: Hamilton, Ohio.

Mark: 1921?

Crabb: 1921.

Mark: So you were born in 1921. So, you remember the Depression. Perhaps you had to get a job in the Depression for example. Did that affect you and your family much?

Crabb: The Depression affected everybody. My dad worked all through it. It surely affected everyone.

Mark: What did your father do?

Crabb: My father worked for the Industrial Commission of the State of Wisconsin.

Mark: You must have finished high school in '39?

Crabb: 1939.

Mark: What did you do when you first got out of high school, for a living? Did you seek a military career? That's the kind of thing I'm looking for.

Crabb: I worked as a gas station attendant for a while and then I joined the Air Corps February 19, 1941.

Mark: So, before Pearl Harbor.

Crabb: It was before Pearl Harbor, right.

Mark: What prompted you to join the military, and the Air Corps particularly?

Crabb: Actually, I was trying to get into the Navy. The Navy and the Air Force had offices down in the Post Office and one day I went down to try the Navy and they were closed. The Air Corps was there and I joined them.

Mark: Was it an economic decision on your part?

Crabb: Partly, I was working in the gas station.

Mark: Is there something that attracted you to military life? Or was it fascism and the Nazi's?

Crabb: No, that had nothing to do with it. Adventure, I think.

Mark: So, you went into the service in February of '41.

Crabb: '41.

Mark: Could you describe your entry into military service? Where did you get sworn in, where did you take your physical, where did you get your haircut? And, where did you do your basic training?

Crabb: I was sworn in Milwaukee, joined in Madison, then they sent us to Milwaukee to be sworn in and from there we went down to Scott Field.

Mark: Scott Field?

Crabb: Illinois. Actually, the entry base at that time was Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, but they just closed that up because of a yellow jaundice outbreak or something like that, so they just shipped us across the river to Scott Field.

Mark: Now that you mention it, I have heard of that place.

Crabb: A very old base. I think it was a balloon base during World War I.

Mark: What sort of training did you undergo?

Crabb: At Scott Field I went to Radio Operator and Mechanics School and after I graduated from there they shipped me out to California.

Mark: Did you have any of the standard boot camp sort of? I joined the Air Force we had six weeks. We marched around.

Crabb: Well kind of yeah. That's what we did. I don't know how long it went on. I was in a school squadron at Scott Field and that's really about all I did was march around until I went over to the school.

Mark: Was there like yelling and screaming?

Crabb: Not much.

Mark: So, you went where in California?

Crabb: McClellan Field in Sacramento.

Mark: What did you do there? This was your first duty station.

Crabb: I just kept practicing code. I sat in the code room all the blessed day long, copying the codes. Some guy sitting up there sending. When they figured I was good enough, they sent me down to another base.

Mark: Where was that?

Crabb: That was what they called Muroc Dry Lake, which is now Edwards Air Base. Test base.

Mark: Was it different duty than what you had?

Crabb: Well, it was point-to-point radio operator.

Mark: Was this still mostly training?

Crabb: Well when I went to Muroc, then I went to work. They accepted my training and put me to work in a point-to-point radio station.

Mark: Between what points? What was the purpose of these communications? Would it be with the test pilots or--

Crabb: No, it was point--March Field was the closest base to Muroc and we just worked--

Mark: So, you were there until Pearl Harbor then.

Crabb: No, I was at Scott Field during Pearl Harbor.

Mark: You did move around a lot. Did you go back to Scott for training or was it just a duty station?

Crabb: No, Scott Field I was going to school, radio school.

Mark: Again?

Crabb: I don't recall the dates I started the school, but I didn't get out of the school until after Pearl Harbor.

Mark: I'm interested in your reaction to the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It's one of those things like the Kennedy assassination or whatever that sticks in people's mind. At the risk of sounding cliché, I wonder if you could describe to me, as you recall--

Crabb: On that day we got to go into St. Louis. A group of us, with a fellow from Madison who had a car and he drove us into St. Louis and none of us had a pass. We just took off and another fellow from Madison was married and we went down to his apartment and had breakfast and then we went into St. Louis and we were going across the bridge and the radios in those days were not nearly what they are now. As we went across the bridge, the static just blocked out the radio. We came across the bridge and came out away from the bridge and all of a sudden we heard the announcement on the radio. "All military people return to your base. There has been a bombing of Pearl Harbor." We had no idea what Pearl Harbor was or where or anything, but we continued on into St. Louis and spent the rest of the day there. Then when we finally went back to the base, I think we got in around midnight, we came up to the gate and we had no passes and MP at the gate said, "Get your ass into your barracks right now." He didn't even ask for a pass. That was it.

Mark: How does life in the military change after Pearl Harbor? I imagine there was a lot more activity.

Crabb: Well, I don't know as it changed any. We were getting some pretty intensive training in code reception and it didn't really change a bit. We just kept training and when they decided you were good enough, they sent us to a radio station.

Mark: Were there a lot of new people coming in?

Crabb: No, I don't think so. We ran into that before, sometime before I started going to school, they had a program where people could, they used to call them draft dodgers in those days. They could enlist for one year and then they wouldn't have

to worry about the draft. A lot of people did that. They sent up a tent city at Scott Field and they came in there. That was the only input that I can recall.

Mark: I see. When did you get trained as an aerial gunner and when did you finally go overseas?

Crabb: Sometime when I was at Muroc, I applied for pilot training and was accepted and was sent to Santa Maria, California for pilot training and I didn't pass. They washed me out of pilot. Got out of Santa Maria and applied for gunnery training and they accepted me for that and I went to Las Vegas for gunnery training. I don't know, it was four or five weeks or something like that. From there I was sent to the air base where they had bombers and sent to a bomber squadron.

Mark: This is out west somewhere?

Crabb: It was out in Boise, Idaho. I was assigned to a B17 crew, from then on, we were at war we started.

Mark: This was the same crew that you went to Europe with?

Crabb: Right.

Mark: Was your plane named?

Crabb: No, we had no--at this time we just flew a plane that--they had assigned us a flight and a pilot and the crew stayed together except for the pilot, they'd keep shifting the pilots around trying to give pilots some training at the time. We went through from Boise, Idaho we went to a place called Wendover, Utah, which was a pretty bad place.

Mark: Why was that?

Crabb: Well, it was out on the salt flats, near the Nevada state line. We could walk up to Nevada at night and go into the gambling halls, but the rest of the time, Wendover, Utah was pretty bad. It was the worse place I ever did in the service.

Mark: I suppose there were no social outlets?

Crabb: Oh, no.

Mark: What did you do for fun? Or, did you train--

Crabb: No, actually when we had time, when we weren't flying the next day, we'd walk up to Nevada and go into the gambling house and they had a good restaurant

there, we'd have a steak or a few drinks. But, actually, most of the time, I'd gamble in the squadron day room. I was a great card player.

Mark: Poker?

Crabb: Poker and black jack.

Mark: So when did you finally get overseas? It couldn't have been too much longer.

Crabb: Went overseas in--it was three phases of training. First phase was at Wendover, Utah, the second phase--let's see--I don't remember where the second phase was. The third phase was Sioux City, Iowa but when we finished up our third phase they all of a sudden broke us up and sent all of the combat crews out to various stations as training crews. That lasted six months I guess. Then they brought us back together again and we went overseas in June of 1943. They gave us a new airplane at some place in Nebraska, Kearney, Nebraska. They gave us a brand new airplane and said, "OK, you're going overseas" and we started off overseas.

Mark: I got a couple of questions before we get into the air war over Germany. I was wondering if you could describe some of the members of the crew. The Captain, your fellow enlisted people and how everyone got along, where they came from and all that.

Crabb: We all got along pretty good. The pilot, we changed pilots after we got overseas but the rest of the crew, the engineer came from Indiana, the armor gunner came from Indiana, tail gunner was from Michigan and I was from Wisconsin. The co-pilot was from Janesville, Wisconsin.

Mark: Sounds like a Midwestern bunch in there.

Crabb: Yeah. It really was. The bombardier was from Dixie somewhere, Alabama maybe and the navigator was from, I think, California.

Mark: On this airplane there are officers and enlisted personnel. In the military you're not supposed to fraternize. I would imagine in a situation like this, there--

Crabb: Never when we were on duty did we fraternize.

Mark: That's what I was wondering. You didn't go to the club? Things were separate?

Crabb: No.

Mark: How were things on the plane? Was discipline strict? Were you on a first name basis?

Crabb: No, I was never on a first name basis with any of the officers. Our original pilot was named Alonzo P. Adams, III and he was pretty strict. He didn't like us, I never knew why. But when we got overseas we got a new pilot named Vanoy and he was an easygoing guy. The navigator and the bombardier were officers and they could care less what was going on. They were nice fellows, but we didn't go to town together or anything like that.

Mark: I was also wondering about your impressions of the B17. What did you think of the airplane?

Crabb: I can remember the first time I flew in an airplane. They sent me; I didn't know what I was doing,

Mark: Was this after you joined the service?

Crabb: Yeah. This was in Boise, Idaho and they said "OK, you're flying tonight" I said, "Great, where do I go?" They said, "You go out here to the line" and they gave me an air plane number and said, "Go get on the airplane." That's all I knew. So, I got on the airplane and the rest of the crew came on and they had a radio room in the B17 so I sat down by the radio and all of a sudden we took off and I could feel the power of that airplane. Boy, I just couldn't get over it--how powerful it was.

Mark: What's it like inside of there?

Crabb: Pretty barren. In the radio room we had a desk and the radio was behind the desk, behind the seat of the desk and to the right was another seat and those were the only seats in the airplane except for the pilot. The navigator and bombardiers had seats but nobody else did.

Mark: Now, I've seen, down in the Museum here, I've seen some heavy wool coats and these kinds of things. Was it really that cold in those airplanes?

Crabb: Sheepskins. And they didn't keep you warm. You get up to 30,000 feet nothing will keep you warm. "Cause all the windows were open, well they weren't windows, the waist were windows on either side and they were always open--they were taken out as a matter of fact--you had a blast of cold air coming through--at 30,000 feet it's 50 below zero. If you're not moving around you're getting cold. They had heated suits. If you didn't wear a heated suit, you're in trouble. A lot of people froze their toes.

Mark: I was going to ask, was there a problem with frost bite and those kinds of things?

Crabb: Yes. I froze my toes one time. From then on I wore a heated suit.

Mark: Did you keep your toes?

Crabb: Yes.

Mark: You went overseas then in early '43.

Crabb: June of '43.

Mark: Did you fly the plane over?

Crabb: Yup.

Mark: What sort of route did you take?

Crabb: We left from Bangor, Maine, flew up to Goose Bay, Labrador, stayed overnight and then we flew to Greenland and from Greenland we went to Iceland and from Iceland to Scotland and then down to England.

Mark: Sounds like an interesting trip.

Crabb: Oh, yeah, it was.

Mark: So, where did you land in England?

Crabb: We landed in Scotland and I can't remember the name of that air base. Then we went from there down to England at Midland, which is near Norwich.

Mark: I was going to ask which air base were you at East Anglia.

Crabb: I can't remember the name of the base. Eye and Dis were the towns. We were between Eye and Dis. That's where the railroad depot was. I can't remember the name of the town.

Mark: You were taken prisoner then in August. So you didn't fly too many missions.

Crabb: I went down on my 7th mission.

Mark: Between your arrival and--how much time was there between your arrival and your first mission? Did they get you flying right away?

Crabb: We went off on the - first they called a practice mission. We flew decoy for a regular mission. Then we flew on a mission to Bremen, Germany sometime in June and our squadron lost three airplanes and crews on that mission and that was the beginning because from then on 100th [Bomb Group] really took it. They called it Bloody 100th.

Mark: I want to come back to the air war, but I am interested in your experiences in England. Did you get off the base much? Did you have much contact with the English?

Crabb: Well, I didn't have much contact with the English people, no. I'd get off the base every night almost. We'd go down to the pub and drink warm beer and gin and rum and whatever they had. When the Americans got there they'd run out by 9:00. You drank beer because that's all they had left. That was pretty bad.

Mark: But you didn't have much contact with the English people? Cause there is the old phrase, "overpaid, oversexed, and over here;" now you didn't have that much opportunity to get out there.

Crabb: I guess the opportunity was there but I didn't take advantage of it.

Mark: So, it was your 7th mission. I'm interested if you could describe a typical mission. Like what time in the morning did you get up and how were things organized and when did you take off?

Crabb: Well we got up early, they came around and woke us up maybe 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning and we'd get up and go to the Mess Hall and from there we'd go to a briefing. Then we'd get on trucks and go to our airplane. Usually they would take off early in the morning, 6:00 or 7:00 or something like that.

Mark: Did you circle around and wait to form up or?

Crabb: Well, yeah. You took off and formed up the group and then we went to a point on the English coast and the groups formed up into a wing and when the wing got finally formed, we'd take off for Germany. It was a long, laborious time.

Mark: So, it's like maybe five hours to get to the German coast. What happened on this airplane?

Crabb: As far as us gunners, all we did was ride along until we got headed out over the Channel and the pilot would say, "Test your guns." and we'd test fire our guns and then we'd go on in. Drop our bombs and turn around and come back.

Mark: One of the things you see in the movies about the air wars is how the flack in the anti-air defenses. I'm interested in your impressions of the...

Crabb: I only saw bad flack once and that was over the Ruhr Valley. Oh, boy, that was bad. Just a black cloud of it ahead of us and I could see it from my turret, I could see the cloud up there and say, "we're not going through that are we?" and we'd go through it.

Mark: Shake the airplane and all that?

Crabb: Oh, yeah.

Mark: There really wasn't much fighter escort at this time.

Crabb: None.

Mark: How far into Germany did you penetrate?

Crabb: On our last mission we went all the way into Germany, east of Munich and instead of going back to England, we turned and went south and went across the Mediterranean. We were supposed to have been in North Africa. We didn't get to North Africa.

Mark: How come?

Crabb: That was the Regensburg raid and that was the first Schweinfurt on that day too.

Mark: On that very same day?

Crabb: On that very same day.

Mark: Now you weren't involved in Schweinfurt?

Crabb: No. We didn't go to Schweinfurt. See, what the plan was, Regensburg would go in first, draw off all the fighters and then Schweinfurt would go in. Schweinfurt was supposed to be five to ten minutes behind us. Well, it was bad weather and Schweinfurt didn't get off the ground. LeMay was our commander and he had all the pilots in his division trained for take off on instruments. So when our time came, we took off. It was fog, you couldn't see ten feet. But he had them all trained for instrument take-off and we took off and headed out. We got up to altitude and we had just a beautiful, clear day. Schweinfurt never did get off the ground until the afternoon. Of course, they planned on us drawing off the fighters and we succeeded as far as fighters coming up, but of course they went down and rearmed by the time Schweinfurt got there. They got them both.

Mark: Were the fighters more effective than say the flack?

Crabb: Flack by itself, wouldn't knock down the airplanes. But flack would damage an airplane and then the fighters would come in and the two of them would - it's quite a combination.

Mark: I was wondering if you could describe what you--you were being shot down--I assume you were shot down.

Crabb: Actually, no. We had a lousy airplane. Just before we crossed the coast of Holland or Belgium, I don't know which, we lost one engine. When we got to the IP, the initial point, we lost another engine. So, we were on two engines and we dropped our bombs and headed down across the Alps and got down to the Mediterranean and we lost the third engine and that was it. We couldn't go on one engine, so we ditched the airplane and got off Sicily. Then we got into life rafts and the Germans came out and picked us up. We got into a life raft and cranked the Mae West radio all blessed nightlong and they said they got tired of listening to it and came out and picked us up.

Mark: The Germans did?

Crabb: The Germans did, yeah. That was the day Sicily fell.

Mark: Is that right? To the Americans. Patton was--that was just some bad luck on your part. So they brought you back to Germany. Perhaps you could describe the trip into Germany. With POWs in the Pacific, you hear about the Bataan Death March and the retaliations taken out on the part of the Japanese on the Americans and the Germans didn't treat the Russians or Poles very well. I'm interested in how the Germans treated you.

Crabb: Well, they took everybody on my crew except for the bombardier and me, sent them up to Germany. I don't know how they got up there. The bombardier and I went up--we were assigned to a German Sergeant with a few privates and put on a train and went up to Frankfurt where they had a interrogation center. Duaglift it was called. It was run by the British prisoners. It was kind of a nice place but they interrogated there. Then put us in prison camps and eventually sent us down to Bavaria to a prison camp down there.

Mark: Stalag XVII.

Crabb: No. Actually the first one was Stalag VIIA near Munich. Then later they opened up XVIIB and we went to Stalag XVII.

Mark: I'm not sure where that is in Austria.

Crabb: Well, it's not far from Vienna.

Mark: Was there much of the brutality that is often characterized with the Japanese?

Crabb: None. None that I saw.

Mark: It was all professional soldiers and honor and all these types of things?

Crabb: Right.

Mark: I'm sure it was no picnic being in prison, but I'm interested in comparing the German camps and the Japanese camps.

Crabb: There was no resemblance between what the Japanese did to what the Germans did. The Japanese never did believe in prisoners. The Germans did. We had a lot of German prisoners. The American and British armies did.

Mark: Especially after North Africa. So, I'm wondering if you could describe life in one of these camps. Everyone has seen Hogan's Heroes. I'm sure you're sick to death of--I hate to bring up these TV references but it--

Crabb: There was no resemblance to Hogan's Heroes. Actually the prison camp was a very boring place. Nothing to do except lie in your bunk all day or get up and walk around the compound. That was it. There were some books there and you could read if you could get a book. Some people just lay in bed all blessed day and all night long. I used to--they had a softball diamond. I played softball and basketball courts. I played some basketball. I boxed. We set up a boxing ring and I boxed.

Mark: Were these activities organized by the Germans or by the American prisoners?

Crabb: We did. The American prisoners.

Mark: They must have had some leeway in setting up recreational activities.

Crabb: Anything like that, yeah. Of course, the Germans were--several times they brought in movies.

Mark: American movies or German movies?

Crabb: German movies.

Mark: Propaganda films?

Crabb: Not really. Just German movies. They showed them and they weren't very good but--

Mark: That's interesting. I'm interested in sort of a command structure inside a prison camp. I assume you were responsible to the American officers.

Crabb: We had no American officers in our camp. We were all Sergeants, every single one. We elected a camp leader.

Mark: It was this person then who dealt with the Germans.

Crabb: Right.

Mark: I assume not the commandant but someone lower down.

Crabb: Whoever he dealt with I don't know.

Mark: What kind of communication did you have with the outside world? Did you get the Red Cross package?

Crabb: We got Red Cross parcels, it was supposed to be one a week, but we never got one a week. Toward the end they just ran out. And the Germans didn't feed us. They didn't have any food of their own so they wouldn't feed us.

Mark: That's the next thing I was going to ask.

Crabb: Their food was bread. Sometimes a quarter of a loaf, sometimes a piece of bread. Potatoes, and that was it.

Mark: This got worse as the war went on?

Crabb: Oh, yeah. If it wasn't for Red Cross parcels, we'd have starved. We'd get a Red Cross parcel, well it was supposed to be one a week, if we got one a week then we had quite a bit of food, but then of course we'd get one parcel for two or three people or four people.

Mark: What was in these Red Cross parcels? Cigarettes?

Crabb: Yeah, there was a couple of packs of cigarettes, there was a can of bully beef, a can of powdered milk, a can of powdered coffee, and that's about it.

Mark: Was it just Americans in this camp?

Crabb: No, there were Russians in the next compound, and there were French around. Russians and French and Americans. No English. The English had their own camps.

Mark: Were the French and Russians--I assume they weren't airmen, they were just regular soldiers?

Crabb: Yeah. Regular soldiers.

Mark: As there much contact between them?

Crabb: No.

Mark: Were you kept separate or just no opportunity or?

Crabb: We were kept separate. Separate compounds for each nationality.

Mark: One last thing. I was interested to know if you could describe the barracks and the living quarters inside the camp.

Crabb: The barracks were just wooden halls with beds along the sides. Double-decker beds. Two wide and two high. No heat. It was pretty grim.

Mark: Did they provide you with clothing?

Crabb: The Germans provided nothing. Red Cross provided us with uniforms and food.

Mark: I was going to ask did you have to wear the same uniform for two years?

Crabb: Yeah.

Mark: One last thing. Was there any thought of escape?

Crabb: Yes. There were people--one person escaped from 7A, name was Shorty Gordon. This was when we were down in Munich. He got away and he got up to Munich, got sealed in a boxcar that was going to Switzerland. So he was the only person to ever escape from that camp.

Mark: I assume it was difficult to escape.

Crabb: You're in the middle of Germany and unless you could speak German what are you going to do? There are people who kept breaking out but they never got very far.

Mark: Did they always bring them back or did they go somewhere else?

Crabb: Usually brought back.

Mark: So when was your camp liberated?

Crabb: Well, the camp was not liberated. They marched us out sometime in April and we started walking across Austria and we got to Brunow, Austria which is where Hitler was born, and they just shoved us into a forest and said, "Here's your home fellows." So, that was where we were when the war ended.

Mark: That's odd. How'd you get back to contact the allies? If you were in that part of German, I suppose it was--

Crabb: No, the Americans marched us down to an air field and put us on air plane--no, we didn't either--we went by train somewhere to an airfield and then we went to France and in France at a place called Camp Lucky Strike, they said OK fellows you can go to Paris for 48 hours or if you want to you can go back to your old base in England. If you go to Paris we'll give you \$75. If you go to England, we'll give you \$5. So, my tail gunner and I went back to our base.

Mark: For only \$5?

Crabb: Well, we got back and we had some friends there. We had seven days in England and we stayed there for about a month or two because we went down to London finally and we had a great time down there.

Mark: Did you go see some of the sights finally?

Crabb: Yeah. I'd seen them before. I really wasn't interested at this point in time.

Mark: You wanted to get home I assume.

Crabb: Not really. We were kind of enjoying our life.

Mark: There was one last thing I wanted to ask about in the prison camp and that had to do with medical care. What sort of medical care, if any, did you receive?

Crabb: We had an American doctor who was captured in North Africa and I think we had a dentist there and I think there was an American priest there too. I don't know where he was captured.

Mark: Was there a problem with sickness or malnutrition perhaps?

Crabb: No, I don't think so. We were all young and we were healthy. I don't know--I think one or two people died in the camp, but it wasn't very many. One kid went crazy and he was up at the hospital and he ran in the compound and starting climbing over the fence and the Americans were running up and down yelling at the guards, "Kraut kenderkuff" and the guard shot him.

Mark: Those sorts of incidents were rare.

Crabb: They got three fellows who tried to get over the fence one night in a snow storm and they got all three of them. We think the guards were tipped off because they were lined up at the fence and they started shooting when they hit the fence. A

fellow in my barracks got hit. All he was doing was lying in bed and he got hit by a stray bullet.

Mark: Was there any sort of collaboration with the Germans? 'Cause you mentioned the guards may have been tipped off. Did someone do it or do you think they overheard a conversation or?

Crabb: I don't know. We just figured for the guards to be there, they had to be tipped off that there was going to be something going on that night.

Mark: What sort of surveillance did the Germans keep on you.

Crabb: Well, it was behind barbed wire of course, and they would come around with their dogs and they would patrol at night with the dogs. They'd search underneath the barracks, sometimes they would search the whole barracks, up in the attics, underneath. What they could be looking for I don't know. Tunnels I guess.

Mark: Any surprise inspections in the middle of the night?

Crabb: No.

Mark: You returned to the U.S. in June then of 1945. That's what I have written down here. If you would describe the process of going back to the States and what sort of

Crabb: Sam, my tail gunner and I were just living it up in London and they broadcast on the American radio, "Come on fellows, come on, let's go home. We got boats waiting to take you home." So, one morning Sam and I got up and we said, "Let's go home." So we went down to report in, we had leave papers and leave papers said, "So and so authorized 7 days leave to begin on entry to UK." No dates, no nothing. So Sam and I went down and reported in and they put us on a LST. It was 18 days from Plymouth, England to Newport News, Virginia. Then we got on a train and came to Chicago and I came home.

Mark: Fort Sheridan or something?

Crabb: No base. Just moving all the time.

Mark: Did you get actually discharge from the service at this point?

Crabb: No, I got discharged--when we left Newport News we were given 60 days recuperation leave they called it. At the end of your leave report to Miami Beach. While I was home I got a telegram said "Never mind Miami Beach, go down to San Antonio." So, that's where I reported.

Mark: And, what did you do down there?

Crabb: Nothing.

Mark: Just sit around and wait for your term to expire?

Crabb: That's right.

Mark: When did you finally get your free and clear discharge?

Crabb: I think it was sometime in October 1945. October 17, 1945 I think.

Mark: And you came back to Madison?

Crabb: I came back to Madison.

Mark: I'm interested in the post-war period and the readjustment from military to civilian life so I've got some questions I want to ask about getting out of the service and getting reestablished.

Crabb: Well, I got out in October of 1945 and came back to Madison and my brother-in-law and I went up to Princeton, Wisconsin and bought a--

Mark: Which is in Marquette County?

Crabb: Green Lake County. Bought a restaurant up there. He and I worked that restaurant for a couple of years and then I got married and I didn't like the restaurant business anyway so I went back into the service.

Mark: What was wrong with the restaurant business?

Crabb: I didn't like to cook, I didn't like being in the kitchen, I didn't like to wash dishes, scrub floors, I didn't like any part of it.

Mark: After the Vietnam War, the problems that some veterans have readjusting back to civilian life were splashed all over the newspapers. It's something that didn't get a lot of attention in World War II. I'm wondering if in your personal experience, did you have any problems readjusting?

Crabb: No.

Mark: Some vets will talk about wanting to wander around, have nightmares and that sort of thing. Did you have any particular problems?

Crabb: I had no problem.

Mark: Did you have any health problems as a result of being in prison for so long?

Crabb: No. I was pretty healthy. When they marched us out of camp in April 1945 I got dysentery and I think we were on the road for about three weeks and I had it the whole three weeks. I don't know how much I weighed when I got out, but I didn't weigh very much. I didn't weigh very much to start out with. Probably around 100 pounds.

Mark: Did you have any contact with the Veterans Administration and the medical system?

Crabb: No.

Mark: Did you use any of the GI Bill type benefits?

Crabb: No.

Mark: The 5220 club?

Crabb: No. I remember that, but I never did get any of that.

Mark: So then you went back in the Air Force, because you didn't like the restaurant business.

Crabb: Right.

Mark: And so, getting back into the service then, being a veteran, having been in the military a couple of years and having the experience. How was the Air Force different after World War II than it had been during the war? I assume you had accrued some rank by this time?

Crabb: Well, I was a Tech Sergeant. when I went overseas and when I reenlisted after the war I went back in as a Staff Sergeant.

Mark: Took a pay cut.

Crabb: Yeah.

Mark: Did you have the same radio job?

Crabb: Well, I went down to Ft. Sheridan and I had just recently married and we went overseas to Germany. I think I volunteered to go to Germany. We went and spent a couple of years over there.

Mark: At where?

Crabb: Actually, we went to Bavaria. A place called Kempton. That's where we lived in Kempton. I was sent up to Wiesbaden for the airlift when the airlift started.

Mark: So you were sent there after the airlift started.

Crabb: Right.

Mark: I'm interested in the airlift. What was your role in that? Were you on the planes flying to Berlin?

Crabb: No. Our squadron was a troop carrier squadron and we had C47's. When the airlift started, they sent the whole squadron up to Wiesbaden. They loaded them up that day and flew into Berlin that same day. All the airplanes had pilot and co-pilot, nothing else--engineer maybe. Radio operators were not required. I made a couple of trips in just to make the trip. The rest of the time we were flying C47's all over Europe for whatever reason they needed them. We went down to Athens a couple of times and they sold all those C47's to Turkey. We delivered them. The rest of the time, back and forth to England was about all the flying I was doing.

Mark: The cold war had started by this time. Especially during the Berlin airlift, did you think this was going to turn into another World War II? Did other people think that? I'm interested in

Crabb: I didn't think so, no. Then the Korean War started and I got a campaign ribbon for the Korean War but I had nothing to do with that.

Mark: You were in Europe at the time.

Crabb: No, I was--

Mark: You were back in the States.

Crabb: I had come back to the States and when the Korean War started they sent me to Guam and we were flying in support of the Korean War and they gave us a campaign ribbon for that purpose. Nothing to do with the war itself.

Mark: So you were finally discharged from the service after you did your 20 years and you got out of the service finally when?

Crabb: 1964 I think it was.

Mark: After you got out of the service or maybe perhaps even before, I'm interested to know if you joined any sort of veterans organizations.

Crabb: Well, yeah, I've joined 8th Air Force Historical Assn. and the Ex-Prisoners of War and also my old group has got a - that was quite a group. They had a couple of reunions, we went to one. Had over a thousand people there.

Mark: Which group is this?

Crabb: The 100th.

Mark: What makes you want to attend these reunions and join these organizations?

Crabb: Well, this time we, Delores and I went--we were living in Riverside, California and the reunion was Long Beach so we couldn't really not go.

Mark: That pretty much exhausts all the questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Crabb: No, I don't think so.

Mark: Thank you for your time.

[end of interview]