

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JACK R. DAVIS
Rifleman, Army, World War II.

2001

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Davis, Jack R., (1922-). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 55 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 55 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Jack R. Davis, a La Crosse County, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 106th Infantry Division in Europe and his experiences as a prisoner of war. Davis touches on basic training at Fort Jackson (South Carolina), landing in Scotland, receiving supplies in England, being in a truck that flipped over, and arrival on the line in France. He states he often filled in for his first sergeant, who “liked to nip a little bit.” Davis touches upon harsh weather conditions and lack of proper equipment. Davis comments on replacing the 4th Division in the Battle of the Bulge, being surrounded by Germans, and the regiment’s surrender before he had even fired his rifle. He talks about the march into Germany, transport by boxcar to Stalag IX-B near Bad Orb, and not having enough food. Transferred with the other non-commissioned officers to Stalag IX-A (the Ziegenhain Stalag) near Kassel, he talks about living conditions, lack of recreation, elderly prison guards, and making his own eating utensils. Davis touches upon the announcement that the prisoners were free, taking weapons from the guards, and guarding the camp until they were liberated by an American unit. He mentions being deloused and having a delay in getting fed.

Biographical Sketch:

Davis (b. 1922) grew up on a farm in Wisconsin and served with the 422nd Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division. He was taken prisoner by the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge and later liberated by American troops. Davis eventually settled in Madison, Wisconsin and retired from work at the Agronomy Department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1986.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001.

Transcribed by Elizabeth Hackett, 2009.

Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010.

Corrections typed by Erin Dix, 2010.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Interview Transcript

James: And it is the—which day is today? It's Wednesday the—can't figure what day of the week it is—

Davis: [laughs] I can't either.

James: Have to stop that for a second, think about that.

Davis: Yeah, see, I got a, I—

James: See, Monday was—Sunday—12th was Monday, so this is 14th.

Davis: 14th today, yeah, okay.

James: 14th of April, 2001. Talking to Jack Davis. Where were you born, sir?

Davis: I was born in La Crosse County.

James: In a farm?

Davis: Farm background.

James: La Crosse County. 19—?

Davis: 1922.

James: '22. You're a year older than I am. And when did you enter military service? Do you recall?

Davis: I'm trying to think.

James: '40?

Davis: '40—probably '42. I'm not sure on that. Just a second, I may be able to refresh my memory here.

James: Sure, let's do it.

Davis: Because this is—

[Approximately 3-second pause]

James: That's running. That's running. So, where were you—where did they send you for induction?

- Davis: This would be down in Milwaukee.
- James: I see. Were you drafted, or did you volunteer?
- Davis: I was drafted, but I was, in a sense, volunteered, too. I was going to because they got that close to it.
- James: I see.
- Davis: But, no, I was the leader when we went down to Milwaukee to get our—
- James: Be inducted.
- Davis: Inducted, yeah. I went home, and I straightened everything out. My father had passed away. He was a heavy smoker. We worked, we had a farm up in Fish Creek Valley. And a lot of that may be in here. He was very active in community affairs, and then he—but he smoked very heavily, and then he was spreading lime, and this was not the real fine lime, and it got into his lungs, and he passed away from that.
- James: Oh, my. That's unusual.
- Davis: Yes, it is. That lime, with the cigarette smoking, and with the drawing—
- James: Bad combination.
- Davis: Bad combination. My mother and my grandmother—my mother's mother—was passed away just about the same time. So my mother—the farm was in her name, and she—I think all the time I was gone, she took care of it. Then when I came back my father, of course, passed away. Then I—for fill in a little further—I came down here in 1940 to go to Farm Short Course. And so when I came down here I got acquainted, and I really decided that this was what I was going to do, was go back to the farm. But then in the meantime the war intervened, is right. So I always said, well, that's why I'm—one main point I aimed at while I was in the service was that I wanted to come back down here and take an Ag course. Well, I ended up working for the Agronomy Department. And I get my—just the other day, I was surprised that there is when you retire now they give you a certificate of what you did. That was where I really came in, and actually, I didn't enjoy—didn't get a payroll check from anybody else until—I retired now in '86.
- James: You worked that long?
- Davis: Yeah, yeah.

James: Incredible. Where did you—they send you to train when you went into service? Where did you train?

Davis: Oh, at Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

James: In the infantry right off the bat?

Davis: Infantry right off the bat.

James: Were you assigned a division right then?

Davis: Yes, that was the 106th Division.

James: You went right to it.

Davis: Yeah, and because they were—that was a new division, right then. A very—we had some excellent officers and excellent people, young fellows to work with. They were the right age—

James: Sure, pulled out of college. A lot of those guys were ASTPers [Army Specialized Training Program].

Davis: Yeah, that is the word. And so I just—

James: Fell into it well.

Davis: Yeah, I just floated into it. And I—

James: What did they teach you? What was your M.O.S. [Military Occupational Specialty]?

Davis: Well, the M.O.S. was infantry, yes.

James: A rifleman.

Davis: Yeah. And I ended up in—we had a first sergeant that was, needed some help, and I ended up being practically first sergeant [laughs].

James: He had trouble with the English language?

Davis: No, he was—he liked to nip a little bit.

James: Ah! So you filled in when he was indisposed.

Davis: Yeah, well, he wasn't indisposed too much, but—so that's how I got in. So I was doing first sergeant's work from the time I—

James: Did they give you a corporal stripe?

Davis: Yeah, they gave me a corporal stripe, first bat then, and I ended up before—

James: You were the company clerk, I can see that. [Davis laughs] Pretty fast.

Davis: Yeah, it was pretty well—but as I say, I didn't have any trouble with falling in right in to the Army.

James: Guess not.

Davis: And because I had had, in fact, I had had ROTC, too, here—

James: That helped.

Davis: But, you see, it wasn't very long.

James: Were was—and after you formed up, how long was it before they sent you to England?

Davis: Well, it was—I've got to—let's see—

James: 'Cause I have some of the stuff here.

Davis: Yeah, it probably does say some of this here. Yeah, it's right here [reading aloud]: “Arrived in Glasgow, Scotland, October 28th, 1944. And moved to the Midlands of England where we received some of our winter clothing, to cross—crossing the Channel. We left England then with half our personal gear for the rigors we were about to face. We arrived in our destination at Schnee Eifel area, in December 10th, 1944.”

James: Okay, now, hold it there. Now what was going on when your group arrived there? They took you by truck, I assume.

Davis: Yes.

James: So what was going on? Were you on the line then, or not?

Davis: No, we were really just—it didn't involve much of—everything went so fast. We were up on the front lines. In time we arrived in Scotland. Down to southern part of England. Then we went across through the Channel. From there we went—got to see if I can bring back that memory. Got to check this a little bit. [Reading aloud]: “We arrived on our destination in Schnee Eifel area on December 10th, 1944. We had a very heavy

snowfall, ten to twelve inches that night. The temperature dropped down below freezing. Without proper footwear many of the men in our division had frostbitten feet moving on the line. This resulted for standing in steel-bedded trucks, with shoes that were water-soaked and no overshoes. These had been promised us when we arrived in France. 106th Division replaced the 4th Division in their sector, gun-for-gun. This operation took so long that because of traffic congestion we did not arrive at our destination until after dark. We could march the distance we needed to go in a few hours even with full field bags on.” So that’s—well, the only one experience that I had just after we landed in Scotland, they sent me out on a detail to get some equipment that came in late. So I was head, myself, driver, and three other people with me. We loaded a 6x6 with some equipment. We left to go down to another point to pick up more equipment. There were—I think there were two or three trucks that we were in the convoy. One of them was one of these trucks that they held—pulled a cannon behind, where it didn’t have—they had the staves in.

James: But no canvas top.

Davis: No canvas top. We all of a sudden—well, I should say, we didn’t have an official person with an official driver’s license for the vehicle he was driving. He was a motor—he was in the motor pool. So we—for some reason—and they didn’t have any other drivers, these fellows were the ones that drove us here if we didn’t. He ran off the road, up on a bank, and tipped it over. I don’t know how we missed getting killed on that one because all ten wheels were in the air.

James: Oh, my.

Davis: Well, we finally got to a motor pool, got—

James: You tipped the truck back up?

Davis: Took the truck back up, drove the rest away where we were supposed to meet [laughs].

James: You had to put all the stuff back in the truck, though.

Davis: Well, we didn’t have that much in the truck at the time, but we—there were six, I think it was five, I think. Five. There was a driver, and he had fellows with him. And three with me. And all ten wheels in the air. So we had to wait around there for a while to [both laugh]—somebody come to get some equipment to right the truck up. We got it back up again and drove it, and we met our time limit, I guess, even, getting there, because we were around where this area that we were processing in there. But—

- James: So when you replaced the 4th Division, gun-for-gun—
- Davis: Gun-for-gun.
- James: Foxhole-for-foxhole.
- Davis: That's right.
- James: You used all their things, then.
- Davis: Yeah. Uh-huh.
- James: What was that like, getting up on the line? This is for a totally green outfit. This must have been almost a whole different world for you.
- Davis: Yes, it was, but—
- James: You weren't concerned or worried at that time?
- Davis: I don't remember being my own self. Now, I'm not talking about other—
- James: Sure.
- Davis: But I just took it as it came, and even when [laughs] that truck—I was sitting in the—I guess, I don't know if I was right, I guess I was right behind the—not the other driver there. They had two drivers, and because of the mechanics, a couple of mechanics along. And here, I didn't—it didn't bother me at all. I kept my wits about me, I guess. I don't know [laughs] if I had any wits.
- James: Did you hear the Germans?
- Davis: No. We were—this was just—we were driving—see, here I'll give you a little closer—I've got a map in here of it, someplace. Okay. See, we came down from Southampton down to Le Havre. And then we crossed, then we came along here, and we drove up the Ardennes. And I'm not quite sure why I lost my—well, it was in Belgium.
- James: Of course, it has to be.
- Davis: Yeah. Saint Vith, there. And—
- James: It's near there because they drove you in to Saint Vith.
- Davis: Yeah.

- James: So you must have been in front, right in this area right there.
- Davis: Right there, yeah.
- James: Okay, so you're up there, and it was cold. It was hard getting yourself into your foxhole, and getting it squared away?
- Davis: There were—well, you see, there had been a unit there, and they had foxholes, so we just—
- James: Did they say anything to you about what the front was like?
- Davis: No, they took off out of there. They're going [laughs]—they were, had been on the line for a long time. And I don't remember exactly if it was—what division it was, I don't—
- James: 4th Division.
- Davis: 4th. Yeah, okay. That's what my—coming to my mind, there. 4th Division, there. And so we traveled all along there until we got—I guess it was way back here near Le Havre when we crossed the Channel. We had a pretty straight shot through here, but we—
- James: Let's get you on the line here, now. So what's happening now?
- Davis: Well, it was just a very—gun-for-gun, man-for-man.
- James: Right. So you spent that night, and the next day, was it still quiet?
- Davis: It really wasn't very active for some reason at that time.
- James: Do you recall what day that was? How many days were you there before the Germans invaded? Tell me that. I mean, two or three, four or five, or something.
- Davis: Ah, golly.
- James: Roughly.
- Davis: I would say that it would be—I would say probably ten days at least.
- James: So for ten days, nothing much happened.
- Davis: Nothing, no. It was just trying to get organized.
- James: Right, because you were doing no fighting then.

Davis: No.

James: How about artillery fire?

Davis: There would be some artillery fire, but nothing that they—they were just shooting by, you know. They weren't shooting blanks, but I mean, they were just—

James: Shooting past you.

Davis: Yeah. So that was where, the area that we were captured in, near Rouen.

James: Yeah, let's not get ahead of ourselves here. So tell me, the morning that—all of a sudden, trouble.

Davis: Trouble, and then we were—

James: What was that like? I mean you were asleep in your foxhole, or were you awake, or what? It happened about 5:30 in the morning.

Davis: Well, I—yeah, yeah. It was. And it was—we were in our foxholes. We hadn't really had too much problem with artillery at all because I know that they were firing artillery, but—

James: Not like this.

Davis: It was just spaced quite a bit apart. And maybe some of that was our artillery, but fighting over the—then I—we—

James: Then this morning, on the 16th, tell me what went on where you were.

Davis: Well, it was chaos, in a way.

James: The noise?

Davis: No, no one was taking charge.

James: So where was your venerable sergeant?

Davis: Well, I was the sergeant. But it had to come down from—we had—

James: Your lieutenant or captain?

Davis: Captain. Our captain.

James: Didn't they say anything?

Davis: Well, it came down from headquarters that the—

James: That there was an attack.

Davis: That they were planning an attack. And—

James: Did you see the Germans coming at you on the tanks or anything? Down the road?

Davis: No, nothing at all, see anything.

James: You didn't see anything where you were.

Davis: Yeah, but all of a sudden we were squeezed into a very narrow area. And that was when we had to—this was a period of about three to four days that they, before they—

James: Pinched you in?

Davis: Pinched us in. Or maybe it was a little more than that. But—

James: You were falling back steadily, is that the—?

Davis: No, we just stayed right there.

James: Oh, and they sort of came around you?

Davis: Yeah, they—

James: Oh, I see.

Davis: In fact, you see, this was pretty well—we were right up on the front line there at that time.

James: Right. But you still hadn't fired your gun.

Davis: Hadn't fired my gun. I never fired my gun.

James: Never. So we're standing around wondering, "What the hell is going on? What's all this noise we hear? What are we supposed do?" And the captain didn't know?

- Davis: Yeah, it was just a little difficulty there to get any information. But we just stuck it out, and then, all of a sudden, we knew we were surrounded that day.
- James: How did you know that?
- Davis: That was when they told us, I mean, that were was some units had surrendered already.
- James: Yeah, but had you seen a German yet?
- Davis: No, I don't think I saw one yet, not around.
- James: When they announced that that you were now a prisoner of war you still hadn't seen a German?
- Davis: They were going to surrender anyway with the unit, this area here, back to the Germans because the Germans had driven there first or were there. And then when we came in—we were in a later echelon because I'd been traveling with headquarters. So we were with headquarters. I was not with my company at the time I was captured.
- James: So what did they tell you, Jack?
- Davis: Well, it wasn't much. It was just—it was a very [laughs]—I don't know why. It was just a very smooth transaction. I just don't know.
- James: You mean they suddenly announced that you now belong to [the] Germans?
- Davis: Well, now that you're—we don't want to lose any more lives.
- James: Haven't lost any. You hadn't even fired your gun!
- Davis: Hadn't even fired the gun. That's right. But we don't want to, you know—
- James: Yeah.
- Davis: And it was—I think the Germans were as confused as we were, I think. [laughs]
- James: What was your regiment?
- Davis: The 422nd.
- James: 422nd. Did they capture the whole regiment?

- Davis: Yes. Well—yes. Pretty much. There were some that I think took it on their own to fall back.
- James: Run.
- Davis: Yeah.
- James: Bet you didn't know that, that you're supposed to run.
- Davis: No, no, no. And of course, it's—I don't know how much. I haven't looked at Dick's book here lately. He's done a real, I think, a real good job and is not—you may get more out of that than you'll get from my interview [laughs].
- James: I'm just interested in how it bothered you, see. I know all these books. I've got—this [Charles B.] MacDonald wrote the best book on the Bulge. That MacDonald book is really outstanding. Got maps and everything. But I'm interested in how it bothered Jack Davis.
- Davis: It didn't bother me a bit, that's the thing. I said, "Well, if it's my time to go, I'm—"
- James: What did you think might happen to you?
- Davis: Well, you don't know where the bullet's coming.
- James: Now I know you don't know, but I say what did you *think*?
- Davis: Well, just like driving down the road that day. The driver drove up on the bank, and the whole truck body was—all the wheels were in the air. That didn't bother me there. You just take it as it comes.
- James: So what did the other guys do?
- Davis: There were some that may have been bothered quite a bit by it. But as far as I know, the people I was with—and we had been together all the time since we were in the Army when we activated down in [South] Carolina. So we had faith in each other. We knew each other well enough that we would take our chances with them.
- James: Did you know that the entire regiment had been picked up?
- Davis: I think—I surmised. Let's put it that way. I wouldn't say it, but I would—I surmised that—

- James: As a rifle squad(?), about how many men in that regiment?
- Davis: Well, 200 in the company, and added up from there.
- James: Must be 1,000 or 1,200 at least.
- Davis: And it was generally—and of course, because I was traveling by—you know, came down to Southampton, and then, getting over here to Le Havre, we just weren't in it in that area of time because we didn't even know what outfit we were with, I don't think. We just flew by the seat of our pants, I think.
- James: I see. So, when did you see your first German?
- Davis: Well, I don't think that I can really pin that down at all. Because it was somewhere along this—
- James: When did this happen, after they told you "We're surrendering?"
- Davis: Well, we never surrendered, again. Nobody to surrender to [laughs].
- James: I see.
- Davis: That's my—
- James: Somebody rounded you up, though.
- Davis: Well, you see, we were kind of on our own because we still didn't get into the fray until—probably, we were, got over here—well, wait a minute here. I've got to get back here aways. It was, Le Havre, it would be about in here that I think that we were—knew that we were kind of in—Rouen, that I'm familiar with. But, otherwise, we just kept coming, until all of a sudden, they said, "We're disbanding."
- James: What did you do to the equipment?
- Davis: Well, all I had was my rifle. I had bent the barrel on the rifle when we tipped over with the truck so I didn't have rifle equipment at that time.
- James: What did the rest do with their equipment?
- Davis: Most of them just pulled fire pins, firing pins.
- James: Just threw them on the ground?
- Davis: Well, buried them.

James: Buried them?

Davis: Yeah.

James: What was the purpose of burying them?

Davis: Well, I don't know. I think it's just the fact that, if you don't have a firing pin in your gun, you're not going to shoot anybody.

James: I know, but it's not your gun anymore. They own the gun. Someone must have come to search you and put you in the trucks? They'd take you to the prison camp?

Davis: We really didn't—I never felt that we—well, it'd be like a football team with everybody going every over way, and not having a real clear idea what you're supposed to do.

James: They put you in trucks, though, didn't they, to move you? They marched you?

Davis: Marched us.

James: Into Germany?

Davis: Into Germany, and then we got into a train—a boxcar.

James: Oh, I see.

Davis: And they moved us by boxcar.

James: What was your prison camp?

Davis: It was at—let's see—

James: What was the name of the Stalag?

Davis: Stalag—it was—well, the first one was at Frankfurt, Bad Orb.

James: Bad Orb?

Davis: Yeah. It was at Bad Orb. See, they moved us—

James: That's [Stalag] IX? Or that's XI? IX? IX. IX-B.

Davis: Yeah. And then—

James: Did you ever know Diefenthaler? Did you ever meet him? He was in that camp. Twin boys.

Davis: Twin—

James: Willard and Wilber. Diefenthaler.

Davis: Well, okay—

James: They were in Bad Orb. And then one of them died there.

Davis: That's right.

James: Now, see. Now tell me about *them*.

Davis: Well, as far as I think, the one boy—the one that died—had probably ended up with pneumonia, that—

James: Yeah, that's what he died of. We know about that.

Davis: Yeah. That, well, this is—I'm—

James: So you knew them.

Davis: Yeah.

James: Very good.

Davis: Of course, we've had meetings. We get together pret' near—I haven't been last year because it was supposed to be down in Missouri. But we get together and talk some of these things over.

James: Okay. So what was the life in Bad Orb? What was that like?

Davis: It was very little food because they weren't expecting to have such a bunch of prisoners coming in.

James: How many were there of that 106th? Do you know?

Davis: I would say, somewhere in the neighborhood of—

James: Seven thousand is what the books say.

Davis: The book said—yeah, yeah.

- James: That's about half of the division.
- Davis: Yeah, that would—well, that would be—I think it was less than that, though. It wasn't that much because going from the railroad in Frankfurt we walked up the hill, and it was a long walk. Hope I—is there a picture in here? Well, here's the prison camp right—
- James: IX-B.
- Davis: IX-B, at the top of the hill. Then we were stayed there for, I guess about, I mean we were there for—and the trouble is, there was no food there anyways.
- James: They didn't feed you? They must have had something. Cabbage soup? Everybody talked about cabbage soup.
- Davis: Yeah, but as far as this area through here, there was—until we got to Frankfurt, and when we got to Frankfurt we did have a meal, but it was putrid.
- James: Putrid?
- Davis: And so—and you just couldn't eat it there because there was so many coming in and going out. And of course, Frankfurt itself is down on the—
- James: Yeah, I know where it is.
- Davis: Yeah, it's on the—and we walked up the hill to the top of the ridge which that other map was, that was on top of the ridge, and just—we finally got a little organization there, but once we left there with the—see, they broke the non-commissioned officers and the privates. And the privates stayed there. And then the—
- James: What about the NCOs?
- Davis: They—we went up to Kassel. They moved us up to Kassel, and that's—
- James: When did you get up to Bad Orb?
- Davis: Well, Bad Orb was just, well, probably—we drove by or came by train, to the station there because I remember the station there. But I think that there was—apparently it was from back over here, probably. And I don't know, we were so fast going through that we just couldn't remember what—
- James: Wasn't most of your time spent in that Stalag, though?

Davis: At Frankfurt?

James: Well, I thought you were at Bad Orb.

Davis: Yeah, Bad Orb is at Frankfurt.

James: It's near Frankfurt.

Davis: Yeah. They loaded us in a train someplace along there between, say, which one—

James: It's all right. That's not important.

Davis: But they loaded us in a train and took us right to Frankfurt. I remember very well getting off the train there. But I don't know where we got on 'cause we were out—

James: So they put you in prison camp. Were these wooden barracks?

Davis: There were some wooden ones, and there—

James: What were *you* in?

Davis: We were in wooden barracks. But here is—I can point out the barracks to you, here.

James: That's okay. We can't do that on tape, anyway.

Davis: No, this is the thing.

James: I can look at that. Can I read this book?

Davis: Well, if you'd like it, I could give you one.

James: Well, you keep the good one. *That* one's worn-out. [Davis laughs] Sure. The Museum would like this.

Davis: [laughs] They would?

James: Sure.

Davis: Okay. But I know I can get another one from Petersen.

James: So the life—what did they have you do? Anything in the prison camp? You had no duties?

Davis: No duties. But just you—

James: Did they let you have a garden or anything? You could grow vegetables?

Davis: No, it wasn't. We weren't there long enough.

James: That's right. You weren't there very long.

Davis: Yeah. See, we were—the noncoms were then moved up to Kassel, and that would be—

James: That's a different prison camp?

Davis: It was a different prison camp [Stalag IX-A].

James: What was the name of that?

Davis: Well, it was—let's see—I don't know if I—

James: How far from Frankfurt was that?

Davis: Well, it was just a short distance.

James: Oh, I see. Okay. I'll look for it on the map.

Davis: Yeah, you can look for it.

James: I've got a map of all the prison camps.

Davis: Yeah, well I assume that you would have—but, you see, and this is—these were all along there, were all cement or blocks, block houses. But all along there, that's what—and these were all just wooden barracks, there.

James: Okay. What did you do to pass the time of day?

Davis: We made up some things to do.

James: Did they give you a ball and a bat to play baseball or anything(??)?

Davis: No, there wasn't too much of that, but we were not there long enough, I think, to—'cause we were just there—this was a receiving point

James: Oh, at Bad Orb, you were there just briefly.

Davis: Briefly.

James: Ah, I see.

Davis: And so then they—

James: Kassel with a “K” or a “C”?

Davis: With a “K”

James: K-A or K-E?

Davis: K-A.

James: S-S-E-L ?

Davis: I believe it’s Cassel, with C, where is—Ardennes—

James: Well, it’s all right.

Davis: Take a second here.

James: I can find it.

Davis: Yeah. Well, here’s some pictures. This is what we were staying in there. And I don’t know where this building, apparently was a high—they had wires all around there. But these were all cement structures along there.

James: I see that.

Davis: And I don’t think there were any prisoners there. All the prisoners were in this type of barracks here.

James: So did they make you do any exercises or anything?

Davis: We did it on our own.

James: You did it on your own. On a regular basis?

Davis: Regular basis.

James: Did somebody sneak in a radio?

Davis: Yeah, there was some radios in there. They were—but the batteries, you know—

James: They’re hard to come by.

Davis: Yeah.

James: You could bribe the German guards, couldn't you?

Davis: They were so old, they didn't care what [laughs]—

James: They were too old?

Davis: Oh, yes. They were all old guards.

James: All old, retired soldiers or something?

Davis: Soldiers, yeah. Yeah, they were all—

James: Well, they weren't very much guards, then.

Davis: No, no, they weren't—we could have walked away. But this is the thing. We felt that if we would cause any problem like that, then they'd get tough. And so we tried to—

James: Probably true.

Davis: Yeah.

James: How many were there in your group?

Davis: I think—let's see, I would say 500, I think, is the number. It might tell in—

James: How did they feed you?

Davis: They had wash tub boilers.

James: In each barracks?

Davis: Yes, and no. It depended on how much food they could get in.

James: So I was wondering if you did any of your cooking yourself.

Davis: No, we did not do any, it was all—

James: So when it came time, you get fed twice a day, once a day?

Davis: Twice.

James: And you'd go out of the barracks?

Davis: Well, actually, it wasn't. It'd be once a day, but you'd get tea-ho(??) in the morning, and that was just coffee, or what was—

James: Did you go somewhere to get that? Or did they bring it to you?

Davis: They brought it to the—

James: To each barracks.

Davis: Barracks.

James: And supper at night, or in the afternoon, they brought that, too?

Davis: They brought that, too. Because it was just soup.

James: Just soup, anyway.

Davis: As long as you had a helmet, you were all right. You had a bowl to—

James: That's what they put the soup in?

Davis: Yeah, that's if you didn't have anything else, you'd put it in. I have a couple things here.

James: You made that?

Davis: Made that, because I lost my utensils, and I—

James: What did you use to make this with?

Davis: Well, that's just a piece of aluminum.

James: I know, but you had to cut it and bend it.

Davis: Yeah, well, you see, we did have—somebody would have a spoon—

James: Hold that up so I—

Davis: Okay. So that—

James: This is a piece of aluminum?

Davis: Yeah.

James: Okay, tell me about it now.

Davis: And so what I did was, it was just a sheet, and I kind of cut it out as best I could.

James: With what?

Davis: With—I don't remember exactly how [laughs] I did it, other than—

James: Must have had a knife of some kind.

Davis: Yeah, had to have something on that, but I just, you know. But this, I shaped by taking—see, some had their mess kit gear with it, but I didn't have—

James: Oh, you just copied theirs.

Davis: I just put it in there, and pounded it to fit the spoon. This was the spoon itself, was laying there.

James: Right. So, G.I. spoon, and you just made this a match.

Davis: Match, uh-huh.

James: I don't see how you could bend this without some kind of a pliers or something.

Davis: I don't remember how I did that [laughs]. But I think we had something that I could—because I remember how I had a flat handle here, but it was kind of weak, and so I wanted to make a little more strength there on it, and so I—

James: What else do you have in there? **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

Oh, that's your tags.

Davis: That's my tags. Here's my—

James: This is your prisoner of war tag. This is your prisoner of war tag.

Davis: This is my tag right there.

James: This—you going to donate this to the Museum?

Davis: Well, you think it's worth it [laughs]?

James: Well, I'll ask Bill Brewster. He does those things. I know he's got some of these. But this is unusual, particularly because you did it. When we're through here, we'll go talk to Bill—

Davis: Okay.

James: And see if that'd be something he'd like. I think this is unusual.

Davis: Otherwise I—

James: Did you know that the war was nearing the end? How did you know that? Radio?

Davis: No, mainly the guards.

James: They got older?

Davis: They got older.

James: And fewer.

Davis: And fewer. And they just—

James: They sort of left you on your own then the last couple weeks.

Davis: Yeah, well, it wouldn't be even that long. The division came in that released their, you know, that came there—

James: What division was that, do you remember?

Davis: I don't know. It probably is in here [the book] anyway. Now—

James: Tell me about seeing those guys. That must have given you a real lift.

Davis: Well, there was a lot of laughing, after that [laughs]. I can remember that you got a laughing jag—

[Approximately 15-second pause in recording]

James: Tanks(??)—was that the first indication that the Americans were there?

Davis: No, it was just fated that the guards had all left.

James: You mean, they suddenly just disappeared.

- Davis: Disappeared, and most of them were older men. So they didn't stick around at all, I'm sure.
- James: So you knew the Americans were—
- Davis: We knew they were coming.
- James: Right near. And how did they come in to the camp. With marching or trucks, or what?
- Davis: No, they came in with the trucks. They were—
- James: Prepared to take you out.
- Davis: Out, yeah. They knew that we were there, I'm pretty sure.
- James: Oh, I'm sure they did. Where did they take you?
- Davis: Well, they just—back to—
- James: How far back, into France? Into Reims?
- Davis: Yeah, I think Reims would be part of it, where we could go back. That's because, you see, this is—it could have gone—no, I think we went back in to Frankfurt. And I think they took us back out of there in a train.
- James: Oh, a train from Frankfurt.
- Davis: Yeah, from Frankfurt.
- James: To back to France, did they?
- Davis: Yeah, I think it may have gone back to Belgium. I'm not sure. I know, going in, that this was our track in. But going out, I can't—could be Brussels, we went through Brussels. And it may give you a better answer on that in the book.
- James: Well, tell me how you felt, though. Other than the fact that you were laughing all the time.
- Davis: Yeah. You just laughed. [laughs] Because it was all of a sudden the guards were all gone, but we didn't go outside to take a step outside of that camp then.
- James: Because?

- Davis: Because we were afraid there were still some Germans around that would shoot you. During that time we were carrying German guns inside the stock area of the prison camp.
- James: You were preparing a breakout?
- Davis: No, we were just defending ourselves if they'd come—
- James: Decide to kill you all?
- Davis: Yeah.
- James: Gonna make a last stand?
- Davis: Yeah.
- James: Is that right? Where did you get those guns?
- Davis: Took them away from—you can take a gun away from an 80-year-old fellow pretty easy.
- James: Without too much trouble.
- Davis: And I'm 80 years old. [laughs]
- James: Right, but they didn't know how—I mean they didn't report you, though, when you took those guns.
- Davis: No, no. Well, they just came in and said we're free.
- James: American soldiers?
- Davis: I don't know just exactly, but the troops that moved through there, and I think they left some guards. In fact, we were guarding the camp for a few days when we got some guns from some of those older people that were carrying those around. Didn't have much ammunition, but it had a lot, quite a few guns around there.
- James: So they took you to Frankfurt first in a truck and then by train back to France. Is that right?
- Davis: I just have to—yeah, that would be—now, I haven't finished that out the way I should have, but I—
- James: Just tell me, when they got to Frankfurt, did they feed you?

- Davis: Nothing more than what we'd been getting.
- James: Surely they gave you more than cabbage soup?
- Davis: No, they didn't have, because the U.S. Army wasn't organized enough to—
- James: They didn't have any food for you?
- Davis: Well, there were so many prisoners that it was—they just didn't have the manpower to—
- James: By God, you were all starving to death!
- Davis: Well, you lose six-tenths of a pound a day.
- James: Yeah, I understand, but I can't imagine that the Army wouldn't do something to try to feed you.
- Davis: I really don't—we were in their way more than if they tried to feed us. We would be more in their way. That's the feeling I got out of it. Because we had—the group that I was with, you couldn't find a better group to be with. They looked out for each other, and I remember when we—by that time there was quite a bit of action in that area there in the West German area, and up to Kassel. Then from Kassel they took us down to—I'm not sure if we went down here—somewhere near Frankfurt again. Yeah, because I remember seeing Frankfurt. And get on the train there, and I don't know how they took us back to [unintelligible]—
- James: When did you get deloused and fed?
- Davis: We got deloused, would have been up at Kassel. Then I think, then we were deloused again, maybe at Frankfurt. I don't know. There was some—
- James: There must have been some food there.
- Davis: We didn't get any food 'til we got—I don't remember where we got our first food that was—
- James: Back in France?
- Davis: Well, I would say something, I think around Puum maybe. I don't know the area there enough, but Puum is, but—
- James: All right. So then what happened to you?

- Davis: Like a—
- James: Did they give you a medical exam?
- Davis: Like a—just a—we went through—most of us—this is a thing that I feel that was the best thing about it that everybody—you didn't have any stealing, you didn't have any fighting, or anything else. Everybody just took care of themselves, but still would be—take care of the group or another friend or something like that.
- James: Didn't you get a medical exam, Jack?
- Davis: Didn't get any medical exam as I remember, and I don't know—it was a— if it was at Rouen that we had a medical exam, and then from there on I—
- James: Tell me about your first decent meal, wherever it might have been.
- Davis: I couldn't—
- James: Can't remember?
- Davis: No, I can't remember.
- James: Didn't upset your stomach or anything, having—eating all that rich food?
- Davis: No. [laughs] No, they—it really—well, the thing is, that we were—we had help from [Richard] Petersen. He was the one that kind of took care of not to feed to—not to give too much food or—and it traveled, you know—it would just travel like fire if, say, there was something that was—they thought was better, they'd just go for it, and—
- James: So then, how did you get back to the United States?
- Davis: We—I don't remember too much about that.
- James: A ship?
- Davis: A ship. Came by ship, yeah. And—
- James: You were shortly discharged shortly thereafter?
- Davis: No, I was—let's see, I was—think I've got, it's in here either—well, here, the 106th in the Bulge, it—but I don't recall. I think Dick has done a real good job of—you, have you read—?
- James: No.

Davis: Well, if you read it, you—here you are. And I'll get another one. [laughs]
Other than the—that one there.

James: Yeah, you've got one. I'll read this one. This is—

Davis: Oh, yeah. [laughs]

James: Of course, you've got that signed right there, you better keep that. That's a
signed copy.

Davis: Yeah, yeah. This is the one that—so, if you want to take this, and—you
may get more out of this than you're getting [laughs] from me today
because—

James: I don't think I need that. I think this book will tell me.

Davis: Yeah, that—that book will tell pretty much, and—

James: I've got this, too.

Davis: That, too, yeah. So you've got me cornered from all angles. [laughs]

James: Right. Exactly.

Davis: You—what?

James: We'll show that to Bill Brewster.

Davis: Oh.

[End of Interview]