

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

WILLARD F. DIEFENTHALER

Infantryman, 106th Infantry Division, German POW, WWII

1995

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Diefenthaler, Willard F., (1922-). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100 min), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 100 min), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Willard Diefenthaler, a Kiel, Wis. native, discusses his World War II experience serving alongside his twin brother (Wilfred) with the 106th Infantry Division in Europe. Includes processing at Fort Sheridan (Illinois) and training and transfers to various units ending with 106th infantry training at Camp Atterbury (Indiana). He tells of instructing troops in gas mask and mine detector use and the dangers of various gasses. He describes military life including anecdotes about the confusion caused by having twins in the same unit, interactions with the English army, and various odd jobs he did around camp. Stationed near the Siegfried Line, Diefenthaler mentions establishing a camp, attacks at St. Vith, going on mail runs, and a sniper attack. Captured at the Battle of the Bulge, he tells of his unit's surrender, marching to Germany, carrying a wounded American soldier, train ride to the POW camp, and the U.S. bombing of the train track on which he was traveling. Also discussed is his experiences at Stalag 9A including condition and treatment of the prisoners, housing, food, and recreational activities. After his twin became ill, he comments on medical care and medical facilities, visiting Wilfred, and learning of Wilfred's death from a prisoner on burial detail. He touches upon liberation, stay at Camp Lucky Strike (France), medical treatment, arranging for Wilfred's burial in France, and return home where he trained soldiers for Pacific combat at Camp Wheeler (Georgia). He also talks about his Combat Infantry Medal, trip to Fort McCoy (Wisconsin), and use of the GI Bill. He discusses post-war life including recurring medical problems, fear of Germans, and quitting a job because the machinery sounded like a machine gun. Diefenthaler is active in the Disabled American Veterans and the Wisconsin Chapter of POWs, he talks about the importance of these groups, veterans reunions, and communicating with those he served with. He discusses the attitude held by some that POWs "sat out the war," or were too scared to stand up to their captors.

Biographical Sketch

Diefenthaler (b. August 18, 1922) served with the 106th Infantry during World War II. He was taken prisoner at the Battle of the Bulge as was a prisoner of war along with his brother for four months.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1995.

Transcribed by WDVA Staff, n.d.

Transcription edited by Abigail Miller, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Okay. Today's date is—

Diefenthaler: 15th.

Mark: --December the 15th, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Willard Diefenthaler, a native of Kiel, Wisconsin, a veteran of the European Theater in World War II. And I should also mention that this is the first time that the Oral History project has hit the road and we're in the Manitowoc County Courthouse this morning. Thanks for coming in.

Diefenthaler: You're welcome.

Mark: And thanks for driving in. I appreciate it. I suppose we should start at the top as they say. Why don't you tell me a little about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Diefenthaler: Okay. I was born in Kiel, Wisconsin on August 18, 1922. I was a twin. We were the first twins in the Kiel Legion and I was working in the Wooden Ware making cheese boxes on December 7, 1942, '41 and we were inducted on December 7, 1942 at Two Rivers and went to Fort Sheridan.

Mark: You were drafted?

Diefenthaler: I was drafted. A year after Pearl Harbor.

Mark: So, if you would describe the process of going into the military — the steps you took, and in your particular case you went in with your twin brother. That sounds like an interesting story all by itself.

Diefenthaler: Yeah. He was twenty minutes older than I was and we were drafted December 7 at Two Rivers so then we went to Fort Sheridan and we were inducted there and when we were separated — we were separated at Fort Sheridan and my brother went to Camp Phillips, Kansas in the 919th Field Artillery and I went to the 101st Airborne in the glider infantry at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Mark: Now, how'd you get into that? Was it just the luck of the draw or were you selected for that for some reason?

Diefenthaler: Well they do. My serial number was D-5655 and his was 57. They just took every other person and put us in the Airborne and the others went someplace else. So I talked to the sergeant and lieutenant that I wanted to stay with my brother and he says, "Well, it's all fixed up. You better go now where you're

assigned and then turn the transfer in at that time.” So I did. Three months later I was on my way to Camp Phillips, Kansas ‘cause twin brothers could be together at that time. So I went to Camp Phillips, Kansas in the 919th Field Artillery and that was quite an experience because I had come in on Saturday and my brother had been on KP so he was taking a shower and I said, “Well, I’ll take a shower, too.” And just that time the first sergeant called and says, “I want you guys in the day room, in the officer’s day room.” So I said, “Well, I’ll take a shower first.” And Will, my brother — his first name was Wilber and mine is Willard — and he said, “Well, when Sergeant Felts says something, we’d better go.” He was a big, 7/8ths Indian, had been in the Army 18 years and when he barked everybody jumped. So I went in there and they put — Sergeant Major Bierdon — put one of us up on the day room table and Sergeant Felts put the other one up. He was so proud to have twins in the outfit. So the next day was Sunday and I went in and we stayed in bed in the morning but in the afternoon, or at dinner time — they had a reputation for having the best pancakes in the business — so we went and Sergeant Hilt was the mess sergeant — I come through, my brother came through first, and about two or three later I came and Sergeant Hilt, the mess sergeant, says, “We don’t give seconds and move on soldier.” So I moved on and I had the Screaming Eagle on my shoulder yet and Will had the 94th so I sat down on the table and Sergeant Felts come in and says, “What’s the matter, soldier? Isn’t my food any good?” and I says, “Yeah, but that darned mess sergeant wouldn’t give me any. So we went over there, and Sergeant Felts is about a foot bigger than Sergeant Hilt, and he starts pulling him over the counter and says, “I want my men fed.” So I got fed. Well, Monday and Tuesday and a lot of the month I was on KP. You’d have thought I was a cook because Hilt didn’t like me. So then I had training on the carbine and the M-1 rifle in the Airborne and my brother only had the old Enfield and Springfield so I could give lessons on the carbine and on the M-1 Barrent (??) so I got to be PFC and pretty soon I got to be corporal. So that took care of that. I wasn’t on the KP no more. So what else you want to know? That’s the start.

Mark: Yeah. Well, I went to basic training about 40 years after you did and it’s a much different situation, obviously, but one of the things I remember is that it was a mix of people from all different parts of the country. The East coast and the South and that sort of thing. I’m interested in who you trained with.

Diefenthaler: A lot of people that I have, I’ve been in about six different outfits so I remember a lot of the 94th and I joined the 94th reunion outfit and I just got The Attack from them. Anyway, when we took off in the gliders in the Airborne, I was scared and everybody else was scared. So I wanted to be the pilot and couldn’t be the pilot unless you joined the Air Corps, that was the Army Air Corps. And no engine and stuff like that and it took off at 60 miles an hour and the C-47 took off at 90 so we were about 12 foot above the tail of the airplane by the time they took off and I went up three times. A couple of times we really got scared because we went, had to land and the windshield blew out so we landed. Well,

then when we got to the 94th, along came the Air Cadet Program so we joined the Air Cadets and for six months we were learning to be fighter pilots down at Miami Beach and Wal—Arkansas and we wanted to be P-51 and P-47 and P-38 pilots. And when I think back, I'm pretty lucky that we didn't get that because so many of them were killed. So in six months we were turned back and that's how we wound up in 106th Infantry at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. We went across with that outfit and we met some real nice people and, in fact, we were trying to get a hold of quite a few of them now after 50 years and I just, on Thanksgiving Day, my daughter came up and I showed her the bible that I had in the Army and out falls a little address book. And here it was my brother's address book and I don't know yet how it got there because we had writing in there from going across the Channel and everything and he died in the first prison camp and he didn't come back. But I found this book and for 50 years, or 51 years, in November I was trying to get a hold of the guy that took us across the English Channel in an LST and he was from Oostberg, Wisconsin. So I couldn't remember his name and anyway, my brother had talked to him on the LST and we were from Wisconsin and this guy was from Wisconsin so we got invited, my brother and I, into the officer's mess. For all these years I was wondering how I could get a hold of this guy. Well, I paged through that book and here's the guy's address — his name was Ellis Bosquill from Oostberg. So I got on the telephone and called and the first guy I got was this Ellis Bosquill and he was the guy that took us down the French coast to Rouen, or to the Seine River, and up the Seine River to Rouen and he didn't remember us but he was the only guy taking us 'cause he had come up from Africa. So we spent that Monday afternoon reminiscing and having a heck of a good time down in Oostberg. So it was really nice.

Mark: It can be a small world sometimes.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, and for 51 years in November, that I was trying to get this guy, and never knew his name, and I don't know, to this day, how that book got back from Germany because my brother didn't come back and somebody must have sent it back. So it was interesting in that respect.

Mark: That is interesting. So you eventually ended up with the 106th before you left.

Diefenthaler: Yeah. We were in the 106th Infantry and my brother was assistant supply sergeant and full-time armor. So in order for me to stay I got to be assistant armor and full-time chemical warfare non-com. So I—

Mark: What did that entail?

Diefenthaler: Well, I had to teach everybody how to use the gas mask and put it on and go in a gas chamber and go out again and clear the mask and everything else and then I had the mine-detectors and we had to recover mines and disarm them. Then we

had to decontaminate the uniforms and equipment we used from mustard and lucite gas and a lot of tear gas. And I have scars on both arms from chemical — a tenth of one percent and a half a drop of mustard on one arm and lucite on the other arm and in about ten seconds it gets to be as big as your little finger and then we neutralize that in another spot and showed the difference to all these people. So I had scars on my arms. Then when we went to England, I studied with the Blitz firemen and out of the London fire fighting and so we went over to Oxford University and there were big gliders, bigger than the ones in the 101st, and they were all loaded with chemicals ready to be dropped at a moment's notice. And we couldn't see them. They were all camouflaged in this woods and we couldn't see them until we were right up there and noted that those were gliders filled with chemicals.

Mark: Did someone tell you that they were filled with chemicals. I mean, you didn't go and look at them.

Diefenthaler: No, Major John Livze was our battalion non-com, or battalion gas officer, and he pointed it out. And then we went on the big Oxford drill field and the Blitz firemen gave demonstrations on putting out fires. And I remember the biggest thing they had, they had about a 250 gallon tank of petrol they call it instead of gasoline, and they had a little pep talk on that, and then a rain pipe going down. So they started this gas leak and lit it and that flamed up to the tank and then they asked for a canteen cup of water, so one of us give him a canteen cup of water and he shinnies up the ladder on the side of the tank and dumps this water in it. So water being heavier than the gasoline, it went out first and the fire went out and we shut the pit valve off. And then he had another tank there that they had a crack in it, like a gas tank, and it was leaking — and I used that theory many times when I come home. I worked in a filling station and we had trouble with getting gas tanks during the end of the war and during the war — and he asked for a mess kit with some water and a bar of soap. So I took my bar of Lux soap and smeared it in the mess kit and then you start, you wipe off the crack on this tank and you start swirling around from the outside in and by the time you get in with this soap the gasoline will quit because gasoline won't cut soap. So we fixed quite a few gas tanks that way until we could get something new.

Mark: Thanks to the U.S. Army I guess.

Diefenthaler: English Army. We hated those Limeys but they sure did a good job.

Mark: So, the 106th was trained in Indiana, is that right?

Diefenthaler: When we got there, there were 106th Infantry and they were, had been replacements I think. They started out in Fort Jackson, South Carolina but when we got there as the Air Force returned we got to Indiana and we could keep our same rating. I had T-5, my brother had T-5 and my buddies had mostly T-5.

Mark: Yeah. So when did you go overseas?

Diefenthaler: Went overseas in October of '44 with the 106th and we landed in Scotland and got a train down to England and then we took a couple of older trucks and went back up to Scotland and got new trucks. My truck had two miles on it, a GMC 6x6. We had about 30 or 40 of those trucks on a convoy and we drove down to England and, of course, we got lost. I remember my buddy had taken us up there 'cause he had an older truck and it would go faster. So I found him and I was in back of him and then a little English guy, a little car — I don't know, like a Volkswagon — he blew his horn and everything and finally he passed me. So we were double-clutching into this and going like a dickens and this guy was in between us so we hit a tunnel under some river — I don't know exactly where it was but I was talking to my buddy, oh, about two months ago, in Iowa — and we went under this tunnel and I had a big bumper with a winch on that 6x6 and I got right up in back of that guy and blew the horn and double-clutched it down and made an awful racket so when I could see light I kept right on his tail and he crowded up the side of that embankment with that little car and we passed. I think he's still there. [Laugh]. So then, we had a lot of fun that way, you know.

Mark: Did you have much other contacts with the English people themselves? You were a kid from Kiel, Wisconsin. I assume this is your first trip overseas.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, it was the first trip and I could have gone several times after that but I didn't want to. I just wrote a letter to The Cup of the 106th, John Klein up in Minnesota — he puts out this newsletter — and when I talked to Bill Brewster about this German lyplan (??). Well, anyway when I was in England I was kind of on my own and we only had so much work 'cause I was just assigned to the company and the colonel, Colonel Kent — he was a paratrooper — and he evidently didn't like the Glider Infantry so we talked quite often about that — and he says that he had a pair of binoculars, German binoculars, that you could see at night and he would give those to anybody that could hook up the telephones in this big manor house in Fairfield Park, England. So I had a diploma for electronics before I went into the Army and so I probed the little boxes up in the ceiling that came up there and all the telephone wires were in the ceiling and came out in little boxes, so I probed them and hooked up the telephone in several rooms and I got the binoculars. And then I'm looking for Lieutenant Turner, he was a motor officer, and he was a good looking guy and the ladies just seemed to like him. So I had hooked up the telephone and the switchboard in a little room in this house and each room had a fireplace. So we hooked up the telephone switchboard and I could use one of those rooms. So then we'd call into England, into Fairford and Swinden I think it was, and make a date for Lieutenant Turner and he would go out at night and we had a little stove in place of a fireplace and we ironed his uniform so he looked 100 percent. And I had the binoculars and a room in England. And then when we

went across the Channel with this LST we were up on the Siegfried Line in the Ardennes Mountains and Colonel Kent was kind of a friend — he was a real soldier and was real proud of him — and he showed this Luger pistol and on it was a beautiful piece and he said this Luger pistol to anybody that would drag a light plant out of the Siegfried Line. And most of the guys didn't have the time but then my brother and I took like a clothesline and I went in like this pill box and the pill box had been bulldozed shut because they couldn't get the Germans out of there, they just bulldozed them shut. And there was a little crack, an opening in there, so we dug a little more so we could get in there and went in the Siegfried Line and we must have went about a block or two in there, that building, it was all cement and steel, and we found this generator. It was kind of a portable generator that could pull out four pipes on the end and four gorillas can carry it. Well, my brother and I was little gorillas, and we pulled the whole thing out. I got—I had been using a jeep and a headlamp for Colonel Kent's map area and I had the jeep outside idling and every once in awhile I had to go and race it up to keep the battery up and then I brought a couple of bulbs along from the Siegfried Line and hooked up this generator so we had light. So I got the Luger pistol. And then, well, like tomorrow, the 16th of December, was when the Bulge started in 1944. And I got the Luger pistol. We kind of went our way and then the 16th, like 50 years ago, 51 years ago really, tomorrow, the Bulge started and it hit this CP, command post, in the Siegfried Line and the next thing we knew the tarp on our truck, I was driving a 6x6 with the mine detectors and the kitchen equipment, and we had that parked up on a hedgerow and all at once something exploded and the tarp got tore and everything else and somebody hollered "Colonel Kent got hit". The next think I remember they're trying to get him into a ¾-ton weapons carrier or ambulance and had white flags on it and tried to get him to the back, to the rear. About that time another shell hit and blew that ambulance up so that was the last we knew of him. But just last month Dan Bide is an author of some kind of a book and he wrote in this Cup publication, this 106th Magazine, that Colonel Kent was such a fine guy so I thought I'm going to write to this Cup and explain to him that I knew him and what a good guy he was. And that's the generator that looked just like the one I bought up in Kiel, Wisconsin and wanted to donate to Bill Brewster's museum and he said, he'd come up and looked at it and he was kind of leery about taking it 'cause it was kind of heavy and stuff like that. So They can still have it if they want.

Mark: Okay, that's still an open story that you know of.

Diefenthaler: Yeah.

Mark: You know, this is kind of off the track but it occurred to me while we were talking, you come from Kiel, Wisconsin, with the name of Diefenthaler, now in World War I there was a lot of animosity towards Americans of German descent.

Diefenthaler: World War II, too.

Mark: I don't detect any such thing in your experiences.

Diefenthaler: No, we just found a memorial in the town of Ryan that has a Diefenthaler name from the Civil War that we never knew about. A lot of guys, evidently my great-grandpa come from Germany and left the family over there. So I'm not sure if some of those "Sauerkraut's" weren't shooting us. I'm not sure but it was interesting. I could talk a little German so I acted as interpreter quite awhile. We were marching quite a bit after we got captured on the 19th of December and my brother and I and this buddy from Iowa drug another cook almost 100 miles 'cause his legs gave out so I asked the guards — they were the old German home force, let's put it — how much longer and when do we eat and everything else. And it was, the snow was deep and it was cold, and he stopped the whole thing, the whole group, and they fixed their bayonets — and that's the meanest think you ever saw; it's like a three-cornered file, just razor sharp — and from then on we didn't say much. We wern't so scared to die and scared of getting cut up. When I come home, my wife just gave me the note about Ludwig. A neighbor guy, a big German fellow, moved across the field from us and bought the 80 acre farm next to us. His name was Ludwig Frietag and he was a Hitler youth.

Mark: Oh, is that right?

Diefenthaler: And I was first kind of alarmed, and the accent, the German accent generally got to me. But he died a couple of years ago and he turned out to be a fine friend and a real good neighbor.

Mark: So with the 106th, you were in England for awhile and you crossed the Channel at what point? I'm interested in—

Diefenthaler: I think it was Southhampton and then we went across, supposedly it was the narrowest part, and then we went up to the Seine River and to Rouen and we landed, drove off the LSTs there. It was raining and awful cold. It seemed like yesterday.

Mark: And you got to the front, when?

Diefenthaler: Well, we relieved this one outfit that had been, the front had been very quiet for quite awhile, so we were greenhorns and didn't really figure on anything. We slept with our rifles and everything. The outfit ahead of us had made some little log cabins and some, well, big fox holes and covered them with logs and so we could see out — like a machine-gun emplacement. And when the Bulge started we backed into this one, another fellow and I, into this one big hole under the

logs and I stood up to my waist in water all night because it had been filled up with water. It was something that you don't forget.

Mark: So it was December the 16th was when the Bulge started.

Diefenthaler: The Bulge started.

Mark: What was going on just prior to that? You, apparently, had no idea that they were going to be coming.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, we went about training and we had to stand guard and stuff. I was pretty lucky. I had the truck and I didn't have to walk much. We went down, just a couple of days before the Bulge started, Sexton and I went down the hill, they had just carved a road out of the mounts with a cat and it was steep on one side and just rubble on the other. So we went down the hill there, down the mountain to get some mail and gasoline and oil, and Bob Porter was the mail clerk and he went with us. And I drove down and went past this open place where the sniper'd always hit and everything, we were going and stopped almost at the bottom of the hill and hear come a ¾-ton weapons carrier and the stopped in the middle of the road. So here a sergeant, an English Sergeant, come in the, wanted me to pull in the side of the road so he could get past. And it had been snowing and everything else so I says, no, that he could pull off, I would go past, and then would pull him out. Then the lieutenant, he was a British lieutenant, come up and said, "Now that's an order. You pull over and let me through." And I says, "I can't do that 'cause you can't pull me out. I can pull you out." So I walked up and I was kind of pouting and walked up to the truck and wound her up good and I come about as fast as you'd go and I smacked this ¾-ton in the front bumper and pushed him in the ditch and we never stopped to pull him out. He's probably there yet. One reason we didn't like the Limeys because they were so smart and driving our vehicles and that kind of hit a sore spot.

Mark: Sort of resentful about that.

Diefenthaler: Yeah. So it was one of those things. I think the Limeys did a good job but we just didn't like them. They didn't like us either.

Mark: Yeah. And then there's an old phrase in military history that there's one thing worse than having an enemy and that's having allies. It seems to have been the case here as well. So when the German attack started—

Diefenthaler: Oh, what I was going to tell you once before—

Mark: Oh, I'm sorry.

Diefenthaler: I drove down and then we loaded up with all these “jerry cans,” five gallon cans of gasoline in the bed of the truck, the 6x6, the GMC, and on the tailgate we strapped a lot of five gallons full of oil. So my buddy drove back and I sat aside the buckboard with feet up on the cans and it was rattling and we’re hollering back and forth and all at once the tarp across the side tore and we didn’t hear nothing and the cans were rattling and so I kept talking to Porter and he didn’t say nothing, I looked and here he’s slumped down and he took a bullet in the back of the helmet and it spun around and took the top of his head off. And so I was pretty thankful it wasn’t me because just a second or something it would have been. So we got back to where we were headed and I talked to Lieutenant Mike Tomey. — he was the S-2 there — and we wanted to go out and get this sniper — my brother and I and this guy from Iowa. He said, “No you guys are too upset and made some foolish mistakes.” So he wouldn’t let us go but he did send out four or five guys and they come back with this German kid and then they took him back for interrogation and something. I called this Mike Tomey from California and I wanted to find out if he had ever got a hold of Bob Porter’s wife. Bob had just got married before we left Indiana and he was just a kid and a real fine kid. I asked Tomey if he had ever got a hold of his wife ‘cause I was going to explain to her that I was sitting next to him. And, no, he said, all the records were burned in St. Louis and Kansas City, too. So that was as far as we got. We got a couple of other guys on the trail trying to find Bob Porter’s wife, but it’s kind of hard.

Mark: Yeah, I’m sure it is very hard.

Diefenthaler: And then the day we got captured, that was only a couple of days after that. We really hadn’t been in combat. A lot of them never even got to fire their rifle because when we got up in this rest area, there was hardly any ammunition available, so I went in one of these log cabins that they had built and I found a bunch of armor-piercing and incendiaries and tracer ammunition that they weren’t supposed to use against personnel. And then Captain Wilson, our CO, had given me two A-6 machine-guns in [unintelligible] and I should clean them and give one to the radio section. I says, “I’ll clean them but I’m not going to give them away.” So then I had just cleaned mine and I loaded up all the ammunition I could and the M-1 clips and the machine-gun clips. And then we had this Curtis Allen from Mississippi, was an All-American football player, a big guy, and he was driving with me. And then we had a 50-calliber machine-gun on the ring so we sat in the seat and fired. So this night it was raining and snowing and cold so Allen and I had dug a slit trench, and he was over six foot tall so we dug a pretty good sized one, and kind of filled with water and ice, so we laid on our raincoats and covered up with the shelter hat. And that night I heard something up by the truck and I hollered, “Halt!” and he hollered “Halt!” right back with a German accent. So we let loose with a couple of the rounds from the BAR and it stopped working. When I hollered “Halt!” we were laying on top so I pushed Allen in the hole and he stood up, all six foot of him, and

started to fight me. So I finally got him to sit down and my rifle wouldn't work anymore so I used the A-6 machine-gun and kept him down and Lieutenant Marshall was just across the way from there and all I could see was the second lieutenant bar on his helmet and a 45 sticking out. And then my brother went up on his truck — he was the third truck — and was getting down his 50-caliber and he had the supplies from the supplies area and during the day some of the cooks had stood guard on a road section and had cleaned his 50, so when he got up there and he got down and put it on the bi-pod, it wouldn't fire. And here they had put the sheer pin in backwards, which was quite common. So then I hollered back to get the one off of mine 'cause I wouldn't let anybody have that. It was my personal gun, you know. And up comes Spitzer, a little Jewish guy, and he says, "I don't know much about it but I'll help you." So he reaches up for that 50 and I hollered at him not to touch the butterfly 'cause that was the trigger. So my brother took it by the muzzle and handed it down and Spitzer helped him get it to the bi-pod and set his on the side and then it started to chatter. Well, everything was quiet. In the morning I looked to see why my rifle didn't work and I got a bullet through the front hand guard. So that was only about six or eight inches from my hand. So I was lucky again. And I was lucky so often. I think the good Lord took care of us.

Mark: So were you bypassed?

Diefenthaler: I don't know. We were running back and forth and Lieutenant Turner was a motor officer and we were the first big truck because we had the mine detector and the jeep ahead of us where he was supposed to be, where Lieutenant Turner was supposed to be, that hit a mine and it blew the wheels off. Then he was on the weapons carrier — that was the second truck — and he had a sergeant and stuff with the maps and that went through and that hit a mine and so he was hanging on our truck when we got captured. And before that we were in St. Vith (??) and everybody says, "Well, this is good. You can hear our 50s chattering." and the Germans were more of a rumble deal, fired faster, so we thought we were safe. We went into St. Vith and all at once they turned those 50s on us and there was Germans in our uniforms, guiding us right into the trap. And they called that, I think, Parker's Crossroads. I didn't know that until we went to a couple of reunions that that's where it was but I said, "That's where we were." So we backed, I couldn't back up to get out of this trap 'cause I had a little trailer on this 6x6, so I backed it up and unhooked the pinnel and give it kind of a jerk and let it go down the mountain. Then we could turn around and we headed out of St. Vith towards Schoenberg. And then, it didn't take long, the orders come over to destroy our weapons. So we were there destroying our weapons and in the ¾-ton Red Cross truck there were two medics guarding two German prisoners in there. They stopped right aside of us and they come out and they hit their carbines on the frozen ground and this one shot himself in the belly. So I bent down to see what I could do to help him and this German had grabbed the Riskano, a 45 machine-gun, 45 caliber machine-gun, and shot this

guy dead. Hunt told him to put his hands on his head again and that was the end of him. Then we had to run down this hill. Lost our freedom that day.

Mark: And that's when you knew that you were captured.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, we were, I think there was 1200 of us, and it was raining and sleeting on December 19th and it was about 3:00 in the afternoon I think. They tried to call in air power but it was so foggy and snowy the aircraft couldn't get in.

Mark: And so what happened after you were captured? I mean, you were marched to Germany.

Diefenthaler: We marched in, well, the first night we stayed in a cemetery. Some of them only had a blanket and they took our helmets and everything away. I had a field jacket and full knit cap that goes under the helmet and I had three pair of heavy socks on because I had, my brother was in the supply room so I grabbed three heavy pair of socks and I put on combat boots that were a size-and-a-half too big but they fit in the socks good. When we got all done, and we drug a guy about 100 miles, and these little "black shirts" come and Hitler Youth, and they pulled — I had a pair of four buckle galoshes and I had put them up on my epaulet on the shoulder — and this little "black shirt" come and jerked them off. I, like a goof ball, I brought them back and hooked them on the other shoulder and about that time I got a kick in the butt and a trooper come off of the pole — he was fixing the telephone line — and he let me have one with his spurs. So that was pretty stiff and still carried, drug this guy 'cause any time you let them lose, let them lay, they would shoot them and they had orders to shoot most of them and they weren't going to take prisoners. So we were kind of lucky that way. I never found out his name and I don't know if he made it 'cause there were so many of them that didn't make it. But then we marched and marched and finally they put us in a train. There was about — some guys say 60, some guys say 100 in these 40-and-8 boxcars. Anyhow, we couldn't move around. There was one kid, he had a cigarette lighter but no fluid so he sparked it so bad you lost your vision at night. So then I traded a pack of cigarettes, there were two cigarettes in a pack we got somewheres, from the C-ration or K-ration or somewhere, and I got the, traded them cigarettes for that lighter so he wouldn't spark it anymore and I donated it to Bill Brewster the other day. It wasn't a Zippo; it was one of these reproductions but somehow I kept it. When we got captured that time and destroyed our weapons we had orders that anybody had German equipment would get rid of it fast because they figured they'd kill the guy to get it. So I lost my binoculars and my pretty Luger.

Mark: Your Luger.

Diefenthaler: And, oh, that hurt. It was just the nicest little gun. Never got to fire it; I just kept polishing it. And I threw it in the snow and the mud. I kept the wristwatch

and a pen and pencil set that I had and I had \$10 sandwiched between two pictures in my billfold and two pounds and ten shillings, equivalent of \$10, and you could buy yourself out of the country for that I thought. And just by luck I always could hide it when the Germans come around so nobody took it away from me. I kept that.

Mark: So they brought you to a railhead somewhere.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, they brought us in this railhead and they put us in the boxcars. And that was on Christmas Eve. So we were sitting on this siding, outside of Lindberg Prison Camp, and they were going to put us there but that was full, so then in the evening our planes come and strafed and bombed these, this rail yard. Some of the guys, when the railcars tipped over and busted open, and some guys ran and they shot them. Some evidently must made the POW sign with their bodies in the snow. Anyhow the fighter plane, all I could see, I thought it was a P-47 and I'm not sure if it was or not. But anyway he saw this POWs and he flew over and headed back. So then the next day was Christmas and they had to fix the track enough that they could pull us out of there. Anyway, I got a picture of that, must be about a year ago now, that was finally released and I thought the engine had blown up and we were the first car behind that. Well, according to the picture, it seems that the coal car was next to us and then the engine was blown up. So we were pretty lucky there.

Mark: Once again.

Diefenthaler: And Christmas Day, we pulled into Bad Orb town and we pulled a guy by the name of Jeske out of this boxcar, he was all filth, didn't have a toilet and he had the diarrhea and everything else, and they had a five gallon bucket in one end for all these people to go to the toilet and Jeske, nobody'd touch him 'cause he was such a mess. So my brother and I and this Maynard Sexton from Iowa, we were always together, we pulled him out of that corner and laid him on the street. And the houses were right next to the sidewalk. So we laid him down and we took snow and kind of brushed him off hoping we'd clean him a little bit and I think Jeske was from northern Wisconsin someplace but I never have been able to find him. A little old lady come out and wanted to know, in German, if some warm milk would help. I said that would be fine. So then she got a little, like a little white pitcher, and the milk was just lukewarm and we raised up Jeske and poured a little down him and this SS trooper come up and kicked that pitcher out of our hand and threw that little lady back in the house. I don't know where those, those SS troopers were just plain mean. Then they got us together again and we marched five miles up this road to the Bad Orb, Staleg 9B and they put us in there. And just, it must be about 20 years ago, I worked for Elkhart Engineering in the electronic department and we got a call — we made hide measuring machines for cow hides, pig hides, horse hides, and we also represented the Turner Germany — they made hide measuring machines — and

we got a call from Chicago, from Karl Koche— he was the German representative and mechanic — and he'd been in Chicago fixing this machine and somehow or other it didn't start so he took a magazine and pushed the starter switch and it started but it wouldn't stop. So he took another magazine and pushed the reversing switch, so then he burned out the whole switching. So he called up to Elkhart Engineering in Plymouth and wanted to know if I would come to Chicago to fix that machine for him. So I says welkl if he'd drive up from Chicago, because that's such a mess driving, that I would go with him. So he took this little Mazda convertible that they had and went to Chicago. By the time I got down there I was shaking because I always thought a truck was following us with that rear-end drive and as soon as I got used to it, then it would be quiet and all at once it would go again. Well, anyway, Karl wanted to go back to Germany for Easter. His wife had died and his kids, his two daughters, were staying at Siggenheim. And he wanted to go to Bad Orb for Easter. So then I fixed everything and I found out that — Siggenheim was where we got liberated from — and Bad Orb, he knew all that 'cause his dad was a baker on the corner. And when Bad Orb was liberated on April, about April 2 of '45, we talked about that on the way to Chicago. And he said he went out, he was just a kid, I think about 14 years old, and he always took a German helmet, put that on, took the scuttle, coal scuttle, and went out and got a bucket of coal for his dad's bake oven. So this day he put his helmet on and got his scuttle full of coal and he looks aside and here he looks at this big, grand rifle, and a soldier — he said he looked bigger than ever — pointing it at him, so he took his helmet and threw it away and hid in the basement. So then we had talked about that. So I got him home for Easter and his, he got his two daughters from his sister-in-law in Siggenheim, went to Bad Orb and celebrated Easter and he sent me a picture of this prison camp. He called it a "kiddies" camp and all you could recognize on it was the big tower and the transformer that they had there. And he wanted me to go over there and demonstrate this, our hide measuring machines in Paris for the big show, and also in Germany for the big machinery show but I said I didn't want anything to do with that 'cause I had enough. But he was going to give me his Volkswagon or he would drive me, anywhere I wanted to go. But I says, I was scared [END TAPE 1, SIDE A] to drive with him. He puts his foot to the floor and then just passing them.

Mark: They have a reputation for doing that.

Diefenthaler: Yeah. So then he came back and I think he married a girl from near Milwaukee and he asked me if I would work for him and I had a good job I didn't want to quit.

Mark: Bad Orb? O-R-B?

Diefenthaler: Yeah. Bad Orb, that was originally, I think, a prison camp, a kiddies camp, and it was turned into a prison camp for, we had Serbs and Australians, Russians.

And some of the Russians, they didn't belong to the Geneva Convention, they had, at least that's what they said. Some of those people didn't have any shoes, they just had rags around their feet. Some of them looked like they were maybe 20 years old and they'd been there five years already.

Mark: So there was a difference in the way certain prisoners were treated?

Diefenthaler: Yeah. They had big fences and in between the fences there was alleys that they marched through, the guards did, with guard dogs. Those were like, we called them wolfhounds and they were always snarling and it was very dangerous.

Mark: So the Russians would be in one particular part of the camp.

Diefenthaler: The Russians would be in one and the Serbs, and I often wondered where the Serbs came from and now we just hear about Serbia. And then the Australians, they had their fancy hat on with the side turned up, and then they were in the compound next to it. And evidently the French had some underground connections because when, on March 30, in the morning, we were liberated on March 30, about 3:10 in the afternoon. That was Good Friday of 1945. But in the morning the Germans tried to move us, the American POWs, so we had orders to carry each other in the back in the barracks and make believe we were sick. Well, we were sick. We couldn't stand up five minutes or we'd pass out. So these, I was laying behind the chimney and there was a double door open and I saw this plane come and we had known that there was any guards around; it seemed like they had left. Anyway, there was an anti aircraft gun open fire at this one fighter plane. I think it was a P-47 and one of the guys at the reunion said it was an English plane. It went straight up and come straight back down and blew up this gun emplacement and as he pulled out he hit, I think about 30 Frenchmen, as he pulled out of this dive, he didn't let up on the trigger fast enough I think. But I was laying behind the chimney and it knocked out the side of the building. It was just all mud and beams. And I laid behind the chimney and I saw this and I could see the pilot with his goggles on and I could see his eyes. I could see the four machine-guns coming onto each wing. Pretty lucky there.

Mark: That was close.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, and that was the day that later on in the afternoon we had orders to stay in the barracks, on the floor, and the 6th Armored Division come in with a tank and busted the gate down. One of the guys come in there and he couldn't figure out how we could still live 'cause it was — I weighed 99 pounds and that was with my big boots on.

Mark: Now, I was going to ask about life in the camp. You were basically a prisoner for about four months; from—

Diefenthaler: From December—

Mark: --December to April.

Diefenthaler: March 30, yeah.

Mark: How was your camp set up and how was it—

Diefenthaler: It had big buildings and the buildings were double-ended. In the middle there was like a wash area but they didn't have any water. Then there was 500 of us on each end. Every once in awhile they'd take us out and count us — [a German phrase said here that transcriptionist can't decipher]. That means up and out and counted. So then they'd count us and every once in awhile they'd come through with a wash tub, a couple of guys carrying it, and it would be soup and they'd have a dipper. Ours, my buddy and I, ate out of a steel helmet. I think there was three or four of us with helmets then. Most of the time it was just water, maybe a little warm. We figured there was sugar beet tops. To this day, when we eat together, we always look to see if we've got any solids. Sometimes you'd have a piece of meat or something. So we didn't have much nourishment.

Mark: And you were fed three times a day?

Diefenthaler: No, we were lucky sometimes if we got it once or twice a day and then they'd have maybe six or seven men on a short loaf of bread. When we cut that, the guy that cut, he always got the last piece. And the next day if we got it, no cheating. And they'd measure that, oh, just minutely. Then we'd have something to eat, go back and lay down. Some of them they took out to fix the railroad tracks but most of us were so weak they couldn't work them.

Mark: So, how would you occupy your time?

Diefenthaler: Well, some of the guys would be cooks and they'd concoct the darndest recipes. Some guys would write songs and poems and everything you could think of. A lot of us just prayed and slept. Just when I left Bad Orb, the 25th of January, 1945, they were going to move us and getting behind myself. But anyway, they were going to move us and they lined us up. It was funny; the Germans would always count in three's, five's or seven's, and real loud. So we'd line up in the snow. And they had moved my brother into a building with some other people and — it all started when one night he got up — and there was a bed, you know, as wide as this table — and there was three of us in there — and he got up and sat on the edge of the bunk and put on his shoes. Most the time, we'd left our clothes and everything on, and I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "I'm going to teach these guys how to make coffee." And we never had any coffee. So then we talked him into coming back and put him between Maynard Sexton and

I and held him in the bed. A couple of days later, he had such a high fever that he was talking silly. They took him into this other building. So then I didn't see him for a couple of days and then when we were going to move and I talked to one of the sergeants — we called him the “Man of Confidence” and he was the ranking non-com and he was in charge of the whole thing — and he said, “I think he's in that building.” So we stood there and I was getting madder and madder so I asked the guard if I could go and see my brother and tell him good-bye, and he wouldn't let me go. So then I walked back and got in line, he'd always count us so that the guys shuttling back and forth to goof him up on his counting. So finally I got really disgusted and I went up, and it was about three steps, and a little porch, and then there was a door — so I went up there and here's old Germans down there with his rifle, well, I got up and looked him right in the eye and I pushed him off to the side in a snow bank and I went in. Just by luck, I turned right and my brother was laying on the floor and just on an old blanket and Fred Cavell, one of our other buddies, had the mumps and he was supposed to go with us. He had just got over the one side mumps and that morning he had got the mumps on the other side so he couldn't go along, Freddy Cavell. So I changed my field jacket, which I had loaned him 'cause my old one was warmer than his new one, and he said I better take that back. So I took my field jacket and put it on and took the one I had and put on him. He was so weak he could hardly raise his head. And, of course, we hadn't shaved for the whole time and hadn't washed the whole time and so then I said good-bye to him and went back. And just by luck, the German that, the guard, came in and he turned left down the length of this building and by that time I was out again. But he couldn't find out which one, who it was, but when he come back we had all shifted. Then in, he got, I went to this other — Staleg 9A, and I think that's when we froze our feet the second time. Well, anyway, we were liberated March 30 in [unintelligible] and I never heard any more about him except that I got, my folks got a letter from the War Department that--and we agreed that he would be buried in France at St. Avold Cemetery. And then several years ago in Muskogee, Oklahoma we had went to a Staleg A, B and C reunion and a guy tapped me on the shoulder and he says, “I'd like to talk to you.” I said, “Okay.” Here it was Chuck Stubbs from Minnesota and he had been the medic that took care of my brother. And he had a little piece of paper that had his name on and what he had given them. All they had was sulfa drug but they give it to him and he had the dates and stuff and he had some pictures from newspaper clippings that showed a burial detail there and the open pit where they had buried these guys. And he'd got taken care of him. A German colonel operated on him for an abscess on his left lung. So that was interesting. I had heard that he had been operated for an abscess on his left lung, pneumonia. So when I go to the VA I asked the doctor there, I says, “What does this entail?” He says, even if they had anesthetic, it would be rough. And when Chuck came and he visited with us at Elkhart Lake and he explained what they did — they put a needle between his ribs and tried to suck the infection out. He claimed that Colonel Borst, that was the name of the German doctor that did this, he tried. Then we were

looking at this book again. I think I said I had shown my daughter the bible I had in the service on Thanksgiving and out come a little black book that had all these addresses in. I don't know how it got there. Somebody must have sent it back from Germany because this guy from Oostberg was named and he said that was his writing and we hadn't seen him since we were in the [unintelligible]. Anyhow, there's a guy by the name of Cliff Acey A-C-E-Y and I have a letter that he brought from a French captain that was in battle and helped, wrote the letter that my brother dictated to me in Siggenheim. During the day my buddy and I always stood next to the door because there'd always be some stragglers coming in and all at once this couple of guys come in from Bad Orb, and a lot of them we didn't know because there were so many of them, and this one guy says, he stood and looked at me and he said, "I swear to God I buried you at Mannheim." And then I kind of knew something was wrong and he had handed me the letter that Will had died and what all happened to him. So we knew about that. And I'm trying to get a hold of him. He was from the Cincinnati area and this book give his address so I had contacted some people in telephone company to see if I could find him but they couldn't find him. Then when we were down in Columbia, South Carolina I think it was, we went to another reunion and I had bought a — was it in Columbia? — I bought a World War II helmet and the little master of ceremonies, just about five foot tall, he wanted to wear that helmet. I had bought it in a surplus store there. He wanted to wear that helmet and just show everybody how heavy it was and everything, so I let him do that. And we talked and he was going to introduce me up there and then this one guy, big guy, says, "Well, I know you." I says, "I don't know you." He says, "You remember those big guys that slept above you at Siggenheim?" I says, "I remember there was two big guys." He says, "I'm one of them." So here it was Bill, Bill Malone. And we had a good time. So they interviewed the two of us and then when we were up at Rapid City last year, two years ago for a division reunion, here he brings another guy. He says, "Here's the other big guy." Russell Hoff from out West someplace. He was the other big guy that slept above Sexton and I at Siggenheim when we got liberated. So we got some pictures of them. They're about a foot bigger than us and we were some of the heaviest guys.

Mark: So you were liberated Good Friday of 1945.

Diefenthaler: '45, 3:10 in the afternoon.

Mark: To be precise.

Diefenthaler: Yeah.

Mark: What happened after that?

Diefenthaler: Well, they, this one guy from the 6th Armored came in and he was looking for his brother so our guys tried to carry him, you know, [unintelligible]. I couldn't even lift a rifle. And he found his brother in the other end of the barracks. So they unloaded their whole supplies on us. They had cigarettes and candy bars and everything else. So then Chaplain Neal came in — he was one of the chaplains that we had always been with — and he held service for Easter for whatever was left of Good Friday and for Easter. Then a couple of days later they brought in, the same day, a couple of days later, they brought in a bunch of German prisoners—

Diefenthaler: The man of confidence there, this big tech sergeant, he says to come in and his name is Hauptman Fitzbach. If you ever get the chance, kill him. So they put, some of the guards had left. They had parked a tank in the corner of the field and they left so we thought that there'd be a fight but there was no fight. And some of our guys come and they just stomped this Fitzbach and another officer to death; they just stomped on his head and everything. So they put the MPs, our MPs, on, to keep us out. So then we had to stay in the barracks for a couple of days and the German, some of the soldiers come in and scrubbed the floor.

Mark: I would imagine they were feeding you by this time.

Diefenthaler: They hadn't fed us yet except what the tank guys had in their store. Then they come, and they must have had a storeroom full of potatoes so then we got some potatoes. And then a couple of days later the truck that was in the — I don't know if it was a red ball or white ball highway. They were a bunch of black soldiers with the worst looking trucks but they run like a clock. And they trucked us in to Giessen airport. And they had to dodge a lot of shells and bombs at the airport. And we went in with these 6x6's and one of our guys, they had to take the bullets out of the 50-calibers on the ring in the cab. So one of these guys, he goes up and he clicks that 50-caliber — cluck, cluck, cluck — and all the people along the side of the road, old ladies and old men, they would hit the ground and we'd laugh and go on. Anyhow, we landed on C-47s that were climbed in, and they flew us in to Camp Lucky Strike at LeHavre. I remember one of the guys asked if he could, if they would fly over the Eiffel Tower 'cause he wanted to see that. So this pilot flew us over the Eiffel Tower and banked just so we could see it out of these little windows and when I got home, quite a few years after that, we had a veterinarian that was a pilot and he flew C-47s. His name was Dr. Edgar Zorb, and I talked with him. He says, "Well, there was somebody asked me to fly over the Eiffel Tower." So I don't know if he was the guy that was piloting us or not. But anyhow, we got into this Camp Lucky Strike. It was a tent city. And the French were cooks and they couldn't understand English and we couldn't understand French. So a lot of the guys ordered pancakes and a couple of them died from exploded stomachs because they just ate too many pancakes. My buddy and I ate cereal. We had powdered milk and we had a vanilla pill to stick in it so it would taste like

something and we made up our mind that we're going to get sick on ice cream and Twinkies when we get home. [Laughter]

Mark: And did you?

Diefenthaler: Yeah. But he was in Iowa and I was in Wisconsin. We wrote back and forth. We call every once in awhile.

Mark: Now, I would imagine you had some contact with doctors somewhere along the line. I mean, I would be very interested in your—

Diefenthaler: Yeah, they examined us quite often but in Bad Orb or Siggenheim, I don't remember exactly where, but our guys were so sick and they had no medical help so one day here come a Captain Morgan. He was a doctor. He was a real friend. And then another fella, he looked like a big Jewish guy, and he acted like a doctor but he had corporal or sergeant stripes on. And they come in and they talked and they were going to do what they could do and that we should stay. They told us the Yanks were close and everything like that. So this Captain Morgan felt bad. He didn't even have rubber gloves to treat some of the people and I think all they had was sulfa drug. So on the way, I was in charge of a group of chemical soldiers and before we went across the Channel they passed out a bunch of condoms to everybody. And they were in a string of about ten or so and I had nine of them in my watch pocket yet. I had given one to one of our crew. So then I talked to Captain Morgan and I give him nine of those condoms and I went all over the barracks to find one more so he had ten and he was really happy about that. And I had forgot about it until we were down at Muskogee, Oklahoma and somebody had mentioned Captain Morgan. I says, "I knew him." So I just brought this back up again. Generally, at that time in the 1940s and stuff, you didn't talk about condoms and stuff like that. But anyway, I talked to our group and they were surprised that I never even had a girl friend but I had nine condoms in my watch pocket and I never let them go. I kept them. We had taken all our clothes off and been deloused and all that stuff twice and still I had these in my pocket. Captain Morgan said, "Boy, you're a life saver." and put his arm around me. Most of the time enlisted guys and captains didn't get along too good so that brought back a lot of memories, too. And then when I come back I was diagnosed as, I had frozen feet and had an ulcer, and all that stuff. But then we were so happy to get home we just didn't stop. We just come home. I had piles so bad and bed bugs had eaten me and frozen feet and my toes were open were for two years after I come home. I finally, I was servicing for Hoise Meter Gas up in Olsen, at, and a couple of times I couldn't hardly make it home. I got such headaches, migraine headaches. So Hoise knew a lot of the guys in Milwaukee so he made arrangements for me to get down to the VA and they diagnosed me and all this stuff and I still go.

- Mark: I was going to ask, when you were discharged from the service, what sort of medical conditions they had identified and what sort of help you received after discharge for these service-related conditions.
- Diefenthaler: When I come home, May 2 of 1945, I come home from Germany. I stayed for 60 days and arranged for my brother to be buried in France and then I reported back to Miami Beach and I laid there, my feet frozen, and I was in the ocean, salt water, and then clear water and all this stuff, and the doctor said, "If you don't get that color back to your feet you're going to have to take them off." Up to my ankles was really kind of black already. And around the heel it seemed like the nails of the boots, combat boots, just froze the spots in my heels. My right foot was just like a rotten potato. Anyway, I got some, I went in the ocean and then back in the clear water, rinse them. Then I bought a couple of bottles of Listerine and they didn't want to sell them to me because some of the guys were drinking them, the Listerine, and I put that in my mess kit and I kept my feet in them. I used that for the lice, for the piles, for the frozen feet and everything 'cause that's all you could get. So then when I got—was sent to Camp Wheeler, Georgia to train rookies for the Pacific and the first time I was down there they put me on an 18 mile hike and my feet were so doggone sore and I, but I made 18 miles. And some of these guys were older and some were florists, one guy didn't know his left hand from his right and put a stone in his pocket so he knew which was that. Then I trained rookies for six months down there and the doctors took pretty good care of me. And then they, I didn't have to stand formations because I worked in a weapons pool and took care of the PA system. So then I took care of that and they called me out, full dress, and I says, "Oh, boy, now I'm going to get hell." 'cause I hadn't had to stand formation and here they awarded me the Combat Infantry patch. And there was another POW there in Camp Wheeler but he was drunk all the time so I took his section of the barracks and my section of the barracks and I made these guys work and march and study and I could take them to the PX in half the time what they were allotted. And when I left they give me 48 hours to get to Camp McCoy and it was in the winter time, December 5, 1945. So I took off and down in Georgia we didn't have any anti-freeze in the car so I got to Terre Haute, Indiana and I dumped in a gallon of anti-freeze. All I could get. So the next morning another fellow and I kind of conned me into taking him along, well, we took off and I had a '41 Ford and was really proud of that car. It was almost new when we went in. Here the thing froze up and blew both hoses off the heads and kicked the hood so I couldn't—didn't know what to do. I took the thermostats 'cause they were shot, and I put the hoses back on and stopped at a little country store and got some Sani-Flush. So I put that in in order to clean it out. So by the time I got home, to Kiel, I was going to stay overnight by my folks and go to McCoy the next day, and then I cleaned it out and put anti-freeze in. The heater leaked, the radiator leaked, and so I managed to get over to Camp McCoy. The snow was so deep that going to Fond du Lac there was one track and I had to drive in a ditch and let the other guy pass, and back out again, and go again. Then when

I got to Camp McCoy I let it sit for a couple of days. So then I got discharged and I was supposed to leave by noon and here it was 7:00 in the morning and I wasn't ready yet so I went out and wanted to start the car and it wouldn't start. The starter wouldn't kick in. So I had another fella help me to push it over a fire where they had heated water for washing the kitchen tanks and the cans and stuff. I couldn't get quite over there so I took a stocking and put in a quart, a can of anti-freeze and made a torch out of that and put it under the pan. And, oh, about half-an-hour later I could go out and start it and by the time I got it to move, the battery was dead. So then I asked the guy to take the jeep and give me a push 'cause I had everything warmed up. No, he couldn't do that. Well, I says, "Go in and ask the cook if we can use his jeep." So he went in and got the cook and by that time I took his jeep and give me a push, and another guy was driving, I give him a push and everything worked alright so I let her run until I could leave for Kiel. I got to Fond du Lac and the train was passing, the train was just passing so I had to wait a half-an-hour for that. Finally, I let this guy out that was with me and he went up north someplace. I never saw him again.

Mark: So, you're finally out, discharged.

Diefenthaler: Then I got home.

Mark: The war is over for you. It's over, period by this time really. So, when it came to getting your life back on track, after the war—

Diefenthaler: I had worked for the Wooden Ware before we went in and so then, they had an opening in February of '45, so the 3rd of February I went to work. I had run the nailers and the saws and stuff like that. I worked for about a couple of weeks and the noise got to me, the high speed planer and the baler was automatic; it sounded like a machine-gun. I just got so goofy, I took off. So then I just carted around for a couple of months, started another job rapid saw and one of those seminars and I got seven diplomas for electronics. I went to school in Chicago for it, in DeForest. GI Bill.

Mark: I was going to ask, did you use the GI Bill?

Diefenthaler: Yeah, and a couple of them. Then I went to vocational school in Sheboygan for machinist. We had gone for machinist before the war and I took up electronics and machinist. Then I went to Manitowoc Vocational School for electronics and I worked for Boyse Meter Gas and I went to the _____. I found something to do.

Mark: And the GI Bill was of assistance to you.

Diefenthaler: Well, it was to a certain extent. And then I was getting tied down too much and I didn't want to repeat a lot of the stuff 'cause they always wanted to start me at

the bottom. So quite a bit of if I did on my own because it was just too much hassle. Like the electronic courses, I should have started at the bottom and I already had maybe six months of the same stuff so I took them.

Mark: And apparently finding work wasn't too much of a problem for you either.

Diefenthaler: No, I've had some pretty good jobs. I worked for Boyse Meter Gas for seven years and then I worked for the city of New Holstein for awhile. I went in to read the meters, I was in the electronics department, went in to read the meters and the superintendent at MB asked if he could hire me so I started there. I was there for seven-and-a-half years as maintenance man. Then I, I was the highest paid guy there. They had to change to whole union schedule 'cause I threatened to quit. Then I talked to the, Bob Gumm from Radio Shack, you know in electronics, and he says Alinko Electronics needed a technician. So I went down there and I wanted to study more on solid [unintelligible] electronics which he had, so I started there. And I wanted to make an exercise machine for crippled kids. My first wife's aunt had taken care of kids with cerebral palsy in Green Bay during the school year and they came to visit us and I felt so sorry for those kids. And we had made our own computers and stuff for the hide measuring machine and I had designed an exercise robot that — they said it generally took seven nurses to exercise one kid and I had figured they could take seven kids and exercise them with one nurse just pushing the button. So I worked on that and got some machinery, going to make a robot, and then I got called back to MB in the engineering department. Then I didn't have time for that so I spent ten years in the engineering, making highway scrapers, and going all over the country putting them on the road, scraping the highways. Then I left there and worked for Stelting's company in Kiel and I worked for manufacturing engineering there and wound up in the manufacturing engineering tool room. So when I got 62 years old I had my fill of that so I retired. Up to now, I'm retired 11 years, I have a machine shop and I do a lot of custom work for Medpool making farm machinery and for John Deere Equipment, and for the gravel pit, and the log homes. I do a lot of custom work for them.

Mark: No, it doesn't seem like making a living was a problem for you after the war.

Diefenthaler: Then we had, I had to mention this, I have a daughter and we had two boys. Then we had the third guy, he was three months old and my first wife died in her sleep. So then, and he was—Tommy—just three months old. So then I had known Jean for several years before and she lived in Kansas just about a mile-and-a-half from my mother's home place and after my first wife, Dorothy, died, I took the baby and my mom and we went to Kansas for vacation because my dad had died just a couple of months after that and they had been retired and went to Kansas every summer. So I took them down there and visited and we went fishing in the big pond they've got there. So we took my uncle's, well, nephew back, he was going to the airport and go back to Denver. So then I saw

Jean there and I went back, she's the only one I called me Lefty. They always called me Willard down there. So she said, "Well, Lefty, how are you?" and we had gone home already to my uncle where we were staying and so I had to take, Tommy, the baby, and show her and see how she was. So then I talked her into coming back to Wisconsin and we got married. She had Tommy since he was two years old and now he's 28. So we go back to Kansas every year, sometimes twice. Her dad's in a nursing home. He's 92. And her sister-in-law is full of cancer for a couple of years longer than they expected so we go to see her, and then my uncle and cousins are in that area, too. So that's where we spend our time.

Mark: I thought I detected an accent other than the lakeshore dialect around here.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, one of these days Kansas is going to join the Union and get rid of that accent. My mother comes from there and she's 99 now. She just had gall bladder surgery and she's in the Willowdale Nursing Home and figured on coming out and going home again 'cause she's stayed by herself all these years.

Mark: I'd like to ask about your involvement with veteran's organizations and that sort of thing. You touched on this. You mentioned the Legion.

Diefenthaler: I never joined the Legion because when I come home my dad had been in the Legion, we were the first twins in the Legion, but when I came home in '45 they had called us, three of us — Ralph Meyer was in the 101st. He went in when I did. Dan Gable was in the Marines and I was in the Infantry. They called us back to a meeting and kind of interviewed us and two of my classmates, Henry and John Wilkins, were killed and another guy that I worked with in the Wooden Ware, Osborn Beckler was killed. So they're going to name the Legion after those guys, which was very well, fine. But they explained to me that being a prisoner of war didn't somehow make the rating to name it after my brother. Which I've, that was alright because for the longest time we figured we had been abandoned and let go. So I didn't say anything but still some soldiers, Legionnaires and people like that, still believe we sat the war out. That's not quite true, but that's what they believe. But I am a life member of the DAV in Sheboygan and I'm the senior vice-commander of the Northeast Wisconsin Chapter of POWs.

Mark: When did you get involved with these organizations? Soon after the war or were you later on?

Diefenthaler: No, that's only several years ago. I was at, I was in the hospital, in the VA in Milwaukee, and I had heart surgery, and ten days later I had a ruptured ulcer so they took real good care of me and a couple of POWs that I had known from years ago come to see me and all this stuff, then I got a letter from the DAV and so I joined that one, in Sheboygan, as a life member. I joined the POWs 'cause

we came over here to Manitowoc for a state convention and I had known some of the guys. By that time they had come to see me and stuff, so then Jean and I had joined them. And that's, well, I had the heart surgery seven years or eight years, so we're in their six or seven years now. And I really enjoy that. The DAV, I went to last year's Christmas party and, not to say anything bad about them or anything like that, there's another POW there that belongs to our outfit, and he's vice-commander too, but there was a big guy there, and I don't know his name and it doesn't matter, from, he was in the Pacific and they introduced me as a POW and he come up and said to me he wouldn't have done this, he wouldn't have done that, they would never have taken him, and things like that, and I says, "You're talking silly. You'd do just exactly what we did. When they tell you to destroy the weapons, that's all you do." And I was thinking, I think I mentioned Lieutenant Turner before, when we got captured we were supposed to dismantle our rifles and stuff and throw the parts away. So I had talked to him and I darned near begged him to keep some ammunition for that 50 'cause we were out of ammunition and everything else. Well, that was against the orders but I think I got to keep two rounds. I'd like to get a hold of him and talk to him. He could have got court martialled for that, too, but at that time we didn't have a chance. And then, I was going to say, too, in Bad Orb we were supposed to stay out in the snow two-and-a-half hours every day 'cause we wouldn't tell them anything but our name, rank, and serial number. So we were all in such poor shape that Colonel Desjenow, he was a lieutenant colonel, he agreed that we would tell him what state we were from but that's all. So then we didn't have to stand in the snow so much. Then after the war I got a book, Lion in the Way by some, I don't know his name, Dupuy or something like that, and they court martial Colonel Desjenow and, through all the efforts of the soldiers that he was with, they got that overturned. But I haven't found Lieutenant Turner yet, and that's 50 years ago.

Mark: I hadn't heard that story actually. Now, these reunions, you referred back to them several times.

Diefenthaler: Yeah, that was something, there was three guys out in Muskogee, Oklahoma that had been at Bad Orb so they — Bad Orb was one of the notorious prison camps — and so these three guys had called several fellows that they knew and they organized a reunion in Muskogee. And somehow or other they got our name and we went. And we went to Kansas, stayed overnight, then go down to Muskogee. So that's how it started. Then the next year, they had such fun and a nice time, they decided to have another one in Muskogee, Oklahoma only bringing the other two prison camps — the 9A that we were liberated from, and also 9C, that was the Jewish camp. So they did. And since then they've had them in Columbia, South Carolina and Waco, Texas, and Washington, DC, and Arizona.

Female Voice: Florida.

Diefenthaler: And Florida a couple of times, but we didn't go to quite all of them 'cause I drive, I don't like to fly anymore, but we've gone to several of them and had a real good time.

Mark: And you get to see people—

Diefenthaler: Everybody gets old but us, you know. And you look at them, where did you get all this gray hair? How come you don't have any hair?

Mark: Isn't that funny how that works.

Diefenthaler: And you look at ourself and here it's just as bad. But it's something that 50 years seems like yesterday and things like I met, this guy says, "I remember you." Finally it comes back. It's been a long time and it's been quite an experience you wouldn't buy and you wouldn't give a cent for it either, and you couldn't buy it. It's something, people haven't realized that prisoner of war have had a rough time of it. If not only from the short time we were there, it's the after-effect. Like one of our fellows there from, I don't know if he was from the North East Wisconsin Chapter, Les Wozik from over here in Meadow, he was in the Marines and he was in the Pacific. He was captured for three or three-and-a-half years. And then we talked to another guy, he's 80 years old already, and he was in three years in the Pacific. It was hard for us and it was doubly hard for those guys. I have a lot of respect for them. And, of course, you can't go without mentioning your wife that put up with us all of these years 'cause that's a special type again.

Female Voice: I shouldn't butt in, but one of the interesting experiences was in Waco, Texas. We were attending this reunion there so this fellow picks up his newspaper and reads about it and calls up to see if he could come to the reunion and it was the tank commander that—

Diefenthaler: Liberated Bad Orb.

Female Voice: --broke down the gates of Bad Orb and so he gave his view of what that was like and that was really something. And it seems like every reunion we go to, these prison camps, something like that happens, some unexpected thing. It just really makes it—

Mark: Special. I guess that's a bland term but it—

Female Voice: Seems to fit.

Mark: Well, you've pretty much exhausted my line of questioning. Is there anything you want to add?

Diefenthaler: There's one thing I'd like to say. Anyhow, when we were in Indiana, Joe Kiersky, our supply sergeant, he had a '41 Buick there, convertible, big black one, red leather upholstery. And my brother and him were real good friends 'cause he was assistant supply sergeant. We were going to the drive-in movie in Indianapolis and my brother and Joe went in to the PX and got the ration of candy bars and soap, which was only one apiece. And then I and I think Sexton come in. We'd been gassing around someplace else and we were late. So I asked for my big Crackle bar, they costed a quarter at that time, and a bar of Camay soap. That's what I always used 'cause it seemed to be the best in the water. And this waitress — they were all civilians in the PX — this waitress said, "No, we can't. You got your candy bar and your soap. I can't give you anymore." "No," I says, "I didn't have any yet." And she argued and argued and finally I argued and argued and she called the manager. So the manager come and says, "What's the trouble?" And she says, "This soldier wants a candy bar and a bar of soap and I just give it to him." "Yeah," he says, "we can't give seconds because that's rationed." About that time my brother and Joe come back in and says, "Lefty, why aren't you out here? We're in a hurry." And then the waitress says, "Oh my gosh, you're twins. Give them anything they want." So I got my candy bar and my bar of soap and she goes up and says, "How can I make it up to you?" And my brother liked the girls and I was so bashful I couldn't care much for them. He says, "What's your name?" And she says, "Nellie Jo Pike." "Where to you live at?" "Edinburg, Indiana." Well, that was just in between there. "When do you get off of work?" "Nine o'clock." "Stick around, I'll pick you up," he says. So he borrowed Joe's convertible and took her back to Indiana, to Edinburg. And when I come back, I got a letter from Nellie Jo saying she was sorry that Will didn't make it. All things like that that we had fun with. In Indiana, this Curtis Allen that was driving with me, his wife named Donna, they came up and they found a room in Edinburg and he was only a private and we had Corporals so we could have a pass and he couldn't. But we had a '41 Ford down there, a two-door sedan, shiny black, [END TAPE 1, SIDE B] so we'd load Allen in the trunk at 5:00 in the evening, take him into Edinburg so he could stay with his wife, about 5:00 in the morning we'd head out there again and put him in the trunk and bring him back. My brother, he could get away sometimes from the supply room, I couldn't get away, so he always called her "Our Girl" and her name was Donna and when, a couple of years ago, we took a little ride, Jean and I did, and we went to Memphis and saw Joe Kiersky, the supply sergeant, and we went to Jackson, Mississippi and saw Curtis Allen. And I was interviewed there by the newspaper man. Curtis was a head coach in Jackson, Mississippi. Had 37 coaches under him. So we had to go to the newspaper and be interviewed and I met Sam Packy there. He was another buddy that lived a couple of miles away there. And then I told the newspaper guy something or other and I says, "I'm not sure if that's true or not." but Sam Packy finished it so then I felt better; he knew about it, too. So then I told the reporter that when we got liberated, or

captured, we had our hands over our heads like this and Allen's standing here this high and says, "What's Donna going to say?" and I says, "Our Girl is better off right now than we are. Don't worry about her." So then old Allen, he blushes and kind of says, "Did he really say that?" I says, "He really said that." So then we left and went further down to Tennessee I guess and she says — we write back and forth — and he was going to have a knee replaced and he died not long after that. And not long after that Joe Kiersky died. He was a Jewish guy, one of the best in the business, and the Germans really treated him rough, and he died of lupus. So we lost a couple of those guys in—but got to see them which was very important to me. And then Nellie Jo — we were identical, my mother could tell us apart, my dad couldn't — anyway, I went down the street after I was discharged and I wanted to fix the, get a new radiator for the Ford that had been blown up, so I come walking down 6th Street and this young girl come and just give me a big hug and I said, "Woop, you got the wrong one." But she had heard Will had died but she thought it was me, you know. So she give me a big hug and I kind of blushed I guess, but we had a good time anyway. With twins like that, we really had a lot of fun. Things you can't reclaim, you know.

Mark: I'm sure that's true.

Diefenthaler: Yeah. I met a set of twins in the hospital about a week ago, and they were 59 years old, but they knew a set of twins from Stockbridge that were our age and they had worked in the Wooden Ware when we did before the war and they were country school teachers. And they knew them. And my brother would take one out and bring the other one for me, and I was so bashful I says, "I don't know what to do." He says, "Just do what I do." And so I says, "Well, you better drive pretty soon." "If I've got to drive, I'll park," he'd say. I was so bashful I kept driving all night, you know. But that changed. But that's what twins — if one guy got a licking, the other guy cried. It was just that close. He was 20 minutes older than I was.

Mark: Well, I guess we end it there I guess.

Diefenthaler: Well, sure.

Mark: Thanks for coming in.

Diefenthaler: You bet.

[END OF INTERVIEW]