

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMES P. JAMES
Paratrooper, Army, World War II.

2005

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James, James P., (1923-). Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 42 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 42 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

James P. James, a Fond du Lac, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a paratrooper in the 507th Infantry Regiment, including his experiences during the Invasion of Normandy and as a prisoner of war. James talks about being drafted, basic training at Mineral Wells (Texas), joining the paratroopers, jump training at Fort Benning (Georgia), and training with the 507th Regiment for the Pacific Theater in Alliance (Nebraska). He talks about his transport being rear ended by another boat during the voyage to the European Theater and training for three months in Port Rush (Ireland). James details getting injured during a windy practice jump in England. He states he knew they would be jumping into France after being “fattened up” with all the food he could eat. He details the D-Day jump: seeing a soldier get shot in the airplane’s doorway, being the second to last person out before the plane crashed, getting hung up in a tree, and finding only two people from his unit on the ground. James describes getting captured and held prisoner in a barn with 350 other paratroopers. While being marched to Paris, he speaks of the casualties that resulted from being strafed by American planes, and he mentions helping bury them. He tells of spending three days in a boxcar and, after reaching a bombed out bridge, getting out and marching for three months into Germany. James addresses lack of food, his own morale, weight loss, and arriving at a camp in Mühlberg (Germany), where he was put to work cutting timber. After hurting his wrist, he talks about being made a cook and preparing cow beets. James describes spending three weeks in Chemnitz (Czechoslovakia): getting a haircut from Greek prisoners, seeing some prisoners die from eating too much sawdust-filled bread, and helping bury German civilians who were killed by bombs. Recalling his liberation, he tells of the German guards dumping weapons into the toilet pits and fleeing. He talks about finding a hoard of potatoes, meeting a couple of Russian soldiers, and frying eggs all night. James speaks of capturing a loose horse, attaching him to a wagon, and collecting other ex-prisoners of war on his way to Dresden. After reaching American lines, he mentions asking for cigarettes first thing, getting a medical check, and being flown to Camp Lucky Strike (France). James touches on his homecoming to the States and to Fond du Lac. He reflects on receiving decent treatment from the German guards, being spit on by Frenchmen while in Paris as a prisoner, his religious faith, health problems from being a prisoner, and medical care as a veteran. James mentions joining some veterans’ organizations and talking about his experiences to high school students and Boy Scouts.

Biographical Sketch:

James (b.1923) served in the 507th Infantry Regiment in World War II and taken prisoner during the Normandy invasion. He eventually settled in Markesan (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2005

Draft transcription by court reporter Cathleen Colbert, 2008

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Interview Transcript:

Jim: Today is March 22nd, 2005. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm interviewing James James, who is a member of the 1st Battalion, 107th Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division at the Normandy invasion. Mr. James, could you tell us when and where you were born?

James: 19th of April, '23.

Jim: '23. And where did you grow up?

James: Right in North Fond du Lac.

Jim: North Fond du Lac. And when did you graduate from high school?

James: I didn't graduate. I went to one year of high school and then I went to work.

Jim: And where did you work?

James: Shoe shop. Two different shoe shops. I moved in the garage, and then [unintelligible] and then I got drafted.

Jim: When did you get drafted?

James: '43, February.

Jim: February '43. Okay. And where did you get sent for training then?

James: At Mineral Wells, Texas.

Jim: Mineral Wells.

James: Mineral Wells, Texas, thirteen weeks of basic training.

Jim: And after basic training, how did you get into the Airborne?

James: A guy come along—you want to hear the story?

Jim: Yes. That's what we're here for.

James: A guy come along with an old matchbox, you know, made into a casket, and he says, "Who wants to join the paratroopers or go home in one of these here?" So I thought it over. The reason I joined them, I wanted a little excitement for one thing, and then I was getting six dollars and thirty-five cents a month. That wasn't enough to live on, and so two other guys says, "Let's go join 'em." So two guys and myself, three of us, joined. Two guys flunked out. I made it.

Jim: How much more money did you get with jump pay?

James: Fifty dollars a month. [laughs]

Jim: That's a little bit more, isn't it? Quite a bit more.

James: At that time.

Jim: Where did you take your jump training?

James: Fort Benning, Georgia.

Jim: Fort Benning, Georgia. I was down there. I got trained down there too. I got trained at Fort Benning, also.

James: Oh, you did?

Jim: I'm not a paratrooper, though. Okay. So how long was jump school?

James: Four weeks.

Jim: Four weeks.

James: Yeah.

Jim: And could you just describe what happened at jump school a little bit?

James: Four weeks. The first week, you run three miles every day. They figured you—just calisthenics. We'd do a lot of exercising to get us in shape. The second week we started jumping out of towers, thirty-five foot towers. Put a harness on us and then we'd bail out, and you'd land on some sand so you won't hurt yourself. And the third week we started packing a chute, learn how to pack a chute, and we jumped out of towers, two hundred-fifty foot towers. First you went up with a buddy, and then you went all alone, and that's where these three guys—two guys flunked out. They forgot—they'd tighten up—they had a piece of paper in your hand. You held it in your hand and you'd get up there two hundred-fifty feet, release the paper, see which way the wind was blowing, and they froze right there. They couldn't release the paper, so they wound up on the gliders. Thank God for that. [Jim laughs] And then the fourth week we started makin' the jumps.

Jim: How many jumps did you have to make?

James: Five jumps to qualify.

Jim: What kind of airplanes did you jump out of? Do you remember?

James: Pardon?

Jim: What kind of airplane did you jump out of? C-47s?

James: C-47s. Flying boxcars, we used to call them. You did too, probably.

Jim: Yep, yep. So then you completed training. Where did you get assigned after that?

James: Nebraska. Alliance, Nebraska.

Jim: And what unit were you in?

James: 507.

Jim: So the 507th trained, or was formed in Alliance, Nebraska?

James: That's right.

Jim: How long were you trained—I mean, how long were you in Alliance, Nebraska?

James: From November—from July to December 3rd.

Jim: So—and then this is in '43?

James: '43.

Jim: Okay. And then what happened in December of '43?

James: Went over to Camp Shanks, New York—or New Jersey, and they put us on a ship, and here we're training—here we're training for Japanese war. Took us over to England.

Jim: So you were trained to fight in the Pacific and they took you to England?

James: Yeah. [laughs]

Jim: That's the way the military operates. Do you remember the name of the boat that you went—the ship you went—

James: The old Strathnaver. I don't know how you—

Jim: It sounds Dutch.

James: Yeah, they finally sunk her. It's an English ship.

Jim: How long did it take to go across the ocean?

James: Twenty-three days. And I was sick every day. [laughs]

Jim: And did you do any training when you were on the ship?

James: No, no.

Jim: Just sat around?

James: We just sat around and sat around, a little exercise, all the equipment you had on and your life jacket on always. We got hit by the rear end, from another boat from the rear end, piled into us, a big storm, and we started getting water. I was in [unintelligible] at sea, whatever it is now. That was full of water. Guns were floating all over, stuff like that, and they finally—we figured that was it for us, and we finally got the motor started again and it pumped out the water and we went on.

Jim: Okay. Where did you land in England?

James: Liverpool, England.

Jim: Liverpool. And from there, where did you go?

James: Liverpool, we got on a liberty ship, went to Port Rush, Ireland.

Jim: Port Rush, Ireland. Okay. And is that where you trained before D-Day?

James: We lived with civilians there.

Jim: Okay.

James: They had no barracks, nothing like that. And there we trained with ourselves, and we went on problems and stuff like that, and that went on for three months, I think it is.

Jim: Yeah.

James: Three months. And then we went to Nottingham, England.

Jim: Nottingham, England. So that would be like in April or May of '44?

James: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: And—

James: We made jumps there.

Jim: Okay. Then—so you're in Nottingham, England. You did some jumps and stuff like that?

- James: Yeah, but there was a thirty-three a mile an hour wind, but Captain McCoy says we're gonna jump regardless—or Colonel Miller, rather, says we're going to jump for Eisenhower, Churchill, and Stelling was there to see us jump. Two-thirds of us casualties.
- Jim: In the practice jump?
- James: Yeah, practice jump, yeah.
- Jim: So were you one of the casualties?
- James: I was one of them, that's right. I got hit—you know, after you jump a while, you leave your buckle a little bit loose. So this was real loose when I went out, the wind was blowing so hard that I spun around, hit my arm against the plane.
- Jim: Uh-huh.
- James: My left arm. So the chute opened up, buckle got me in the back of the ear here. Still got a little scab there—or a scar, rather. It knocked me out. So how I landed I didn't remember, but I landed face down. Captain McCoy come along and he rolled me over, and he says, “What's the matter with you, James? You all right?” So I come to. I says, “Where's my left arm?” He says, “Right where it is.” I says, “Well, lift it up for me.” So he lifted it up. So I says, “Okay.” I stood up and I passed out. [Jim laughs] Ruptured down below, and I was twenty days or twenty-one days with a bucket—an empty bucket, and I added water every day until I was able to carry it. So I carried it, and I went back with the outfit and—
- Jim: Okay. So when did you know you were going to be jumping into France?
- James: About ten days before. They took us out to the hangars.
- Jim: Uh-huh.
- James: They fed us until we couldn't eat no more. There was ten days of food on the tables, all you want to eat, any time you want to eat. They were fattening us up. That was the thing.
- Jim: Did you do any training or just eat?
- James: Eat. We went on [unintelligible], what they call [unintelligible].
- Jim: Yeah.
- James: Went out running, but come back to eat. Never give it a thought. Eat to get fat. What for? So you lose it all at one time.

Jim: Yeah. So did you do any live-fire exercises where you fire—

James: Do any what?

Jim: Live-fire exercises?

James: Yeah, we did that. It was—we shot—I had a revolver, shot that. The M-1, and the carbine, and a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle].

Jim: Okay. So what was your principal weapon?

James: BAR.

Jim: BAR, okay. What did you think of the BAR?

James: How—

Jim: What did you think of the BAR? How did you like the BAR?

James: Oh, it was all right, but I had to carry it and jump out carrying it.

Jim: It was kind of heavy then?

James: Yes, twenty-one pounds.

Jim: How many rounds of ammunition did you carry when you jumped?

James: Bandoliers, I guess they called them.

Jim: Yeah.

James: We must have had three or four of them strapped on us.

Jim: Okay. So what do you remember about when you left for France?

James: What do I remember—

Jim: When you left for France to jump at D-Day? What were you told?

James: They told us we were gonna jump at 1:30 in the morning. So we got shot—Major Figget[?] was right in the doorway. He got shot right in the head; pushed him out. I was number eight, and Pfeifer was number nine. The plane was going down nose first. Both engines on fire, and she was really—and so Pfeifer was the last one out, and we seen the plane, watched it. It went down, blew right up. Seven guys never got out of the plane, and the same with the plane crew. I got hung up on the tree. It takes a hundred feet for a chute to open up and it just opened up and I got hung up there. Just luck.

- Jim: Yeah. So how did you get down from the tree then?
- James: Cut myself out. I wasn't very high. I'd say four or five feet I'd landed, and I run into Pfeifer, my buddy.
- Jim: Um-hmm.
- James: Two of us, that's all; out of nine, there was two of us there. So we started looking around. It was dark, pitch dark. We got into a ravine and seen somebody coming. Now Laddy was our sergeant, and he went coo-coo for a while. "Thunder," he's supposed to say lightning. So we kept hollering "thunder." He says, "It's me, Laddy. It's me Laddy." Kept coming closer. Pfeifer was on one side. I was on the other side. He says, "It's me, Laddy." It sounds like him, but is it him? So as he got closer, he had the gun—he had the gun in his arms. He didn't aim it at us or anything. So we looked at him, about from here to you away before we could really make—recognize him, and it's Laddy. So we got together, the three of us. So we started digging holes. Why we dug them holes, I don't know, but we dug holes anyway, and he says—it got daylight. We couldn't hear—we heard a lot of firing going on, small arms fire. We're not close enough to realize it was ours or what it was. So Pfeifer—or Laddy says to us, "You guys stay here, watch. I'm gonna wander around a little bit." He wandered off somewhere; he got caught. We didn't know he got caught, but we found out later that he was caught. So he got caught.
- Jim: By the Germans?
- James: By the Germans. They were Pollocks.
- Jim: Okay.
- James: Nothing against the Polish, but they were Polish people that were fighting—
- Jim: Yeah, yeah.
- James: And all of a sudden, we heard—we fired some, but not enough to hit anything, but we heard—and Pfeifer was lookin' that way, lookin' this way, watching all around. They come from the other side, about thirty or thirty-five of 'em. "Hande hoch." That means hands up.
- Jim: Yep.
- James: And that was it.
- Jim: So you got captured?

- James: Captured, went into a barn. They walked us—oh, they must have walked us about an hour, and we got into this barn, and there was Laddy in there, and there was three hundred and fifty of them there at that time.
- Jim: Three hundred-fifty Americans?
- James: Americans, all Paratroopers, 501—or that is, the 101 and the 82nd. They were mixed together.
- Jim: Yeah.
- James: Now where we landed and where we were supposed to—six of us were supposed to take this town over. Maybe I shouldn't say that. No Germans allowed, nothing like that. Three days later we went through that town. There was more Germans there than I ever saw in my life. And we were supposed to occupy the town, six of us guys. Three. I was—I was with two other guys.
- Jim: Do you remember the name of the town?
- James: Oh, God.
- Jim: That's all right.
- James: I don't remember.
- Jim: So basically, your mission—you were told before you left England—was to capture this town, and you were going to be dropped near it?
- James: Yeah, that was it.
- Jim: Okay. So did you ever fire your weapon when you—
- James: Not the BAR; I let that go and I used the M-1, or carbine.
- Jim: Carbine, okay.
- James: And we fired that there, but if we hit anything, we don't know. It was dark.
- Jim: Sure. Sure. Okay. So your D-Day ended pretty quick?
- James: Yeah, that's right.
- Jim: And you got marched off. So where did they take you after they took you to this town?
- James: We—they took us to Paris.

- Jim: Okay. How did they take you to Paris?
- James: Walk. [laughs]
- Jim: So you walked all the way to Paris?
- James: All the way to Paris.
- Jim: Did you have any trouble with American planes strafing you or anything like that?
- James: I'm gettin' to that part.
- Jim: Okay.
- James: Oh, that's right. That happened before Paris. That was four hundred and fifty prisoners, all walking, and there were a bunch of guards; I don't know how many guards there was, but there was a lot of guards there, and down come a plane. That was the third or fourth day out. See, he was wearing a mustache, had a mustache, wearing it, and he tipped his wings, recognized troops, so he took off. But five minutes later, three other ones come—two or three other ones come, peel off, and open fire on us. Killed twenty-eight Americans and nine guards, German guards.
- Jim: So that's probably why they didn't want you to talk about it. Do you remember what kind of planes they were?
- James: Yeah, B-47s, yeah. That's all we had there at that time.
- Jim: So what did the Germans do after you were strafed? Did you just keep walking then?
- James: First the sergeant, he dropped right there, right in the path. He says, "Now all of you stay in line and they won't fire at us." But they opened fire at us. He stayed right there. He got metal right there, he died right there, and I run for the—I—all of us run for the woods, that's a lot of woods around there, and three of us—I was in the middle and two guys, two buddies on the side. They both got killed and I got their blood. Now them bullets are spaced so many—so far apart, like they got two guys, each side of me, and I got—God was with me all the way.
- Jim: Yep. It's pretty random, isn't it?
- James: Yeah.
- Jim: So after that incident was over, did you bury the Americans that were killed or—

James: They said they buried 'em. We went twenty-eight in one hole. The dog tags was taken off and given to a French minister or priest, whatever he was, given to the priest. Germans were buried somewhere else. We didn't see that.

Jim: Okay.

James: But helped bury them.

Jim: Did you know any of the ones that were killed?

James: Oh, yeah. There was a kid from—Snow was his last name. He got killed. He got a 50 right through his head, and he was still alive. You could see his brains and whatever you want to call it, you could see it in his head. He had his wrist watch. He says to me, "Jim," he says, "take the wrist watch and give it to my wife if you ever get back." I says, "You ain't gonna die. You're gonna be all right." Well, he was dead the next morning, or he was—and the watch was gone. Somebody else hiked it.

Jim: Sure. What kind of food did they give you when you were on this march to Paris?

James: Food?

Jim: Yeah.

James: Anything we could grab with our hands. Down. There was onions, we'd grab it from the farmers, and of course, you hadda march and march real good, stepping off. You would beller it out, and the guards behind us, they would put their bayonet or—

Jim: Yeah.

James: —between our legs if you wasn't marching right. Went to Paris. We didn't have nothin' to drink, nothin' to eat, and locked up in box cars that held—well, there was sixty of us in a car. I see it that way.

Jim: Sixty in a car. And how long were you in these box cars?

James: Three days, about three days. We laid there. We started getting black and blue marks on our hips because we lay one way. Okay, turn the other way. We could not lay flat. There wasn't enough room.

Jim: They gave you no food or water during this time?

James: Very little of that, and the only water we got, it rained that day and we'd catch the water.

Jim: Okay. Then what happened after you were in the railroad car for three days?

James: They bombed—our planes had bombed their bridges.

Jim: Okay.

James: And they couldn't get out, so the fourth day they got us out of the cars. He says, "You're gonna walk now because they can't drive the trucks. They've blown up the bridges." Okay. We start to walk. We walked—we went into Belgium, I think it was, and down into Germany. Three months.

Jim: It took you three months to walk from Paris to Germany?

James: Germany. That's right. I don't know how far that was. But we walked. We stopped over for about a week at one place. We called it Starvation Hill.

Jim: Uh-huh.

James: We nicknamed it, because that's where the guys were really starving.

Jim: So they didn't give you any more food when you were walking?

James: We'd walk and they'd come in at night, give us half a slice of bread and a little sip of water. That was it.

Jim: And so did many people die on this walk?

James: Oh, yeah, yeah.

Jim: How many Americans were—

James: How many what?

Jim: How many Americans were prisoners on this hike?

James: You mean in the outfit that I was in?

Jim: Yeah, I mean in this group that you were walking in, how many—

James: Well, there was four hundred and fifty, and then they killed twenty-eight of 'em.

Jim: Okay.

James: And it got thinner right along, and then we wound up in Germany, and I can't remember where—where they first took us in. They weighed us, and that's how I happened to know I was ninety-seven pounds. From a hundred and sixty to ninety-seven pounds. No wash, no shave, no haircut, no nothing. Looked like a couple of bums.

Jim: What were you thinking about this whole time that you were walking? I mean—

James: I was thinking of when will the war be over? Will I make it home?

Jim: Did you believe that you were going to make it home?

James: I had faith in God. That's right.

Jim: Uh-huh. And were there other people that you were with that felt the same way?

James: Well, Pfeifer felt the same way. He was the closest guy that I had with me, and I had him through training and all that.

Jim: Okay. So when you were in Germany, did they put you in a prisoner of war camp then or—

James: They put us in three different camps and we wound up at Mühlberg, Germany.

Jim: Okay. And how many people were in a camp that you were at?

James: That one there, one hundred.

Jim: And so were you in like a fenced-in cage or cells, or how were you kept?

James: We—how is that again?

Jim: How were you kept? Were you in barracks?

James: Barracks. Barracks—three boards, a bag of straw you'd lay on.

Jim: Was the food any better there?

James: Well, it was—just one second. We were making prefab homes, which Geneva Convention allowed that.

Jim: Okay.

James: So we'd go out in the woods—not that we made the homes, but we went out to the woods and cut timber, cut trees down. So about a week of that, I hurt my right wrist. I couldn't move it or anything else, so they took me to Chemnitz, Germany, with guards.

Jim: Okay. What happened there?

James: He checked my wrist over, and I don't know whether he give me pills or not, but I wouldn't take 'em anyway, and a couple days later it started feeling pretty good, so I says—so the Germans got to take me back. So they took me back. I couldn't understand or anything. So I got back, he looked at the letterhead for me. So the sergeant that was

in charge of us, German, he could talk broken English. He says, "Can you cook?" I says, "A Greek can't cook?" He says, "You're a cook from now on." So I wound up to be a cook.

Jim: And so what did you cook?

James: Cow beets, they called them. They fed them to animals. Cow beets are about that big around. I'd peel 'em. It took eight to ten hours to soften 'em up.

Jim: Okay. And so you were in this camp till the end of the war? Were you in this camp until the end of the war?

James: Well, outside of three weeks I went to Chemnitz—or yeah. Chemnitz—not Chemnitz. Czechoslovakia.

Jim: So you went to Czechoslovakia for three weeks?

James: Yeah. We went into—they give us a loaf of bread. The bread was made out of sawdust. A loaf—our loaf, a pound loaf weighed four pounds or better.

Jim: Uh-huh.

James: So I went across—when we first got—yeah, I went a little too fast. [pause] There was three Greeks there. They were prisoners of war from Greece. Three years. And they were barbers, and so I sat down and Pfeifer on one side, I was on the other side, and he started cutting. He says, "What is this old man doing in the Army?" So he started shaving. "He's not very old. Shaved," he says, "looks like a kid." I says, "Sas ef charistó" in Greek. I says, "Thank you." He says, "Oh, you're a Greek." So they told us then, them guys, "Please don't eat all the bread at one time because the bread will kill you." They give us a loaf, wanted to get rid of us, I guess. So three guys, they ate the loaf, they didn't pay no attention to that; they were dead the next morning. Drank water and they blew up. And then we went back—we got—that's when we went—Christmas of '44.

Jim: Yeah.

James: They went over there and they bombed—they were supposed to bomb—this is a bad thing to tell you now too—Standard Oil Company.

Jim: Uh-huh.

James: But they had big pipes there and it looked like an ocean. And they took it and they bombed—just dropped the bombs anywhere they could find, killing people, civilians, so we went back in March. That was in March we were through Czechoslovakia. We helped bury some of the people that were laying there yet.

- Jim: I gotta turn the tape.—[End of Tape 1, Side A]
- Jim: You were telling us about Czechoslovakia and the bombing. Did this bombing happen in Czechoslovakia on Christmas?
- James: Yeah. B-17s come over. That morning, Christmas morning, it was, the sergeant says, “Pretty good Americans. They don't bomb on Christmas day.” That was about 10:00. About 10:30 a siren started going and just the sky was black with ‘em.
- Jim: Okay. How did you get to Czechoslovakia from Germany?
- James: We got trucked in.
- Jim: Trucks?
- James: Yeah.
- Jim: Okay. You spent three weeks there. What did you do the three weeks you were there?
- James: Just sat around, yeah.
- Jim: Okay. Then they took you back to Germany?
- James: Because the Russians were coming through there and they were worried that they were going to recapture us, so they took us back to Germany, back to Mühlberg. We were there about a month out, say at the most. May the 6th, was it, 7th? May the 6th or 7th. We seen the Germans running, no guns or nothing, start running for the hills, for the Czechoslovakian hills. And we couldn't figure out what was going on, so the sergeant—they took all the guns. We had outside bathrooms, outside bathroom—
- Jim: Yeah.
- James: —and they dumped all the guns in there so we would get no guns. Everything they left us but the big radio. House radio. So they left about—the town was quiet. It must have been 5:00 in the afternoon, we heard small arms fire, so we went for an air raid shelter, which we went in there, which we had an air raid shelter. There was potatoes there to feed an army, and here we were starving all the time. And two Russians come through—
- Jim: Um-hmm.
- James: And he says—we had one Polish kid with us could talk pretty good Russian, so he talked to ‘em. And he says—he asked where the other two guys were. We—the other two guys, they went with the Germans, they were turned Nazi. These two—they were captured, four of them together; two got away and two stayed in Germany. So they were looking for these guys. Some guy, one of our buddies there, kicked something by; “bang” they opened fire on that right away. They didn't know what it was, so they—he

says okay. So the town was bare. Nobody in it. So being a cook, they asked me, “Can we go downtown, Jim, and see what's down there, see if we can get some food?” “If you guys are willing to go down there,” I says, “I’ll pay.” So they went down there, bought one case, thirty-six dozen eggs up. I fried eggs ‘til the next morning at 5:00. They ate, they ate, boy, they really ate. So did I. So we grouped off in tens. I had nine guys and myself, so on and so forth. And my brother-in-law was along with me. He wasn’t my brother-in-law at that time, but he become a brother-in-law. And we started to walk. We got through Chemnitz—

Jim: What direction did you walk?

James: I don't remember. South, I imagine. And we—just before we got to the town, about thirty-five kilometers, twenty-eight miles or so, old horse out there wandering around. So there's a kid from Centralia, Illinois. Your mother will get a big kick out of that, Centralia, from Illinois. And he says, “Jim,” he says, “you mind if I catch that horse?” I said, “You catch him, you drive him all the way back to Centralia.” So he jumped on him. He was a pretty good horse. Three guys got on him. So they start riding him, and we got up to Chemnitz and there was a nice wagon out there. So we asked him—we had the Russian kid with us—we asked him about that wagon. “Can we get that wagon, put that horse on there?” He says—and people are looking, Germans are looking through the windows, and they’d pull the curtain down right away. See that like it was today. And we put the horse on, harnessed the horse on somehow or another and we took off. We took off from Chemnitz to Dresden; we picked up thirty-five prisoners, ex-prisoners of war. So the wagon was pretty well loaded. So we get into Dresden and we run into a [pause]—can I say that?

Jim: Yeah.

James: A drunken lieutenant, and driver of a Jeep. So he says, “Let the horse go. Tie it on here.” So we managed to tie it on somehow or other, and he started out. The first loop we made around, he tipped it right over. [Jim laughs] [unintelligible] so fast, you know. So off we went. So the lieutenant—we got going again, in Dresden, it started getting dark, so we run across a Red Cross man; he was wearing a Red Cross on his arm. Broken German, but he was a civilian, and we asked him where the American lines were, and he said, “Oh, that's a long ways from here. You guys stay here tonight and go tomorrow.” Now whether he was trying something, I don't know what it was, but we stayed there that night, every hour—we had a watch. Every hour, when I laid awake all night. I still don't sleep. We got up at 5:30, 6:00, got things together, took about three steps and there was the American line there. Now that guy was lying to us or what he was doing, I don't know. The American line—the first thing we asked for was cigarettes. We were so hungry we could eat the cigarettes, but we asked for cigarettes. So we took our butt cans, threw them away, and cigarettes. They—all that they—they deloused us, give us a good shower, bath, doctor checked us over, clothing, and put us on a C-47, flew us to France.

Jim: And what happened then?

James: In France we stayed thirty days at Lucky Strike Camp. All the camps are named after cigarettes. And there, it was the same thing there. Food on the table as long as you want to eat, as often as you want to eat. So I picked up—I was a hundred thirty-seven pounds when I got home, and we ate good. So they put us on a liberty ship—no, no. They put us on USS Douglas, about five thousand of us guys. We got on there. Five and a half days—took us twenty-three days to go over and five and a half days to come back.

Jim: So when you got back—

James: We landed in the same place as we took off.

Jim: Oh, my gosh.

James: Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. Right next to—when we took off, there was the St. Mary on one side of us, and we come back, and it was St.—the two English ships, big ones.

Jim: Queen Mary?

James: Queen Mary was on the other side. So I seen them both. [laughs]

Jim: That's neat. Did they let you out of the military right away then?

James: Did they what?

Jim: Did you get out of the Army right away?

James: No, no. They—first of all, they said on the ship, you'll have to stay here tonight and we'll try to get you out tomorrow. Five thousand of us blowing our top. Can't get us out tonight, we'll walk. We could see the harbor. We'll walk over there. I couldn't swim a stroke, but I was with them, and by God, they got us out about 9:00 at night. Got us on a—took us—they gave us food, cigarettes, everything we wanted, and we got in the barracks. And the next morning this guy got up, stood on the table and made that remark, whatever you say, what I'm telling you now, I'm not supposed to say nothing like that. So that was it.

Jim: Okay. Now a couple things that I want to ask you about. How did the Germans treat you, the guards and all of that?

James: Well, we were—when we were at Mühlberg, they treated us pretty fair. We got—I had to weigh the bread, a slice about that thick, a slice of bread, a bowl of soup, blood sausage. Whose blood it was, I don't know. And we got cheese with maggots crawling all the way around. We'd scrape the maggots out of there, eat the green stuff first and then eat the good stuff later. And they treated us pretty good. There were old guards there. Even the sergeant was about—I call them old: thirty, thirty-five-years old. And they were pretty fair. But that camp we were in, it's just like—Paul Hunger was his name.

He owned the whole town, just like Kohler used to own Kohler, and that's what I thought of right away.

Jim: So when you were walking from Paris to Germany, were these German soldiers that were guarding you?

James: Yeah.

Jim: And they were walking right along with you?

James: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Jim: And they didn't treat you very well?

James: Well, they didn't even have nothin' to do with us. I forgot to tell you on that, too. When we got to Paris, people spit at us, hit us, cussed up and down, Americans are no good, and stuff like that.

Jim: The French?

James: The Frenchmen. We come back, Americans just—they loved us then. I still don't like 'em. [laughs]

Jim: The French, yeah. You said it was your faith in God that got you through this. Were there any religious services—

James: No.

Jim: —at the camps or anything like that?

James: Nothing.

Jim: Did the prisoners try to have worship services or anything?

James: Oh, no. There was no camp.

Jim: So you're pulling out, and you're showing me a cross. Did that cross—was that with you during—

James: This was with me all through camp. I had it strapped on—I had it tied on with my dog tags, so whether they didn't see it or nothing, I don't know. But that's eighty-two years old.

Jim: So that was with you the whole time, so that's pretty meaningful to you, obviously?

James: Yeah, that's right.

Jim: When you came back to the United States and got out of the military, you came back to Fond du Lac then? When you got out of the Army, did you come back to Fond du Lac?

James: Yeah, yeah.

Jim: How did people treat you when you came back?

James: The cab driver that brought me—got me from Fond du Lac to North Fond du Lac where we lived, he says no pay, glad to see you, happy to see me. But as far as the rest of them, my folks—I got a little ahead of my story. My dad got a card, a guy brought it. He says, “Your son's missing in action.” Ten days later he come over there and he says, “Your son's a prisoner of war.” My dad kept them letters. We combined them letters together, and here it was I was a prisoner of war. They knew it. But they told them I was missing in action first. The people at Fond du Lac, they treated me all right. I didn't expect anything else.

Jim: So after your experience on that, did you join any veterans organizations or anything like that?

James: Did I join any?

Jim: Yes.

James: I got magazines, yeah.

Jim: American Legion? VFW?

James: Disabled Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Ex-Prisoner of War. I belonged to the—what's the other one they call it?

Jim: The purple heart one?

James: No.

Jim: Well, that's enough. Were you active in any of these groups? Did you go to meetings and reunions?

James: Yeah, I went to meetings quite a bit when I had a partner and his mother. We'd go to all the meetings. They'd write us and tell us the meetings, but since he passed away nine—eight years now, I haven't left the house.

Jim: Okay. How do you feel about your experience?

James: It's a million-dollar experience, but I wouldn't take a million to go through it again.

- Jim: Okay. So in other words, it was positive, but you don't want to do it again?
- James: No, no. To weigh ninety-seven pounds, my teeth were all black, drinking black coffee—or black tea; that's what we drank. So we'd try to put salt on our hand and scrub them. I lost most of them. Most are fake teeth. And my hearing went to heck. My eyesight's gone. Of course, that's old age, I guess.
- Jim: That happens too. Do you feel that the United States government has taken care of you fairly as a veteran?
- James: They're taking care of me real good. The only thing that makes me mad is I got a letter in the mail last week and I had my hearing aid, be here at 8:00. I have to get up at 4:00 in the morning and start out and who do I get for a driver to go to Madison? So she's—my daughter-in-law is cancelling it today—yesterday. Today is Tuesday. Yesterday, she canceled it. That's the only thing. I try to tell the people over there, the doctors and nurses, that I can come only in the summertime. My son is off. He can give me a ride up and back. They say okay. But I get letters, had to go April 7, 8:00. And the doctor, they scanned my ears. I had another kind of hearing aid; he says these are the best. Maybe they're the best, but they don't do me any good. And he says now I won't see you no more until you have trouble. I gets a letter, I gotta go. [laughs]
- Jim: James, have we covered everything that we should cover in this?
- James: As far as I remember all this.
- Jim: Well, yeah. But I mean, are you happy that you got this—because we'll mail you a copy of this so that you can have that and give it to your family. Well, then—have you gone to any schools to talk about your experiences?
- James: Yes. I went to Berlin High School. Bell was the guy's name, the teacher, and Mr. White, another one. Two teachers there, and had twenty-three seniors and juniors, history teachers, and I told them my story. I talked for forty-five minutes and they stood up, and I says to the kids first, I says, “Now any other questions you want to tell me, ask me? I'll try to answer them.” They all shook their head like I did a wonderful job and they give me a standing applause, and the two teachers were real happy about it. Now I got to go to Boy Scouts the 11th at Green Lake.
- Jim: So you're willing to talk to youth groups and stuff like that that are interested?
- James: Yeah, because there's too many people my age that want me to talk. I say, “What do I talk to the kids about?” So this nurse is gonna come with me. He says, “I'll talk and you just”—I can't hear the kids talk real low. I can't hear very much. So I says, “I'll talk the best I can.” So that's the best I can do there, and that's about it.
- Jim: Okay. Well, good. Well, thank you very much for your time.

James: You're welcome.

Jim: And thank you for your service.

[End of Interview]