

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DONALD A. KAPLANEK
Tail Gunner, Army Air Force, World War II.

2000

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Kaplanek, Donald A., (1921-2005). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 50 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 50 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Donald A. Kaplanek, a Deerbrook, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a tail gunner with the 740th Bomb Squadron, 455th Bomb Group stationed in Italy and his experiences as a prisoner of war at Stalag Luft IV. Based at San Giovanni Field (Italy), Kaplanek talks about duty as a replacement tail gunner for several different crews. He speaks about several of his missions including the Ploesti Raid, a mission over Austria where he saw six of seven escort planes shot down, and a situation when he was being targeted by three enemy planes. He details getting shot down after a mission to Blechhammer (Germany): the engines getting damaged by flak, his crew bailing out over Hungary, being taken prisoner by the Hungarian Home Guard, and almost being hung from a tree by a mob of civilians. Kaplanek talks about being taken to jail by a German soldier and getting spit on by Hungarian civilians. He speaks of the trip by train to a prison in Budapest (Hungary), ten days of interrogation, and his train trip to Stalag Luft IV. Kaplanek describes the prisoner of war camp, food and coal rations, showers, German guards, and Red Cross packages. Leaving camp on the 6th of February, he recalls the long, cold march away from the Russian advance and being freed by the Russian Army. He touches upon getting food from Germans by threatening to report them to the Russians, seeing freed prisoners from Dachau, and drinking with a couple of Russian soldiers. Kaplanek mentions being in Rheims (France) when the war ended and witnessing German fight pilots come in to surrender. He describes being deloused, his hospitalization at Camp Lucky Strike (France) for an infected foot, and returning home. Kaplanek touches on his discharge from Camp Kilmer (New Jersey), attending bomb group reunions, and using the GI Bill to take flying lessons.

Biographical Sketch:

Kaplanek (1921-2005) served with the 740th Bomb Squadron, 455th Bomb Group, 15th Air Force in Europe during World War II. He was shot down on his 46th mission, taken prisoner in August of 1944, and was held as a POW until May of 1945. After the war he eventually moved to Tomahawk (Wisconsin) where he co-owned the Gambles Store, became owner of the Bridge Restaurant in 1960, and become owner of the Bridge Motel in 1979.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000
Transcribed by Alex Combs, 2009
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010
Corrections typed by Erin Dix, 2010
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010

Transcribed Interview:

[Transcriber's note: the audio starts part way through the interview; Mr. Kaplanek is a Deerbrook, WI native who served in the 740th Bomb Squadron, 455th Bomb Group, 15th Air Force, and was stationed in Cerignola, Italy.]

Don: Ah, C-47 (military transport aircraft used by Allies during World War 2), that was going across, so I that's, I rode over on a C-47.

James: Oh, I see.

Don: And—

James: Did you catch up with your crew?

Don: Yeah, but by the time I got there they had 10 or 11 missions in, and I had to go up through Africa, and, well, more to it than that, but then—yeah, I finally got with the crew.

James: But they were in Africa then?

Don: No, they were—

James: They had been there.

Don: They went, they went through the same way, through Africa and up through across Sicily and southern Italy at a little town called Cerignola. And, well, they had a tail gunner by that time, 'cause they already had 10 or 11 missions in. Well, I flew with them some, and then I also flew what they used to refer to as a "bastard crew" where—

James: You were all replacements?

Don: Replacements—anyplace, anybody that needed a gunner. Any gunner had been hurt, killed, sick, whatever, and, well, that was it.

James: So you flew in several, with several crews then?

Don: Oh yes, quite a few. Different crews—

James: Mainly out of Italy?

Don: Out of Cerignola, Italy, yes.

James: The 15th Air Force.

Don: San Giovanni Field.

James: Uh-huh. How—what was your quarters there like?

Don: Tents.

James: Tents?

Don: Just like old—

James: Yeah.

Don: Olive drab(??) [laughs]. They were rather crude.

James: And did you have decent food?

Don: Well, [laughs]—

James: You mean you got hot food.

Don: Yeah—

James: You didn't eat K rations [individual, non-perishable ration consisting of breakfast, lunch and dinner, issued one per soldier per day] all the time?

Don: No, no, it was a mess hall there.

James: I see.

Don: You'd eat standing up [laughs] and—

James: Yeah.

Don: That sort of thing. That was the 455th Bomb Group.

James: That you were in?

Don: Yeah, that was assigned to 740th Squadron.

James: I see.

Don: And you had to make—if you lived through it, 46 missions, and then you rotated back to States. Excuse me, 56. I'm all screwed up here, 50 missions.

James: 50 missions?

Don: I was on my 46th when we got shot down.

James: Oh, I see.

Don: That's what I'm trying to say.

James: Right.

Don: Yeah

James: Did you have—before that, did you have any, were you shot at a great deal?

Don: Flak.

James: Flak?

Don: Oh—

James: That was the biggest problem?

Don: God, yes. That—

James: And particularly you were so exposed to that flak.

Don: Well, it—anybody that was in the airplane was [laughs] exposed.

James: I suppose.

Don: Yeah.

James: That could go right through any part of it.

Don: Yeah, we got shot up quite bad several times.

James: Had trouble landing when you got back?

Don: One time, yes. And no brakes, bounded across the ditch and they tell me they junked the airplane [laughs].

James: Yeah. Where did you, where was your mission usually to?

Don: Well, there was a lot of them. Some southern France, and I flew in that one that—

James: Ploesti?

Don: Oh yes, I was at Ploesti five, six times. That was a bad one.

James: That one raid, that one particular raid where they had so many airplanes there, they lost so many in that one big raid.

Don: Well, that was early in the war, or when they—some idiot got a brainstorm to try a low-level attack.

James: Right.

Don: As if the Germans didn't know where they were going, and they got all shot to pieces.

James: Yeah, I talked to three guys who did that. They never understood how the, what the Air Force thought were thinking.

Don: Some idiot—I have a book and it tells the guy's name. He got this brilliant idea that they could slip in under the radar, and, my God, I think from the time they took off the Germans knew where they were going—

James: Knew they were coming so it didn't make any difference—

Don: No.

James: About the radar at all, did it?

Don: The dumbest thing they ever did, and many men died—

James: I'm sure they did.

Don: From somebody's stupidity.

James: Right.

Don: Then that was the [unintelligible]. I was there, like I said, five or six times. God, that was, that was a terrible target.

James: Because of the flak.

Don: Flak, was just phew!

James: They really had that protected, the Germans did, didn't they?

- Don: Oh man, oh man, that was just—the old expression was, “You could just get out and walk on it.”
- James: Ah. Less of a problem was the German air, air fighters?
- Don: Yeah, we did run into ‘em several times, but I remember distinctly on the 26th of June of ’44. We went up near Vienna, Austria, and we got the shit, excuse me—
- James: It’s alright.
- Don: Hell shot out of us.
- James: Sure.
- Don: We lost one plane flying right next to us. The 742nd was flying right behind us. They sent up seven planes that day and six of them got shot down.
- James: My, my, my.
- Don: And being in the tail gun I watched that. I remember distinctly one time I had three Messerschmitts [possibly the Messerschmitt Bf 109: German single-seat fighter plane, very successful against Allied planes] right on our tail. Well, there was no doubt in my mind that we were gonna die.
- James: Well, certainly. You couldn’t fight off three of them.
- Don: [Laughs] I just shot from one to the other to the other down, and I feel, peeled off one down below, and then they’d come up.
- James: Did you hit ‘em?
- Don: I don’t know [laughs].
- James: Right, but they were unable to put your, put your plane down though, so you must have—
- Don: No, but they put the one right next to us down, and I was supposed to have been on that plane—
- James: Oh, my!
- Don: That blew up, and I don’t think anybody lived through it.
- James: Not if it blew up. Jeepers.

Don: They—we had escorts, see, and I looked up one time I seen all the escorts are gone. What the Germans had done, they decoyed the escorts away, and then another force hit us.

James: I see.

Don: And I was flying in the tail gun of the last plane in the formation, and I looked up, and I said, “My God.” I don’t know how many planes it was. It looked like a swarm of bees, and they come down between us, and the German Me-110s [Messerschmitt] I think they were, twin-engine fighters at us, and I shot at that one. He come right down. I cut loose at him. He blew up—

James: Oh, good shot.

Don: But, there was right on his butt was a P-38 [P-38 Lightning: American twin-engine fighter, nicknamed “fork-tailed devil” by the Germans]—

James: Oh.

Don: So I don’t know to this day if the 38 or I—

James: Right. Well, that’s unusual to have two twin-engine planes in combat.

Don: Yeah. Some of our fighters escort had got back when they saw evidently—and then they—oh, a huge, it looked like a swarm of bees when they come through, and then they split up, and some went around the back. They hit the 742nd boys in the back, and the other ones came around and hit us from the front. And that’s when the plane next to us went down, and the ones the 742nd, their six planes went down, and their sole remaining one came up and joined our formation, and that was a hell of a fight that day.

James: Boy! Generally speaking, what time of day did you take off to bomb in that area? 8:00, 9:00 in the morning?

Don: Oh no, much earlier.

James: Much earlier?

Don: Usually it was almost around daybreak, just past daybreak.

James: So you were about four hours from target?

Don: Yeah. Three or four hours, depending on where you were going.

- James: Oh, I understand, but you know, most missions are in a relatively same area.
- Don: Ploesti was a long mission. That was seven or eight hours—
- James: So if you left at 4:00 in the morning, when would you come back, assuming you came back? Twelve hours?
- Don: Oh, 4:00 in the afternoon.
- James: Twelve hours.
- Don: The mission itself didn't last that long. They were usually six, seven, and eight. Eight was a pretty long mission.
- James: That was, yeah. Okay. So tell me about getting shot down. Tell me about that experience.
- Don: I guess that we were on our 46th—well, I was. I was flying with a different crew, and we went up to a place called Blechhammer, Germany, and that was a bad target, and we lost two engines in the, from the flak—
- James: Going in?
- Don: No, while we were in the flak.
- James: Oh, I see. You were still on your run, though—
- Don: Oh yes, we were over the target, and we lost two engines, and the third one was also hit. Naturally we fell out of formation, and they don't wait for you, they go right on, you know.
- James: Well, you couldn't maintain speed, right?
- Don: Or altitude. We slowly, slowly began to drop down, and we were trying to make, well, naturally trying to make it home, but we didn't think we were going to. We were—anyway, we had two engines out and one not working well.
- James: But you had dropped your bomb load by that time?
- Don: Oh yes, yeah, we dropped the bomb load, and then—and we got over Hungary and of course we were flying by ourselves. We had dropped down to about 16, slowly, slowly, and the pilots told us to throw out

everything that was loose in the plane, the guns, ammunition, anything you could get loose, flak helmets, suits everything, throw 'em out.

James: Did you get out of your seat back there?

Don: Oh yeah, after—

James: You got inside the plane then.

Don: Yeah, oh sure, after we'd come off the target, and we got over Hungary, everything was out of the plane and that was loose, and we just got over Lake Balaton. That's a long lake, and three German Focke-Wulf fighters hit us.

James: Oh, my.

Don: And we couldn't shoot back or nothing, and we had gas and hydraulic fluid all over the plane, and a good burst in there woulda blew us up.

James: Sure.

Don: And I remember it like it was yesterday. The pilot said, "Hey, you guys in the back end. Get the hell out of there," he said, "I'm leaving." So—

James: You went out the bomb bay?

Don: No, there's a hatch in the back. They may have in front, they may have went out the bomb bays. That was the ways they would go, but there was a hatch in the back end, and we went out of that hatch. And—

James: From about what height? Do you recall?

Don: I think we were a little over 15,000 feet. We had just—

James: That's quite a ways.

Don: Yeah. If I remember it took us about, it took me about 15 minutes to get down 'cause I looked at my watch just before I left, and it was a little after 1:00 o'clock, and it was about one quarter after, 1:20 [laughs], when I thought about looking at it again and I was down on the ground.

James: So how was your first airplane jump? Surprising?

Don: Well—

James: Or did it not—

- Don: I didn't, never cared to make another one [laughs].
- James: That satisfied you, your curiosity?
- Don: [Laughs] I was never curious about it.
- James: [Laughs] So did you land in a decent spot?
- Don: No, I—well, I came down in a, in a vineyard, grapes you know, and I didn't know what the—from the air it looked like brush, but I got real close, and I seen what it was. Well, they have spikes—
- James: Right.
- Don: You know, and then I at the last second I saw what the hell it was. I thought, "Holy Christ, I don't want get one of those right through me," and I threw myself lengthways, or tried to, in the aisle. Landed pretty hard. I thought sure as hell I had broken bones, but I didn't. I laid there for a second, and moving my fingers and my hands, and after—"Hell, I'm still all right," and I took the harness off, and I started to run. I didn't know where the hell I was going. I started to run down a, the furrow there, and there was some woods and a big valley, and I got to the valley, and I didn't know where to go, and I looked around and there was two Hungarian Home Guard, and they were standing there looking at me, and he kinda had a rifle at ready and I thought this was no time trying to be a hero [laughs], I put my hands up.
- James: Sure.
- Don: Then they took us, these two kids, I would say kids—they were younger than I was, and I was about 21, and they were—told me to come with them. Of course I had extra cigarettes and candy along, and I'm trying to be friendly. They weren't so bad, but then a bunch of farmers and other people started gathering around and then we were walking down a, kind of a country lane like, and by that time quite a group had got around us—
- James: But nobody else in your plane?
- Don: No, I was alone that time, and we stopped by a tree. Well, I thought, "What the hell are we stopping for?" I had my head down, and this mob—well, I'll say mob, quite a few, they were hollering and yelling and kinda—well, you didn't have to be too bright to figure out what they were saying like—
- James: They wanted to string you up.

Don: Absolutely, and there was a branch right over my head like this, and then they began to make motions what they were gonna do. So they were gonna hang me up from my parachute shrouds this tree, you know. Well, dying in combat is one thing, but getting strung up, I was pretty damn scared, I'll tell ya, and then a German soldier come up on a motorcycle, and he seemed to carry more authority, and he started yelling at them, and got the crowd and got me moving again and took us to a little jail, small country, small town jail like, and in the meantime they had picked up the other boys, and they were one by one bringing 'em in there, all except our bombardier. He got away. I never did see him again. I think he was captured, but I saw him at a reunion. He said he got away for two days, I think, and then he got—

James: Picked up.

Don: Got picked up. What they set us on the floor, you know, with your arms out, and—

James: Right. They take away your watches and stuff?

Don: Not right then. They probably did later, but not right then. I don't recall it. But they let the town people in the small town come through, and we were all sitting on the floor, [laughs] and they, of course, they had all kinds of comments to make and spit at us and that sort of thing, you know.

James: They spit at you?

Don: Oh, yeah [laughs].

James: Didn't throw anything at you?

Don: No, because this was inside the jail, and there was officials there—

James: Oh, I see.

Don: They let them all come in and take a look at us, you know, but they didn't let 'em harm us. I'm sure they would have liked to kill us. They hated the Air Corps for they'd been bombed silly, you know.

James: Sure.

Don: Well, we there—oh, a couple hours, and then they put us on a bus similar to a school bus, you know, and then they sent us to another town that was larger. We thought they were gonna take us out and shoot us because—

James: Oh, really?

Don: We went out a ways out in the country and the bus stopped, and the guards got up and got out, and we thought—

James: “This is it.”

Don: “What the hell, they’re gonna take us and execute us,” but what they were doing, they were looking for this other bombardier—

James: Oh.

Don: That’s what I understood. But they didn’t find him so they got back, and then we went to another, another jail, another town a little bit bigger, and we were there, oh, for a day or two. I think just overnight, and then they marched us to a station, put us on boxcars, and there was another thing, we had marched through town, and they threw stuff at us and spit and—

James: At the bus, while you were on the bus?

Don: No, we had to march through town from jail to the—

James: Then they did that.

Don: Yeah [laughs], but we survived that all right.

James: Was it mostly women or men too?

Don: Men, kids, whatever [laughs]. And they put us on a boxcar, and they sent us to Hungary, Budapest, and they put us in a big prison there, stayed there about, about 10 days I guess, solitary confinement—

James: What’d they feed you?

Don: If I remember right a hunk of bread in the morning, and a bowl of soup in late in the afternoon. That’s all I recall having then. We were interrogated somewhere up there—

James: What’d they want from you? They knew what your bomb group was. They didn’t—

Don: Yeah, they—

James: Did you have any information of any value really?

- Don: We were instructed always to just tell them our name, rank and serial number. That's all they got. I remember this one guy, he kept coming in, and that's all I would give him, and he said, "You know, Kaplanek." He knew my name—
- James: He knew your name?
- Don: "You have,"—well, he had it down—
- James: And he spoke good English?
- Don: Fairly good. He says, "You know, Kaplanek, you could stay here and rot if you don't tell me," and I said [laughs], "Okay, I'll stay here and rot." And then after that was never bothered, that was the end of it.
- James: No physical violence then?
- Don: No, not that I endured. I've—maybe it was about a half hour a day they'd let us out in the yard to walk around then back in the cells again.
- James: By this time you'd found several of your shipmates then—
- Don: Oh, yeah.
- James: Of the ten of you, you had nine there?
- Don: Well, we had an eleventh man along that day. It was a German fellow—well, he was American, but he spoke German. He could read and write it, and I think he was born in Germany, and he was flying with us that day, and his job was to listen to the German—
- James: Air traffic?
- Don: Yeah, the traffic and the fighters and whatever, and he'd write this all down. It would go to intelligence. He wasn't part of an air crew, that was just his job, and he happened to go with us that day. His name was Dinky, Rudolph Dinky. And then eventually load us up in boxcars again, and we went up to a little town—hell, I can't think of the name of it. It doesn't make any difference, it was up near the Baltic Sea, and that was—I'm trying to think of how to pronounce the Stalag Luft 4 [German prison camp in Tychowo, Poland: contained American, British, Polish and other nationalities].
- James: Luft 4?
- Don: Stalag Luft 4.

James: I've talked to two guys who had been in Luft 4.

Don: Yeah, that's where it was, Stalag Luft 4.

James: Yeah, you probably saw them, but course, that was—

Don: That was, ah, at least 8,000 of us there.

James: Yeah, well, as I say I've talked to two others who were in Luft 4.

Don: Yeah, airmen, that was them. It was all airmen there.

James: Yup.

Don: And being noncoms [non-combatants: downed fighter and bomber pilots and crews are treated as non-combatants] we were, we didn't have to work, you know, as you probably know. They just kept us behind the barbed wire all the time.

James: Right.

Don: Food was not much, but—

James: A lot of cabbage? Cabbage soup?

Don: Yeah [laughs].

James: Everybody talks about the cabbage soup.

Don: Yeah, that was [both laugh] a staple, that ol' black bread—

James: Black bread and cabbage soup, that was it.

Don: [Laughs] Yes, that was(??)—

James: Were you in wooden barracks there? That's my understanding.

Don: Yeah.

James: Two-level, two-story?

Don: No, ours were all—the ones I was in was single-story, right.

James: And you had a heater in there?

- Don: Yeah, then you were issued so many pieces of coal a day, if I remember right. Tried to stretch that out, [laughs] you know.
- James: And how did you get along with the German guards?
- Don: Ah, okay. They didn't pay much attention to us other than watch us you know, and it was kind of funny. Some of them I think could speak a little English, but they wouldn't let on, but they'd come into rooms and stand, look around, and course the guys would make very insulting comments [laughs]. Sometimes you could see a faint of a little grin on their face, you know.
- James: So you knew they understood.
- Don: Yeah [laughs]. You could about imagine what a bunch of GIs were, comments they could make [laughs].
- James: Right. So all day then, during your daytime you really had nothing to do then.
- Don: No, you were counted twice a day, once in the morning and once in the late in the afternoon and—
- James: Do you recall when it was that you were captured, what time of the year? And what year was that? Was it in '44?
- Don: Yes, August.
- James: August of '44?
- Don: 22nd.
- James: Okay.
- Don: 1944, yes.
- James: Right.
- Don: Yeah.
- James: Was the winter tough?
- Don: It was damn cold. It was a very, very cold winter, and then the 6th of February we had to go on this march, you know—
- James: I know about that, yeah.

Don: And—

James: That's when things got worse.

Don: Oh, God, yes that was, that was something else.

James: You were just on the highway all day then, and then bunked in on a farmhouse?

Don: Wherever, yeah, if there was a barn—

James: But you had no blankets?

Don: Yeah, we were issued, I think I had two. They were not good American wool blankets. They were just, I recall they had a couple of old German greys, and yeah, that's, that's what you had.

James: How did they feed you when you were on the march?

Don: Loaves of bread that were split up, four, six guys depending on how many, and then if they could they would boil a bunch of potatoes, and you maybe got one or two or three little potatoes, boiled, you know, skins on, and that was it. And there was a few Red Cross packages, but very few. I don't really recall much once we got on the road. We used to get 'em in camp. There were cigarettes and Spam and things like that, and they were designed for one man per week, but some weeks we didn't get any, and then we did get them, if I recall, it might have been, well, four men on a package was good, and then sometimes six or eight, and if they got a lot of them then it was maybe two or three men on a—you know, there was—

James: That was pretty nice.

Don: Those were good, at the time you know.

James: When you started marching then, did you have any idea where you were going?

Don: No, not the slightest.

James: They wouldn't tell you of course.

Don: The Russians were coming up.

James: Then you assumed you must be going west.

- Don: Oh yeah, and we went up to the Baltic Sea and Swinemunde [Swinoujście, Poland: suffered US Air Corps bombing during World War 2, German population was expelled after World War 2] I believe is up there, and then we thought, “Well, hell, we’re trapped up here. The Russians are coming in,” and they came, but they put us on barges, took us across this bay, I’ve forgotten the name of it. It comes down in Germany like this, and then we start marching, always west, southwest, whatever. We were on the road, well, the 6th of February, and I got back with Americans around the 2nd or 3rd of May.
- James: Just before the end.
- Don: Yeah. The war was still on when I got back with Americans.
- James: Yeah, well, it ended on the 8th, so you must’ve got there—
- Don: Yeah.
- James: About four days—your, your guards all of a sudden gone one day, is that how you found out that—
- Don: Yeah, we were at a place called Annenberg, Germany I believe, and it was an old apartment complex building, and they had us housed in there. Of course they had split us up. Some went other places, too.
- James: Sure.
- Don: And there was a big iron thing around the place, a big gate. That wasn’t, I think it was just there when this big apartment complex, and one morning we woke up and the guards were gone.
- James: You sensed then that things were starting to get better.
- Don: Yeah, and, well, the guards were gone, and there was a alley right behind us. From the room I was in I could look out, and there’s three or four German, or Russian soldiers walking down this alley with these Tommy guns [possibly PPSH-41: a durable, low-maintenance submachine gun mass-produced by the Soviets during World War 2, was used through the Vietnam War] they carried all the time, and then I believe they told us that we were free, and they brought in a tank or something and knocked the gate down and—
- James: American?
- Don: No.

James: Russian.

Don: Russian, I was with the Russians there for a while.

James: But they didn't, they feed you? The Russians?

Don: No, no, we just got into town and kinda helped ourself wherever we could without, you know, being obnoxious about it. We asked for eggs or—

James: Sure.

Don: Well, if they didn't, the Germans were reluctant to give us any eggs or anything, we would threaten to call the Russians, and that usually [laughs]—they were scared to death of the Russians.

James: How did you, how did you understand that the Russians were suddenly bad guys?

Don: Well, they treated us, I had no trouble with any of the Russians soldiers. I associated with them a little bit, very little, but the Germans were just—

James: Petrified. **[End of Tape One, Side A]**

Don: Absolutely terrified of the Russians 'cause they had, I think that they raped and—

James: Pillaged.

Don: They thought nothing of shooting anybody.

James: The Russians.

Don: Yeah. And then, not that I saw, I didn't see 'em, but I seen, or I could hear a lot of gunfire at night. What they were doing, I don't know.

James: So where did you stay now that you were on your own? Where did you find a place to stay?

Don: We stayed right there, and then, German—I'm, excuse me, American officer flew in. He had one of these, well, it's equivalent to a Piper Cub [small, 2-seat, propeller-driven airplane meant for training, used for officer transportation & medical evacuation during World War 2].

James: Right.

- Don: He landed out someplace near there, and then they made arrangements, and 'cause the war was still on to take us out at night and—
- James: How many were there of you from that?
- Don: Oh, I don't know because they—
- James: Five or six thousand, or not that many?
- Don: No, I don't think any, that many because they had split up and went different places. Some went to some abandoned factories and different places, and I don't know, there was a couple thousand. While we were there they brought in several wagonloads of these Dachau, I don't know if they were from Dachau, but they were this prisoners of, yeah, from the—
- James: Concentration camp.
- Don: Right. Oh, that was the most pathetic thing.
- James: You mean their bodies or they were still alive?
- Don: They were still alive—
- James: Sort of.
- Don: But sort of, yeah.
- James: Terrible sight.
- Don: Yeah. Hmm, they were dying off.
- James: Yeah, it was probably too late for them.
- Don: Yeah, I gave one a cigarette, and they had 'em—they put 'em in their rooms, and I gave 'em—I had some cigarettes. I don't know where I got 'em, but I had 'em, and I went down the room further down, and I was lookin' in the room, and I came back and his buddy was smoking the cigarette, and I said, "What happened to him?" and he said, "Oh, he died," while I—
- James: My gosh, that's a shame.
- Don: Oh, it's sad.
- James: That's really sad. So when the Americans got there did they bring, they got you, how did they get you out, I guess that's what I'm—

Don: They brought us trucks at night and took us out at night, and—

James: Took you to France?

Don: Yeah, I believe, I can't remember the first—it was a German—it seemed to me it was a German town. I can't remember the name of it, and we stayed there a while, and they gave us a lot of good, what we considered really good food at that time, and then I wound up in Rheims, France when the war ended. I was in Rheims. Some of—there was an airfield near there, and some of the German fighter pilots come in to surrender while I was there.

James: Oh, really?

Don: Mm-hmm.

James: Just brought their plane in and—

Don: Oh yeah, mm-hmm. They didn't want to—

James: Where the Russians were.

Don: Exactly.

James: [unintelligible]

Don: They, they were giving up to the Americans—

James: Oh, sure.

Don: And, well, I was there for a while, and then—

James: Tell me about—was there a problem with diarrhea? Prevalent in that camp and on the march?

Don: Oh, yeah [laughs].

James: And just couldn't get away from that.

Don: Uh-uh.

James: The diet was—almost guaranteed it, didn't it?

Don: Yeah, and the water, you took what water was available.

James: Yeah, it wasn't very good.

Don: Yes, that was, terrible thing.

James: Any tuberculosis that you know of?

Don: Not that I know about, you know.

James: Everybody of course lost lots of weight.

Don: Oh yes, yeah.

James: When you got out, how much weight had you lost, do you recall?

Don: No, I'm guessing I was down to maybe 120 pounds. I'm guessing, because I wasn't real heavy when I went in. I was maybe 140, 145 and—

James: And tell me about that first meal at the American camp? Could you keep it down?

Don: I don't remember it.

James: Oh, you must have then.

Don: Yeah, no.

James: So many guys couldn't keep it down. It was just too rich.

Don: No.

James: After that potato soup, you know, it just—

Don: I don't remember, I don't recall the first meal. I know we were gonna get good food, and I—

James: They give you a new uniform?

Don: Yeah, deloused us. God, we were all lousy [laughs].

James: I imagine. Jesus.

Don: Not new uniforms, I had, I had a British jacket and I had pants [laughs]—

James: Well, at least they were clean.

- Don: Yeah, they were clean, and, oh yeah, they gave us showers. That was something we hadn't had in months and months, you know, and lousy, oh God, we were lousier than hell [laughs]. I tried to forget about that, and they put all this DDT on you, you know, if you've seen that.
- James: Right. Yeah, it was a terrible experience.
- Don: Yeah [laughs].
- James: Was there any time that you thought you weren't gonna make it in that camp?
- Don: Yeah, when we got in the camp and the Germans—well, I was—they would take about six or eight of us, or maybe ten from our barracks, and they would take us to the shower room, and for some reason or other I got suspicious. I thought, “Now, if they're gonna do any executing that's the way to do it.” You split 'em up, take a group at a time, you know. And then finally—I didn't go in the first group. Of course it wasn't, only a certain amount could go at a time, and I went, and got a good hot shower. They were good about that and—
- James: Once a week?
- Don: I don't recall if it was once a week. There was so many of us there, and then the facilities were not too great so that we just had to take turns, you know. Certain group would go one day, and then, and a lot of it is, got very hazy in my mind about the food and—we were all lined up one day for a roll call late in the afternoon, and we seen plumes, rockets going up. We didn't know what they were, and that was the V-2s [Vergeltungswaffe-2 or Revenge Weapon-2, German ballistic missile, first ever long-range ballistic missile, first human artifact to reach sub-orbital spaceflight, predecessor of all modern rockets] that were going towards England we found out later, but we could see 'em from where we—after they got up a ways we could see 'em. Now, see that was up at—
- James: Peenemunde [village in northeast Germany.]
- Don: Yeah, Peenemunde, yeah. See, we weren't too far from there—
- James: That's not far from you.
- Don: Mm-hmm. Right.
- James: So what—how did they get you home?
- Don: Ah—

James: You go, you come home from Rheims and you went over to Lucky Strike Camp?

Don: Yeah, Lucky Strike—

James: At Le Havre?

Don: Yeah, Le Havre and home.

James: Right, by ship.

Don: Yeah, and I got in the hospital in Le Havre—

James: Oh?

Don: I had an infected foot from that damn march, you know, and—

James: Oh, was it from frostbite initially?

Don: Probably started it and my foot got infected real bad, and it still wasn't cured. It was still sore, and then I was in Le Havre and at one of these tent hospitals, and for, oh, I don't know, what three or four days, four or five I've forgotten, and then put us on a ship and sent us to New York, and we were at Fort Kilmer, I believe. They brought us there in New York, and then we were given—

James: Medical exams then?

Don: Oh yeah. We got back—

James: Make sure you fellas—didn't want to send you home to momma and not till you're in the best shape possible.

Don: Right, and then they'd treat us back to real good, and we went—

James: Fattened you up (laughs)?

Don: Yeah, they gave us all the food you wanted, you know, and train ticket—

James: Were any of you plane crew there by that time, had you lost them?

Don: Ah—I can't remember. We kinda got separated, and—

James: In France, when you were back in France, probably?

Don: The original boys I went down with?

James: Yeah.

Don: Yeah, I saw some of them. I associated with some of them. I did a little drinking with, ha, more than a little, we had some Russian soldiers, and my buddy was with me then that I was shot down with.

James: Where'd you, where'd you do the drinking with the Russian soldiers?

Don: When they liberated us [laughs]!

James: When you were liberated?

Don: Yeah, we were—

James: You celebrated—

Don: My buddy—

James: With vodka?

Don: Yeah [laughs], my buddy and I were in a house where we were looking for food [laughs] and these two Russian soldiers come in, and they motion to us to sit down at a table, and when they said, "Sit down," well, we sat down—

James: Of course.

Don: And because they were armed, and we didn't—

James: Those burp guns.

Don: We were, yeah, we were very uncomfortable around them. You never knew what the hell they were going to do.

James: Were they drunk?

Don: They had been drinking, and then they brought out a bottle, and they set it on the table, and I don't know where they suddenly had some coffee cups there. I suppose they took 'em from the Germans, and they fill it up with vodka. My buddy and I, and then they'd want to toast to Stalin, [James laughs] and Churchill and Roosevelt, and they'd want you to drink the whole thing, not just sip, you know.

James: I know. Jesus.

- Don: Aw, God.
- James: [Laughs] Oh, my. My, my, my. How did that work on your diarrhea? That vodka, that didn't help I expect.
- Don: Well, I don't know, but the time we got through the vodka, I probably didn't know or care [laughs]. I don't know.
- James: Probably that's the least of your problems, right. Oh, that's funny. Oh, my. So, you got back home, did you, were you discharged rather quickly or did you have to spend some time on [unintelligible]?
- Don: No, I got back to Chicago, and I think we had a month or two with I've forgotten, and then they sent us to Miami Beach, big hotel down there, and it was beautiful, but then they decided that the only the married men that brought their wives could stay in there. Us single boys [laughs] they shipped us out again, and they stuck us on C-47s and flew us to San Antone, Texas [San Antonio, Texas], and that's where I was discharged.
- James: Then you took a train home from there.
- Don: Oh yes, oh sure, yeah.
- James: Oh boy. So, and, since the war have you, do you have reunions with your bomb group?
- Don: Yeah, first years I didn't even know about 'em. They had one in Chicago I didn't even know about it.
- James: Yeah, I didn't write that, tell me the bomb group again.
- Don: 455th Bomb Group.
- James: Okay, 455th Bomb Group.
- Don: And the 740th Squadron.
- James: 740th Squadron. Okay, 46 missions. So what decorations did they give you, Don?
- Don: Ah, Air Medal, and I had three or four oak clusters for that, and I think our unit got the Presidential Citation—
- James: You must have.

Don: Yeah, and that was that blue one on the, that you wore on this side.

James: Did you get a Bronze Star for being a POW?

Don: Not that I recall.

James: Most POWs did get Bronze Stars.

Don: I never did get a POW pin.

James: That's probably why.

Don: Never did get one. Yeah, Blanche Smith, do you know her?

James: No.

Don: Oh, she's quite active. She was a former WAC, and she's hell of a nice girl. She's here in town, and she asked me the same thing. She's very active in the Legion, and I never got any POW pin.

James: She was a WAC when?

Don: During the war.

James: In World War 2?

Don: Yeah.

James: Where was she stationed, do you know?

Don: No. I don't know. Blanche Smith, if you ever care to talk to her, she's—

James: Yeah, if she went overseas I'd like to talk to her, but if she didn't I wouldn't.

Don: I don't know. I just know she was in the WACs, and she's quite, very active in the Legion.

James: Oh, okay. All right, well, maybe if I have time maybe I can get a hold of her.

Don: Yeah, you can call her up, she's in the phone book.

James: All right. That's good. And you say you have reunions. The 455th has a reunion once a year?

- Don: I was at one last September in San Diego, and they've had—now there was another one in Colorado Springs, and I was at that one.
- James: So you have found some people that you flew with?
- Don: A couple. There's, on our crew, there's only four of us left. Pilot died, the copilot died, the bombardier died, the gunner died, one of the gunners, another, another couple, but, yeah, there's only four of us left. Our navigator after the war became an FBI agent, very intelligent guy, nice, hell of a nice guy. And, well, bombardier died—
- James: Did you use your GI Bill when you got home?
- Don: A little bit, yeah, I used it to take flying lessons [laughs]!
- James: [Laughs] Well, whatever works.
- Don: Real intelligent [laughs]!
- James: You just got out of that, right [both laugh].
- Don: I didn't use it all up, I just—
- James: I see, you went to work then.
- Don: Yeah.
- James: What did you do?
- Don: [Laughs] I went to work in a brewery in Chicago, Meister Brau Brewery, and I worked there a while. Then we got married, and I had a chance to come up, get a job here in Tomahawk. 'Course I had relation here, and I took it, and we wound up—
- James: And how'd you get in the motel business?
- Don: Well, we had a—first chance we got I was working for Skelgas. My wife was doing waitress work, and we wound up in the Snack Shack. That's a little, was a little restaurant next to the theater. Now there's something else in there, I don't know what it is, and then occasionally we used to come out to Bridge Supper Club. A fella by the name Bob Reed (??) was running it at the— [approx. 15-second pause in tape] I said, "Where's Bob tonight?" and she said, "Oh, didn't you know, Bob had a heart attack. He's in the hospital," she said, "We gotta get out of here," she said. She turned around, she pointed at Ruth and I and said, "Why don't you guys take it?" meaning the Bridge.

James: Sure.

Don: And, I thought what the hell, [laughs] I didn't, and after I thought about it, and I had a brother—in fact he's here now, but he had a supper club in Minocqua. He said, I talked to him, he said, "Why in the hell don't you take it?" I thought, "Well, what the hell, I came to town broke. I could leave the same way [both laugh] if it don't work out," so we scrounged enough money and borrowed all we could, and finally—we didn't buy it naturally, Bob didn't own it either, he was leasing it, but we had to buy all this equipment and stuff, and it cost us over \$10,000 just to come in. Well, in those days—that was 1960—

James: That's a lot of money, a lot of money.

Don: Oh man, that was—well, we finally did raise enough to get in, and we went in there in January of 1960, and when my wife and I ran that over 20 years—

James: That restaurant.

Don: Yeah, there used to be cabins here. There was twelve. There was eight in front and four in the back, and, well, they got too old and decrepit, and that was just a summer deal anyhow.

James: Sure.

Don: And I was getting tired of tending bar too, after 20 years. My wife said, "You gotta get out of it. You're getting old and grouchy," [both laugh]. I did have a little temper that was starting to show once in a while, and—

James: It's hard to deal with the public.

Don: Well, especially when you get older.

James: I know it, I know it, yeah.

Don: The newer people, the younger ones began to come in the bar, and the older ones that I knew got old along with me. We got along fine, but some of the younger ones got on my nerves, you know they had different, wanted different music and different talk, and—

James: Too loud.

Don: Yeah, so we built this. In 1980 we opened it. We been here ever since and—

James: Very nice.

Don: Then I leased that to my son.

James: He runs the—

Don: Yeah, mm-hmm.

James: Oh, that's a nice arrangement.

Don: Yeah, it, it works out all right. So we've been lucky.

James: And you look like you've been busy here.

Don: Pretty much, yeah.

James: Is it primarily seasonal, or not?

Don: Oh yeah, in the summer you're much busier, fishermen, you know, last couple of weekends we've been filled up from Friday to Sunday with fishermen. Oh, not all, but mostly, 90% probably.

James: Once October comes then it drops off.

Don: It begins to drop off until again, possibly snowmobiling. That's been a big thing up here, you know.

James: Oh, it is.

Don: Oh yeah, this, you know how they travel in groups.

James: Yes.

Don: Clubs and—

James: Right.

Don: And, if the conditions are good you fill up, you know, and of course if they're not, then it's—

James: Just the other way around.

Don: Yeah, that's [laughs] about right.

James: Well, that's good. Well, very good. I can't—did you forget anything?

Don: No.

James: Okay.

Don: I probably have, but I just can't think of it right now [laughs].

James: That's right, if you can't remember it then it doesn't count. Okay.

Don: I hope you didn't have this on all this time.

James: Every second.

Don: Oh, my God.

James: Well, you didn't say anything wrong.

Don: No, but I—[laughs].

James: It's just fine. You did, you did great.

Don: Well, I hope they edit this and take out all that. I didn't realize after the initial thing that that was on [laughs].

James: Oh sure.

[End of interview]