

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
MILTON E. REINKE,
Pilot, Army Air Corps, World War II

2003

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Reinke, Milton E., (b.1922), Oral History Interview, 2003

User Copy: 4 sound cassettes (ca. 215 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 4 sound cassettes (ca. 215 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Reinke, a Madison, Wisconsin resident, discusses his experiences during World War II as a pilot in the 512th Squadron, 376th Bomb Group, 47th Wing, 15th Air Force and as a prisoner of war in Germany. Reinke grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. At the request of his mother, he finished high school before enlisting at Wright Field (Ohio) in the Army Air Corps. Reinke spends time describing the physical and psychological exams and flight training and that qualified him as a pilot at Santa Ana (California), Wickenburg (Arizona), and Yuma (Arizona). He mentions 50% of pilot candidates “washed out” and became gunners, navigators or bombardiers. Reinke compares various aircraft at length, including: the BT-13 Vultee Vibrator, Stearman bi-plane, Cessna AT-9, P-38, A-20, and B-24. Reinke recalls his frustration when, after flight school, he was assigned to a B-24 instead of an A-20. In August 1943, Reinke traveled by boat to Casablanca (Morocco) as a replacement joining the 376th Bomb Group. He outlines the history of how the Group, also called Halverson’s Raiders, got to North Africa, and he states the 376th was the first Air Corps Group to bomb Europe in World War II. From Casablanca, Reinke was sent to Satif (Algeria) en route to Maduria (Italy). The entire 512th Squadron of the 376th Group had been wiped out shortly before Reinke arrived at the Maduria air base, so in December 1943, he was assigned to the 512th as a replacement. Reinke reports that for thirty days after these major losses, the 512th Squadron stayed in Italy practicing formations and bomb drills. He recalls “Bed-Check Charlie,” a German ME-109 plane, strafing the base every few nights while the airmen slept. Reinke describes a bombing mission in Anzio (Italy) and outlines the duties of the B-24’s ten-man crew. Next, Reinke details a mission in February 1944 when his plane was shot down. His mission was to bomb a warehouse in Steyr (Austria) as part of “Big Week,” one of the largest aerial assaults in World War II. (Reinke later learned this warehouse was an empty shell, set up by the Germans to fool the Americans). Reinke feels several unusual aspects of this mission contributed to his being shot down; he was piloting a B-24H for the first time, a new but slower aircraft with an eleventh man in the nose turret. They were supposed to meet the 450th Bomb Group in the air, but this group never arrived, so Reinke flew back to the 376th. Reinke explains that Colonel Fellows, leading this oversized formation in a B-24D, was moving too fast and left six planes behind. Reinke’s plane was shot through the fuel tank by German anti-aircraft guns. After dropping their bombs on the target, Reinke and his crew bailed out at the urging of the engineer. Reinke describes in detail parachuting to the ground and making a rough landing. He explains they hoped to land over Yugoslavia and be rescued by partisans, but they ended up bailing out over enemy territory. Reinke lists the contents of his escape kit, which included: Rye-Crisp crackers containing benzedrine sulfate, gold seal currency, and a map printed on silk that could also keep airmen warm. Reinke tells how three German girls found him. He knew German

from his grandmother, so he greeted the girls in German. He mentions he returned to Germany in 1997 to visit them, and the women gave him a piece of his parachute that they had kept for fifty years. One woman, Miss Sammer, revealed they had helped Reinke not out of altruism but because fabric was scarce and they wanted to use his parachute to make underwear. Some of the material was used to make a wedding dress for their neighbor. Reinke states the girls took him to the home of Miss Sammer's father, where a fellow crew member, "Robbie" Robinson, was already waiting. Reinke depicts Mr. Sammer as a nice fellow despite the fact that he turned them over to the police, refusing Reinke's bribes. Robinson and Reinke were then given to Gestapo agents who had apprehended seven of their eleven crew members. From there, Reinke states they were sent to Graz (Austria) with thirty-five other prisoners of war. Reinke shares a frightening experience of hiding in an air raid bunker in Graz with 3,000 German civilians who spat on the POWs and hit them with handbags. Next, he describes his interrogation at a center north of Frankfurt (Germany) where all captured airmen were taken and interviewed by the Luftwaffe. He portrays the German interrogators as clever, putting crews together in bugged rooms in the hopes they would reveal secret information. Reinke tells how Robinson burnt a "flimsy" (a piece of tissue paper listing Air Corps code names) with a match, and the Germans put him in solitary confinement. Reinke goes on to describe taking a railroad car to Stalag Luft I in Barth (Germany). On the train, he refuted a German guard's claim that New York City had been bombed. When the Americans laughed, the guard denied the POWs water for two days, although they managed to get some from snowballs. Reinke details the layout of Stalag Luft I; the prison held nearly 10,000 POWs, mostly American airmen captured during Big Week. Reinke explains the camp was divided into compounds of 2,500 men with 100 men to a barrack, and he was in North Compound Number One. There were also British prisoners from the Royal Air Force as well as 150 Russians, who were kept separately. Reinke comments that the Russian POWs were afraid the Russian Army would treat them as cowards when they were released. Reinke discusses at length pastimes and daily life: prisoners crafted chess sets from bed slats, made playing cards from Red Cross packaging, played ball, and gave lectures to each other on various subjects (French, zoology, engineering, etc.) they had studied before the war. Reinke mentions there was a chaplain from South Africa and one RAF doctor for all 10,000 POWs. He describes the mess hall where POW cooks pooled everyone's Red Cross packages along with rations from the Germans; however, the mess hall burned down a couple months before the war ended. He recalls how getting sauerkraut from the Germans was a special treat. Reinke comments that the American POWs made committees for everything: food, escape, security, etc. He also reveals a prisoner named Bennett, an Associated Press reporter, had a radio that could be dismantled and hidden among several POWs. Bennett listened to the BBC and wrote up a two-page newsletter called *POW WOW* that soldiers passed around the compound. Reinke describes the barbed wire fences surrounding Stalag Luft I and outlines several escape attempts. He states POWs dug 102 tunnels which were "engineering feats," but the Germans always found them. Reinke learned later that the Germans had a seismograph and knew when the POWs were tunneling but let them continue to give them something to do. Reinke tells of one successful escape: 2,000 men in his compound staged a fight as a diversion while one POW put a board over the two barbed wire fences and walked over. He was caught four days later and put in solitary confinement. Finally, Reinke tells how the camp was liberated. The Germans left one night in anticipation of the Russian Army,

and the next morning, Reinke saw Americans in the guard towers. Reinke praises Colonel Zemke, the ranking officer for the Americans, for his dealings with the Germans and Russians. Reinke comments that the Russians staged a liberation photograph, opening the gates and telling POWs to “act liberated.” As Reinke explains, Colonel Zemke had orders from Eisenhower to keep the gates locked and the POWs together until airplanes arrived to take them to France. However, the Russians were planning to march the American POWs to the Crimea and the Black Sea and release them in Italy, which would take months. According to Reinke, Colonel Zemke held his ground against the Russian general and insisted they follow Eisenhower’s orders. Reinke suggests some Americans followed the Russians out of the camp and brutalized German civilians. He also tells the unusual story of Major Von Mueller, the German Security Officer in charge of Stalag Luft I. Von Mueller lived in the United States for many years but was forced to join the German Army in the 1930s when he returned to Germany to claim some land. Von Mueller became *burgomeister* of Barth after fleeing Stalag Luft I and was eventually captured by the Russians. Reinke reports that B-17s finally came to rescue the POWs. He flew to Rheims (France), took a train to Le Havre (France), and eventually sailed on a troop ship back to the U.S. Reinke reveals there were a rash of suicides by American troops waiting at Camp Lucky Strike in Le Havre. He attributes the suicides to soldiers “cracking up” after witnessing destruction and German propaganda. Throughout the interview, Reinke discusses German propaganda including rumors spread about the destruction of major U.S. cities and posters portraying Russians as baby-killers. Reinke reports many Germans committed suicide before the Russians invaded. He also claims that the Russians held three million German prisoners for seven years after the war. In addition, Reinke recalls being perplexed by signs on telephone booths in Frankfurt that said “No Jews.” He explains none of the POWs realized the extent of the Holocaust. The interviewer, John Driscoll, mentions frequently that he interviewed another Wisconsin Veteran who was also at Stalag Luft I, but he forgot his name. (That POW was Henry Renard, also a pilot with the 15th Air Force.) Finally, Reinke expresses great affection for Germany and states he returned several times, meeting the three women who rescued him and attending a dinner in Steyr (Austria) in honor of crew members who died during Big Week. He says of his overall experience: “There is always humor.”

Biographical Sketch:

Reinke (b. 1922) grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio and spent summers in Michigan. After high school, he joined the Army Air Corps and became a B-24 pilot with the 512th Squadron, 376th Bomb Group, 47th Wing, 15th Air Force. During “Big Week” in February 1944, his plane was shot down over Austria. Reinke became a prisoner of war at Stalag Luft I where he stayed for fifteen months until the war ended. Reinke has attended several reunions of the 376th Bomb Group and made five trips back to Europe. In 1997, he went back to Germany and visited the three women who came to his aid when he parachuted down near Graz, Austria. He now lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcription completed by Patrick Gould, 2009.

Abstract written by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

John: Okay, today is November 7, 2003. This is John Driscoll and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. And this is an oral history interview with Milton Reinke. We are at Milton's apartment at Oakwood Village in Madison and Milton is a veteran of World War II, the United States Army Air Corps. Is that right?

Milton: Right.

John: Okay. Good afternoon and thanks for the hospitality and the coffee, and thanks for agreeing to the interview.

Milton: Well, you are certainly welcome.

John: Can we go to the very beginning. Where were you born, and a little bit about your early life and education, up to going into the service?

Milton: Okay. I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati called College Hill, and grew up there. My mother had very severe hay fever and asthma, so every summer we would head north into northern Michigan, up around Bay View, north of Petoskey, Michigan, where we had a summer home. And that gave her the relief from the hay fever and asthma. And I fell in love with the country of northern Michigan, and the forest around there, compared to Cincinnati. But anyway, in 1941, I can still remember, my mother and brother and I were in the car heading downtown when the news came over the radio that Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

John: What was your birth date?

Milton: Oh, I was born November 7, 1922.

John: Okay, so you were nineteen, eighteen, nineteen?

Milton: Eighteen, at the time. And I was still in high school, because when I was in the second grade I developed rheumatic fever and had to be taken out of school for a year. So I missed one year because of that. However, I remember my mother and her concern about what was going to happen to her two sons. My brother was three years older than I, and he was enrolled at the University of Cincinnati in aeronautical engineering. So he did have an exemption, but like so many, he went ahead and enlisted. Well, my mother asked that I stay in school, because a lot of fellows dropped out of school and they enlisted in the service. It was the patriotic thing to do. And everyone was anxious to get in before the war ended.

John: It would end before we got in it.

Milton: Yeah, that was the belief. However, I did stay in school and finish out that year. Graduated in June and the day after graduation, another fellow from school and myself enlisted up at Wright Field, in the Army Air Corps. Now, at that time it was not the Air Force and was not a separate branch of the service, it was part of the Army Air Corps. And up at Wright Field, or really at Patterson Field, adjacent to Wright Field, I went through a number of training situations for ground depot work. One was in engine maintenance and another was a welding school. And I still remember how difficult it is to weld twenty-five thousandth inch aluminum. It's virtually impossible. However, right near our barracks was the cadet exam barracks, and the two of us decided, what the heck, why don't we try out for the cadets and see if we can pass the exam and get into that. Which we did. And both of us succeeded and got good grades on the cadet exam, so then we got shipped out to Santa Ana, California, for pre-flight, ground school training at Santa Ana. At Santa Ana, you went through a complete physical and psychological evaluation and they determined there and then what branch of the Air Corps you would get into. Was it pilot training, navigation training or bombardier training.

John: Now, did you have any say on that? Or was that pretty much up to them?

Milton: We had a choice, and of course the choice was about ninety-nine percent, "I want to be a pilot!" As you can well imagine. And there was a need for bombardiers and for navigators, and the bottom line was that they gave you a choice but it didn't mean anything. The greatest thing was the psychological exam that they gave you and I will give the military all of the credit in the world for doing an excellent job with a large number of people at that time in making the selections. I have no idea how it was all done but it was just fantastic. Just like gearing up the country for the war effort, and switching plants over to military production.

John: That was amazing.

Milton: It was amazing. Well, anyway, I always remember I came out of one physical where they had taken blood and the fellow next to me, still remember his name, it was Schweinfert, and believe it or not, Schweinfert was a whiskey taster for Seagrams. A job that everyone envied. And Schweinfert had come out where they had drawn blood, and when he got out in the hall, he kind of sat down on his haunches and somebody walked by and reached over and grabbed his physical papers out of his hand, took it and wrote something on it, and handed it back to him, and kept on walking. It was the doctor and they washed him out on that because the doctor thought he was faint from having seen blood drawn from him, and sat down on his haunches. And that was enough to wash you out.

John: Oh, wow.

Milton: And if you ever fainted, anytime in your life or passed out, you was done as far as cadets were concerned. Well, I was fortunate, I got selected for pilot training and went through the pre-flight at Santa Ana, California. That was all the ground school training and the hardest thing in the world for me personally was learning Morse Code. You had to get up to so many words a minute and I practiced that, and worked on it a long time. But then they shipped us, for primary training in Stearmans, bi-planes, over to Wickenburg, Arizona, out in the desert. And that field is gone today, but another field has been built right nearby. So at Wickenbrug, there were an even hundred of us. That consisted of ninety-six cadets and four officers that had transferred in from the Infantry into the Air Force, Air Corps. And so there were four officers, ninety-six cadets. When we left there six weeks later, after about fifty hours of flight training, there were forty-eight of us remaining including the officers. Fifty percent had washed out. And that was a pretty high wash out rate.

John: What did the guys that washed out do? Do you know?

Milton: Usually they gave them a choice. Many of them, they would transfer into bombardier or navigator training because even though they weren't coordinated, they felt, and could perform the pilot duties, they could do the others. If they didn't go there, they wound up, usually, in gunnery school. And were made gunners. So we went from primary training, at Wickenburg, Arizona, to Bakersfield, California, Taft Field, for basic training in the BT-13A, which was made by Vultee. And it was kind of a hazardous plane because, as your air speed decreased, you had to use a lot more rudder to prevent from skidding the aircraft on the turn, and the last turn that you make into the field, on the approach to the field, that last turn, you put it up to about a thirty degree bank and you got the power off, so you got the aircraft slowed down. And at that point, periodically, somebody would get just below the minimum a little too far and they would stall. Now, if you visualize the wings in a turn, the upper wing is going faster than the lower wing and the lower wing is the one that will stall. The upper wing is still flying and forces the plane right over on its back, instantly. And now you are down to two or three hundred feet off the ground and there isn't enough room to recover. So you go in upside down. And that was an awful high loss. In fact, my roommate was killed in that fashion, flying that BT-13 Vultee Vibrator.

John: BT, like Boy Tom?

Milton: Basic Trainer, BT.

John: Okay.

Milton: Okay, let's see. That had a 450 horse engine in it, single engine. Well, from there, now they separated you out and shipped you in advanced training, the last part of your training experience, and that was whether you were going to wind up in single engine or multi-engine. And I got shipped to Yuma, Arizona, for twin engine training.

John: Now, this would have been about when, in what year?

Milton: This was, let's see, I went to advanced training in, I think, July of 1943. That is when we went down, let's see, I said, Yuma, Arizona. And that was twin engine training, and we flew twin engine Cessnas, and also another AT-9. I think it was made by Curtiss. All aluminum. A real hot aircraft. And they used the AT-9 as a transition trainer for P-38s. P-38 was a one-place airplane so you couldn't get dual instructions. In flying a P-38, you got dual instruction in an AT-9 and went directly into the P-38s. And we left Yuma. I had one harrowing experience at Yuma. What you do is you have a twin engine aircraft and you had a two place, pilot and co-pilot. One day you would be pilot and the next day you would be co-pilot and navigator on the flight. And I, we went up, well, let me back up. The weather was bad. There were thunderstorms rumbling through at night, and they canceled night cross-country flights several times. And finally, one night, when Captain Perry, our instructor, said, "Look, I got a heavy date with a nurse tomorrow night, and if you don't fly tonight, I got to stick around here tomorrow night." So, he said, "You are flying tonight, like it or not." And we flew from Yuma, Arizona, to Desert Center, California, and then from Desert Center over to Phoenix and back to Yuma. That was the flight path. Well, as we approached Desert Center, we started getting into the clouds and got a lot of turbulence and lightning around us, so we did a one-hundred-and-eighty and called Desert Center and said we were heading for Phoenix. We got about half way to Phoenix, and the fellow with me, that was flying co-pilot that night, Reeves, he was a really nice young man. And he woke up. He had been sleeping. And this is 2:00 in the morning. And he reached down and he turned the fuel selector valve, which we had been using all of our fuel out of one set of tanks, and now he set the fuel selector where it would take the fuel out of the other tank, which was still full, to kind of even them up. And as soon as he had done that, in about ten seconds, two red lights come on, on the instrument panel to indicate fuel pressure is dropping off. Which is normal. But, those lights go out almost immediately, normally. This time they didn't go out. They stayed on. And suddenly the engines coughed and quit, both of them.

John: Oh, wow.

Milton: Well, we were flying at about eight thousand feet over the desert. There is nothing below us, no lights, absolutely pitch dark out there, and we were about eight thousand, and we trim up the aircraft and started to work the wobble-pump, which is the pump that pumps the fuel if the automatic fuel pump isn't working. And we hit the wobble-pump, we pumped that as hard as we could go. No action at all. Light stayed on, no engine, no fuel to the engine. So we kept going down and Reeves finally said, "We got to get the hell out of here." And I agreed. He got up, got out of the seat and went back, and the way you bailed out of that UC-78, AT-17, was to reach up and turn a knob which pulled the door hinges pins and with the door pins out of there the door just flew off from the slip stream. And then you had a big door you could exit out onto the wings and bail out. So, we were down to about fifteen hundred feet by this time, and Reeves starts to turn to release the hinge pins and gets it about half-way, and the engine coughed, one of them. What do you do? And now we are a little below fifteen thousand, you are losing about five hundred feet a minute or better, and you are in a glide, and you can't see the ground, it is pitch dark down there. And I was out of the seat, holding on to the wheel and just instinctively, when it coughed, I sat down, hit the throttle and opened the throttles wide open, and we climbed up and the second engine came back. And we got up to about ten thousand feet. Well, when we got over, I've forgotten the name of the field now. But there was a big military field that we flew over, and when we got over that, we called them and told them what had happened. And, meanwhile, back in Yuma, Arizona, Captain Perry was listening to the radio also. And he heard our conversation. We told them the engines had both cut out. We were back on the old tanks now, and our fuel was running pretty low in those tanks, and we were switching over again to the full tanks. And we were going to circle the field for about five minutes and see if the engines cut out. We switched it over, the red lights went on then they went off, and everything was okay. We flew in circles there for a little while and then finally we called in and said we were canceling our flight plan and we were going to head back to Yuma. So we went back to Yuma, and as soon as the aircraft touched down at Yuma, on the radio from the tower, "Captain Perry wants to see you in Operations immediately." We got in there and we got out the maps and he said, "Where did all of this happen?" We showed him about where it was. And he listened very kindly to us and, oh, I have never been chewed out like that in my life! Just never! He called us every name in the book. He said, "Look at the elevation." And here, we looked at the elevation, and it was about eleven hundred feet. Well, we couldn't have even bailed out.

John: Oh, that's right. Yeah

Milton: Your chute needs at least three-four hundred feet. Well. He said, "Here they got \$25,000 invested in each one of you guys and you were going to kill yourselves." He said, "The airplane is cheap," he said. "Forget that. We can make another

one.” But, he said, “Tomorrow morning at eight o’clock, you get an oral exam from me on the Pilot’s Manual,” which had all the information in it, what you should do and at what altitude, and so on. So the next morning, we had a two and a half hour oral exam. We spent the night, by the way, neither one of us slept, and we read the whole book from cover to cover that night.

John: Do you have any idea what the problem would be?

Milton: Oh, when we parked the aircraft that night, we told the crew chief what had happened. The engines had cut out. The crew chief laughed and said, “You know, that happened to one of the instructor pilots about a week ago.” And I said, “Well, what did you find?” I said, “Is there a rag, maybe, in the fuel tank that got stuck into the line? What was the problem?” He said, “No, we never found anything wrong with it.” So they put the plane up in the air again.

John: Wow.

Milton: Anyway, that was our training. And from there we went to Mountain Home, Idaho, after graduation. Now, all the way through cadets, at least three or four times, while you are an aviation cadet in training, they’d ask you, “What do you want to fly when you leave here?” And every time, my favorite was the A-20. The A-20 was a real hot twin engine aircraft with one pilot and one gunner in the back of you, facing backwards. And it was used for low altitude bombing, skip-bombing. And it was comparable, I would say, to the Mosquito of the Royal Air Force, RAF. And every time I would put down I wanted A-20s. When I graduated in Yuma, Arizona, I opened my orders as fast as I could, which everybody did, to see where am I going next? I can still picture it. I wish I had a copy of them. It said I was assigned to Mountain Home, Idaho, for twin-engine light attack-type aircraft transitional training. The only thing the Army had was the A-20 that met that definition. Well, when I got up to Mountain Home, I found out they did have A-20s but they shipped out all the A-20s and had B-24s now.

John: Oh, wow.

Milton: So I wound up in B-24s.

John: Oh, man.

Milton: That was the last thing I wanted. To get in bombers. First of all, I am short, I am small, I don’t weigh a lot.

John: I understand that was a bear to fly.

Milton: Oh, I'll tell you. The day we were shot down, and I will get to that, but that day, it was sixty-two degrees below zero at twenty thousand feet, and when you say a bear to fly, I had sweat running down me. You couldn't believe it. Even at that temperature. And had to wipe the sweat out of my eyes. Because I had every ounce of energy going into holding that aircraft so it didn't flip over.

John: Wow.

Milton: Well, that was kind of summation of my training. Then we got shipped overseas, to Casablanca. And then wound up assigned to the 15th Air Force flying out of Italy, San Francuccio (?) which is east of Manduria and west of Lecce, in Italy. The 376th Bomb Group I was assigned to, was kind of an interesting group. It didn't have a group number initially. It was called Halverson's Raiders. They were assigned, believe it or not, and trained here in the States, flew overseas, with the intent of bombing Tokyo from India. This was the follow-up to Jimmy Doolittle's B-25 raid off of the carriers. Now, they were going to bomb Tokyo from India and the Halverson Group was the group assigned to do that. They flew overseas and they got as far as Palestine, and they refueled in Palestine, and spent a few days when Montgomery asked for the help of the Air Force in attacking Rommel in North Africa, in the North African campaign. And Washington approved, and held them over in Palestine. And they started to bomb. Believe it or not, their first bombing mission was the first time that any American aircraft had bombed Europe. And that was in early August of 1943. They flew from Palestine up to, believe it or not, Ploesti oil fields in Romania. And that was the high altitude, not low. That was the high altitude mission in August of '43. Wait a minute, August of '42, 1942.

John: '42. Okay.

Milton: We were the first ones. Meanwhile, out of England, the 8th Air Force, about a week later, sent a flight in and bombed a target in France. But the 376th was the first Bomb Group to bomb the European continent. When those fellows came back from that mission, to show you how critical it was-- there were twelve aircraft that were on the mission-- when they came back, they had to refuel their own aircraft because they didn't have any fuel crew on the ground. There was just the air crew, period. So they all pitched and with Jerry-cans, ten gallon cans, they passed those up to a man on the wing and physically refueled each of those aircraft. And with about, what was it, twenty-four hundred gallons. That takes a lot of Jerry-cans of gas to fill up a plane. And here they are, they are down from flying at altitude on oxygen, and they are tired, physically, and here they are refueling their own aircraft. That was only on the first few missions. After that, the RAF, Royal Air Force, flying out of North Africa, gave them fuel trucks so they could refuel their aircraft. But, anyway, the 376th was a well-known aircraft,

or bomb group, they sent you. They were, they had quite a reputation, the 376th. All of their aircraft at that time were sand colored because on August 1, 1943, they led the low altitude mission on Ploesti oil fields, at low altitude. And, as I mentioned, it was a year before they had bombed that same target, about a week shy of a year earlier that they had bombed it. At high altitude. So, at any rate, we went through North Africa, got assigned to the 376th. That is a day I will always remember. They sent B-17s down to pick us up in North Africa, at Satif, near Constantine. And they flew us up to Italy, and we landed at Manduria, which was Wing Headquarters. The Air Force was organized, you had like the 15th Air Force, the 8th Air Force. And it was the Air Force for the whole time. Then that is broken down into Wings, and Wings are broken down into, every Wing has about four or five Groups, and under Groups come Squadrons. And that is the lowest unit.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

John: Okay, there we go. This is Side Two. You were talking wings, groups, squadrons.

Milton: Yeah. Well, we flew up from Satif, North Africa, near Constantine, to Manduria and landed at Manduria, which was Wing Headquarters for the 47th Wing, and there we were all given our orders as to which Group we were going to join and which Squadron. So, that was early in the morning. We spent the night there and early in the morning they gave us our orders assigning us to the different Groups in Italy and to the 15th Air Force, and the 47th Wing. And there were about twenty-three of us that flew up from Satif. We watched, that morning, as the aircraft took off and went to a mission, and I believe the mission that day was, I want to say Vicenza, Italy. And it was supposed to be a milk run. A milk run meaning that it was an easy mission without too much flak or fighters intervention. So we watched them forming up and leaving the area for the target. So they took us by truck to the various airfields that we were assigned to now. So wind up with the 376th.

John: 376th Squadron?

Milton: Group. And was assigned to the 513th Squadron, for one day. The operations officer at the 513th showed me around the 513th Squadron area. We lived in tents. Our mess hall was a big tent. No buildings there, just tents for the crews. And then, something humorous that I'll get to, but he took us around, introduced us to everybody in the squadron that wasn't flying that day. And then pretty soon we heard the roar of the engines with them returning from the mission. They came back from the mission, the first plane in flew over the field at about eight hundred feet and bailed out the whole crew. And then came in and landed with the gear up. And in a B-24, you didn't land with the gear up. You got a high wing and that is

where the landing gear is fastened. And by the way, much of the design of aircraft at that time, like the DC-3, the C-47 was the military version, their gears retracted into the engine nacelles and they always stuck down, they never retracted all the way. They always hung down so if you had the hydraulic system shot out where you couldn't get the wheels down and for some reason you couldn't crank them down, you could still come in and land that aircraft on the wheels, and you'd still even have brakes.

John: Oh, I didn't know that.

Milton: And that was deliberate, by design, and it was very effective. It was great. Well, the first aircraft in was Major Fisher. He bailed out his crew and then he and the co-pilot and I think the engineer brought the plane in and landed. And I can always remember that thing landing. He made a beautiful landing but then it started to turn, and it turned off of the runway and it headed right to a revetment area with another B-24 in it. Nobody said a word. We all stood and watched in silence because we could just see going into that other revetment area, and the two aircraft coming together. Well, it didn't happen.

John: Oh, okay.

Milton: Right before it hit the revetment area, thank God, the aircraft just spun around on the ground and stopped. But that was one in. The others came in and landed. But out of, let's see, they put eighteen aircraft in the air that day out of the group. And that was three squadrons with six aircraft each. So, eighteen aircraft in the three squadrons that went on the mission and that night only nine or ten came back. So they lost eight or nine aircraft on the mission. And that was my introduction. Now, that was the Group that I saw the aircraft assembling and going on their first mission when I got to Italy, at Manduria, I watched them forming up that morning and that night eight or nine of them didn't come back from our unit. But, the one group, the 512th, or the squadron, the 512th Squadron, was across the field from the 513th. Well, the next day they found out that the 512th Squadron had lost absolutely every single solitary crew member. There was not one crew member left on the ground. And the whole squadron got wiped out on that mission. And there wasn't nobody left. And they had to make up and transfer crews in from some of the other squadrons. So I got transferred from the 513th over to the 512th. So they transferred in some. They had quite a bit of flying experience, combat experience. And others, like myself, were brand, spanking new. But, that was quite a shock. To watch those aircraft assemble in the morning and then eight or nine of them just from one trip alone...

John: And how many men in a crew of a B-24?

Milton: Ten. Ten to eleven, depending if it is a B-24D, which had a glass nose on the front of the aircraft. That had a ten man crew. Now, the other models, after the D, D as in dog, after the D models, the newer models all had a turret, a regular moveable turret and required one additional gunner to sit up there in the nose position, so that was an eleven man crew.

John: Wow. That was eighty or ninety men.

Milton: That's right. Yeah. They never made it. We ran into them later on, some of them, in the POW camps.

John: Oh, did you? Okay.

Milton: Well, the following day, they could not muster enough aircraft to run on a mission, so Air Force Headquarters pulled us off of all combat missions for thirty days, during which we went through training. We flew, oh, almost every other day on practice bombing, practice formation flying and so forth. And waiting for more and more crews coming in from the States. And I remember that, in fact, the day after this, there was a new crew that came in. The pilot was a warrant officer, Zube. And Irv Zube came in and landed and they went out with a Jeep to pick up the crew and they told him, he was the Squadron Commander now. Which normally called for a major.

John: Sure.

Milton: Here he was, a flight officer, not even a second lieutenant. And he said, "How come?" And they said, "The whole crew got wiped out. No crews left in the 512th."

John: That is amazing. Wow.

Milton: Well, that kind of summarizes my introduction. That night, I might add, there was one fellow that came overseas with us in our flight, by the name of Williams. And Williams was as nervous as could be. He was jumpy like you wouldn't believe. And I wound up in the same tent with him, that night. It was the tent of one of the old combat veterans was in the tent also. And about one o'clock, the air raid siren goes off. And they said this was Bed-Check Charlie coming in from Yugoslavia, an ME-109 from Yugoslavia, and he would come over and strafe the field at night, different fields in Italy. And usually there was just one plane. And Williams, when the air raid siren went off, said, "What's that? What's that?" And the other guy in the tent said, "Aw, that's just Bed-Check Charlie coming over to do a little strafing." And he says, "You mean he is going to shoot up the field?" "He might, or he might go to one of the other fields. He comes over and harasses

us every night or two.” And Williams said, “Well, what do we do?” And the other guy in the tent says, “Well, if you want to, there’s a big trench out by the tent area, and you can jump into that for protection.” And Williams, with that, was out of bed and out in that trench, and the next thing we heard was, “Oh, my God!” That trench had about two feet of water in it. You couldn’t see it at night. And the poor son of a gun jumped into that, and he never got out of bed after that. Well, after we started flying again, let’s see, it was December. I joined the Group the latter part of December of 1943. When this mission I mentioned that they wiped out part of the Group. And so it was not until about the first part of February, February 1 or thereabouts, when we started flying combat missions again.

John: When you started flying combat missions, Milton, how many hours did you have, by then?

Milton: Not a hell of a lot. It was, to me, it was kind of shades of World War I, how quickly they put you through training, gave you the minimum and sent you into combat. That was not true for most of the people who were flying. But in my instance, we didn’t have an awful lot of hours after training and that one month of training, when they stood down and didn’t run combat missions in the Group, that month was kind of God-send to a number of us where we could catch up and get a little more stick time in, and more formation flying and practice bombing. But I can’t give you a definitive answer.

John: That’s all right.

Milton: But, February 1 we started flying missions again and a number of those missions were over to Anzio, because the beachhead was established at Anzio, north of Rome, and there we were dropping fragmentation bombs. And I think the first mission over there I lost a good friend who went overseas with our group. But they never found anything but an oil slick and a few things floating on the surface in the Mediterranean. But it was an easy target. You came over the shoreline at Anzio, and there was no way, you didn’t see a line on the ground, where it says “Don’t bomb,” and “Bomb.” So, when you broke over the shoreline, you just timed it and the bombardier in the nose looked through what was called a drift meter. He could tell as soon as they vertically crossed over onto the shoreline here, and then he started a stop watch and after so many seconds, he would drop his bombs. I think it was assumed now that this was German territory, and they were fragmentation bombs.

John: Will you back up just a second? How did you go across to Europe? Did you fly over?

Milton: No. A whole batch of us were sent by boat, and we went over by boat and went

into Casablanca, and I'll always remember the destruction at Casablanca. And most of that was about a year old now. This was the end of 1943 and they had attacked North Africa, I think, in the end of '42, when the North African campaign really started. So, yeah, there were ships all over. In fact, when we arrived by ship, we had to lay off the port quite a few miles, and they opened a big submarine net, and I never knew they had anything like that, but it was a big netting of heavy steel that surrounded the whole port area. And they had to send out two tugs to open that up so we could get in. So, let's fast-forward here to the 23rd of February of 1944. We had been flying now for twenty-some days and normally, the way you flew, there was four squadrons that made up a group, and normally they put three squadrons in the air. So one didn't fly. So you got about every fourth mission off, where you didn't fly. And then you flew the next one, and another squadron did not fly that day. So that gave the guys somewhat of a rest. And rested in between missions. But the day we were shot down, it was a screwed up day. It really was. It's the only time in the history of our group that part of us flew with the 450th Bomb Group instead of with the 376th. We took off, and we were to assemble over the Adriatic at a certain location. We got there and circled, and the group that we were to meet, the 450th, wasn't there. And we couldn't find them. And there were about six of our aircraft from our group that were going to fly with the 450th. Well, we circled, and how long do we keep circling? Finally, we said, "The heck with it. They aren't showing up." And we joined the rest of the 376th Bomb Group, we joined up with them, and started to fly with them. Colonel Fellows was the Deputy Commander of the 376th Bomb Group and he was flying on that mission. And with Sandberg, Operations Officer, from the 513th. They flew the mission but there was a real problem from the beginning. First, we didn't join up with the group that we were supposed to. Now, we joined our own group and were flying off on the right wing of the lead ship so there were six aircraft here, six on the right wing, six on the left wing. And we were up here, on the right wing. And we called. You are supposed to maintain radio silence but we thought it was critical enough where Colonel Fellows could not see us from where he was. He could see his plane and the one flying on his wing but he couldn't see our flight out here. So we called him. He is flying a B-24D. We've got a brand new aircraft from the States, a B-24H, with a nose turret. That nose turret slows you down about twelve to fifteen miles an hour. And we were falling back, so we increased our power. But there is a limit to how far you can go, because you increase your power, you are going to use more fuel.

John: Sure.

Milton: And fuel is a very, very critical thing to manage on a mission. So, we went back to our old setting and we kept dropping back. And we called Colonel Fellows, and there was a code name for him, and we were using the code name and we called him and told him to throttle back. He's losing the whole group. Well, these six

ships were way back here, these six ships were back here and he was alone with six ships up in front. And a few miles separating the two. Well, you lose an awful lot of guns on a German target when you do that. So we called him. He didn't throttle back one bit. He gets to the Indication Point, this is the turning point. It was up on the Danube River. The target was Steyr. He gets to the I. P. and he makes a turn about two hundred and forty degrees, to a heading from north, he turns here, well, to a heading of about a hundred and ten degrees to go to Steyr. He makes that turn, and when he makes that turn for the first time, he can look back and see the other aircraft. And he sees everybody strung out over the sky. Fighters had hit us by this time, and they were shooting the daylight out of us. And then, because the three hundred and sixty degree turn over the target, which is something you never do-- Colonel Fellows came from the South Pacific where that was a common practice, but it was not in Europe with the number of fighters around.

John: You would be staying around in the neighborhood too long.

Milton: Yeah, that's right. Well, that caused a lot of us to go down, see. Jumping way ahead on that, the following day — I didn't know this for forty-five years — but the following day the 376th were host to numerous generals from Air Force Headquarters, and Wing Headquarters. I think there were six generals that came to the field to investigate what had happened. And the final conclusion was that they put a letter of reprimand in Colonel Fellows's file. Some people thought he should have been court-martialed, for what he had done, because he had caused a lot of us to go down. But, you know, you got to appreciate, this is during combat, and things don't always go as planned.

John: That's true. That's very true.

Milton: I bear no animosity to him. In fact, I had lunch with General — he made general, finally — it took him a long time, and I had lunch with him down at Wright Field. Well, at any rate, we got shot up, and we weren't the only ones. All six aircraft that were flying off of our wing that day, all of us went down. The whole six were gone. And, once again, the 512th Squadron was virtually wiped out that day.

John: That's twice.

Milton: Twice. Within, well, just a little over a month, about. Well, why did we bail out? I can't even give you a summary. It's not clear in my mind any longer, but we had one engine where we tried to feather the prop, and we couldn't feather it. It was just wind-milling out there, and that creates a lot of drag. And that was either number three or four on the right hand wing. And we had another one where the supercharger had frozen and we couldn't increase the inches of mercury in the

pressure in the prop blade to change the blade to take a bigger bite of air. Couldn't do that, either. So, that one was just frozen at its present setting. We had another one that we did get severed, the engine. So, when you got down to it, we were flying on about two engines for a while. And we were trying to make it into Yugoslavia, to bail out over Yugoslavia, because if you got to Yugoslavia, the chances were good of being picked up by either Marshall Tito, or Mihailovic, who was one of the partisans. These two groups hated each other. They killed each other off during the war. They fought with each other as well as the Germans, but both of them fought with the Germans, too. And if you got into Yugoslavia, there was a chance that you could get picked up by one of the two groups and then be brought back to Italy, to your group. So, that is what we were trying to do. We were tooling along, losing altitude, could not maintain altitude. And one other aircraft, that Jerry Brown-- he was operations officer-- he fell out formation and came back and joined us, and flew with us to give us a little added protection against the fighters. Well, about that time the fighters, the P-51s and the P-38s came up from Italy and met us, and drove the German fighters off. So now we were sitting out there alone, but there weren't any fighters there. And we were losing altitude and we are going down, and our engineer, Jim Connors, Jim came up. We were on oxygen, and we were down to about fifteen thousand feet. Lost about five thousand, six thousand. And Jim Connors comes up and says, "You got twenty gallons in one tank. You got fifty gallons in another. You are losing the fuel through a great big hole in the wing, and I am leaving right now! When those other engines quit, this thing is going to flip right on its back." And he headed right for the bomb bay to open the bomb bay and bail out. We grabbed, before he could get too far, and pulled him back and he had a portable oxygen bottle on. He took that off and took off his oxygen mask, threw it in the corner and he said, "I'm not kidding, sir! You can see it go down!" See, we didn't have fuel gauges up on the flight deck.

John: Oh, you didn't? Oh.

Milton: No, the fuel gauges actually were back behind us on the flight deck and they were actually four glass rods that showed the fuel by gravity by the level with the tank.

John: Oh, man.

Milton: At any rate, we said, "Check it again!" And we were staring back there at those fuel rods, and we couldn't see them clearly. And he went back and he said, "You can see it going down!" He said, "So help me God, get the crew out of here now!" So we rang the bell and then called and told them "Get out now!" And told them, "We have no fuel left!" After we got on the ground and we ran into some of the waist gunners, he told us what had happened. We didn't know this and nobody reported it. Would you believe an 88 millimeter flak shell went through the wing

and tore off two of the tanks that were adjacent and they fed two different engines, and each tank, each engine had three fuel cells in the tank. It tore this out, and the fuel went out through that hole. The German flak antiaircraft with that 88 millimeters did not have instantaneous fuses, so when they hit something, they didn't go off, they kept going to when the timer was set. And that shell went through our wing and burst above us somewhere.

John: That's amazing.

Milton: And we didn't know there was this big hole. In fact, the gunners told us afterwards when we got on the ground, they stopped shooting because they were afraid the tracers being fired would go through the vapor and set off a big explosion.

John: Oh, yeah, sure.

[End of Tape 1, Side B]

John: All right, this is the beginning of Side 1 of Tape 2. Okay, you were saying the gunners were afraid to fire because of the tracers might ignite the fuel.

Milton: Yeah. And they could see the fuel coming out, as a vapor from those tanks. And when the engineer reported it to us, then we figured we got to get out of here right away. So, we called everybody and did a quick check and we checked with everybody except the nose gunner. And we forgot about the nose gunner, quite honestly, because this was the first time we had flown an eleven man crew. We normally flew a B-24D that had been on the Ploesti mission. That was the one that we were assigned to. At any rate, we knew we had to get out. We called everyone except the nose gunner, and had a crew check. And said, "Get out right now!" Well, back in the waist, the two waist gunners, they got together. We were down to a little below fourteen thousand feet now, so the area could see peaks of mountains sticking through the clouds. Underneath us now was a fog layer of clouds with the peaks sticking through. We knew we couldn't penetrate that in a glide pattern to try to land in it. So we said, "Just bail out." I remember reading the intelligence report about some of the German fighters were shooting the fellows out of the parachute harnesses as they were coming down. Now, this was very, very unusual. But it was a new breed of fighter pilots in Germany. There was a certain *esprit de corps* between people who flew, and you just didn't do that. When a guy is going down in a chute, you didn't pick him off, because you were just a sitting duck there in the chute. But, the intelligence report mentioned that this was being done, so when I bailed out, I didn't pull the chute right away. I got to back up a moment. Before I bailed out, Robbie — Robinson, our navigator — was from Alabama. Had a big, thick Southern accent. He came up and he said,

“Reinke, take the Very pistol.” The Very pistol was a signal gun. It had a diameter of about two inches, or so. He said, “Take that and a cartridge,” he said. “Stick it in your clothing, bail out, and shoot that straight up in the air.” No, wait a minute. Robbie said, “Hand me the Very pistol,” which I did, and a cartridge. He said, “I’ll shoot this off at exactly two o’clock and you come to where I am. And I said, “Okay.” So he went back and waited on the catwalk of the bomb bay door. The engineer had opened the doors so he is standing on about an eight inch wide framework, holding on to the bomb rack. We had dropped the bombs on the target. And I got out of the seat and went back, and with that he said, “Come on!” And he jumped off into the air, and I was right behind him. So I figured we were going to be close together on the ground. I didn’t pull my chute cord because of those intelligence reports. I said, “I am going to get down near that cloud deck.” And I kept watching the cloud deck and then I finally pulled the chute cord right above the clouds, and went into it. But, before I went in, I looked back, and here were two more chutes open up from the waist gunners that had waited and counted bodies as they went by because like the one said, “That plane isn’t going back home without me, if it is going home.” And that happened in many cases, where somebody would have an engine fire or there would be problems. Clendenin, I remember, was one guy, he bailed his crew out north of the Alps because he couldn’t keep up, he couldn’t get over the Alps to get home, and then one of the engines they had feathered they brought back on line, and they made it over the Alps, and oh, that crew was mad.

John: I’ll bet.

Milton: Well, when I landed, it was kind of a rough landing. The one thing you want to do is you want to drift in the direction that you are facing so that when you hit the ground, like this, you can roll over and pull the upper risers of your chute if the wind was catching it. But, a lot of guys had been dragged to death where they didn’t collapse their chute. So I spun the chute when I realized the direction I was drifting. I reached up and grabbed the risers and spun my body. It didn’t move the chute about an eighth of the way around and I did it a second time but this time before I had a chance to turn it, whoom! I hit the ground, and I thought I had broken my back. Oh, did I hurt! And I fell into a clump of snow. Everything was snow covered, of course, in February up in the Alps. And I laid there for, I would say, twenty minutes, figuring I had broken my back. And I thought, if I stay here much longer without moving, I am going freeze to death. So, I got a choice. If I move and I got a broken back, it is going to kill me. If I don’t move, I am going to freeze to death. So I figured I am going to try and crawl and see if I can do that, down to a wooded spruce stand. About a hundred and twenty-year-old spruce stand on the side hill that was fifty feet from me. So I pulled my chute from behind me and actually crawled down into that woods. Got down in there and ended up against a tree, and brought the chute up around me for like a blanket, to

stay warm. About an hour after that, I heard voices. And I turned and looked, and up the hill from where I bailed out, up the hill were three young girls standing there. And they could see where I had hit the ground, and where the chute had hit, and the disturbance in the snow. And then the one pointed and had spotted me leaning up against the tree. So I said, "Good afternoon," to them, in German. Now, at that time, I could still speak German rather fluently. My grandmother was German and I learned German when I was a little kid. So, I said "Hello" to them and they stood there for fully five minutes more. Later on, jumping ahead, when I went to visit them, and I'll come to that, I found out that they were afraid I was carrying a gun and I was going to shoot all three of them. So, they came down and they helped me. One got under each arm and they helped carry me to their, the one girl's father's house. Just the kindest old gentleman in the world. He said, "You're cold," and I said, "Yeah." And he said, "Jump up here," and he had me sit on the stove, which wasn't very warm. The heat from the metal from where they had a fire earlier was enough to warm me up. And he gave me some rye bread and bacon and some lard on the bread. Not butter, but lard. And I felt, eat everything you can because you don't know what you are going to get fed next again.

John: You said the girls were afraid you might have a gun. Were you armed when you jumped?

Milton: No, we had a choice, if you wanted to carry a sidearm. That day we should have carried them, because we were going to fly over Yugoslavia for part of our mission. And the reason was that, if you had a sidearm and you got shot down over Yugoslavia, you could leave that sidearm with the Yugoslavs. With the patriots. And they were always looking for ammunition and sidearms. So you carried it most for that reason. But later in the war, many of the guys carried a sidearm for their own protection against civilians. Now, well, I'll come to that. Right in the area where I got shot down, there were two air crew members that were clubbed to death by civilians who were rather radical Nazis, they tell me, party members, and both were apprehended by the German authorities and tried, and sentenced to jail. I don't know what the length of term was but the local people there put up a little monument and a praying station where people could stop and say a prayer. Which I thought was really exceptional. And we were in Austria, and the Austrians didn't have too much love for the Germans. But, as I say, the elderly gentleman was nice. It was the uncle of the one girl. Then we continued down an old road, and I am jumping ahead on this, that old rut road was put in by the Romans about 100 A. D. Can you imagine?

John: Oh, wow.

Milton: When I went back over there, and I will tell you about that, when I went back over there, I would say they didn't do much improvement on that road from 100 A. D.

to the present. You still couldn't take a car down it. But, at any rate, we went to the uncle's house first and rested, and we went to the father's house, Mr. Sammer, of one of the girls. And he was a nice gentleman. And as soon as we came into the house, we entered the house, this Mr. Sammer, his daughter, Miss Sammer, said that he understands German. And they had told me earlier they had a Frenchman at their place who would help us escape and get with the Partisans in Yugoslavia. And I believed them. You want to believe anything, at that time. And I believed them. Well, as it turned out, they did have a Frenchman there. And you could always identify the Frenchman with his beret. A when we walked in, here was the gentleman with the beret, obviously a Frenchman, and I nodded to him, and said "Hello" to him in German. And he answered me, but the father immediately got up when his daughter said, "He can understand German," and pointed to me. He immediately got up and went over to the Frenchman and said something to him. And the Frenchman left. Well, I found out, he sent the Frenchman to town to get one of the Volksturm, one of the police. And meanwhile, when I walked in, Robbie, our navigator, is sitting there in the corner window on a rough hewn bench and table, with a stein of beer, and some bacon bits in front of him. And when I walked in, he looked up and just like we were walking into a bar somewhere, says, "Hey, Reinke! Come on in here! They got really good beer!" In his Alabama accent. And beautiful setting, overlooking the mountains, you know. You can just picture it. So, I talked to the father. He got out the map and he showed me where we were, but the problem is I had forgotten what all he showed me on the map. I couldn't identify it later on. And he talked to me. And here is a picture of his son on a little corner shelf. And I looked at him, and I said, "Is this you son?" And he smiled and said, "Yes." And he is in a German uniform. Well, that should have told me something. But, you believe what you want to believe.

John: Sure, sure.

Milton: Now, it was a little known fact during World War II that the crews that flew carried an escape kit. And in that escape kit were maps, printed on silk so you could use it as a muffler to keep warm, and there was like a hardtack that contained benzedrine sulfate. Now, this was to furnish food, but not really for the nutritional value but more to keep you going physically. Benzedrine sulfate was a chemical that they used to give the air crews after I went down. We didn't have it, but my brother who came over a year later was issued a little strip of cellophane with five tablets in it of benzedrine sulfate, and you took that, it killed your appetite, you weren't hungry at all, and it gave you energy. You couldn't sleep for twenty-four hours after you took one of the pills. Today, in the year 2003, today they are still furnishing benzedrine sulfate to the fighter pilots.

John: Oh, yeah?

Milton: Yep. And it made a big issue at the Congress.

John: I read something, yes, okay.

Milton: They started raising hell about it, using it. But, boy, you got to take something when you are up there for a mission for twelve, fourteen hours, you got to have something to keep you going. And that benzedrine was great, really great. Well, anyway, in the escape kit which was in a plastic container, were Rye-Krisp laced with benzedrine sulfate, and you ate one of those about every eight hours, and man, it kept you going. It really kept you going. Well, to back up for a moment, back in the room with the father of Maria Sammer, suddenly, after talking for about an hour, and Mr. Sammer, a very kind gentleman, he showed me everything, where we were on the map, as I pointed out. And he was very, very nice. But he didn't tell me that he had sent the Frenchman down to get the local citizens police. And finally about an hour later, storming through the door and coming in through the kitchen and the mud room, and into the kitchen, was this little German, no bigger than I. I would say he had a moustache that extended out on either side, waxed, waxed to just perfection. And I found out years later he was the blacksmith. But he was given this arm band, and boy, I tell you, he took that very seriously. He was now the police in town. And he came in and walked over to me and said, "[unintelligible German]" and I said "*Nicht gehen (?)*," realizing now that we had been turned in. I said to Mr. Sammer's father, I said, "I will pay you \$500 in gold if you will let us go." We had that in our escape kits [**probably referring to gold seal U.S. currency**]. And, no, he wouldn't bite. And he kept saying, "Money does a dead man no good." He said, "They know you are here." He said, "They come looking for you," he said, "they arrest me if you are not turned in." He said, "They hang me in town, as a lesson to the others." And I understood that. But we were allowed to go up to \$50,000 per person to buy our release. And I got up to \$25,000 for both of us, and also a promise to bring his daughter to the United States after the war. Not even that helped. He kept going back to that original statement that money does a dead man no good.

John: I can understand that.

Milton: I could, too. And he was nice about it. So, finally, we decided to go with the little citizens police. Now, there were no roads up there. There were just trails and cattle paths. And we start walking to town, which is about three kilometers away. And we are walking down the trail, and lo and behold, here in an intersecting trail comes another old gentleman with a big blunderbuss of a rifle, carrying that, and with another member of our crew. And they joined us. And now there is Robbie and myself, and Watson, so there were four of us. We say, "Hey, let's get rid of this escape kit." So we, each, as we are walking along, we open our escape kits. We take the gold coins and throw them away and we get to the Rye-Krisp. The

Rye-Krisp we threw over our shoulders. This is the stuff laced with the benzedrine sulfate. And coming behind are these two old gentlemen, following us, and when we throw the Rye-Krisp away, they stop, reached down and picked it up, dust off the snow and start to eat it. I think those two guys are still awake. After all these years, they are still not sleeping.

John: I can imagine.

Milton: And we didn't know how to tell them, you know, "Don't eat that." I think we tried to tell them, but it didn't do any good. But, anyway, they took us in to jail and then they called Graz, Austria, and got a truck.

John: Where in Austria?

Milton: We were, we found out years later, we were at Semriach, Austria, and it was about ten to twelve miles north of Graz, Austria. Had we gotten just another five miles, we would have been out of the Alps on a big plateau at Graz, but we would have gone directly over the Graz aerodrome, which was a military facility at the time, and we spent a couple days there, or a day there, a few days later. And if we had gone over that, they would have shot the hell out of us, because they had flak battalions all around. Well, to make a long story short, about two o'clock in the morning they sent a truck up from Graz, with one guard and four of us. They put us into the truck and started for Graz. Would you believe it, the truck was not going on gasoline but was going on wood.

John: I've heard that.

Milton: It was a wood-burner. And they stopped, by the road I would say it was fifteen miles, and they had to stop once in that fifteen miles and refuel and stoke some wood kindling into the firebox which was outside on the right. Well, they got us into Graz and the first thing they did was take us to the courthouse and turned us over to the Gestapo. This was the only time we dealt with the Gestapo. And there was a woman who spoke perfect English...from England-English; her accent was a British accent. She was the interpreter. Then there was a Gestapo officer who did the interrogation. They took us all into the room and by that time, by the way, other of our crew members had joined up. So we had about seven of the eleven members. They put us in jail there, first, and then took us in for interrogation. But they had taken away the Very pistol that Robbie never shot off, because he came down in the front yard of Mr. Sammer's Alpine home and landed in one tree, a big spruce. He landed in that damned thing. Mr. Sammer had to get a ladder out of the barn and go and get him down with the ladder. That was Robbie, the navigator. So they took us, well, they took us in for interrogation and they go through our personal belongings that had been taken away from us. And he pulls out the Very

pistol, and he couldn't believe it, and he says to the interpreter, "Ask them whose this is." So she asked, "Whose is this?" And Robbie said, "That's mine." And he said, "My God, ask him how many millimeters this is." And he is looking at that big barrel. And she said, "How many millimeters is that?" Robbie didn't know a millimeter from a mile. And Robbie thought for a minute and he said, "A million." And she translated without thinking, "[German]." "Oh, nein! Nein!" It couldn't be. So, they wanted to know what it was. Well, they never understood what a Very pistol was. But they put it back in the paper bag. Then they locked us in the jail, in the same building, and this was so funny that it is sad. They put a mole in there, a fellow who could speak English, and tried to make him look like an American. And they put him in the room to overhear the conversation. Well, this was so obvious. It was actually to the point of being ridiculous. And we, one of the guys thought, "Let's have some fun with this guy." So he starts making up all kinds of stories, that tomorrow they are going to bomb Graz, I hope they get us out of here. But the following day they took us out of the jail. Our interrogation was a joke, by the Gestapo. They took us out of there the following day and took us out to the airfield at Graz, the one that we almost passed over. Well, twelve miles, if you are flying three miles a minute, a hundred and eighty miles an hour, it doesn't take very long. Four minutes and you are over that airfield. So that was pretty close. When we got out to the airfield, they had other crews there from the day before where the mission was Ravensburg, and some of them had gone down in that area. So they had maybe thirty-five POWs, together. And they took us out to the airfield, and we thought, okay, they are going to fly us somewhere. We weren't comfortable in flying in a German aircraft. But it wound up that they were holding us at the airfield where they had better facilities. And a German pilot came in, and introduced himself to us. He was about eighteen, nineteen years old. We were all amazed at his age. And he told us he had been flying for, I don't know, three months and a real nice guy, a young fellow. And he said the reason he came in was to ask us if any of us, when we were coming down in the parachutes, had a 109 doing circles around him. He said, "That was me, and I was taking pictures of you, and I'd like to get your address in the States and send you the pictures after the war."

John: Oh, wow.

Milton: Isn't that strange?

John: Yeah, sure.

Milton: And nobody in our room was involved in that, so we said, nah, we aren't the ones. So he went to another room, because we were broken up at that point. But they came in with a snack in the early afternoon and ersatz bread and honey, and they were very nice to us, they really were. But then the following day they took us out

of there and took us to the aerodrome, to the Bahnhof, the railroad station, and shipped us by rail to Graz, Austria. Now, there were about thirty-five of us, and we had about six guards with us and a German sergeant in charge. And boy, was he officious! He, man, I tell you, that guy ran a tight ship. But he did a nice job, and he got us into Frankfurt where he took us off the train and lined us up on the causeway going out where you get on the train, and the air raid sirens went off. Well, you should have seen the terminal in Frankfurt. The whole over, the skylight overhead was mostly glass initially, was all broken out from bombing missions. There wasn't much left of that, a steel structure.

[End of Tape 2, Side A]

And when the air raid sirens went off, and we were at the Graz railroad station, they took us to the air raid shelter which was in the basement. And that was a terrifying experience. There were thirty-five of us and six guards and we get to the air raid shelter and there are maybe three thousand German civilians down there. And if you can imagine fear, that was fear.

John: I'll bet.

Milton: Because they had to walk us through the middle of those three thousand and took us over in the corner at the far end of the air raid shelter. Put us in the corner and formed a ring, a semi-circular ring, of the six guards around us, not to keep us from escaping, I can assure you. It was to keep the civilians off of us. And as we were walking through, they were spitting at us. That was the most common thing. And some of the women were trying to hit us with their fists or handbag, or whatever. And there is always humor. When we were in the corner, one of the guys, because of the stress we were under at the time, and it was stressful, one of the fellows said, "I got to go to the bathroom." Oh, my God! What a time to go to the bathroom! And the German sergeant, who could speak some English, he said, "You what?" And he said, "I got to go to the bathroom or I am going wet myself." And he just shook his head. He called one guard over and said, "Take him to the bathroom." They took that man out in the middle of the air raid shelter and there was an eight inch floor drain, and the guard points to the floor drain and says, "Go there." There ain't no way in hell that man is going to be able to go to the bathroom. He came back. He hadn't relieved himself yet.

John: I can imagine.

Milton: They took us then from that railroad station to a local inter-urban train and took us about ten miles north to a little town where there was an interrogation center. Now let me explain something very unique about the Germans. When you were an air crew member and you got shot down, from that point forward you were guarded

by the Luftwaffe. If you came from the Air Corps, the Luftwaffe guarded you. And the Luftwaffe did their own interrogation of you as a prisoner, and that was done in one central location in Germany regardless of where you were shot down. And that was north of Frankfurt, at the interrogation center. They had a whole series of German officers who could speak English. They tried to match your rank, in many cases.

John: What was your rank?

Milton: I was a second lieutenant. Everybody who went down that day was a second lieutenant, if they were an officer, except one who was a first lieutenant. And he had experience in previous missions. But, at any rate, the interrogation center was located in a town Uber Rusal, or Rusel, I am not sure. But that was located north of Frankfurt. And we reached that by going by inter-urban, very efficient transportation system. And got up there and I couldn't believe the number of POWs that were there at the time. Now, let me digress [*sic. means digress*]. The week of February 20th to 26th was called the Big Week, in Air Force terminology. It was a maximum effort during all of World War II of putting the maximum number of aircraft in the air and spending seven days bombing. Unfortunately, the 8th Air Force was grounded for several of those seven days because of weather, but the 15th Air Force flew virtually each day, with a maximum effort to do the bombing. There was no week in which they put more aircraft in the air than that one week. And during that week, a number of air crews went down. The number 242 kind of rings a bell. Multiply that by 10 and you got about, what, 2,400 going through interrogation a few days later in Frankfurt, at Uber Rusal. And the one German interrogator said to another interrogator as I was walking by, "My God, if this continues, we are going to have the whole American Air Force here in Germany." And I didn't want to let on that I could speak German, because that gave you a certain advantage. And I didn't say anything, but I felt like saying, "Oh, we got lots more coming." And boy, we did. Well, at any rate, we went through interrogation. They kept us one day. But one thing happened that was frightening. While we were there, Robbie, the navigator, the one that came down in the front yard at the Sammer place, that Robbie reaches in his pocket and pulls out a flimsy. A flimsy is printed on tissue paper and it gives the code name that is given for each of the crew members, or crews, the pilots' names, the leader of the group, and so forth for our group. And here, he has still got that instead of having destroyed it earlier. So, he takes that out. Now, each room has got hidden microphones, listening to what you are talking about. They deliberately tried to put crews together so they would talk, and they got that. So they got a lot of information. But Robbie, he brings it out, didn't say anything because we all know the place is bugged and he shows it to me. And we say, "Eat it." It's made of tissue paper. Just chew it up and eat it. He indicated that it didn't taste good. So, he says, "Anybody got a cigarette?" They still let us keep our cigarettes and

matches. And he took a match, pulled a cigarette to light it, and lit the paper, and whom! Instantly, the door flew open and the German guard came in and stepped on it and put it out. Now, how they knew he was doing that beats the daylight out of me. Because it was never mentioned. And we knew they were listening but they must have obviously also been watching somewhere. And he put it out and he grabbed Robbie and he said, "Say goodbye. We are court-martialing you for destroying German property. What you came down with is German property."

John: Wow.

Milton: And they took him out. They threw him in solitary for about three or four days, and they interrogated him again, and they found out he didn't have any information. They released him a week later and he came up to our camp, one week after we did. So, our interrogation was mighty simple. We went from there to a dissemination camp from Uber Rusel and interrogation. Now, remember that was the camp where everybody in the Air Force was concentrated and interrogated. I had a major that interrogated me, that he hands me a piece of paper and he is working on some paperwork, and he says, "Here, fill this out." So I filled out my name, rank and serial number, which we did. And handed it back to him, and he looked at it and handed it back to me, he said, "You didn't fill out the rest." Nothing military on there, but home address, mother's name, father's name, living or dead, things like that, church. Where did you high school? If you answered those questions, you'd answer a lot more. So, they were shrewd, but not one military question on that whole list. Anyway, I handed it back with name, rank and serial number, I said, "I am sorry, sir, but that is all I am at liberty to give you." And he handed it back again, and he said, "Well, we would like to inform your family through the Red Cross that you are a POW, and if you don't answer those questions as to who your mother and father are, and their address, we can't do that." And I said, "Well, then they are just going to have to wait." And I said, "I'm sorry, but I can't answer those questions." And he said, "Get the hell out of here!" And just that abruptly, and my interrogation was over. Very simple.

John: He was probably ready to get rid of you because there would be someone...

Milton: Yeah. Somebody was going to talk. And one guy I know did, because later on, he got special privileges, and you earned those from the Germans, you didn't get them. At any rate, one day later, we were sleeping on the floor of the barracks because there were so many, and they issued one blanket to every two people, and boy, it was cold in there. I can still remember that. But the next day they took us down to a dissemination center, and this was located in what was called Palm Park, and it was a city park of the city of Frankfurt, and adjacent to it was the I. G. Farbenwerk, a German manufacturer, a bit tall building and spread out over a big area, and this was located right immediately adjacent. In the park, they had built a

bunch of barracks and there was where they made the assignment as to what POW camp you were going to go to. Now, we get down there by inter-urban again, by street car, we get down there and we get off the street car and we walk about three blocks to this camp, which is called Gulag Luft, no number or anything. We got down to the camp, we entered the camp, and here is a German captain in the Luftwaffe, who is holding court, I will call it. We all lined up in the one barracks, four deep, and this captain walks up and down in front of us, giving us instructions. "You are now a POW. If you are outside at night after lock up and dark, you get shot automatically. If you try to escape, you get shot." And reading all this off, and trying to impress us. And, standing in front of me in line, in the number two line in the barracks, was an American captain, and he was, I found out later, a B-25 pilot that had gotten shot down. And this captain, nice looking, big tall guy, was cussing the German captain under his breath. Every time that German captain opens his mouth, this guy calls him an S. O. B. and everything else under the sun, and then finally, when the German captain dismisses us to go back to our own barracks, he walks up to that German captain, and said, "Hans, how are you doing?" He was at Northwestern University with him. They were both students there.

John: Wow. Small world.

Milton: Yeah.

John: Isn't that something?

Milton: They had a long talk. I ran into this captain later on and I asked him, "Where did you know him from?" And he told me. Well, at any rate, the next day, they bring trains right in to that Gulag Luft, and we load up on 40 and 8 boxcars, and that is forty men and eight horses. And we go up to our camp. We didn't know where we were going, at the time. We get in the railroad cars, and that was an experience. There were in the railroad car I was in, I think, about thirty POWs and six German guards. The six German guards took half the railroad car. We had the other half. Now, it is February, the end of February, colder than hell. And we started, and went north along the Rhine River. Beautiful railroad. We were on the east side of the Rhine River and another fellow and myself, standing there, we even kept the door open part of the time looking out and seeing what beautiful country it is. We saw the castle built in the middle of the Rhine River on an island, all right. And we thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to come back here after the war." Well, I did go back about five times. And it turned out we head up toward Hanover, from Frankfurt, up to Hanover and then cut over to the northeast to Barth, Germany, and Stalag Luft 1. On that trip, which took about three days, and it is a short trip but we got put on sidings periodically, and that scared the hell out of us, because we weren't so worried about being strafed at that time as we were of being in a

marshaling yard somewhere and being bombed. Well, on the way, this German sergeant found out I could speak English, or German. And he starts telling me how New York is all bombed, nothing left of New York. It was completely destroyed, New York City. And Atlantic City, also, completely destroyed. Nothing left. And I kind of frowned and shook my head, and said, "A lot of these guys left there within the last two months, you are telling me it was bombed before that?" "Oh, yes." He was convinced. Very effective propaganda machine. And I said, "No way, no way." And laughed. Well, that infuriated him. I wound up standing damn near three days in the corner, leaning up against the corner and falling asleep in a vertical position. When the sergeant went to sleep, there was a little *untergefleiter* (?), that is a German rank like between a pfc. and a corporal. And this guy was a nice young man. And it was kind of sad. He had lost his sister during the bombing, his mother was injured in the bombing, and they lived, initially, in Frankfurt. He didn't hold that against someone. But, when the sergeant would go to sleep, he would motion to me to lie down. And I'd lie down and catch a few winks. And then, for punishment, he denied us water. And for two days, nothing to drink. And after about the third day, when we approached Barth, at that time, a German officer came around, looked in the car, and asked the German sergeant, "Is everything okay in here?" And the German sergeant popped to attention and answered, "Yes, sir! Everything is okay." And I spoke up in German and said, "No, it isn't. He has denied us water for the last three days. He wouldn't give us anything to drink." And that German officer looked at the sergeant and said, "Come, and take your pack." And off the train he went. And we never saw him again. He pulled him out of there and he sent another sergeant back, and we had water immediately. But that sergeant got his come-uppance, for denying us water. But we made up for it. When the train would go into a siding, we'd open the door and we'd go out and tell the little German *untergefleiter* that, "Throw snowballs at us." So we would have some water from the snowballs.

John: Oh, okay.

Milton: So he would get off and he would throw snowballs. Pretty soon, even the sergeant is throwing snowballs, and you know, we are ducking them and pretending we don't want this, and we are catching them and eating them, for the liquid. And so we didn't suffer too much. When we got up to the camp, they met us on a siding, with police dogs, and marched us the last three kilometers or so, into the camp. So we joined Stalag Luft 1, at Barth, Germany. And when we got up there, they put us in the North Compound Number One. Eventually, they had built North Compound Number Two and a Number Three. Well, we were in North One which many of the barracks we were in were older military barracks. There was also a South Compound. That contained a lot of RAF, Royal Air Force from England that had been captured at Dunkirk. During the evacuation at Dunkirk. We had one doctor, he was a flight surgeon from the RAF, for 9,900 men.

John: Oh. wow.

Milton: That were in the camp. We had, in addition, a contingent of Russian POWs. I would say there were, oh, maybe a hundred and fifty Russians. Now, the Russians had never signed the League of Nations, never joined the League of Nations. So they were treated completely differently, and the Russians, to move ahead, the Russians that were not being in the League of Nations were treated like dirt. They got very meager rations. Regardless of what rank, they had to work. Our camp carpenter, kind of a handyman, was a Russian major who was a P-39 Aircobra pilot that got shot down and captured by the Germans. Now, the Russian POWs were looked down upon by the Russian soldiers, and they were very fearful, looking ahead, when we were liberated by the Russians. They were very fearful of what the Russians would do to them.

John: A lot of them didn't want to go back.

Milton: No they didn't, and for good reason. And to this day, in Russia, they are looked down upon.

John: I'm running a bit short on time. This is a fantastic story. My God, what a great memory you have got, after all these years. Can we move forward to when you got released, the liberation?

Milton: Okay, Yeah. Our liberation was very interesting. We woke up one morning and started to fall out for roll call when, in the towers, and our barracks, Number 7 of North One, was right by one of the control towers, with a guard and a machine gun. We fell out that morning for roll call, which was twice a day, morning and night. And from the tower comes an American voice, "Okay, you sons of bitches, get out there and line up right now!" And here, it's an American. And everybody looks up and says, "What the hell is he doing in the tower?" Found out all the Germans left there at midnight the night before. And we had taken over the towers. But they didn't open the gates. And that morning, Colonel Zemke, Colonel Zemke said, "We are in contact by radio with Eisenhower and Supreme Headquarters, and they are asking us to stay in camp. They are going to bring planes in from England, out of the 8th Air Force, to fly us out of here to take us back to France, and stay here in camp so you don't get missed in the process." Well, many of them didn't. But here is how they got out. Late that afternoon, about three o'clock, Colonel Zemke starts to walk up to our gate, which is locked and kept closed, and he walked up to the gate, and behind Colonel Zemke comes a Russian soldier with a gun in Zemke's back, and with him a girl in a beautiful velvet cape with a red silk lining, riding a beautiful horse. Just the Russian and the girl. And as he is walking up to our gate, Colonel Zemke says, "Guys, this son of

a bitch, regardless of rank, this guy is a corporal or something in the Cossack unit, the first troops that came into town, and he said, "I tried to talk this guy out of it but he insists we open the gate and you guys act like you were liberated." And he says, "Stay around but come back to camp. We want to get you out of here. And if you aren't here, we can't get you home." And with that, the gates swung open and everybody poured out of that camp. By that night, sixteen POWs had been killed by the Russians, for good reasons. They just went hog-wild out there. When the Russians called a halt to somebody, they just kept right on going and the Russians shot them, pure and simple.

John: Now, this name Colonel Zemke is very familiar. I am sure somebody else that I interviewed that was a POW talked about — I'll dig out who that was. That is an unusual name. So, I'll let you know, because there is someone else in Madison that...

Milton: He just died, Colonel Zemke.

John: I'll find out who that is and I'll let you know, because somebody was in that camp with Colonel Zemke, and somebody that I interviewed in the last year, or so. I'll let you know.

Milton: Here is the interesting thing about the girl. The girl that was riding with that Russian that had been a slave laborer up in that area around Barth on a farm, and the Germans had brought her in from a certain area when they took Russia and made her a slave laborer. When the Cossacks invaded Barth, two days before they came over with a plane at night and went over the town a number of times dumping leaflets saying "Hang out a bed sheet, hang out a pillowcase out of your window, stay off of the streets. Anyone on the streets will be shot." And they cautioned everybody to be extremely careful now because we don't want you on the streets when we ride into town. Anybody is liable to be shot. When the Cossacks came in, there is this girl standing on the corner talking to them in Russian, and talking back and forth. And they asked her, "What is your name? Where are you from?" She told them. They said, "We got a guy riding with us by the name of so-and-so, also." She said, "My brother's name was that." They go and look the fellow up. They find him in a tavern. And they look him up and they bring him up, and sure enough, it's his sister.

John: Oh, that is amazing.

[End of Tape 2, Side B]

Milton: Let me back-date something here. Under the Freedom of Information Act, after that was passed by the Congress, I wrote again to the Archives and I did receive

the seventeen pages of microfiche and it was a whole investigation of our crew, where we were shot down, who the people were that picked us up, after the war interrogation with the police locally in Semriach, Austria, that I had mentioned. And then I had written, based upon that information, to the authorities in Graz and asked if they could identify the three ladies who picked us up. They sent me the information about four months later. I had written to the three and they invited me to come over. So one of my very good friends is the *forestmeister* (?) in *Garnischpartenkirch* (?), Germany. So I went over and stayed with him and we drove over. My granddaughter from California was at a meeting in Amsterdam, so she met me in Munich and we traveled together and we went over to see the three ladies.

John: Now, before we end, would you tell the story about the three ladies wanting your parachute?

Milton: Okay.

John: That's classic.

Milton: Okay, well, we met the three ladies initially in Graz, Austria. In the hotel, where we were going to stay. When we met them, they aged a little bit. Of course, you and I, we don't age.

John: Right.

Milton: Everybody else does. And it was very humorous. Mrs. Sammer, who was kind of the ringleader of the three ladies, that said, "I have a present for you." Now, recognizing that it is very common in Europe to give presents for visits, and so forth. She reached down into her backpack and she pulls out a strip of my parachute from top, where there is a hole in the chute, from the top all the way to the rim, about ten feet, and plus about two feet wide. And she hands it to me and says, "This is part of your chute." She had kept it for I think it was fifty-three years. Nineteen ninety-seven [1997], I went back. And she told me then the story. Three days before we were shot down, these three girls, who were all neighbor girls, all three named Maria, and those three girls had gotten together, and they had talked. This is terrible. They are growing girls and here they cannot find material to make new underwear. And you can't buy underwear, either, because all of the dry goods is going for the military. So, they said, "Well, the only way we are going to be able to get any material to make ourselves underwear is if we capture a parachute." So they decided, and talked among the three, that if a plane goes over low, they are going to run out of the house and they are going to see if anybody bails out, and if so, they will recover the parachute and use it to make underwear. And that is exactly what they did. So they said they didn't come to

find us for altruistic reasons or patriotic reasons, whatever, it was to get material to make new underwear. And Robbie, as I mentioned, the navigator, he came down in their front yard. And her father, Mrs. Sammer, Miss Sammer, I keep saying Mrs., Miss Sammer's father had to get the ladder to get Robbie down. That parachute went to make a wedding dress for one of the women in the neighborhood. Not for one of the three Marias. They gave that to another woman. Now, there was a hazard involved, because if you were caught with any goods that were considered to be German, the sentence was up to death. They were pretty strict, the Germans. So what they did, they came and got me, and after we were turned in to the local police and left Miss Sammer's father's house and taken to town to Semriach, when that happened, the three girls went back and recovered my parachute, and took it and carried it, physically, into the woods to a different location and buried it under the snow, and three or four days later, they told me, they went back and got the parachute.

John: That would have made a lot of underpants.

Milton: Yes.

John: Can we move ahead, Milton? After the service, first of all, did you stay in the Reserve, or anything?

Milton: No. At that time it was highly risky. Because so many guys tried to stay in and unless you had a college degree behind you, it was virtually impossible to get assigned Regular Army because they cut the rolls way back. And at the time, I didn't stay in the Reserves because I didn't know where I was going to wind up. If I stayed in, I was going to go to the University of Michigan, I had made up my mind, and study forestry. And therefore I did not stay in any of the Reserve units.

John: A couple of wrap-up questions. You got the GI Bill. Did you use it?

Milton: Yes. Absolutely, and I tell you, there were two pieces of legislation that passed in the 20th century that I think were the greatest things that ever passed, and the first one that I would mention was the Marshall Plan. What the Marshall Plan did for Europe to rebuild, and having visited Germany five times since then, I can tell you that every German, every single, solitary German school kid knows about the Marshall Plan. And in this country, you mention the Marshall Plan to most people, they have no concept of what it was. But that and the GI Bill were the best pieces of legislation.

John: Any, did you take part in any vets associations? VFW or Legion?

Milton: No, that is one thing I did not do. I didn't join and I have not to this day joined any

veterans organization.

John: Neither did I, and you would be surprised, although the VFW and the American Legion are all over, but so many of the guys I talk to, they really have nothing against it, they just didn't join it.

Milton: That is my feeling. I don't have anything against it.

John: And one other question. Any reunions? Get together with the guys?

Milton: Yeah. I returned to the 376th Bomb Group, to our reunion, and have attended a number of them. Because of my physical condition, I felt that I couldn't do it this year. But, anyway, I remember one reunion, I walked in and one person could I identify, Howard McClellan. Born and raised in Sunflower, Kansas, and Howard had come back, well, first of all, I got to give you a little anecdote. We came back from a mission at Anzio. No, not at Anzio, yeah, this was the beachhead. We came back from a mission and you went first to the flight surgeon, and you got a two ounce shot of whiskey. Oh, man, that made you feel good! You never felt better in your entire life. You had been on oxygen all that time and you were burning fuel like mad, and you are physically worn out. You are just exhausted. You come back and you get that two ounce shot, whether you drank or not didn't matter. Oh, that did it! Some of the guys didn't want one, and somebody was waiting there to get it for them.

John: I am sure.

Milton: At any rate, we came back and went to the flight surgeon, got the two ounce, and then everybody still in flying gear with their parachute oftentimes, like I had a seat chute, parachute still strapped to them, went to Operations, and there you kind of talked about the mission. That was the Operations Officer, and so forth. But it was all loose, everybody was talking and the din was pretty loud in there, when suddenly some guy hops up on the table, still in his flying outfit, hops up on the table and yells, "At ease, you sons of bitches!" And everybody, "Ah, that is just Howard up there." Howard McClellan jumped up on the table and said, "I want witnesses." The place quieted down. And he said, "I want witnesses. I earned the Purple Heart today!" And with that, he rolled up his right pants leg, and he showed us how he had a piece of flak still stuck in the back of his leg, and a little trickle of blood that had solidified coming off of it. And he said, "I left it there to make sure everybody would witness it." They all agreed he was entitled to the Purple Heart. But that was Howard.

John: And you met him later?

Milton: Yeah, at the reunions. Howard, very unfortunately, stayed in the service and went through cadets, and he was one of four people that had a bombardier's rating, a navigator's rating and a pilot's rating. The first pilot to exceed the speed of sound, Yeahger, was one of four people who held that rating. At any rate, Howard became a jet pilot and did not go to Korea, but anyway, he finally figured he has got to quit this. He got out and went to the University of Kansas and became an attorney. He opened a law office in Washington, D. C., and Guam and Tokyo, and he became a leading attorney in the Pacific area for the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. And he had a lot of cases involving the CIA. And I met with Howard down at Dayton, at the reunion, and he said, "It got to me." He said, "There is a lot I can't talk about. But it got to me to the point that I mentally cracked up." And he said, "I'll be very honest, I spent two years in a mental institution because I just couldn't cope with it."

John: Yeah, I can understand that.

Milton: And he said that, "Today, I can talk about it and today I can tolerate it, but back there a few years ago, I couldn't take it."

John: I can understand that. Well, listen, I am going to have to wrap up. This is an amazing, amazing story, and you have got a tremendous memory.

Milton: You know, I am fortunate.

John: I need a release, so the Museum can make this available to students and that. This, by the way, is interview number 482 [sic].

Milton: Oh, really?

John: There are 482 vets stories on file down there, and they are tied in with the National Archives. They keep these in Wisconsin because Wisconsin has one of the best archives going, but they are tied in so that, years from now, if some student is studying the 376th Bomb Group, they can tie in to it. So, if you will sign this up here, and I'll sign it there, and they will send you a fully signed copy for you to keep. This is a remarkable story, I'll tell you. Oh, you use the middle initial, E. Okay, I'll put that on it.

[Continuation of interview on November 18, 2003.]

Okay, this is John Driscoll, and this is a continuation of the interview we started on November 7, so Milton, we'll just pick it up wherever you want to, and go from there.

Milton: Okay. Well, let me skip ahead here a little bit. On February 23, we were shot down over Austria, north of Graz. Our target that day was Steyr. The Air Force went back three times, four times, correction, four times, and bombed the same facility, and the Germans rebuilt it. Now, I am going to skip way ahead, fifty years. One of the air crews that went down that day on the Steyr mission, the one that went down that day, Lieutenant Price was the navigator. And the remaining members of his crew, three died in the crash, but the rest of them got out. There was seven of them flying a B-24D, they had gone back to visit the bombing site. He said they were treated royally in Steyr. There were church services dedicated to this, and to the death of the crew members. They treated him with a great deal of dignity. There were, of the remaining seven members, there were dinners put on every night. And they went to the factory that we were to bomb that day, and it was then owned not by a German corporation, or an Austrian, but it was owned by a Swiss, correction, a Swedish corporation. The CEO [Chief Executive Officer] that could speak English very fluently, and he invited them to lunch. And they had a special lunch at the plant for the surviving crew members. And then he got out a scrap book and he said, "I want to show you the damage that you did when you bombed." And he had many pictures of the bombing damage of the plant, and then he said this, "You notice there is no machinery in the plant. There is nothing but an empty shell of the plant, and that is what you bombed. The Germans knew you were going to bomb this place long before, and they wondered why you hadn't sooner. And they moved all of the machinery out to an underground factory that was built into the mountains, about three miles away. Of course, you didn't know that. And as soon as you had finished bombing," he said, "they again put in the superstructure over the plant, the roof, to make it look like it was producing again," and he said, "You came back in total four times, and bombed the Steyr target. But you were just bombing an empty shell." Now, that didn't make us feel too good, considering the number of lives that were lost that day, but it was a lack of good intelligence that brought that about.

John: This is interesting. That is quite a story.

Milton: Well, that was the Steyr mission, and being shot down, I guess we were not unique, as compared to any of the other crews. We went through the same thing. And did I mention earlier why we bailed out? I don't think I did.

John: Ah, you weren't shot down, but you had a hole through your wing?

Milton: Yeah. I mentioned that. Okay. I kind of lose track of things, here. The lack of fuel is the main thing that made us bail out earlier. We wanted to make it into Yugoslavia and either hook-up with the patriotic forces of Tito, or Mihailovic. These were two warring factions in Yugoslavia. They were fighting among themselves, between the two groups, and fighting the Germans at the same time.

But if you could get into Yugoslavia, and you could get into the hands of either Tito's patriotic forces or Mihailovic, then they would get you back to your base in Italy. And we were trying to stay in the air to get to Yugoslavia and we damned near made it, but unfortunately, when the engineer came up and said you got twenty gallons in one tank and forty in the other, and he can see it going down, it was time to leave. We were taken from there, if my memory isn't that good, I think I mentioned about being taken to the aerodrome at Graz, Austria, and the young German pilot that came in with a photograph of an American in a parachute.

John: Yeah, you mentioned that.

Milton: Well, from there they took us by train to Frankfurt, for interrogation. And I also mentioned that, at Frankfurt, all interrogation of air crews was done, at one central location with one group of interrogators. And my interrogation was almost a joke. All the interrogations were done, and that was, as I mentioned previously, the Big Week, as they called it in Air Corps parlance, it was the maximum effort bombing throughout all of Europe during that one week of February 20-26.

John: 19--?

Milton: 1944. And that kind of broke the back of much of the munitions and military production that was going on, but surprisingly enough, it didn't stop the military production. They actually increased it right after that. Well, from there, after interrogation, we got shipped to a dissemination camp where no one spent more than two or three days, and then they shipped you out to a permanent POW camp. We were assigned to Stalag Luft 1, and that was at Barth, Germany, due north on the Baltic. The camp was previously a Hitler Youth camp, and flak gunner training camp. It was still at the time a training camp for training flak gunners, anti-aircraft. And when we got there, much of the camp had been turned over to POWs where they phased out much of the military training that was being given at that location. And the barracks that we were moved into, were a typical POW situation as it occurred throughout all of Germany. They broke down the total attendance and we had just shy of 10,000 POWs in the camp, ultimately. But each compound, where they broke down the camp into compounds, and each compound, basically true throughout all of Germany, contained about 2,500 POWs. I think they felt that they could contain any uprising, or any difficulty, by having the camp broken down in that fashion, with a maximum of about 2,500 in one location. And these were all adjacent, the compounds that is, were all adjacent to one another. The camp initially was made a POW camp for RAFs, Royal Air Force, and most of the people that were in that camp were not the night fighter-bomber command people that got shot down but were actually captured RAF pilots and others in the RAF captured at Dunkirk. So, they were early on POWs.

John: They had been there a while.

Milton: A long time. And they were in the South Compound. We were assigned to the North Compound, and we were the first ones in there, and our compound, oh, I think a barracks had about a hundred people in it. So there were about twenty-five barracks or thereabouts in a compound, containing the 2,500 people altogether. The camp, the enclosure, consisted of two twelve-foot high barbed wire fences with a tangle of barbed wire in between the two twelve foot verticals, and those were, the twelve foot verticals, were separated maybe eight feet or so, with tangled barbed wire on the inside of that, between the two. Now, as you went toward the camp from barbed wire, double twelve foot fence, about twenty feet in you came to a single wire, called a warning wire, that was strung on inside of the twelve foot barbed wire enclosure. And this was about twenty feet in, and the warning wire was, as the name implied. If you crossed the warning wire, and you didn't have the attention of the guards in the towers at the corner of the compound, where they okayed it, like you were playing ball and the ball got away from you and went beyond the warning wire, you would have to get the attention of the two guards in the towers nearby, and have them approve your crossing the warning wire. They you could go in and get the ball. But if you went out and tried to retrieve that ball without their approval, you got shot, pure and simple, with no warning. The warning wire was kind of a misnomer because there was no warning. But it was a warning to anybody, don't cross this particular wire. One of the Englishman, the RAF people in the South Compound did go over and cross the wire. He had the approval of the two guards but another guard in a third tower that covered the same side area saw him beyond the warning wire. He hadn't approved it so he shot him, and killed him. They burned him, and the RAF people were permitted to his funeral at the cemetery in Barth. They told the caretaker, "When the war ends, that grave is going to have more flowers on it than any other grave in this whole cemetery, or you are going to join him." Believe me, he took care of that grave. Well, anyway, you had the warning wire and the double twelve foot barbed wire with entanglements between. So, it was virtually impossible to get out of that camp. Except for one thing, during the time when I was there, and even starting before, if I am not mistaken, they had dug or attempted to dig a hundred and two tunnels.

John: A hundred and two?

Milton: Yeah, that is the figure that I kind of recall. And if your barracks that you were assigned to was near the double wire, you could go down. Now, I got to describe the barracks. The barracks were broken into rooms with anywhere from fifteen to twenty people to a room. The exterior wall space was covered with double bunks along the walls and in the middle of the room you had one wooden table maybe

three feet by two feet, and two wooden benches to sit on, and that was it. So there wasn't enough room to fit on the benches for the crew inside that room. You actually had to sit on your bunk. And while we were in the camp, the greatest pastime activity was to talk, and a lot of talk going on, as you can imagine. But some of it was organized into lectures. One of the fellows there was a member of the French Foreign Legion, before he joined the American Air Force.

John: Oh, that is interesting.

Milton: Yeah. And he told about walking into the barracks at the Foreign Legion and telling a veteran immediately, not by his face but by his feet. He said they always took their boots and socks off when they laid down and he said they had callouses half an inch thick, literally, on the bottom of their feet. That was a veteran. And he never said why he joined the Foreign Legion. There was a little bit of suspicion there. But, at any rate, we would talk, and somebody would have a degree in engineering, criminology and whatever, zoology, and they would line them up to make presentations. Which was great, because it gave everyone an opportunity to really hear about different professions that they may be interested in going into when they returned home.

John: And it gave you something to do, also.

Milton: Right. Yeah. And they were always interesting. All of the lectures. Secondly, we played chess. Oh, boy, did we play a lot of chess. Now, we had no chess sets. So, let me digress for a moment. Each bed, each bed and the bunk had seven wooden slats about four inches wide that went across the bed and held your...

[End of Tape 3, Side A]

Okay, regarding the chess pieces, we cut them out of a bed slat and the biggest problem was the coloring. How do you differentiate in the chess pieces, and for that we used the grass in the Spring of the year, and rubbed grass on it.

John: To give it a greenish...?

Milton: Yeah. It gave a greenish tone to it and that worked pretty well. So, it was a pretty rough chess set, as you can well imagine. But it did the trick, and I think everybody learned how to play chess while they were there. It was a very popular game.

John: You mentioned about the fellow that was blind.

Milton: Yeah, there was one, I don't know if he was a bombardier or a navigator, but he

was over in the hospital. And our hospital was about a five bed hospital with one doctor with 10,000 POWs. And this fellow, whose name was Mike, Mike just laid there day after day because a twenty millimeter had gone off from a fighter in the front cockpit, the front of the aircraft, and it scarred both of his eyes to the point where he was blind. And somebody said to him, "Mike, why don't you learn to play chess?" And he said, "That's not funny." He said, "I can't see the board." And he said, "You can memorize it." And he did, and by God, I don't know how he did it, but his power of concentration was unbelievable and he became an excellent chess player. Guys wanted to get to the hospital so they could sit and play with Mike. It was unbelievable. It shows you what you can do when you put your mind to it. Well, our major activity was talking, education of one another. Anybody that had a degree in criminology or one in zoology or for the scenic view, everybody that had some college behind him, they would corner him and have them give lectures for an hour at a time. And in the summer they would do it outside, and the person would tell about his particular profession. It was great, it really was. It gave you an opportunity to study what you might want to go into when you came back home. And that was the major activity, going to the lectures. We played chess, as I have mentioned. Long games. One game I remember went on for three days without a break, except to sleep. Second to chess, bridge was the number one card game. Now, we had no cards. But we got a Red Cross food parcel once a week at that time. Later on, we didn't get the parcels. And in the parcels was, I think, an eight ounce little box of cheese, Kraft cheese. Well, we found we could take and cut the lid off of the cardboard and it gave you, when you got fifty-two of them, you wrote what the cards were and those were your deck of cards with which you played. And they were very difficult to shuffle.

John: I can imagine.

Milton: Later on, we did get food parcels from home. That took about six or eight months, and usually they included a deck of cards in that food parcel from home. But at the outset we had to make our own cards, and bridge was the number one game. And I think one of the worst things of living in the camp was something that people just don't talk about. I think many have forgotten, but the worst thing, visualize if you will, twenty-one guys, twenty fellows in a room in double bunk beds, the lights get turned out at ten o'clock, and everybody was trying to go to sleep. And out of twenty guys in the room, you are damned sure that nineteen of them snored like you would not believe. If you didn't get to sleep right away, you might as well quit thinking about sleeping for about two or three hours, until exhaustion caught up with you. But the snoring was terrible. And the outside activity was walking around the compound. Now that compound with twenty-five hundred POWs in it, that was around the exterior, inside the warning wire, it was a quarter of a mile if you paced it off. It was really a fourth of a mile, or a quarter of a mile for each leg of the four legs of the journey around. Later on, we got

hungry. We used to get one Red Cross parcel a week and that was a small cardboard box, I'd say about eighteen inches by fourteen inches by six inches in size, and that contained enough food to keep you for a week. It had a can of fourteen ounces of powdered milk, a can of Spam, twelve ounces.

John: [Unintelligible] for Spam.

Milton: Yeah, Spam, I'll tell you, that was a God-send, it really was. And the, I can't tell you any more without checking the record on what they all contained.

John: Now, each of you got a parcel?

Milton: Initially, the parcel was made to provide you about 1,000 calories, or a little more, per day, per week. And it worked out, it kept you alive. Now, you were terribly hungry.

John: What about food from the Germans?

Milton: From the Germans, what we got was several things. One, we got little potatoes, about two inches in diameter, and most of those potatoes in the spring of the year had been buried over the winter, but they froze anyway. And the potatoes were black. But they still contained some nutrition, as far as we knew, so we went ahead and ate them, even black or not. We got, other than the potatoes, we got rutabagas and kohlrabi. I don't think very many Americans know what kohlrabi even is, and I'll tell you, I don't care to know. But, in addition, at breakfast, we got a cup of barley. Now, this is interesting, in our compound at Stalag Luft 1, we had a mess hall. So, we gave the mess hall our individual parcels and they cooked the food for us, and they did all of the mess duty. That was true until about two months before the end of the war, when the mess hall burned down. But up until that time, we had a mess hall staff, all volunteers, of course, that did all of the cooking, cooking all of the food parcels. In the winter of '44-'45, a horse fell pulling a wagon that was hauling coal, and the horse fell and broke its leg. Now, there was no reason to rejoice but in reality there was because we wound up eating that horse, ten thousand people ate part of that horse. And we had to turn the bones back to the Germans because they ground them up and used them for fertilizer. But, I tell you, that horse, the meat we got was ground up and I think you could have put it in one or two thimbles, it was so little. So when you ask about the food from the Germans, there wasn't much. One time we got sauerkraut. I'll never forget that. God, that tasted good. We got sauerkraut from the Germans. When we asked them if we couldn't get another ration of sauerkraut, they said the American *terriflier* (?) come over, bombs, boom, no sauerkraut factory any more. That ended the sauerkraut. That kind of summarizes our day which, I would say, was very boring, very little to do. The only thing you could do was talk, play

chess, play cards.

John: You mentioned religion.

Milton: Yes. Okay. It is rather interesting to me that people who have gone through some harrowing experiences, would they become more religious or less so, because of those experiences? And there were some surveys done after the war, long after the war, and I found it rather interesting. If you were religious when you were shot down, there was a good probability that you would increase your religious commitment. If you were not religious, there was a good probability that you would go the other way, you would become less religious. It wasn't that everybody who was a POW became very religious all of a sudden. That did not happen. Many lost their religion rather than gain it.

John: In the POW camp, were there chaplains?

Milton: There was a South African chaplain who was a member of the Royal Air Force and after the war he went back to South Africa and continued his ministry, and he died about, I think, six years ago, now. It was noted in the POW news. The chaplain had approval from the Germans to go from one compound to the other on Sunday, so he would start in the South Compound, where he was living, he would hold religious services there. Kind of nondenominational. Then two people would carry the organ, which was a portable organ, up to North 1 and here he would hold another service, then North 2 and North 3. And he was the only one, captured at Dunkirk. But, I can still picture him holding church services on Sunday for the troops. But I always thought it was interesting, if you were religious, you probably became more religious. If you were not religious, you became less religious.

John: You mentioned, the Germans thought that 2,500 men could be handled in uprisings or trouble. Were there uprisings or trouble?

Milton: No, not in our camp, during the time I was there. But you had no opportunity to. And you had no weapons. You had absolutely nothing to defend yourself, so, well, let me talk a little about escapes.

John: Yeah.

Milton: Along that line. I mentioned a hundred and two tunnels. Now, the barracks were all built up on pilings, so every barracks in the POW camp, the guards could crawl under and particularly at night, the German police dogs that they came through the compound with, they would untether the dog. He would look down under the barracks, and he would look for tunnels that emanated from under the barracks out toward the barbed wire fence. And we never knew how the Germans knew we

were digging tunnels, but they would send a mole over, and at night, he would crawl under the barracks with a flashlight. The floors were very flimsy and we could see the light down there between the cracks in the floor, and if there was a pot of boiling water on the stove, they used to take that water and pour it right down to where he was. That was not pleasant for him. Anyway, they would actually go under the barracks and they would look to see if we were digging tunnels. One night I remember, the barracks next to me, they had dug a tunnel and they had gone all the way out, and by the way, these were engineering feats. They really were, because you had to shore them up, and they used individual bed slats in order to shore the thing up. Then you crawled on your stomach. You had to have air, so you ran out of air, so they made a little candle out of a belt, you know, a web belt, Army belt, and stuck that down into oleo, and lit it and took that down into the tunnel, and if that went out, it was like the canary died. You hadn't any oxygen there. So then they took the milk cans, the powdered milk cans, Plem (?) that came in the food parcels. Well, the can is maybe what? Five inches high, at the most. It took a lot of those cans stuck together. They cut the bottoms off, and that made a tube that they ran down into the tunnel, and then they made a blower system up above, oh, these were engineering feats.

John: That is great.

Milton: They had a blower system that somebody had to turn the crank continually and force air down into the tunnel to replace the air that was being used. But one night, Barracks 6, next door to us, we knew something was going on because we saw Colonel Zemke and a whole bunch of majors and everybody else heading for that barracks at night. At a certain hour, about eight o'clock, the barracks got locked up so they were in Barracks 6, so we knew something was going on over there. And that night they waited until about one in the morning and finally they broke out beyond the double wire, and the lead group that went into the tunnel first, were the moles that were digging in there, and they dug down and they then broke out on top. About eight or ten of them came out of the tunnel and stood up and all of the searchlights went on, from the towers, all concentrated on that one spot. They weren't searching around, they were focused just right and they knew it. And we never found out. And we thought there was an informant that was informing the Germans as to our activities. Well, after the war was over, jumping up to that point, and we went over to the German headquarters building, which was in the camp. And we found they had seismographs buried all along the perimeter of the whole camp. They could tell you within five feet of where your tunnel was. And why didn't they close you down as soon as they heard you digging, or felt it? No, they gave you something to do.

John: Something to do. Well, you know, that is right. If they knew about it. Well, if you had got out, how would you have got out of Germany?

Milton: That was the problem. We were way north on the Baltic. Ah, there was one British pilot who escaped that he was caught at Dunkirk, and he was the only person I know that got out of our camp, or any other camp, for that matter. He got out, and I'll tell you, a successful escape from our camp. He got out of the camp, and he could speak German fluently. And they supplied him with artificial papers, forgeries, of course, and he made it all the way back to England, from Barth. When he got back to England, within a few months he was back on flying status, flying, oh, the fighters, Spitfires. And about two or three months after he was back on flying status, he got killed. And so he was the only one that ever got out, and then he didn't live to tell the tale. That one time, to show you, we had committees for everything. Americans are great for appointing committees. And, of course, there was an escape committee, and if anybody wanted to escape and had a plan, he had to run it by the escape committee. And the escape committee had to approve or reject it. If they approved it, then it went to another committee that provided the false papers, so they had identification when they got out. We had a fellow, I can still picture the guy. We had a fellow in our compound that was of German heritage. He was born in Germany. And he lived there a number of years, and then his parents moved to the United States. He was a nice looking, blond kid, and he could speak German just very fluently. He used to go sit under the tower with the guards and talk to the guards, just in a nice friendly way, talk to them in German because they didn't understand English. Well, all of a sudden, this guy turns up missing. And the German security officer was Major von Mueller. Major von Mueller's family, wife and two children, were in Santa Barbara, California. Major von Mueller had lived in the United States for a number of years. But then he got a letter from the German high command, "If you want to retain your ownership of your land in Germany," and he was a land owner, "If you want to retain your ownership of land, you must come back to Germany and renew your visa to visit the United States." Well, he came back and many others came back at the same time, and when they got back, they just pulled their passports and that was the end. They never let them go again. And they put them in the army. So von Mueller, because of his knowledge of English, was put up in a POW camp, which was logical. And he became the head of security. When one person escaped, every morning and every night we would fall out for roll call, they would count every person. You fell out by barracks. And if somebody was missing, then they would report that to the commandant. If the numbers didn't tally, you stood out there in the cold and the rain, you stood out there the entire time until they were, until they said they had got it solved. Usually there was somebody that had stayed in bed because they were sick and they didn't get counted, and there was a miscount of one person. Well, this time, in the evening roll call, there was one person missing. We stood out there for about an hour and a half, while they counted and recounted. They finally were convinced that person has escaped. And that was this

German fellow, this American Air Corps officer who could speak German. Here is the way it was done. I'll give you the solution that von Mueller would have given his life to know, because the American security officer — to jump ahead — was Nick Robeson, from Kansas, a good friend of mine, and von Mueller would come in to see Nick, and he would say, "As an officer and a gentleman, I give you my word I won't stop how he got away if you try it again." He said, "I won't prohibit that from occurring, but I got to know how he got out of this camp. I got to know that." It was driving the poor guy crazy. And they told von Mueller, "Nah. Von Mueller, we'll never tell." But here is how they did it. The word went out to everybody in the camp that at 1:30 in the afternoon, that the guards are about to change in the tower and the guards were pretty sleepy by that time. And they said that everybody fall out of the barracks, and there is going to be a commotion raised. And everybody said, "What kind of a commotion?" Well, they wouldn't say. But they said, "You just hop in on this, participate in it, no matter what happens." So everybody fell out, and they were outside. It was a beautiful summer day, and all of a sudden somebody comes running out of the barracks with a guy chasing him with a bucket of water, and this is cold water. And the fellow is yelling like hell and running, and finally gets doused with the water. He turns around and starts a fight. Everybody gathers around. There are twenty-five hundred people in a big circle as these two are out there fighting and mixing it up, and then other guys get into a fight. It was all staged. Meanwhile, over here, the compound was here, and over here, the only one that could see one spot in the fence was this tower guard, up here. So what they did, they staged this mock battle right under this tower so this tower guard was looking down and watching what was going on here, and not what was going on over the other side. This fellow went over the top of the two twelve foot fences. He had gotten a board and gotten it into camp. And the board was wide enough to cover between the twelve foot barbed wire fences, across the top. So he went up, went over on the board, came down and hit the board and knocked it back, and somebody on the ground inside the camp grabbed the board and got it out of there so there was no evidence how he got out of that camp. No evidence at all, and it drove von Mueller crazy! Von Mueller was beside himself. And it is true. I think if we had told him how the guy got out, by the way, he was captured in four days. He was free four days and he was captured, so when he came back, they gave him, I don't know what it was, a short period of time in the cooler. And that was about the max of the punishment. But von Mueller-- well, let me jump ahead to the end of the war. When the Germans left the camp, von Mueller used to tell us, "I'll be in Santa Barbara before you set foot in the States." And we believed him. And he kind of reminded me of Goering. He was a heavy-set man and he owned land in Bavaria. He was a big land owner in Germany. At any rate, when the war ended, all of the Germans left. We woke up in the morning and they were all gone. Two o'clock in the afternoon, or thereabouts, von Mueller comes back to the camp, and takes off his pistol belt, and hands it to Zemke, and said, "I am your prisoner." and Zemke said,

“No, you aren’t.” And shoved the pistol belt back to him and said, “You take your chances like everybody else. You leave now.” Well, the Russians were in the area, and von Mueller took the pistol belt back because he knew Zemke wouldn’t back down on his word. Put the pistol belt back on and went downtown in Barth, and the *burgomeister*, the mayor, had committed suicide. So then, von Mueller became the new *burgomeister*. And when the Russians came into town, he welcomed them to Barth, Germany. The Russians had a--

[End of Tape 3, Side B]

Milton: Was that a system?

John: Yeah, the Russians had quite a system when they invaded an area. First, as I mentioned they allowed the powers that be, the *burgomeister* and his staff to remain for a period of, well, on small cities, four or five days. In big cities, as much as two months. And then they removed them and put their own people that they had selected into that job. But, in addition, when they came into the area, and I want to elaborate a little more on this, how they entered the area. But when they came into the area and they captured German soldiers, by this time, most of them had gotten out of their uniform and into civilian clothes, but it was pretty easy to tell that they were soldiers. That they captured them. If they were Waffen w-a-f-f-e-n, SS, which were Hitler’s personal troops. If they were Waffen SS they just strung them up literally on a lamp post. And choked them to death rather than breaking their neck when they hung them. But they would not take prisoners. Several of the people in our room that witnessed where they had picked up SS personnel and in one case, they doused a person with petrol fuel and just lit him on fire. That they would not take an SS prisoner. But other troops like the Wehrmacht, the infantry and any other troops, they would put twenty of them together as a squad and they would start them out at one check point and they’d tell them, you walk down the road here. Maybe ten, twelve, fifteen miles from here, you are going to come to another check point. And they are going to go over your names. If there are nineteen of you, we execute the nineteen. You had better make sure that twenty show up at the check point. And they weren’t joking.

John: Yeah, I can---oh yeah.

Milton: They were playing hardball. And they didn’t send any Russian guards with them. That would have taken time and effort. Two days before they invaded, the Russians, invaded the area, late at night we heard an airplane go over the town. Waiting for the bomb blast, never happened. Then we found out, next morning, they had dropped leaflets for two nights in a row saying the Russians are invading your area. When they come into town, hang out a bed sheet or a pillow case on your window. Stay off of the road and the Cossacks were the first ones in. The

Cossack troops. Hoo, boy oh boy! Some of these were kids, seventeen, eighteen years old with high rank. The only thing you had to do to get the rank is live. And that wasn't easy. They road into town and they road up and down the streets. Looking for a fight, and when one didn't happen, they would go to a tavern somewhere, a roadhouse, and drink and then move onto to the next town. That was their modus operandi. But, they were drunk and they were mean. Some of our fellas got caught up with them when they left our camp area that first night, I think I mentioned that, what was it, sixteen were shot by the Russians in the first day.

John: Would you do a little bit more on Col. Zemke and the Russians and Eisenhower and all that.

Milton: Okay.

John: When you get there.

Milton: Well, the Cossacks were the first in. Then came the Russian infantry. John, I have never in my life seen the number of horses and wagons. I don't think I saw a truck. Everything was horses and wagons. And the ones pulling the wagons were Mongolian, that, almost a hundred percent of them were Mongolian features. And, coming in with all of the supplies and everything. And, I believe I may have mentioned that we were told to act liberated and get out of the camp by this Russian soldier who had liberated our camp, that, two of us went across a little estuary on a bridge and came across a sight which, it was frightful. The ground was literally covered with blood. And we wondered what was going on. It was a mess area for the Russians. And, the cooks were killing the horses in order to eat. And those horses were just beasts of burden to them and food. They would slit their throats and the horse would run and of course, the blood would just pump out all over. It was a horrible sight. But then they would take the meat and cut it up and put it into a stew in big kettles. And a lot of the Russians and their officers were women. And they were fighters. I mean there wasn't any pussy footing around with them. That day when we left the camp, we walked down along the Baltic, along the shoreline, along the road and we came across two women. Russian women. And, they were out planting, what I believe were potatoes at the time. And when I said something to them in German, they both stopped and looked up and said, are you going to fight the Russians now? I don't know if I mentioned this before or not.

John: No

Milton: It really surprised the two of us. We said, well no, the Russians are our allies. And they laughed and they said, not really. They said, "Are you going to fight the Russians?" The Germans were ready to turn and fight the Russians on the

American side at that point and many of them thought that was going to happen. They really believed that it was going to happen. Well, now you asked me to cover?

John: Zemke and Eisenhower.

Milton: Oh, okay. We were hungry and we didn't have any food. And Nick Robeson, our security officer for the Americans, he, the only thing that possessed him was the fact that Von Mueller was the *burgomeister* in town. So, Nick Robeson, got dressed up in the best clothes he had, he still looked funny, and he went down town and he saw the Russian general, in charge of that whole corps area, who later on became one of the high officials in Russia. He went down and he told him, "Von Mueller is your *burgomeister*. He was our security officer out at the camp." And the Russian, he said, was eating lunch and he kept looking up and saying, "ya, ya, ya." He agreed with everything. So Robeson said, "Aren't you going to get rid of him?" And he said, "In time." [laughs] Well, it took five days when they marched him out. So, I don't know if they hooked him up to nineteen others and turned them loose, but they took in about a million and a half German soldiers at the very end of the war. Now, let me digress for a moment. When I was in Germany, I found the German forester who is ninety two years old.

John: Oh wow!

Milton: And he was a former forester for Garmisch-Partenkirchen District. Which is a big resort area in Germany. And one of my best friends lives there. He's a forester there. Well, at any rate, I got introduced to this ninety-two-year-old gentleman. And he was a POW of the Russians. After the war, he was one that they lined up and marched back to Russia. Twenty of them in a group. He said, if you showed up at a check point with nineteen, you were all shot. And he said, they weren't playing games with you. That was it. And, he told me something that I don't think most Americans are aware of. When the war ended, Russia held something like three million Germans prisoners, but they never let them go. When the war ended, they held them as prisoners, and continued to hold them for seven years. And then, Khrushchev was now the premier of Russia. And Khrushchev came to visit the head of Germany, the prime minister of Germany. When he came to visit, that morning, he started to eat raw pork, fat. And he filled himself to the point that he could no longer eat anymore fat. When he met Khrushchev, he sat down and they started to drink. And he was taking that fat to prevent the absorption of the alcohol into his system. And he had one purpose in mind, the prime minister of Germany: to get the release of three million German soldiers that Russia was still holding seven years after the war had ended. And this ninety-two-year-old gentlemen was one of them. And he said, Khrushchev drank, or Adenaur, I think was the prime minister, I'm not sure, of Germany. He drank Khrushchev under the table.

Khrushchev got so drunk, he just couldn't drink anymore. And finally, he concluded, "okay, you win, I will let the prisoners go." And that's what it took to get the release of three million German POWs that were being held by the Russians after the war for a period of seven years.

John: Wow! Yeah, that's something.

Milton: Well, now, did I cover what you---No.

John: No, Zemke and Eisenhower.

Milton: Okay, Zemke went down and met with the corps general also, the General of that Corps area. And the general said, "We are going to transport all of you to the Crimea and put you on boats and take you out through Istanbul, through that area and over to Italy and then put you, transfer you onto ships for the Americans that are going back to the United States, in Italy." Zemke, told him, "No. The supreme commander--" Eisenhower, that he kept throwing up to the general-- "Eisenhower says that we are to stay in camp. That we are to fly out of here and we are to fly back to France from here." And he said, "We have to listen to General Eisenhower." Well, the general, the Russian general wouldn't buy it. And, this went on for a period of several days. He kept saying, "we are going to move you through the Crimea and back from the Black Sea," or whatever it is over there, where we would get on boats. You are talking months. And he said no. So finally, the B-17s came in on about day seven or eight. They came in on that day and landed. And we thought it was kind of funny, that the skeleton air crew which was pilot, co-pilot, engineer, and radio operator, that they came in and they were all carrying their .45s and we asked, what are you doing with that? They said, we were told to expect trouble with the Russians. And we wanted to put on a show of force. Well, I'll tell you, that .45 wouldn't have stopped---

John: The whole Russian army.

Milton: Oh lord, that when-- I think this is rather interesting-- I think that all of us in that camp were optimistic during the entire period of the war. Even as POWs, we knew there was going to be a second front. It was only when-- and we knew we couldn't win the war until the second front had started. So, we kept waiting for the second front. Now, to digress, we had a gentleman by the name of Bennett, who was an Associated Press reporter that got approval to fly on one of the missions and then wound up getting shot down with that crew. Bennett, wound up in our camp. Since he was flying the Air Force, they put him in an air force camp in Germany. That Bennett had access to a radio which was broken down into component parts every day and given to different fellas. If you looked at anything, any one piece, you couldn't-- it meant nothing. So, they would tune in BBC, they

get the new reports in the news. Bennett would write it up. He would write it up in a one page summary and printed on the top was "Pow Wow," P-O-W-W-O-W. And that was, "P.O.W. Waiting On Winning." And, I'll tell you, those things are worth a lot of money today to anybody out there. And, after he typed it up, it would be about four o'clock, a carrier would come from his office into all of the barracks, one at a time, and they would post guards at the barracks to make sure the Germans weren't coming and any search teams, then he would read off a two page summary of the news and what was going on. So, if a German approached the barracks, he'd yell, "Goon up!" and--they named them "goons"-- and everything stopped and the guy disappears with the message. At any rate, Bennett, puts out an extra one day, and they run it to all of the barracks and he had carbon copies so he could get it to several barracks at the same time. And here it was: "Ten thousand parachutists descend upon Germany." The second front has started, obviously. And it goes on and it gave the coordinates, latitude and longitude. Somebody got a map and looked it up. Not two pages, and I looked it up. It was a POW camp [laughs]. Ten thousand descended. They went and got Bennett. He got the cold water treatment that day, I'll tell you.

John: [laughs] You were parachutists.

Milton: Yeah, everything he said was correct.

John: Now, when they took you back, when you got on the B-17s, they took you back to bases named for cigarettes.

Milton: Right.

John: Lucky Strike was one of them.

Milton: That's where I went.

John: This other POW I interviewed told me that. So, I will find out who he is and will let you know.

Milton: Yeah, well, Camp Lucky Strike was located at Le Havre. And that's where we finally shipped out by boat, at Le Havre.

John: Okay, I'll get, I'll find out who this is.

Milton: At any rate, when they finally flew us out, Zemke just to defy that Russian general, he said, "We're flying out tomorrow. The planes are coming tomorrow," and they did and I think every two minutes I think a B-17 landed and I think about 45 guys got on it. Well it takes a lot of airplanes to get 10,000 people out of there.

But, I think one of the thrilling things about that, the pilot we had, still picture him, they were about twenty, twenty-one years old and this guy was just fascinated that we were POWs and he was picking us up in Germany. And on the way out he gave us a cooked tour. He took us over Aachen and Cologne, and so forth. And, Aachen, there was nothing left. There wasn't a building standing. There were walls, but nothing inside. And, at any rate, he said, "Do some of you guys want to fly it?" A lot of guys said, "Yeah, let me get behind the wheel again." And we were like this. Oh, it was a terrible ride [laughs]. It was funny as hell, but those fellas had no sophistication on flying anymore. But, that's right. They took us to Rheims, France first. We landed there that night, then the next morning we went by train from there through Paris, over to Le Havre to Camp Lucky Strike. And landed at Camp Lucky Strike. Now, we were at Camp Lucky Strike, at that time, there were maybe ten suicides a day.

John: Wow!

Milton: Here, from POWs, guys that had gotten out of the camp that, and the cause of it was this, in my opinion at least. They had heard on the German news, broadcast in English, a fifteen minute newscast per day about the strikes in the United States going on at this aircraft factory and that one and this propeller factory and that engine, Allison engines and so on, and they thought it was funny as hell. No way is that happening in the United States. Not during the war, not as long as we're over here. Here, already when we got picked up, when we asked the pilot about these different things, oh yeah, they were all true. And when they got to France, some of these fellas were so dejected by the news of what was going on in the United States, that they just knocked themselves off. Right in the next tent. I'm sitting in the tent and suddenly I hear a .45 go off in the next tent. Ah, three or four guys in the tent got up to go next door and I said, "Why do you want to go look? You know what happened." And he said-- I told them, "don't go." They went. Ah, they were so dejected. One guy, Jesus, it almost cracks me up to the point of talking. But one guy in the room next door to us in the POW camp was Trowbridge. Trowbridge was a great guy. First of all, he got shot down, but was not captured right away and wound up in the underground. And he worked in the underground for four months and then they were going to blow up a factory one night and he got picked up by the German police one night and he said, I was not part of that underground, I just happened to be there. Well, they didn't know whether to believe him or not. So, believe it or not, they tried him in a military court. They gave him attorneys to defend him. And he won his case. They never proved he was part of the underground. And, he had his story down so pat that after four months, really with the underground, that they believed him in court. That he had bailed out just a few days before and he kept those missions in his mind about, you know, where they bombed yesterday so he could say he was part of the crew. And, they finally let him go and assigned him to the POW camp. He

came in and was in the room next to us. Now, Trowbridge would not talk to you about this in the room. He was afraid the room was bugged. So, the only time he would discuss it with you was if you were walking with him outside. And, Trowbridge and I did a lot of walking together. At any rate, he went to France, he survived France, came back to the States, landed in Newport News, Virginia and took a train, not home, but to New York City, checked into a high rise hotel and jumped out the window.

John: Oh wow?

Milton: After all the guy had been through. Good God.

John: Yeah, that's tragic.

Milton: It was, and God I can see him. He had a big bushy haircut and he was just a nice, nice fella. But, he wasn't alone. As I say, that at Camp Lucky Strike there were many suicides. And it was dejection over what they had learned.

John: Milton, I'm going to have to wrap up again. This was a remarkable American--- we've got some time and we've got some tape, do you have items you want to get on here before---

Milton: Ah, let's see.

John: Take your time, we've got---

Milton: Oh, there's one thing. When all of the Germans left our camp, they left us there. In the morning we fell out for roll call and up in the tower was an American instead of a German. And, saying, "Okay you sons of bitches, get out there and line up for roll call." [laughs] And, you talk about release--

John: I can imagine.

Milton: --or pent up emotions that it happened.

John: How long were you in from when you were shot down until you were released?

Milton: It was fifteen months.

John: Fifteen months. That is a long time. It's a long time never knowing how long it's going to be.

Milton: Right, and that you didn't know. Yeah, let's see. Oh, one thing I'll mention. I

want to go back to when I was first shot down and we came back by train. There were thirty five of us from the Steyr [Austria] mission and the Regensburg [Germany] mission a day or two after that. Thirty-five air crewmen members and six German guards. They took us by train from Graz, Austria over to Frankfurt, Germany to the interrogation camp over at Frankfurt. And, when we-- forgot my line of thinking here. When we got back to Frankfurt, the air raid sirens went off, and they took us downstairs. That whole area downstairs today is shops. And at this time back then, this was the air raid shelter under the railroad station, really. And they took us over and down the stairs and here were a line of telephone booths. I would say about twenty telephone booths. And each one had a decal on it. "Nicht Juden, Nicht Juden." No Jews, No Jews. For nineteen, and on the twentieth, the Jews could use that one. And, I couldn't understand why. You know, we had no knowledge that, what was going on here.

John: Yeah.

Milton: Well, then there were posters of "Russen Kommen," Russia coming. And it shows a Russian soldier stabbing a little baby and the blood spurting. There was fear put in the German people—

[End of Tape 4, Side A]

Milton: --Posters in Germany cautioning the German people about the Russians coming and invading their country. And they had to fight harder to prevent it. Well, when the war ended, everybody took off. Not everybody, but most people took off into the countryside. And, we were a little different. We got everybody organized into committees. Everybody's got to have a committee. We had one committee that had to get a car and another one that had to get the liquor and food and so on. At any rate, most of them just took off into the countryside. We had a kid who was a professor at the University of Virginia, and-- I think in French. And he used to come over to our room because one of the guys in our room was a good friend of his. And he'd come and sit and visit with us. So we got to know him real well. And we just called him, "the professor." Now the war had ended and the professor had taken off and gone out. He came back late in the afternoon and sat down and spoke in French, continually. He'd completely cracked up. And we didn't know why and one of the guys said, "We got to bring him out of this." And he started roughing him up pretty bad. Slapping him in the face, and finally the kid just broke down. He sobbed. Man, it felt like his heart was coming out. And, he couldn't talk and then finally he was able to talk and he spoke English now instead of French. He had gone out and he saw something over in some tall grass. And he walked over. Here it was a mother, a grandmother of a young child, a baby and a baby carriage. All three dead. They committed suicide.

John: Oh, wow.

Milton: And that was extremely common among the German population.

John: I'd assume.

Milton: In fact, John, going ahead for many, many months, when they turned on the gas in Berlin for the first time, that day there were I don't know how many hundreds of suicides that people took advantage of the gas.

John: That's tragic. Really, really tragic. Okay, what a remarkable, remarkable story. I will find out who this other guy was who I just talked to within months.

Milton: It had to be another POW.

John: Oh yeah, yeah. And you were talking about B-17s and I'm thinking "Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields." He told me they named the bases after cigarettes.

Milton: They did.

John: Okay, well then I know what I'm talking about. I'm not nuts. I will find out, because he's right here. Right here in Madison.

Milton: Well, I probably know him. We have the POW association.

John: Oh, okay. Well if you do, you can compare notes and if not someone else. Well, I got to pull out, I've got grandkids.

Milton: Did you ever interview Chuck Rick?

John: No.

Milton: Chuck Rick was in the Battle of the Bulge.

John: Okay.

Milton: And he was on a number of the forced marches and froze his legs.

John: Okay.

Milton: He's a double amputee today.

John: I just ended up interviewing this woman who was a WAC.

Milton: That was interesting, I'll bet.

John: Yes, she, this was the group--

[End of Interview]