

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an Interview with

JOHN G. SCOCOS

1st Lieutenant, Army Air Corps

December 15, 1997

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Scocos, John. (1918-) Oral History Interview, December 15, 1997.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca.90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips

Master Recording: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips.

Abstract

John G. Scocos, a native of Fond du Lac, Wis., discusses his experience in the Army Air Corps as a bombardier on a B-24 in Europe during World War II which eventually led to his capture and internment in a POW camp in April of 1944. Scocos describes his experiences during basic training at Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis (Missouri). From there, he was reassigned to various bases throughout the United States such as Fort Logan (Denver), Lockland Airbase (Texas) and Langley Field (New Mexico). In Europe, he was stationed at Manduria Air Force Base (Italy). Once situated in Italy with the 450th Bomb Group, he flew thirty-two daylight missions before being shot down near Weiner Neustadt (Austria). He depicts most of his missions as military targets including submarine pens in Toulon, airfields in Marseilles and Połęsti and the Airdrome in Weiner Neustadt just outside of Vienna. After being shot down, he was turned over to the Germans by an Austrian soldier. He speaks about his experiences at the interrogation center at Dulag Luft and the move to the POW camp, Stalag Luft III. He details daily life during the fifty weeks he spent at Stalag Luft III including: interaction with the guards, food, conditions of the camp as well as connection to the outside world through a contraband radio connection that allowed for the BBC broadcast. He tells of his move to a camp in Moosberg right before Liberation. After his return to the United States, he gives a picture of his re-assimilation to life as a civilian. Scocos briefly mentions benefits for veterans that he has taken advantage of such as medical care and a federal loan under the GI program to purchase his first home. He refers to his brief involvement with Air Corps Reserves and his membership in such groups as the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veteran's of Foreign Wars and the POW organization. He also touches upon his participation in Veteran's Day celebrations on the Capitol in Madison as well as a celebration at the Expo Center in Madison as well.

Biographical Sketch

Scocos (b. October 18, 1918), was drafted into the Army Air Corps in February of 1942, achieving the rank of 1st Lieutenant. After his return to the United States in 1945, he eventually settled in Madison, Wis.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

Transcribed by Kristin Pachal, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Today's date is December 15, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. John G. Scocos, did I pronounce that correctly?

Scocos: Scocos, yes.

Mark: Scocos, a veteran of United States Air Force during World War II. Good morning and thanks for coming in. I appreciate it. Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Scocos: I was born and raised in Fond du Lac, October 20, 1918. I grew up there, went to school and graduated high school in 1936.

Mark: Now this was in the midst of the Depression Era

Scocos: Yes sir, as I stated it was during the Depression Era where youngsters were brought up under hardships. We were selling newspapers, shining shoes, working a route. After I graduated from high school, I worked at Sears Roebucks doing odd jobs starting out and gradually working into the merchandising field. I was drafted in 1941 and I was inducted into the service in January of 1942 going onto Fort Sheridan.

Mark: So your draft notice came, then Pearl Harbor happened and you actually went into service?

Scocos: yeah right.

Mark: So you were drafted—

Scocos: I was drafted, actually my drafting number came up in 1939 but I was never actually called until later on. Yes, Pearl Harbor. The day of Pearl Harbor, I was in a car driving to go meet a friend in Port Washington, Wisconsin and we had the radio on and we heard the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Mark: What was your reaction, do you recall?

Scocos: We were all raring to go. Most of us were at that time. Actually, I had been deferred in 1939 when I was called in for a physical; the local doctor deferred me. He said that

Interview Transcript (continued)

I had a slight murmur in my heart and he thought that I was—so I had a 4F classification, so December, right after Pearl Harbor, we were called in and I was examined. In fact we came to Madison and had our physical in Madison and then in January we were inducted into the service.

I went into the Army Air Corps, one of the first draftee groups that was drafted into the Air Force. At that time the Air Corps was strictly volunteer. From Fort Sheridan, we went to Jefferson Barracks for basic orientation. I spent two months there and then from there, I went onto Denver to Fort Logan to the supply and clerical school and then in June of '42, I graduated from there and went on to Maine and I was stationed at Holton, Maine. It was an auxiliary air base to Presque Isle. There, the commander seen that I had merchandise experience and he put me into the PX and I was managing a PX for several months until I was relieved and assigned to the headquarters and I become a staff sergeant and a tech sergeant and there I volunteered. I wanted to get into the flying end of it and I took an exam, an officer's exam, and I qualified to go to Air Force school. In November of '42, I went to San Antonio, Lockland Air Base, which was a classification center for the Army Air Corps and we took a series of tests and that and they qualified me for the bombardier. From there, I went to Big Spring, Texas to the bombardier school, which I graduated in June of 1943. Then I was assigned to a bomb group in Clovis, New Mexico. We were trained with a crew, trying to acclimate ourselves to the air and we were flying B-24's. From there, the group, we were assigned to pick up an airplane and first we had to go to Langley Field and we got to take about a month and a half of air patrol looking for submarines and things off the coast. From then, in December of '43, we were assigned to Mitchell Field in New York where the crew was assigned to an aircraft, and then we picked up an airplane. In January of '44 we flew to Florida, then down through South America across Brazil and over to Africa to Natel. We landed in Natel and from there, we went on up to Marrakech where we were socked in for a month practically before we flew across Northern Africa to Tunisia and on into Italy.

Mark: It sounds like you sure got to travel around a lot in a very short span of time. I would like to go back and cover some of these topics in a little more detail. First of all, your basic training, your entry into military life — Now you were a conscript, you weren't necessarily a willing participant.

Scocos: No.

Mark: Did you have any difficulties adjusting to military life? It's very different than civilian life, the discipline or perhaps the language or something like that. What sorts of things struck you and how did you —?

Interview Transcript (continued)

Scocos: No, I don't think so. We were all young fellows and most of us are young. It was a new experience. Truly it was a different— because most of us, as I can recall, had the basic training. The officers, the sergeants, were all Army veterans and most of them were rough characters but it was a real putting us through the hoops. A lot of us didn't know right from left and it was really—

In fact we had some rare occasions in basic training when we were in St. Louis in Jefferson Barracks we ran into a quarantine, the spinal meningitis broke out. In fact one of the boys was from our barracks and he was from Milwaukee. Most of us in our barracks were all Wisconsinites, Milwaukee, Racine, the whole area. And to get to sick call at that time was almost like pulling hen's teeth. The lines were a block long. We were fortunate, our group, we got a barracks, but Jefferson Barracks had expanded so greatly at that time, the Air Force, that the majority of them were sleeping in tents. And most of them were at that time were Southerners and they were not accustomed to or acclimated to the weather. We were from the north; we were used to the cold and dampness. St. Louis is not like Wisconsin but it does have periodical bad weather. It was damp and cold and a lot of these kids, youngsters, all these men caught fevers and cold and it got to the point where you practically had to be dying before you would get into a sick call. The lines were so big. I'll never forget this young lad. He was from Milwaukee, and he happened to be of Jewish extraction and he had some Jewish doctor friends in Milwaukee and they were sending him medicine. I remember he was— it got pretty bad. In fact he passed away. The poor guy, and the drill sergeants gave him a bad time, the poor guy didn't know right from left. He was sick. Anyway, he died and the base was quarantined for a month. Nobody could come and go.

It was just embarrassing. You get assigned. I was assigned to guard duty at the night detail. In lieu of a gun, which they didn't have, they gave us a broomstick. We were out there in the night with a broomstick. (laughs) Most of us were recruits and we didn't know what the command words were, the order of the day. It was quite an experience. I look back at it and it was a real good experience. I don't think any of us regretted it. You were getting a big pay, of— I forget, sixty cents, sixty dollars, I don't know, it was a dollar a day I think. But anyway when we went to Denver, it was really a paradise compared to Jefferson Barracks. Fort Logan, the food was terrific. I'll never forget we drilled quite a bit up in the mountains and you would bring milk by the caseload to the tables. I think we all put on twenty to thirty pounds the period of three months that we were there.

Mark: I have another question about going into the military, and that is as you have already touched upon, is bringing people together from all different parts of the country. Had you traveled much around the country before you went into the military?

Interview Transcript (continued)

Scocos: No.

Mark: Did you have any particular impressions or reactions to the great diversity of America as it was at that time?

Scocos: No, I don't think so. Every place you went, you seemed to be welcomed. No problem whatsoever.

Mark: No Southerners still fighting the Civil War for example or that sort of thing?

Scocos: Um, yeah you noticed a little of that. We were officers then. After we got graduated and I was assigned to Salt Lake City, there was quite a few colored soldiers there that were doing the menial tasks. And one lad, I'll never forget, was a pre-med student. He was from St. Louis and he volunteered and he thought he was going to get into the Medical Corps and at that time, the colored— a group of officers got together and we got him into the medical part of the Air Force. We got him transferred out but that is the only time I actually seen in the United States where there was any disparities or racial— They were segregated they were not into the Army at that time. When we were in Italy the colored regiment or infantry unit was stationed there and you seen some of the colored soldiers and they were infantrymen there.

Mark: Now you traveled around the country too for the first time.

Scocos: Yes.

Mark: Now you had grown up as we had discussed as sort of the Depression Era America. The War sort of brought on more prosperity; at least that's what the history books say. Can you just comment on the country that you found in the early 1940s? Was it coming out of the Depression in your impressions of traveling?

Scocos: No, it was coming out very well particularly on the big army bases where you went. Those communities and cities prospered they were very prosperous because the soldiers, if they got thirty dollars, it was thirty dollars that was spent, I mean there was no worrying about tomorrow. I think that all of those communities where they had that influx of military— prospered, very much so. You can go down, even up to this day you can go down to those communities where they did have soldiers of any extent, the city of Madison is a very good example, of where you had a group of paid soldiers. All the business community benefit very much so.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Mark: Now you decided to become an officer, first of all, you were drafted, not necessarily crazy about the whole thing in the first place necessarily and yet you decided to become an officer, could you explain that decision?

Scocos: Well, I don't know, I just felt that there was an opportunity to better serve myself as well the country rather than just being at a desk, which I was. I ended up at the time, I was working in headquarters in a sergeant major's office and I felt that I could improve myself as well as being service to the Air Force. A lot of my friends thought I was crazy but they said, "you've got it made now."

I said, "Well no, I just want to go out and be of service." I thought more so to the service, and my country and myself.

Mark: How did you become a bombardier? Is it something you chose or was it chosen for you?

Scocos: No, when we went down to San Antonio to the reclassification center, we took a series of tests and they interviewed you and most of us were all going to become pilots we were gonna be air ____ (??) So then they gave you a series of tests and they just qualified you as air— you went through everything, you flew mock flights and they said I would be qualified for bombardier navigator and they said they need bombardiers right now and you classified as a bombardier so—

Mark: So it was chosen for you pretty much.

Scocos: So I was a bombardier.

Mark: And you got over to Italy, how long was it before you started fighting combat missions? From the time you arrived until your first mission?

Scocos: We flew over to Italy. We left January, and it took about two weeks flying down to Florida and we spent a couple of days in Florida, then we went to South America, we flew to Belim, we stayed there a day or so— we were fighting the weather all the way. Then we flew across into Natel and we stayed there a day or so and then got clearance and went over to Dakkar and we spent two days in Dakkar, I think. And we got to Marrikech and in Marrikech we hit bad weather and everything was grounded for about a week. We had close to two thousand aircraft on the airfield. And then from there we went into Tunisia, we spent a day or so in Tunisia and then we went across into Italy. We landed in Manduria Air Force Base and we were there two days in fact and we started flying. They were in bad shape. The losses of the group were pretty heavy and we went in as a replacement to 450th bomb group.

Interview Transcript (continued)

We were in a group that was led by a colonel and he was from Monroe, Wisconsin. His name was Miller. I'll never forget. And the group had been hit pretty hard by the Germans. It's just really funny the Air Force had a code of ethics even the Germans observed it. If you got hurt or your plane was damaged and you dropped your wheels they would escort you to a flying field supposedly. In our group, 450th group, one of the crews decided to do that, they dropped their wheels and the Germans circled the thing and they shot down three or four of the German aircraft. From then on we were a target for the Germans. Every mission you had and knew you were there, they would hit you first. They would leave the other groups and you were a target.

Mark: Now you eventually flew thirty-two missions?

Scocos: Thirty-two, yeah.

Mark: That's quite a few.

Scocos: We were flying everyday practically.

Mark: Do you recall your first one?

Scocos: Yes.

Mark: Why don't you describe your experience.

Scocos: The first mission we flew was a long mission. We were in flying across Italy into Southern France to Marseilles, to the submarine pens at Toulon and that was our mission. It was a long flight. I'll never forget we flew it. We didn't encounter much opposition. Whether the Germans were surprised whether they – we did lose a couple of air crafts coming back, we ran out of fuel, it had problems it was long mission and they landed in Sardinia and some of those islands. But that was our first mission. It was the submarine pens and Marseilles, outside of Marseilles in France.

Mark: So this was the first time you were shot at basically?

Scocos: Right.

Mark: What's going through your mind at this time?

Scocos: Well, I think most of us were scared and the anxiety of the thing and wondering what we were going to expect. Like I said, I think we were there two days, two days and we flew missions right away cause they were, the group, was in bad shape and we flew our own air

Interview Transcript (continued)

- craft that we flew in. It was assigned to the group and yeah I'd say, I think we had a lot of anxiety and we were scared.
- Mark: But, the mission succeeded, you weren't shot down at this time. I'm wondering if all the training that you had you found paid off once you were in combat or do you just learn to improvise things?
- Scocos: No, a lot of it was given to ya, you didn't feel as though maybe you didn't absorb it, but we did. When the time came, actually it came, for example when we were shot down, the day that we were shot down, our aircraft was hit real heavy with fighters. We lost our intercom and the pilot pulled the emergency bell. None of us had ever jumped but immediately it came to mind what you had to do, how you jump.
- Mark: And the bell ringing means what?
- Scocos: Get out. Leave the aircraft; we're in trouble. And in the B-24 we have a nose gunner in front and then you're right below him. And it so happened that the nose gunner that we had should have been grounded. The guy, he wanted to get out and the medics wouldn't approve him that he wasn't safe flying. He froze up there the day we were hit, he froze at the guns, the guy was – I can always remember that instance when we heard that bell, I wore a parachute. I learned. I was the oldest man on the crew. And I made sure everybody carried their parachutes all the time. And that thing would never be arm's length away from me. Anyway, I opened the hood and I pulled that kid, that young man out and he was just petrified. I pulled him out. In fact, I jerked him, I got super strength, I jerked so I pulled him out of his shoes, his boots, and I threw him down the escape hatch right in front there. I remember the last words I said, "Pull the cord" when he hit the thing, he came to the air and we were told when you bail out, make sure you try to count a hundred so you make sure you're clear of the aircraft, which I did remember. You're falling, you really fall fast and pull the chute and bingo, we were out.
- Mark: Now this mission was over where?
- Scocos: It was Austria.
- Mark: Austria.
- Scocos: Austria, we were bombing an airfield right outside of Vienna, Weiner Neustadt
- Mark: I want to come back to that mission, obviously it's important. But the ones in between the first one and the last one. That's thirty missions. That's quite a few. Are there any that stand out? Do they all blend together. Or how do you remember them?

Interview Transcript (continued)

Scocos: A lot of them were seemingly very simple. We were getting; in fact we were pretty cocky. We had to fly fifty missions and man, we were taking other people's crews while we flew so many we were taking guys that could go to rest camps supposedly so we were taking their duty so they could go to rest camp and we flew in their stead. I would say that there was only one, ah, two missions, one that we flew when we went to Budapest but before that we went to Ploësti. The second one, not at the low level job, but the second time that Ploësti was hit and the Germans they had their best, their ace aircraft was stationed in that area, Ploësti in Rumania there. Defense. They made one pass and I'll never forget it. Their one pass at our group and they eliminated six aircraft. You know how the float stacked up _____ (??) and they just eliminated those guys in fact took a thing, I'll never forget it we looked up and bingo, they were gone. That was, I think, the most scariest mission that I had was that one. That one, the Germans, they really come at us. Like I said, our group was a bastard group. The Germans really had it in for us. The groups in back of us were all over the sky and they let them go, they didn't bother them. They hit us first. The other time we flew was when we were going to Budapest and it's the first time that our group flew with radar.

Mark: I'm just going to shut the door

Scocos: The lead navigator, we were flying next to him. We were the oldest crew in our group just about, cause most, like I say, casualties were terrific and for some reason they had taken inverted readings, he takes us way past Budapest. We were flying and we were hollering as were heading for Bruin and finally they realized it cause you could track it visually where we were and finally we turned back and we went to Budapest we caught them completely, they were alarmed as we were way off course, they didn't expect us. As we were flying over the center of Budapest and flak was coming up and the colonel flying our ship, he took us off of the deviated course and we were all hollering we were going wrong and the guys were cussin' at him and he says "hell no, keep going, keep going" and in fact that day we had thirty-five or forty holes in our aircraft, none of us got hurt or anything and we got back safely. One other time we were going to Northern Italy and the weather was bad. We should never have even— we should have – they say "you should have aborted the flight you should have turned back. We had a crazy colonel though. And he says "Nah, we're going on to see if we hit the target". Finally he decided that the weather was bad so the group turned around and we hit bad weather. I'll never forget our aircraft and we're flying individually in fact, we all spread out over the sky and our aircraft we hit bad weather and we lost— and we went down, you know the force and we had one hell of a time getting the thing back up and even ourselves, we were pinned against the seatbelts. It wasn't too bad. We didn't have too bad an experience. We didn't have

Interview Transcript (continued)

any injuries, we were lucky. None of the boys in our crew got hurt. We lost one boy the day we got shot down and that was because negligence. The day that we flew and got shot down, one of our crew men got sick and we had an extra. That fella was supposed to take care of the fella that's in the ball to get him out in case of emergency and they didn't. They all jumped out and left him in the ball and he died. He blew up with the aircraft.

Mark: So you flew with the same crew.

Scocos: The same crew.

Mark: Why don't you just describe the crew to me in terms of who they were and where they were from, their personalities.

Scocos: Well, the pilot was from Texas. In fact I seen him last year. First time since '45 when we were out of the service. He was a younger fella; he was really a very adventurous fella. The co-pilot was a gentleman like myself. We were both about the same age. Who's from Ohio. He was an accounting major in school. The navigator was from New York City, from the Long Island. And he was a very chintzy—in fact he never spent a penny. In fact, he got married while we were leaving New York City; he got married in New York. But he was really sharp, pretty intelligent; he was a pretty good navigator. The rest of the crew, our crew chief was a baker; his dad had a bakery from Long Island. He was from Long Island. The waist gunners were both from Long Island. In fact, one of 'em I hear from. The rest of the boys I've lost contact with them. You know, moving. I try to keep track of them but I lost track of 'em. Name was Scutter. In fact he's in a veteran's hospital now in New York, he's in bad shape. He has a cart, he can't hardly walk. The nose gunner was from Long Island. We had all Long Island boys on our crew except one; the nose gunner was from Kansas, outside of Kansas City. He's the boy that didn't want to fly. He regretted that he was—we tried to get him off of the crew for his own benefit and ours as well. Otherwise they were all fine young, like I said I was the oldest man on the crew.

Mark: Yeah, you must have been what, twenty-six, twenty-seven?

Scocos: Twenty-seven, yeah. We were all—the boy that got shot down came from a broken—his mother never married, he was an illegitimate child. And his grandmother and grandfather brought him up and when we were in New York City, the kid, I say kid, he was the youngest, one of the youngest guys on our crew. He got involved with a girl; we were in New York for about a week, two weeks we were there. And he come to me and says—I

Interview Transcript (continued)

handled all the insurance papers and all that for the crew — he says “I’m going to get married.” I said “the hell you are.” “Yeah” he said, “I’m going to get married.” And I said “no you’re not,” I said, “Stuart, you’re not gonna get married.” I said. “When you get back if you think that that’s the person for you—” But those gals, a lot of them were doing it, they were picking the boys up and then they insured ‘em in case something happens to you, they would be the benefactors of the insurance. So anyway I talked him out of it. And his grandmother, after we got back to the States, she wrote me a letter and she wanted to know what happened and that and most of us didn’t know neither. We bailed out but I tried to relate to her what he was flying and that she wrote a letter, “thank you” she says. I said “I sincerely hope that you receive the benefactors of his death benefit that he would get,” and she did. And they were needy; they were from Pennsylvania, a poor family from Pennsylvania. Otherwise we had a good crew. They were real nice young fellas.

Mark: Now if you could describe to me a little bit about the plane itself. What did you like about it? What didn’t you like about it? What were its strengths and weaknesses?

Scocos: Well, I thought it was a real good plane. We all enjoyed it, we went over, like I say, we got accustomed to it flying from New York City on down to Florida and over across to the ocean into Italy. In going from Natal to Dakkar, in the air, we flew at night. And we felt that we had some engine trouble. I’ll never forget, I was flying as a co-pilot, helping, the other guy was resting and we had engine trouble. We had to feather one of the engines and we flew across the ocean on three engines. It was a very durable aircraft that 24 was really a good aircraft. We became very attached to it. We got into flying then they would sometimes assign us a different aircraft. We were going to Rumania on one of our missions and we were flying over— wherever they got all that trouble now, Bosnia, over Stier (??), Sarajevo and Mostar. Mostar, the Germans had some terrific guns and that up there in the mountains. And they hit us in our aircraft. We got hit, in fact I remember, I had a bad habit of sticking my head outside of the blister there and I would track batteries, flak batteries then for the intelligence. And I was watching, we were flying over Mostar and all these guns were popping and I was trying to track ‘em down and something told me to get out and I moved over to my other side and the whole plane blew up, that whole section blew out. We lost our hydraulic system and that and the pilot says “John what are we going to do?” I says “let’s go home.” And I says “you got no hydraulic system and we lost high pressure, so let’s go home.” So we did. We went home, we got into base, we aborted, the rest of the group went on and we went back. They thought they were going to court marshal the pilot and they had a hearing the next day and we flew the next day but we didn’t fly with him, we had another pilot flew for our pilot. But they didn’t, they exonerated him after he told them what happened that we lost all our system and it was just useless for us to go on. We wouldn’t be of any help to anybody. But the Army has the rules. You disobeyed the commands and they were

Interview Transcript (continued)

- putting the law down to him, they were going to court marshal him. He flew one less mission than we did, our crew.
- Mark: Now in terms of the targets you were actually bombing, I assume these were all daylight missions?
- Scocos: Yes.
- Mark: In what, if you can even characterize this in any sort of way, what sort of targets were you hitting normally? Were they factories, were they bridges? Ploësti was obviously for the air fields.
- Scocos: Yeah, we were hittin' airfields, ball-bearing factories, the munitions plants they claimed. We went to France, the submarine pens; most of them were military targets. The day I got shot down, our target was the airfield at Weiner Neustadt, the Airdrome. That was our— We had one target, I'll never forget it, Bulgaria, at that time Bulgaria was teetering, whether they were going surrender. And the target that our group had that day was a cathedral, on a Sunday and it was the Orthodox Easter, which was the highest religious day of the Orthodox Church and the target was a cathedral in the center of town of Sophia, Bulgaria. But we just got to the target and they aborted it. They called it back, the command decided it was not a good thing to do. And we came back. There was some weird targets that you had. The day I was talking about in Mostar, we were going to Rumania to hit the rail complex, the railroads and that; they were trying to cripple the transportation facilities to Germany. So there was a real mixture of targets that the group flew. We were secondary. You know the boys out of England were flying most of the major targets because they were closer to Germany.
- Mark: Now what can you tell me about the accuracy of the bombing? These were the day before smart bombs and these sorts of things. You basically had a big thing and you drop it out of an airplane.
- Scocos: I don't know. The day we went to Ploësti, we seen some of the recons and that and we hit, we did very well even though we were hit hard. We hit the oil refineries and warehousing facilities outside of Ploësti where all the oil fields were. And the Germans had fortified, in fact they claimed that we hit some of the targets, the Germans had created a dummy area trying to mislead you, they claim they had set up a complete replica of that area a little further north. We hit it pretty hard they could tell by the fire that it created. Some of 'em were real good. Probably some of the targets were missed, I don't know. I didn't see all the recons and the pictures and things. But in Northern Italy, you were hitting the airdromes, and then we went to Bolzano once, before it hits the tunnel before going from Italy into Europe, into Austria, we hit that there. I don't know whether we did any good or not, but it

Interview Transcript (continued)

probably confused the Germans, created a lot of confusion. I'd say our group was pretty good. The boys, we made all our missions and whatever our targets were we always hit the area, I'd say we probably had a 75-85% target hit.

Mark: You pretty much described the incident in which you were shot down, this happened in 1944 sometime?

Scocos: Yeah, April of 1944.

Mark: Near Vienna?

Scocos: Yeah, outside of Weiner Neustadt, we just hit, you know they have the IP called the point where you go into the target and the Germans hit us with 109s and our group hit pretty effective. I counted close to a hundred troops coming down. I was counting and when I was coming down it was really funny, we had B-42s, we had 47s and 38s. It was 47s that were supposed to be our cover fighter pilot and they seen we got hit pretty bad and they come over to our area, in fact I can remember the pilot went by me and he waved to me and I was coming down. He got onto a German fighter and they circled around me and my chute was going this way and that way, and the guy waved to me, good-bye, so long you know. It was quite interesting, like I say, you don't realize how fluid— we had undercast, you couldn't see the ground and you didn't realize how fast your descent was coming down. And we went through that cloud— gosh it just seemed like the whole earth come to meet us and I got caught. I came down and landed in the Alps.

[Side 1, Tape 1, Ends]

[Side 2, Tape 1]

My chute got hooked onto a tree coming down. Thank goodness I went into an opening. I could see all these trees. The opening, I would say was from here to the wall, that was the opening and by the good grace of God, I descended in that area and my chute caught and it flipped me up against the mountains. I stood there a few minutes, I was halfway dazed like, I unbuckled myself and came down. You know the Air Force; you lose the concept of distance. I said, "well, now I'm going to head for Switzerland." I had an idea where Switzerland was, so I started walking to the fort and I ran into my pilot. He and I were the last two guys out of our aircraft. He said "Geez John, one of the other boys, not one from our group, but he's hurt." He had ruptured himself. He didn't put his chute secure enough and when he bailed out he— he said "he's laying down, what should we do?" I said "let's go down and get him and we'll carry him up to the road and the Germans will pick him up." Cause he and I— we're headed for Switzerland, we're gone. So we got down and picked him up, we made a litter of his chute and we had a couple of branches there and we carried him to the road. Just as we got to the road, here comes a Austrian and

Interview Transcript (continued)

he had a little gun and he was shaking like that, he was more scared than we were. He was going “nein, nein, nein, nein, nein.” Anyway he took us to a cabin that was evidently was some hunter’s lodge, cabin. We don’t know what, if we were in the underground. Anyway, he went in someplace and he come back with a great big canister of tea, hot tea. I’ll never forget boy were we hungry. I never used to eat breakfast, because I used to get stomach trouble flying for 4 or 5 hours. Anyway, he was going “stay.” He was trying to tell us, so we were like “alright” We weren’t going anyplace. Boy, about 8 o’clock that night, three great big husky Germans came in. They said “auchmitzca”(??) so we went.. So we had to— this guy on the litter, we carried him, all the way up and down the Alps to a town called Bruck. We said “Well geez.” We were still headed in the southwestern direction.” I said “geez,” I says “Tom, maybe were headed for Switzerland, maybe we’ll make it.” So anyway we get down on these mountains and we see this town Bruck. So we enter the yard, they take us into a railroad station and there, there was another twenty or thirty POWs like us, soldiers that were all captured. The first thing I seen was Hitler’s picture. I said, “Boy, we’ve had it Tom.” So then we all fell asleep; we were tired as hell. We slept that day and the next morning they took us into the town military headquarters there and then they searched us and took our watches, rings and everything, they put it in an envelope. I got everything back but some guys claim they didn’t. I got everything back that they took from me after they took us. From there, they took some of the guy’s clothes. I used to carry two or three extra pair of interwoven stockings in case we had to— like I say, do a lot of walking and they took that. Boy, the girls seen that across the desk, they took your name from your dog tags and that. They took candy bars, geez, a lot of the fellas, we used to carry these big Hershey bars in our flying clothes, they confiscated all that. Then from there they took us— we went to Vienna and we stayed overnight in Vienna. Until they could put us on a train to go into Frankfurt, into Germany. And there they interrogated you. Dulag Luft. That was quite an experience for me, they didn’t bother me. The guy came in and they put ya in a little cubbyhole-like and the guy comes in and he has a chart, a German officer. he speaks fluent English. He says “your name, your religion and your dog tags, your Army serial number” and that’s it. And he said “Where you from?” And I says “from Wisconsin” He says “Where you flying?” I says “You got all the information you need from us, my name rank and serial number.” And he kept asking questions about where we were flying and I wouldn’t answer him. He got mad at me and he said “Ah you’re one of those goddamn spoiled American brats.” Actually I was shaking in my boots and finally, he gave up and he let me alone and I laid back on my little bunk there. But other guys, other fellas evidently gave more information and they would take them into places like you are now setting. They would have cigarettes lined up in front there you know and they say he would be sitting there puffing a cigarette, these fellas were heavy smokers and he hadn’t had any cigarette for three or four days, some of them were a week, two weeks in the process of being captured and they’d ask questions and he have a book and he’d have it open

Interview Transcript (continued)

like this here and have a big line through it and it would show the date you graduated from flying school, this school and all the people's names and then they had your name underscored and they would tell them, they'd say "Now look, your aircraft flew across from the United States and then it went to New England, you flew out of Maine, you went across to Newfoundland, Blue West, we used to call 'em Blue West. Then you went across over to England and meanwhile in Blue West you had trouble with your putt-putt with your aircraft. They had people, somebody in all these places that were giving out information.

Mark: It was kind of impressive, huh?

Scocos: They were, very much so. They had real intelligence. When we were in prison camp we would say, "Well, I hope our intelligence is as efficient as theirs is." They really had an efficient—So anyway from there I went to Dulag Luft, after that spent overnight in the cubbyhole there and then they took us out to an Anlager. (??) The American Red Cross had sent clothes there and like I say, they had taken a lot of our clothing, most of us had flying clothes on and they gave us a pair of pants and a shirt and put us on a train and then we went to Eastern Germany, we went to Stalag Luft III.

Mark: Where's that?

Scocos: That was in Eastern Germany, Stalag is now part of Poland. But it's a very wooded area, it was a rural area, it was in—I don't know exactly what province it was in now—but was north of Dresden and southeast of Berlin. We were about 90 miles from Berlin.

Mark: What did you find when you got there?

Scocos: Well, we got there and we went into a—the Germans had opened a new area. They get so many prisoners there and this camp was a new area. We went into a brand new area; they were just opening up this compound there was west, central, north, a south compound and we were all Americans in the center compound. At first it was mostly British, because in 1941, '42 they were prisoners then. In the barracks they had a little stove, it had a latrine at the end of the barracks, they had a big outdoor latrine outside too. It wasn't too bad. We each had a bunk. There was twelve of us to a room at that time. They furnished us with hot water. We had Red Cross parcels which coffee and tea, the British had tea and SPAM and we got accustomed to cooking ourselves they furnished a soup meal at noon, barley soup and once in awhile they'd get a little meat, I think it was horse meat or something. The camp, we had a library, we had a doctor, an American prisoner doctor, we had two or three chaplains, American and British chaplains. We walked, we had a compound and the guys played basketball, softball. We tried, the older ones from the prior years, '43 and '42

Interview Transcript (continued)

the thing would freeze over and some of the boys had a little skating rink in the center of the place they had a skating rink. This is the camp where they had the Great Escape. You probably read of that, that's the camp we were in. We went there in April, the first part of May we finally got there. The Escape was in April. We were there about two weeks after

the Escape. So they were very conscious of us and they were watching us like hawks. Everyday we would have role call, that was the biggest thing, they didn't bother us, I won't say that. We were all officers in that camp and they didn't bother you. The only thing they would do is call the role call it would be raining outside or something and you'd be out in the rain, taking role call.

Mark: But very little if any physical abuse or beating by the guards or anything?

Scocos: No. no.

Mark: I mean, how would describe the American prisoner's relationship with the German captors?

Scocos: The Germans thought we were crazy. We took tin cans and made pots and pans, some guys said we're making an airplane cause we're going to fly out of here. He scared the hell out of the Germans. There were a lot of crazy things they would do to irritate 'em. We had a radio, I don't know how they got it in there but they got parts and they assembled a radio. The British, one of the prisoners was one of the guys who was one of the radar experts in electronic things, so we had contact, we used to hide the radio, we would keep shifting it and they would go from one barracks to the other. We had intelligence who would get BBC in London so we knew what the heck was going on. The Germans would also broadcast to the camp, they had a loud speaker and they would broadcast their version of the war.

Mark: And what did you hear about what was going on? You were captured in a camp before D-Day?

Scocos: Yeah, oh yes. A year later, like I say, we had BBC so we knew what the progress of the war, what was happening. In fact, after D-Day when they started that big push in December of 1944, the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans really broadcast that they were going to blow the Americans out. So we knew what was happening. We knew that they were having trouble, that they Americans had gotten caught napping there. But at that time too the Russians were pushing, we were sweatin' out the Russians in hopes that they would catch our camp. We were told make sure we don't, they'll move us all out and we should try to get to the American lines somehow rather than let the Russians pick you up. Because a lot of them suffered, I think that a lot of boys never made it that did get picked up by the Russians. In fact there was a full general was bailed out over Berlin, an American general, he was brought into the camp to

Interview Transcript (continued)

advise the fellas what was happening and what they recommend that they should do if conditions exist. You could tell, the day we were moved, in January of '45, the Germans were retreating, you could tell by the aircraft. The Russians—we could see some of the artillery fires and they were close. We moved out. It was a night in January, it was Saturday night when we were told to move. We had to hoof it out. And we walked and we had a big blizzard that day too. The worst blizzard that Germans had in years. It was cold, blizzard and our camp moved. We all moved, we took off.

Mark: You were in camp for more than a year, right?

Scocos: About two weeks less than a year.

Mark: I'm just wondering how camp life may have changed for example as the German condition got worse and worse did your food get worse and worse, did things change or did they stay the same? How would you characterize that in a year?

Scocos: Well, no most of the guards after we got out of that camp, Stalag Luft III, we got moved to southern Germany outside of Munich, most of our problem was the getting' there. They put us in the forty-eight boxcars and we were cramped, we were fortunate. We were the first group to pull out. And most of us were in pretty good shape. We had insisted that we walk around that camp, the perimeter of the camp to stay in shape. We would lap probably—we probably walked ten, twenty, thirty times a day around that perimeter of the camp and we kept ourselves in pretty good shape. I weighed about two hundred and thirty pounds when I got shot down and when I got liberated, I weighed a hundred and thirty. So food was the biggest problem. We had lived to live within the—and we got down to the camp at—we left Stalag and went on that forty-eights and down through southern Germany to Munich to Moosburg. That camp there was an international. They had everything there. All the nations that they were fighting and it was in bad shape. The French were controlling the camp and the food, they would pilfer it, steal it. Some of the Americans, when we got there, we said “well, we'll take over our portion of the camp, you give us the food that you allocate, give it to us, we'll take care of it.” And we did. The conditions were kinda bad because some of the fellas had to sleep in tents. I was lucky I was in a barracks. We were doubled up on barracks. We slept on cotton on the floors in the barracks. It was an old military barracks, so what we were in had been an old military installation. The guards that we had were all old gentlemen. They were all retired, they didn't even bother—in fact I don't they had any bullets in the guns. They were just parading around the thing. The day that we were liberated, Patton came through and the Germans were retreating and then most of them were S.S.S. troopers that come through and they killed ten of our guards because the guards refused to go with them.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Outside of that, they didn't bother us at all. And Patton came in and his 3rd army and they liberated the camp and then they flew us out, we went to an airfield and they flew us out to Belgium and down through France and overseas, back home.

Mark: Why don't you describe that sort of repatriation process. Did you stop somewhere and get debriefed somewhere along the line?

Scocos: When we were repatriated, they took us to Belgium. We had a little problem getting there, because of the British—we went to a German airfield and we were waiting and they, Americans were flying the transport planes picking the fellas up and taking us out. Well, all our commanding officers took off. So consequently the English, all commanders were in charge and they were flying all the British out. In fact, I'll never forget one. He was a warrant officer flying and he says "this plane is not leaving the ground. If it is not full of Americans, were not flying." We had a hell of a time. In fact, Eisenhower came to the camp, came to that area and says "Fellas, we got to fly these boys out of here." All the American pilots wouldn't fly. All the planes were lined up. So he says "now we're going to fly one plane of Americans and one plane of British. We'll get you guys all out of here." They worked a deal out. From there we went to Belgium and in Belgium they gave us, I think they gave us five dollars or ten dollars in money and gave us clothes, a complete uniform and deloused us. Then we went on down to France, to what they call Camp Lucky Strike and there they were supposed to give us a physical examination. Well, I don't think very many of the boys got any physical because you see if you could walk you went through the line, I don't know, I know I went through there and they looked at me and they checked my eyes and then and okay –go on! Poor doctors, they were overworked anyway. And we came back to the States and we went to outside of New York ahhhh...

Mark: Kilmer? Camp Kilmer?

Scocos: Kilmer, and we stayed overnight there and they routed us back to our areas where we were from, the next day I took a train to Chicago to Fort Sheridan and at Fort Sheridan they went through our financial set-up, nothing of a physical, financial set-up and just sent us home. We were supposed to have a thirty-day leave. That was in June. After the thirty day, there was another extension. Finally fell October, they finally sent me— I went back down to Texas, down to Lockland Airbase. And there they gave me a physical. The old Army officer there, he checked my—I had a little trouble with my back where I bailed out and he got everything down and in my feet I had frostbitten 'em when we marched. "I put that all in your record son." He said, "You never know" he says, "you're feeling good now but—" Which he did thank goodness. I also had stomach and they gave us a physical and from there I stayed there from October until the first of November, the end of November and I came

Interview Transcript (continued)

home and was discharged in December 31st, my official discharge was December 31st, 1945 from the service and then back home.

Mark: You were discharged free and clear, no reserve time or anything, that was it for you?

Scocos: No, I didn't sign up for reserve time. I released myself and I got home I decided, I did go reserve and the Air Force at the time, the Air Corps didn't have much of a reserve set up at that time. It was all through correspondence. I stayed about a year or so and then I dropped out. I didn't stay in.

Mark: So you're out, free and clear, discharged, Now when it came to getting your life back on track, in you post-war years, What did you want to do, what were your priorities?

Scocos: Well, my priority, I was gonna to go to school. That was what I thought, but I went back to work at Sears as a merchandise manager of a couple of divisions in the store.

Mark: Was it your old job? The same job you had when you left?

Scocos: Yes, yes.

Mark: Now there were laws about re-hiring veterans. Did that apply to you in this case?

Scocos: Sure, yeah. I mean whether they did or not, whether the company was abiding by them, anyway I got my old job back and in fact, they were glad to see us. They was having trouble getting help at the time. And I went straight there and about four months I stayed there and decided to go into business for myself with another of my old Army buddy. We bought out our drugstore in Fond du Lac.

Mark: Where did you get the money for this? Without prying too much into your personal finances.

Scocos: We had money. I got a complete year's back pay when I come out of the service. When we were POWs we were paid for all the time that we were incarcerated. We had all that time accumulated and they paid us. So I had all that time accumulated as a first lieutenant. We received the Army pay for that period of time.

Mark: The reason I ask is that there were loans available for veterans. Did you use that when you first started your business? Did you use that? Did you know about that?

Scocos: No, no.

Mark: Did you know about it?

Interview Transcript (continued)

Scocos: Yes, yes. No we didn't.

Mark: You just had your own capital.

Scocos: Yeah we had our own, neither one of us — Then I married the following year, '46 I got married and I did use the loan to buy a home. They guaranteed the loan for the purchase of the home.

Mark: Was it a state or federal loan?

Scocos: Federal, federal.

Mark: This was in the '40s sometime?

Scocos: 1946.

Mark: Pretty early then. Would you have been able to buy a house at that time had it not been for the government loan program or did you have enough money to do it yourself?

Scocos: I think I could have. But I figured I bought it without even a down payment. They just guaranteed the loan. I stayed there 'til '49 and I decided to move back to Madison and I sold out my interest to my partner and I went back to work at Sears.

Mark: In Madison?

Scocos: In Madison. I was here until 1950, in Madison two years. And I got promoted to Minnesota, I went to Rochester, Minnesota and was assistant manager to the store and I was there for two years. I got a store, I was assigned a store in Owatonna, Minnesota. I had a Sears store. I stayed there 'til 1970 and then I left. I left Sears and bought a hardware store in Delavan Wisconsin, stayed there four years and moved back to Madison.

Mark: So finding work after the War wasn't a problem for you?

Scocos: No.

Mark: It sounds like there were some good opportunities for you.

Scocos: No, no problem, no.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Mark: Now in terms of other sorts of readjustments, POWs in particular sometimes come back with health related problems or that sort of thing. Could you comment a little bit about the readjustment in that regard?

Scocos: No, I didn't have any problem at all. It didn't bother me, it didn't have any after effects. I mean I could sleep and life went on as it did. I didn't have no problem at all. In fact, several years ago they interviewed me and they wanted to know if I had any problems, and I didn't. My only problems were gradually were my feet and my back, physical problems. Outside of that—

Mark: Now these were when you were middle-aged and beyond I take it?

Scocos: Yeah, that's the thing. The VA was quite concerned. They said "Why didn't you didn't come in earlier?" I said, "Well, I was working. I had a good job. I felt that some other poor soul who worse off than I should be benefiting rather than myself. He says, "You made a mistake." And I said, "Well, maybe so." But that's the way I felt that there were more some who were in need that should get it than I was.

Mark: Your feet for example, didn't keep you from living apparently?

Scocos: No, no. Or my back neither. I'm suffering now with the age but then you're still young and I didn't have any physical labor job, I didn't have anything where I was physically lifting or anything. It was mostly walking around on your feet and sitting at a desk and managing area.

Mark: No nightmares or anything like that? Sometimes they come back in bits after time.

Scocos: No, no I didn't have any problems. Once in awhile you get daydreaming and you start thinking about it, but I didn't have no nightmares or any adverse effect.

Mark: One of the things that vets mention to me that it would never occurred to me had I not done one of these interviews, just some of the little things about getting back into daily life, for example, once again, buying civilian clothes, that sort of thing. When you got out, did you have trouble finding the clothes? Did you want to wear the civilian clothes? Or did some of the language carry over into civilian life?

Scocos: Probably the language did. The clothes, I didn't seem to have any trouble. I don't know it just seemed like I was able to set in real good. I didn't have no problem at all that way. Then the language, you got accustomed to the language. You used a different vocabulary [laughs] a lot different.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Mark: Well, there's a story of the veteran who comes back and is sitting at the dinner table and asks his mom to please pass the blanking potatoes. Did you find you embarrassed yourself at sometime with some language?

Scocos: Yeah, I think once and a while, yes I'd say so. It just comes naturally after you've been gone three, four years. It's a different story. The language portion of it was a little different, you come accustomed to different—

Mark: That doesn't normally effect one's ability to make a living. Of course you never know I guess. I've just got one last area and that involves veteran's organizations.

Scocos: When I came out, I joined the American Legion in Fond du Lac when I got out.

Mark: For what reason?

Scocos: I don't know, I figured it was patriotic and you belonged to an organization representing the veterans. When I moved, I somehow come inactive. I didn't—working I guess, I didn't belong to any organization for a number of years and when I moved to Minnesota—I didn't belong to any of them—I take it back, I think I was at the Veteran's VFW, [Veterans of Foreign Wars] but I was not active. When I came to Madison, I didn't belong to anything until 1946, let's see, 1975, 1976? I joined the DAV, [Disabled American Veterans] they're very helpful. I also belonged to the POW organization and then I joined the VFW. Like I say, the American Legion, I dropped it and the fellas were asking me and I figure I got enough, I belong to three of 'em, that's sufficient to be associated with the veteran's organizations.

Mark: Are you what you would call and active member? Do you go to meetings and hold office?

Scocos: No, no I don't. I'm a life member of all three of those organizations. But no, I have not attended any meetings. I've gone to a couple times they had a celebration at the Capital, November 11th, in fact this year I went to the Expo Center. But outside of that, I've not been active in attending the meetings or anything of that nature.

Mark: Those are pretty much all the questions I have.

Scocos: Okay then.

Mark: Anything you'd like to add or anything you think we skipped over?

Scocos: No, no I don't think so.

Interview Transcript (continued)

Mark: Okay, well thanks for coming in.

Scocos: Thank you, I hope I could have been helpful to you.

Mark: I think it has been.

[Side 2, Tape 1, Ends]