

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
CLIFFORD F. SYVERUD
Radioman, United States Air Force, WWII

2001

OH
124

Syverud, Clifford S., (1922-2010). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Recording: 1 sound cassettes (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videocassette (ca. 60 min.); ½ inch, color.

Abstract

Clifford Syverud, a Black Earth, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a radio operator aboard a B-24 bomber with the 701st Bomb Squadron of the 8th Air Force. Syverud talks about radio school at Truax Field (Wisconsin), gunnery school (Utah), crew formation, and trip overseas. He relates information about his unit which was lead by actor Jimmy Stewart, bombing Kiel (Germany), and attacking submarines at Calais (France). He describes the mission to Leipzig (Germany) when his plane was shot down including bailing from his aircraft, being taken prisoner by German soldiers, interrogation, and trip to Stalag Luft IV. He details life in a prisoner of war camp, talking about food, Red Cross parcels, the 600 mile march west as Russian forces approached, and release by British paratroopers. He mentions return to the United States and medical problems stemming from his POW experience. Syverud briefly discusses his participation in veterans' organizations like the American Legion and the Badger POW Chapter.

Biographical Sketch

Syverud (b. January 7, 1922) served with the 701st Bomb Squad, 8th Air Force during World War II. His plane was shot down, and he was taken prisoner in May of 1944. Syverud achieved the rank of Staff Sergeant, and was honorably discharged in 1945.

Interviewed by Dr. James McIntosh, 2001.

Transcribed by Nathan King, 2003.

Transcription edited by Abigail Miller, 2003.

Interview Transcript

- James: Sixteenth of February, 2001. We're talking to Clifford Syverud. Where were you born, Cliff?
- Syverud: Black Earth.
- James: When was that?
- Syverud: January 7th, 1922.
- James: I see. And what were you doing before the war?
- Syverud: I worked with the Madison – I graduated from High School in June of '41, and of course Pearl Harbor was bombed in December. I was working – I wanted to go back to school, but I wanted to work a year and I decided to enlist in June of '42. I got called up in October.
- James: You didn't wait to be drafted? You enlisted in the Air Force?
- Syverud: Yes.
- James: That's the reason you enlisted? So you wouldn't have to go in the army?
- Syverud: I wanted to go into the Air Force. I wanted to fly.
- James: Right. OK. So where'd they send you?
- Syverud: They sent me, first of all, to Milwaukee for a physical, and then swearing in went to Fort Sheridan for our shots and got the short haircuts. And then went out to Kessler Field in Mississippi for basic training.
- James: A lot of your classmates at East High do the same?
- Syverud: Yes, mm-hmm. That was the popular thing to do out at –
- James: You mean, the Air Force, or just to be in the service?
- Syverud: Went in service, all different branches. After I finished basic training down at Kessler Field I was asked if I wanted to be a radio op or a mechanic, and I chose radio operator. One of the reasons that I chose radio is the two schools – one was at Chicago and one was at Truax.
- James: Right.
- Syverud: And I was sent to Truax and arrived here at 5 o'clock in the afternoon on Christmas Eve.
- James: Oh, in '42?

Syverud: '42. And I had no problem getting a pass, so I was able to have dinner with my parents on Christmas Eve.

James: Oh, that's nice.

Syverud: And I finished radio school roundabout in April, and then went on to gunnery school in Salt Lake City.

James: Uh-huh. OK. How long was that course?

Syverud: That was about a month.

James: About a month?

Syverud: Mm-hmm. Because it tied right in with our phase training, and then we went to Boise, Idaho, assigned our crews – bombing crews – and when we started our phase training, which was three months, our phase training in Boise, Idaho, and then went to Lincoln, Nebraska.

James: You picked up a crew and an airplane then?

Syverud: Right. Mm-hmm.

James: So you knew – this is a B-17?

Syverud: No. B-24.

James: Ok, and this is the first time that you met your crewmates?

Syverud: Mm-hmm. We got assigned in Boise, Idaho.

James: Is it a new plane, and a new crew, and everything new?

Syverud: When we left Lincoln, Nebraska, we took – they gave us a new plane – we flew to Florida, and then down to Puerto Rico, South America, Across to North Africa, and then up to England.

James: Alone, or were you with a group?

Syverud: No, we went alone, but we were already assigned to a group, and they were all going, but we never went as a formation or anything.

James: I see. And where'd you fly in Africa, too?

Syverud: Uh, Dakar.

James: Dakar. OK.

Syverud: And we were assigned to the 8th Air Force, and, with the 445th Bomb Group

James: 445?

Syverud: Mm-hmm. And, so –

James: Where were you stationed?

Syverud: Tibenham.

James: I'm sorry?

Syverud: Tibenham, England.

James: You flew from Dakar up there?

Syverud: Yep, mm-hmm.

James: Where is that, in relation to London?

Syverud: Uh, it's probably two hours by train. It would be, uh, northeast.

James: You know where Cambridge? Probably near Cambridge if it's two hours.

Syverud: Not too far – not too far from Cambridge. But I was assigned to the 701st Bomb Squadron, and the commander, by the way, was Jimmy Stewart, the movie actor.

James: Oh really?

Syverud: Yeah. And a tremendous person. Tremendous pilot, and he had no ego problems.

James: Did you fly with him?

Syverud: Not on the plane.

James: Uh-huh.

Syverud: I flew in the formations, but he led the first – he was the lead pilot in the first daylight raid on Berlin on March 7, 1944.

James: So, tell me about getting used to this B-24, and flying it, and all that. Was that difficult? Or did you adjust to that pretty well?

Syverud: Oh yeah, I started out in 17s, and then we switched to 24s, so – we like the 24. It carried a bigger bomb load and could go farther than –

James: Was there a lot of room in the aircraft for you?

Syverud: No, they're awfully cramped.

[laughter]

James: Now, you're the radio man, right?

Syverud: Radio.

James: Were you able to take and send Morse code?

Syverud: Oh yes.

James: That was easy?

Syverud: That was it.

James: That was with a key?

Syverud: Yep. Mm-hmm.

James: And did you have code books to work off from?

Syverud: Oh yes, we had to encode every message that you wanted to send, and when we were promoted – our crew was promoted to – went up [unintelligible] England – and we were gonna be a lead crew. Then we had special equipment, and then I had to send the bomb strike message, the conditions – flying conditions – fighter attacks, and so on. Then I had to radio it back to headquarters.

James: They sent this to you by air – through - by radio?

Syverud: Mm-hmm.

James: Yeah, and then you just distributed it among the flight.

Syverud: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

James: Generally, how long were your missions?

Syverud: The missions were – they ran – one time we bombed Calais, the sub base there in France, and that was only about a three-hour mission. But the one I was shot down on was – that would have been about an eight or nine hour trip. Berlin was about an eight hour trip.

James: During a week, how many days would you fly?

- Syverud: It depends on the conditions. Now, we got there in November. We flew our first one November the 16th to Kiel. The weather conditions in the wintertime were such that – they’re foggy – and it was the middle of February before we had our 15th mission in. So you know how often we flew. We would get up early, be out to the runways, and sit and wait, and then they’d scrub ‘em because of the weather conditions. It was the big problem – the weather – flying out of England in the wintertime, and I think the summertime would have been better – a lot better.
- James: Sure. Did you have any replacements come into your ship, or did you have the same crew all the time?
- Syverud: I got the same crew all the time. Our navigator went to headquarters, and then we got a new navigator. And then when we went to the Pathfinders, we got that promotion, we added two men. We had special equipment, so we had two more men – so we had 12 men in our crew at that time.
- James: And you started – your first mission was in what month of, uh –
- Syverud: November 16th of –
- James: ‘44?
- Syverud: ’43. We went to Kiel.
- James: Right. So, tell me what you did on D-Day.
- Syverud: On D-Day, we didn’t even know it was D-Day, because we were prisoners then.
- James: Oh, you never got that far.
- Syverud: No.
- James: OK. How many missions did you have before you were shot down?
- Syverud: Our crew was shot down on our 21st, it was my 23rd. I had flown two missions with another crew as a replacement radio operator, so I had two more, and that was May the 12th, 1944. That was about – it would have been about 3 weeks before they invaded.
- James: Right. Up until that time, you had no sort of gear problems with your plane, or?
- Syverud: Oh yeah, we did.
- James: You did? Were you shot up pretty badly a couple of times?
- Syverud: Yeah, we had one time we were shot up so bad that they scrapped the plane – they used it for parts and we were issued another plane.

- James: How'd you get it home?
- Syverud: A lot of difficulty.
- James: It was? It was hard for the pilot to fly?
- Syverud: Yeah, mm-hmm. If you notice, I had a picture there of one plane that we –
- James: Saw that.
- Syverud: That happened because we came in the – we had been flying quite a bit – and I was calling off the airspeed to the pilot, and I told him to circle, he'd never make it – and still a plane on the runway. And he set it down, and we hit the plane before they got off the runway.
- James: Before it got off?
- Syverud: Mm-hmm. And I asked him why, and he said he was so tired, so exhausted, he couldn't pull the plane back up again. And just sat it right in. We were lucky [unintelligible]
- James: Never got out?
- Syverud: No. One of the missions – they had the bombing week when we were supposed to knock the German Air Force out of the air, and our headquarters – they seemed like they wanted to tell the Germans that we were gonna do it – and they sent up their air force and we had ours out there on the 24th, we sent up 25 planes – we lost 13, but we shot down 21, so I guess that's a pretty good stand.
- James: Did you have a chance to do much shooting?
- Syverud: Not as a radio operator. I flew a couple missions as the top turret gunner.
- James: You did?
- Syverud: Yeah, I enjoyed that.
- James: Betcha that was different, wasn't it?
- Syverud: You bet. You bet. That was interesting. When I went out to Leipzig on the 12th of May and we took a hit on the bomb run – and we were flying number two – and it threw our plane into a steep bank to the left, and of course the fire mission happened to be going right when they ran the bomb run – so by the time we got straightened out, we were miles behind them. And when we have one bomber, fighters always attack it, and that was no exception. They came out of the sun and knocked out our number four engine on the first pass. Second pass, they hit us someplace in the bomb bay area, and we started on fire.
- James: On fire?

- Syverud: Yeah.
- James: So, this is jump time?
- Syverud: That was jump time. And it's not an easy thing –
- James: So that was your first parachute jump?
- Syverud: First time I'd even tried.
- James: Was that a surprise?
- Syverud: I was surprised – I had talked to a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne, and I asked him, “What should I do?” And he told me to leave my goggles on and leave my oxygen mask on – anything for protection – be sure I wore my gloves – and watch out for the high tension electrical lines and I don't know what you're supposed to do, because you couldn't steer those chutes at all. And be careful on the water. And they said if you land on a tree, cross your legs. And I hit the biggest tree in Germany, I think. I got hooked way in the top, and as I hung there, I could see two of our guys running in the woods, and I thought if I could get out of this tree, I could join them. And then I looked the other way and two of the guys were laying there and they weren't moving, and I decided I wanted to go help them.
- James: How did you get out of your chute?
- Syverud: I had to swing back and forth until I could get my legs caught onto a bigger branch, unhooked my chute from the harness, and then shimmied down the –
- James: I see, you weren't injured?
- Syverud: Yeah, my back and neck at that time. And I had been hit in the leg, but I hadn't realized it until the day after. It appeared that part of the leg had blown into my – smack in my leg. It was nothin'.
- James: So, everybody got down?
- Syverud: Yeah, everybody got down, and I went over to the other two guys and two civilians came, and one of 'em was pretty nasty, the other one seemed to have a cooler head and he –
- James: Where were you? In Germany?
- Syverud: Oh yeah, we just hit the bomber – strike was on Leipzig and we got hit on the bomb run.
- James: Oh, that's pretty far east.

- Syverud: Yeah, that's a way. So I went across to the other side and one of the guys laying there was the bombardier, Lt. Hasselback – it was obvious he had a broken back. And the other guy – it was the tail gunner, Walt Chamberlain – and he had a – his leg was broken. So I kept trying to get a stretcher, and they didn't understand "stretcher," and all of a sudden it dawned on me to try "litter." And when I said "litter" they understood what I meant, and somebody went and got one and they got him into a house, and I never saw him after until 38 years later. But I saw him a lot while I'd recovered. We never contacted each other.
- James: [unintelligible] made it through, though?
- Syverud: Oh yeah.
- James: They were captured also, then?
- Syverud: Oh yeah. Mm-hmm.
- James: So when did your captors arrive, here?
- Syverud: About ten minutes.
- James: After you got those guys in the house?
- Syverud: Yeah. And I knew – I wasn't gonna go out of the house. There was no point in me going out because there was too many civilians.
- James: So you just sat there in the house and waited?
- Syverud: I stood there trying to help these guys – make these guys as comfortable as I could. And a German soldier came in, and he commandeered two bicycles and I rode ahead of him – he wouldn't let me ride next to him – I had to ride ahead of him, and he put me in a jail in a small town. There, by the way, I met the first – well, it must have been slave laborers because the cell was just dark, and there was rats, and you could hear – and one little opening above and someone handing me two bagels through that little opening. And I assume it must have been some slave laborer, somebody. Then I was moved into a jail where I met the pilot [unintelligible]. And then the next morning they took us to Frankfurt for the interrogation.
- James: By train? Or car, or truck?
- Syverud: Truck.
- James: So you got in the room and they said what?
- Syverud: "We're putting you down in solitary confinement in dark – in the basement." And I think I was there for five days. I had no idea of knowing, but I just checked the dates when we got back out and found out what day it was. And they kept asking me questions, over and over, the same

questions. They wanted information about that pathfinder equipment on that B-24, and I wasn't about to tell 'em.

James: You said they kept you in solitary – how did they ask you questions?

Syverud: They kept bringin' me up. And [unintelligible] man that spoke perfect English, and he was, by the way, from Freemont, Nebraska, and in Germany interrogated prisoners of wars.

James: That's where he's from, is –

Syverud: Freemont. And that's where my base had been – in Nebraska.

James: How do you think – how did he come from [unintelligible] German army?

Syverud: He knew – he said he went back there for a visit and got caught, but that was the story that they said all the time.

James: I remember it happened to –

Syverud: I had my doubts about it because he was a Nazi.

James: But he was pleasant to you?

Syverud: He was alright. He always made it a point to be eating all the time – every time I went in.

James: I can tell – that was a psychological –

Syverud: Yeah, and that was their idea. Keep you in the dark and then bring you out, and then he was gonna be my friend and then I was gonna talk and.

James: Information for food, and –

Syverud: I gave him the 16132061 over and over and over again.

James: Now that – explain that to me.

Syverud: Well, all we were supposed to do is give our name, rank, and serial number, and I just kept repeating that serial number until he finally – if I'd ask him a question, he said I'd know all about that 16132061. But I made it a point I wasn't going to tell him any. So after 5 days, I was released and—

James: And then what did they do with you?

Syverud: They put us in a boxcar, about 40 of us in a boxcar. And I think it was about three days and nights – we went to Poland.

James: Poland?

Syverud: Mm-hmm. Stalag Luft IV.

James: [unintelligible]

Syverud: We had, I think there was 96 hundred – 9 thousand, six hundred –

James: 96 of what?

Syverud: 96 hundred in that camp. Almost ten thousand. And we were one of the first to get there – it was a relatively new camp, and we were about the first to get there – and when we left, I think there was 96 hundred, I'm not sure.

James: Were your crewmates there?

Syverud: I saw two of 'em.

James: Saw two of 'em.

Syverud: And then I got moved to another compound. I was laying on the floor – sleeping on the floor then. They completed the other compound and I was one of the people that was moved over there, so I never saw my crewmates again. I was all alone, and –

James: So, did they give you something to eat, now and then?

Syverud: Oh yeah. They gave us – our rations seemed like it was a potato and a couple of slices of bread a day. And once in a while they would bring in some horse meat. One day they brought in a leg from a horse. You could tell it was a horse. The hoof was still on it, but the meat was all cut off. And they let us boil that in big kettles –

James: Soup!

Syverud: And soup – and the leaves off the cabbage that they didn't want. But it was food. But it was about two months when the first Red Cross parcels came in.

James: [unintelligible] May, and it was about July.

Syverud: July. It was in the middle of the summer.

James: Everybody got a Red Cross parcel?

Syverud: Oh no, they split it one parcel for three men.

James: One per three.

- Syverud: Yeah, and we would split the parcel – the cheese and the spam and what have you in three pieces and it was –
- James: A treat!
- Syverud: It was a *real* treat. It was a real treat. And we had cigarettes in it. The cigarette companies managed to keep our habits going. But we could trade cigarettes for food with the German guards – some of the German guards.
- James: Oh, really. What could you get in return?
- Syverud: Oh sometimes they would bring in a piece of sausage, some bread, and that's everything we'd trade for. I traded cigarettes. I knew – I met a guard – his name was Han Soap and he told me that we were going to be walking someday. And I said "I tell you what, I'll give you cigarettes for a backpack." And I forget how many cigarettes I gave him for the backpack, and it was, when he brought it, he had to sneak in – this man was an elderly gentleman, real nice man. His two kids had been killed on the Russian front. And he brought this backpack – and in the backpack he had a scarf that must have been six feet long – wool. And he says "You're gonna need it when, if we start walkin' in the wintertime, because the Russians are coming, and you'll be moved." So we went along and it was just boredom, but we had some fellas and we finally got a chess set. We had one, and then there was teaching guys how to play chess. And we had a couple of guys that could speak French – one that could speak French and one could speak very good English. And I never saw the man who could speak Spanish. But we had Spanish, French, and German classes. It was something to do. And there was one man, he was an artist, and if we coulda had some paints – it's too bad he couldn't have gotten some supplies. He was very good. But that's what occupied our time.
- James: Did anybody manage to smuggle a radio in?
- Syverud: Yes. The radio came in Red Cross parcels piece by piece. They were marked in some coded way. So we made sure that when we got one coded number on that parcel, that went to the same person every time a parcel came in. And the pieces of the radio were hidden in everything imaginable.
- James: Like what?
- Syverud: It was in a bar of soap – pieces in a bar of soap. In a cheese – little box of cheese that we got – inside of the cheese. We got a can of powdered milk – it was in that. But who had the radio, I had no idea who had that, naturally. But they would make out a news release that would – a man would come around and read it to us whenever we got up – and it came from BBC out of London.
- James: Well that was nice.
- Syverud: Mm-hmm. But we had a way of knowing what was going on because somebody was getting shot down and they were bringing him in. And each time we got somebody new in the camp, we

found out about the invasion, we found out where the lines were, where the Russians were, and we found out what was happening in the Pacific. So that kept us up to date.

James: Did anybody get sick?

Syverud: Oh yeah.

James: I mean other than just diarrhea that everybody gets.

Syverud: They –

James: No typhus or typhoid?

Syverud: Not until after we got out on the march – then the real illnesses start showing up. I have a copy of Dr. Kaplan's testimony that he gave to the war crimes commission, and he tells of the different illnesses that the guys have. We had two guys that were shot for no reason at all – and they shot from the guard towers.

James: What do you mean, "no reason?"

Syverud: They wanted to let us know who was in charge.

James: You mean they just picked two in the group who were out in yard getting their exercise?

Syverud: One man walked too close to the guard rail along the outside – matter of fact, I think he touched it – and they shot him. And one man stuck his head out too far out of the window – it was real hot, very hot – and he was inside and leaned out too far, apparently, and that's against the rules to climb out the window, but. We had our cemetery there. I think we had the first year there was 8 or 9 that died that were buried at that cemetery.

James: Were you allowed to grow anything?

Syverud: No, no. When we were staying at the officer's camp, Stalag Luft IV, my pilot said they had tomato plants, and that's the only thing which one of them plant –

James: Now tell me about your folks – your folks hear that you were a prisoner relatively soon?

Syverud: No, it was about 5 – 5, 6 days afterwards.

James: Got a card saying you're a prisoner?

Syverud: They got a telegram on July the 5th saying that I was a prisoner. They had heard my name over the broadcast. And I got the telegram – I still have the telegram that told you. And then some lady would sit – she had a short-wave radio – and she would take down the names of every prisoner that she heard, and then she would call the parents.

James: That was nice.

Syverud: Yeah, she called my mother about 2 o'clock in the morning one night and said she had heard my name over the – that I was alive, which was a big elephant – my mother paid a terrible price. I think – it seemed like when I got off the train here in Madison, my parents met me and it seemed like my mother had aged 15, 20 years. Unbelievable. But our prison life there was just boredom, is what it was. Of course, you're always talking about food and thinking about food.

James: No reading material available?

Syverud: We got – later on we got Bibles and that sort of thing, but few books.

James: People from home send things in? Could they send food in to you?

Syverud: My parents, after I got home, they said they had mailed 6 parcel, but I got none. I got none. I got no letters from them, and they said they mailed constantly.

James: None of the parcels ever got to you.

Syverud: None of the parcels.

James: Somebody ate 'em. Ate it up.

Syverud: [laughs] Somebody beat me to 'em.

James: Right. Yeah.

Syverud: But long about Christmas, uh –

James: '44.

Syverud: '44. We had gotten band instruments.

James: I'm sorry?

Syverud: Band instruments. Saxophones, and clarinets, and trumpets.

James: The Germans brought 'em in?

Syverud: No, the Red Cross.

James: The Red Cross did.

Syverud: I think they shoulda sent us food instead.

James: Food, yeah.

Syverud: But out of ten thousand, or nine thousand men, we knew how many musicians we had, and they sent us the Glenn Miller sheet music –

James: Oh, how nice.

Syverud: And they put on a concert that you'd swear was Glenn Miller's Orchestra.

James: I'll bet, I'll bet.

Syverud: But after the first of the year, we could see at night – we could see red flashes towards the east.

James: And you pretty far into – you were into Poland.

Syverud: We were in Poland.

James: So they're going to be on top of you very quickly now.

Syverud: And the guards were getting panicky.

James: I'll bet.

Syverud: And they – because it was death if they were caught.

James: No question.

Syverud: I didn't realize it, but they were moving guys out of one of the other compounds. They were sending them out by train, and I didn't realize it. That's when Han Soap told me, he said, "Be ready, you're going to walk."

James: Right.

Syverud: And so I – along about – well, the 6th of February, they got us out and lined us up outside, and they told 'em we were going to walk. And there was hardly any notice.

James: Any what?

Syverud: Any notice of any kind. And we started walking. They said we were gonna walk three days, and they said they – you had bombed the railroads – you have to walk three days to get where they hadn't bombed. That walk turned out to be six hundred miles in eighty-six days of just constant walking.

James: 600 miles in 86 days.

Syverud: Right. Mm-hmm. On the 10th of February, we got up and started to walk and it was raining – the temperature dropped and it turned into plain sleet. And as the – by noon, we had just a flat-

out blizzard. And the walking was very difficult – some fellas had fallen. I know one fella fell and broke a wrist, and with no medical care, this was bad news with the bruises and as banged up as we got. But the temperature kept dropping and it was just unbelievably cold. And every barn we came to was full so we kept on going.

James: Full of soldiers? Prisoners.

Syverud: Prisoners.

James: From other camps?

Syverud: From our camps, and others. They had just went into a barn and the guards just didn't want to be out in that kind of weather, so they kept 'em –

James: They just let 'em sit there, and –

Syverud: They just let 'em sit, and we wound up – walked till dark and they set us in an open field and we just had to sit down. And we piled on each other, 25, 30 guys would pile on top of each other and then we would rotate, and that was how we could keep somebody from freezing to death in there.

James: Did you get any food at all?

Syverud: No, nothin'. They wouldn't let us start a fire because they said the Russian Air Force would be right on us in a hurry – and so they wouldn't let us start a fire. And it was just one of the unbelievable – I was really surprised the next morning that somebody hadn't froze to death or all were sick or something. It's surprising. I think somebody was watching over us, and we made it through that night.

James: Nobody had any gloves?

Syverud: Some did, some didn't. I didn't have any with the backpack – I was able to put my hands in my pockets. But I think everybody had frostbite. And I checked – made a check, and I checked on how cold it was, and I did some research, and Richard Allen, he was the vice chairman of the International Red Cross, and he was giving a speech in Brooklyn, New York, and he said temperatures were down to thirty below zero in the area we were. And I believe it. I believe it. It was unbelievably cold.

James: If you got to a barn, at least you had a little warmth, in a barn.

Syverud: Oh, you'd put a hundred men in a barn, and it wasn't bad as far as cold. But it's the food problem and the blisters –

James: You couldn't get any food from the farm that you would stay in?

Syverud: You'd be shot if you stole any food from a farm.

- James: Well that isn't something new.
- Syverud: Yeah, and we always – we stole eggs if we could find any eggs. One guy stole a chicken, and he couldn't do anything with it. The guards would – if you tried to clean the chicken – that's sort of a dead giveaway.
- James: Right.
- Syverud: But what we had – the big problem, then, in the wintertime – we had the snow that we could eat. Clean snow. When spring came and we had runoffs, then if you drank any of that water or ate that snow after that, you were asking for big trouble – which I did one time, and I never had such stomach cramps. It was just – stomach cramps and diarrhea.
- James: So when did the guards leave you?
- Syverud: Oh, they stayed with us. We were the bargaining chips. And the guys started having swollen feet and swollen legs and that was a big problem. But we kept walking – kept walking, and we got to the Elbe River, and when we crossed the Elbe River, we were in Holland, and it was nice to have people that liked you. They tried to get food to us, and they were actually punished for getting food to us. Elderly women, especially were trying to. And one guy gave me a – I better not talk about it.
- James: Why?
- Syverud: It's too - [difficulty speaking] – too painful. I'll try. I got a sandwich with me – I hadn't seen 'em. They had turned around and they were heading back towards us and we waited while this column went through. And this guy had a half a sandwich – had a sandwich, and it was cut in half, and he handed half of it to me, and I'd never seen him. So then, we were walking in – back into Germany for some weird reason.
- James: Oh my God.
- Syverud: And what they were looking for – the German guards were trying to surrender to Americans. They were looking for Americans, and of course we were too. And we thought, "Boy, we're in trouble," because the English planes had complete control over the air – over the skies, and they were strafing anything that moved. And here, we're walking with – retreating
- James: [unintelligible in background] – what side you're on?
- Syverud: And we sat there one afternoon and watched them strafe an ammo train – obviously it was an ammo train. And our fears were realized when they flew right over us, we dove into the ditch, and they fired rockets, and they hit the group that was ahead of us.
- James: Oh my.

- Syverud: And they killed 29 POW's one week before the war ended. It was a pitiful thing. I got put on the burial detail.
- James: Did they just put 'em in one big hole and dump them all in?
- Syverud: One big hole and dumped 'em in. They took six of us, marched us up on a hill – on the side of a hill where they dug this slit trench – the guards pulled back the top of those covers – 29 men – 29 bodies, body parts of 29 men.
- James: Sure. Did you retrieve their dog tags?
- Syverud: Most of 'em – the Germans took the dog tags. They said they would –
- James: [unintelligible]
- Syverud: No, the ones that I picked up were blown apart, mostly, and [pause]
- James: Well, then, back to the end, and then your German [this was barely audible] –
- Syverud: We went back to the barn that night – I don't remember anything after that burial detail – what happened for a couple of days. I was told that they went back to the barn that night and told the guards, "This is it," we weren't walking no more. We were not goin' out.
- James: How did you know that the war was near the end?
- Syverud: Well, we could see the Germans retreating, and you could hear the front lines.
- James: But you knew there were Americans there?
- Syverud: We didn't know where the Americans were, but we knew there were English, because we could see the Spitfires. And we stayed in that barn for about there or four days, and an English paratroop outfit came in and got us. They came in real early in the morning while it was still dark. And when we looked out of the barn, here the guards stood without their guns.
- James: They were standing there?
- Syverud: They were standing there.
- James: Did the paratroopers shoot 'em?
- Syverud: No. Hmm-mm. The ones that – the Americans – I had no desire to get any revenge or anything, but I understand that they killed a couple of the guards, but, our guys killed 'em with their own bayonets. And we went – started walking at the guards – the English told us we could leave, and which way to go, and we started walking. And five of us says "Where are the Americans?" and they said "Down the road a piece," and we decided, well, we wanted to go to the Americans, and

it was ten miles, but we walked it. And it was something to see the American flag – it was – for the first time.

James: I'll bet, I'll bet.

Syverud: And get a slice of white bread and butter and some milk.

James: Right, I'll bet your [unintelligible]

Syverud: [groans with delight].

James: How many were in your group, the Americans?

Syverud: Five of us.

James: Five.

Syverud: Bill Hein from Pennsylvania, Bill Nixon from New Jersey, Danny Sull from Massachusetts, and Carl Schick from West Virginia. And we walked the whole trip together, we helped each other, and I think that's what helped.

James: Keeping your sprits up.

Syverud: Right. Encouraged each other. We realized then that we couldn't finish the slice of bread and milk – we knew that our stomachs must be in shape – in – that must be bad shape. But they told us at the mess tent to go take a shower. They said, "We can't stand the smell!"

James: [laughs]

Syverud: But, we did, and I had to soap my left sock off my foot. It had become part of my foot – it seemed like it just – same sock for three months and it had – I stayed overnight at the first aid station while they doctored that foot that was in bad shape.

James: Was it very swollen?

Syverud: Yeah, my ankles were swollen for some reason or another. I found out afterwards, when I talked to medics and doctors here at the Veterans Hospital, and they said that was a form of something that was leading up to heart conditions. And I think they call it pulima?

James: Pellagra.

Syverud: Pellagra. Yeah.

James: It's a Vitamin B deficiency.

Syverud: Yep. And I know, we couldn't get our shoes on – I kept my shoes on for three weeks.

- James: They had you there for a bit – did they give you a new uniform?
- Syverud: No. They didn't have any! So many Americans had gone through that there wasn't any Americans, so. I had a Canadian top and an English bottom, and I wore that for a month till I got to Chicago, and then kept it.
- James: Where did you go from this first contact with the Americans? Where'd they take you?
- Syverud: Camp Lucky Strike.
- James: In Le Havre?
- Syverud: In Le Havre.
- James: And you spent a few days there?
- Syverud: Yeah. I spent – I think it must have been ten days – ten, twelve days. Yeah.
- James: Getting used to eating again and all that?
- Syverud: Egg nog. We were –
- James: Did you write home, or?
- Syverud: Yeah, I sent a telegram – cabled home.
- James: Cabled home.
- Syverud: Mm-hmm. Some of the guys went back to England and flew home with their group. I said my flying days were over, and I was not going up again.
- James: [laughter]
- Syverud: And I haven't.
- James: So you decided that was enough.
- Syverud: That was enough.
- James: So you took a ship home?
- Syverud: Yeah, I went on an oil tanker that had been hauling fuel oil – or diesel oil – to Russia, and they said "We're gonna go to New York City and have a big reception," and when we got three days from there, they changed their minds, and we went to Newport in Virginia. And we were met

with a six piece orchestra, and had coffee and donuts. And I remember the song they played, and it was “Don’t Fence Me In.”

James: Ha!

Syverud: And we were there just long enough to get on a train for Camp Grant, Illinois.

James: How many were on that ship – that oiler that came into Newport?

Syverud: I don’t – I can’t remember – I –

James: A hundred guys? Or two hundred guys? Or five hundred?

Syverud: I’d say, you know, two-hundred fifty. We were packed in there pretty good. I found out when I got into the hold of the ship that I was claustrophobic, that I couldn’t take being penned up down there, and so I got permission – I and Carl Schick got permission to go –

James: On deck?

Syverud: I slept on the deck for thirteen days in beautiful weather.

James: That was nice.

Syverud: That was nice, yeah.

James: It was springtime.

Syverud: Yeah, and that was a beautiful trip home. But we went to Camp Grant and got there, and they didn’t have uniforms.

James: [laughter] Well it’s difficult.

Syverud: So they said we could wait – the Air Force clothes – or they would give us \$200 and you could go to Chicago to buy your clothes. And they gave us an 89 day furlough, and I didn’t debate any more than a second what I –

James: [unintelligible]

Syverud: So I took the money and went to Chicago, and I bought the uniforms, and a bunch of us stayed in Chicago that night. And we all went to the railroad station the next morning and we all went our separate ways. And I have not talked to any of those guys, I have not written to any of ‘em. We just wanted to put it behind us.

James: Good. These are the five guys that walked together.

Syverud: Mm-hmm.

James: And you have not seen or heard from *any* of them since?

Syverud: Hmm-mm.

James: I thought perhaps you shared your addresses when you were on the hike.

Syverud: We did.

James: You lost it?

Syverud: No. I still have 'em.

James: Oh.

Syverud: We just didn't want to talk about it. We knew we'd be talking about it, and we just wanted to forget about it. My crew went 38 years before we talked to each other.

James: You must be surprised that they were still – everybody was still alive.

Syverud: Everybody was still alive in 1982, when we first got together.

James: How did they find everybody?

Syverud: The pilot just kept on B.C. Avery, the pilot, he kept on – I suppose through the Air Force, the military and so on.

James: So when you got home, did you use your G.I. Bill?

Syverud: No.

James: What did you do?

Syverud: A friend of mine was in the insurance business which he had down in Illinois – Springfield.

[tape stopped]

Syverud: We got back – I got discharged out at the hospital – I was in the hospital. Oh, I was sick – and I was in the hospital off and on at Truax that 89 day furlough, and I never did leave here. I was in and out of the hospital at Truax.

James: They were treating you for what?

Syverud: A stomach problem.

James: What was the diagnosis, do you recall?

Syverud: They said ulcers.

James: Ulcers.

Syverud: But in 1957 it got so bad that I went to the hospital and they said we're going to have an exploratory operation, and they removed half of my stomach at that time, all because I had – they said there had been so many scar tissues that had healed, and I don't know what. But, however, three years ago, a doctor at the Veterans Hospital said "Do you mind if we make a test?" And they tested my stomach, and they found that I had bacteria, and they said "that's been in there for fifty-some years." So I took treatments for that, and it helped my stomach. Now I'm fine. But it wasn't until three years ago.

James: And did you join any veterans organizations?

Syverud: I belong to the VFW, and I belong to the American Ex-Prisoners of War, and the Badger Chapter here in Madison.

James: Is that an active chapter?

Syverud: Yes, we have dinner – we have lunch every other month.

James: Very good. How big a group are we lookin' at?

Syverud: Well, it's getting smaller and smaller.

James: [laughs] Is that right? But roughly -

Syverud: We used to have 40.

James: That's pretty good. And how far away did these guys come from?

Syverud: They come from as far as Platteville – one man comes from – but now that we've gotten older – we had a meeting, and there was eight women and five men. So it's – but we're hanging in there. We're still having our meetings.

James: Sure. That's nice. Most of them Air Force?

Syverud: No.

James: Most of them Army?

Syverud: They're with 106th Division.

James: Yeah that's the ASTP boys.

Syverud: That were taken at the Bulge.

James: Yeah, there's a lot of 'em around here.

Syverud: Yeah, mm-hmm. And there's quite a few – I'd say 50 Air Force.

James: Yeah, I've interviewed about – I think it's 12 guys who were POWs.

Syverud: Mm-hmm.

James: Most of them were airmen. Most of the POWs are airmen.

Syverud: Mm-hmm.

James: But some of them –

Syverud: It was 80 some thousand – of course they were from the 15th Air Force in Italy, and the 8th Air Force in Germany. I think there was about 80,000 Air Force [unintelligible]. The 8th Air Force we had 26,000 men that lost their lives, and then nearly half the men flying there. I think that's a pretty high ratio compared to any organization then.

James: Other than submarines, it's probably the highest.

Syverud: Yeah, it's high. But that first Berlin raid they had – we lost 80 planes, and that's 800 men. And that's usually a ratio of 4 out of the 10 lose their lives when they come down, and –

James: So did they give you some medals? Air Medal, I see?

Syverud: Air Medal, and –

James: And the D.F.C [Distinguished Flying Cross]?

Syverud: And I'm contesting what they did – and I guess we'll find out. Because they obviously gave the wrong medal, and I don't know –

James: What about your disability? Did they award you any disability?

Syverud: 100 percent. But that – 60% for my stomach, that service connected.

James: And?

Syverud: And my heart, because of that pellagra. And I had a heart bypass 14 years ago.

James: I see.

- Syverud: And their service connected on arthritis. I have it completely in my spine and my neck.
- James: Mm-hmm.
- Syverud: And both hips. Actually I'm 180 percent.
- James: [laughter] If you add up all the percentages?
- Syverud: Right.
- James: Oh my goodness.
- Syverud: I lost the circulation in my legs, I got [unintelligible] to get circulation back in my legs, so there's many problems, but I have the idea that it came from the diet that we were in.
- James: Diet and the cold weather. Cold, wet weather.
- Syverud: Mm-hmm.
- James: How about your work? What work did you do?
- Syverud: I wound up coming back here and I sold advertising – Yellow Page advertising – and then they didn't have a hospitalization insurance. And I've had a rider above my stomach and my bill and my hospitalization insurance was so high, I had to go someplace with group insurance, and I went to the Post Office, and retired at the Post Office.
- James: Oh, well that's a nice job.
- Syverud: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. That was a smart move.
- James: It was, yeah.
- Syverud: Yeah, they have good retirement benefits.
- James: So you got married after you got home?
- Syverud: I got home – I got discharged on the 14th of October, and I got married on the 25th of October. And we just had our 55th wedding anniversary.
- James: You raise some kids?
- Syverud: Got two boys. One is up in Ashland – he is superintendent of the university farm up there. And the other one is full time at the Air National Guard.
- James: Oh really?

Syverud: Mm-hmm. And my grandson was Air Force – he’s out of the military – he’s Air Force.

James: How did you let him do that? [jokingly] You should have talked him out of that!

Syverud: I told him not to fly!

James: Right!

[laughter]

Syverud: I’m very proud of the fact that I can say this, and I honestly say it: For a twenty year old that went in the military, went through all the tech school, visited fourteen foreign countries, flew 23 missions – 22 and a half missions – and made that walk – I still think I was privileged to have served my country.

James: Yes sir. OK. I can’t think of anything else to ask you.

Syverud: That’s it.

James: Thank you for coming.

Syverud: I wish I could have told you –

James: You did fine.

[end of recording]