

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JAMES SEVERA
Radio Operator, Army Air Corps, 8th Air Force, World War II
2002

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Severa, James (1922-2005). Oral History Interview, 2002.

Approximate length: 50 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, [Miles] James Severa, a native of Chicago, Illinois, discusses his service during World War II in the US Army Air Corps from November 1942 to October 1945, a radio operator in the 92nd Bombardment Group, 8th Air Force in the European theatre. A night student at the Chicago campus of Northwestern University majoring in advertising and marketing, Severa entered military service in November 1942, being inducted at Camp Grant in Rockford. Imbued with the glamor of the Army Air Corps, he joined up and was sent for basic training at the Air Corps base in Big Spring, Texas. He became acquainted with Madison when he was sent to Truax Field's school for radio operation and repair; and he honed the skills learned there repairing units at Selman Field in Monroe, Louisiana. Signing up for combat crews, he attended gunnery school in Laredo, Texas, the summer of 1943. A buck sergeant, training for crew, he met his actual crew of six officers and eight enlisted men at phase training in Ephrata, Washington, and took his position as radio operator.

Severa's crew was a heavy bombardment replacement crew that upon arrival in England in November was stationed at Podington Airbase and attached to the 8th Air Force in the wake of heavy losses sustained in an October 1943 raid. He states that the experience of war, gained through his crew's first mission around the Christmas holidays, was what he had been led to expect from his training. On his eighth mission, February 4, 1944, his B-17 of Squadron 327, damaged by antiaircraft fire, stayed aloft long enough for Severa, on pilot's orders, to bail over Belgium. His German captors took him and three others from his crew by train to the same rail yard they had bombed. They were then transferred to the Wetzlar interrogation camp outside Frankfurt, Germany. Stalag Luft VI in East Prussia was his address from February 1944 until Christmastime 1944; his parents not apprised of his status until August. Coal boat next took the POWs to Poland, and a train to Kiefheide where began a three to four mile run to Stalag Luft IV, an ordeal Severa likens to the Bataan Death March in the Philippines. He conveys the sparseness of living conditions at this camp in the Pomerian area of Germany; relating his wounding in camp by rifle butt to the knee lending him a lifelong limp.

In advance of enclosing Russian troops, POWs were entrained for Moosburg in Southern Bavaria, Germany, the location of Stalag 7A, Germany's largest POW camp. Severa speaks of how the men kept informed amidst the misinformation delivered via the "Oversea Kid," a German-published, English-language four-page propaganda newspaper for POW camps. He reveals the nature of everyday life inside the camp; and what prompted a temporary breakup with his fiancée. A P-51 "Mustang" appeared in the skies

on April 29, 1945, flying over camp and dropping an American flag. The front gate being knocked down by a tank of the 14th Armored, liberation also brought a visit from General George Patton; years later the liberation moment, and Severa, memorialized in Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*. Bread doled out "tasted like angel food cake." From flight by C-47 to a staging "Cigarette Camp" in France to a Liberty ship home, Severa arrived in the States on June 8, 1945.

After a month in Florida, and time spent at home, he signed up with Air Transport Command as a radio operator, but instead the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan led to his mustering-out at Truax on October 28, 1945. Resuming his education, he entered the University of Wisconsin, as a freshman, in November 1945. He married, finished college, and started a family. Severa joined the American Legion, and is a former Chapter Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Badger Chapter. He was a longtime administrator at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Biographical Sketch:

James Severa (1922-2005) served during the Second World War, from November 1942 to October 1945, in the US Army Air Corps, a radio operator, attached to the 92nd Bombardment Group, 8th Air Force. Captured after the downing of his plane in February 1944, he was a POW for the duration of the war. After the war he worked in a clothing store, finished his education, and was on staff at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. A member of the American Legion, he was also a former Chapter Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Badger Chapter.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2002.

Transcribed by Colin Robinson, 2012.

Abstract by Jeff Javid, 2017.

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: I guess you can set that there. That should work. We need your approval to use any of the material that you've given us, any information and so forth.

Severa: You mean against me?

McIntosh: Yes, we can use it against you. At any rate, we need—

Severa: Well, I have to start out by saying that I was never a member of the Nazi Party. I was just following orders.

McIntosh: If you could sign in that empty space, please, Jim, right in that empty space. Then we can proceed with the proceedings.

Severa: I guess I better have a book.

McIntosh: There you go.

Severa: Oh boy.

McIntosh: Anywhere in that empty space. You have to run. Pretty hard there.

Severa: I'm sorry about that, I didn't know they put a line right at the end of it. [Pause] Well, we finally got our snow in **[the audio cassette tape begins here]** February.

McIntosh: Yeah, but maybe that'll be enough for awhile.

Severa: It's enough for me. I don't use it much for play anymore.

McIntosh: Okay, talkin' to Jim Severa. It's the 11th of February, 2002. Where were you born, sir?

Severa: I was born in Chicago, Illinois.

McIntosh: And when was that?

Severa: That was in October of 1920. What was that George [the Severas' cat]? '22 I guess it was.

McIntosh: '22?

Severa: Yeah, George no, no George. Joan [Mrs. Severa], will you call George? I think he wants to be on camera here.

McIntosh: And where were you on December 7th, 1941?

Severa: Oh, I was still in Chicago.

McIntosh: Doing what?

Severa: See, I grew up there.

McIntosh: Doing what?

Severa: Well, I was a student at the time at Northwestern University.

McIntosh: Just in general studies? L&S [Letters and Science] school?

Severa: No, I was in advertising and marketing.

McIntosh: Okay, University of Illinois-Chicago or—

Severa: Northwestern University.

McIntosh: Northwestern, I missed that.

Severa: Evanston, but I was on the Chicago campus.

McIntosh: Got it.

Severa: I had a job during the day at a lithographic shop and went to school at night.

McIntosh: Okay. So, you were registered for the draft by that time. So they had you on a deferment, or you were just waitin' to be—

Severa: No, I wasn't—

McIntosh: To be called up, or where were you left?

Severa: I couldn't register. I wasn't twenty years old then.

McIntosh: Aha. Okay.

Severa: I didn't become twenty until 1942.

McIntosh: '42.

Severa: And it was at the end of the year so—

McIntosh: Well, they registered draft people at eighteen.

Severa: I don't remember that. Maybe I was registered at eighteen.

McIntosh: I would think so, yes, 'cause I was, and I had started school, '41. Anyway, when did you enter the military?

Severa: In November of 1942.

McIntosh: Were you drafted, or did you join some—

Severa: No, I joined because I wanted to be in the Air Corps. You know, the guys with the silk scarves and goggles and helmets—

McIntosh: And girls.

Severa: That's right.

McIntosh: Lots of girls.

Severa: There were girls, too? I didn't know there were—

McIntosh: No, I mean you could get lots of girls with that scarf.

Severa: Oh, well, I 'spose the silk scarf did it, I think.

McIntosh: So, where did they send you for your basic training?

Severa: I went to Camp Grant, in Rockford [Illinois]. Actually, that wasn't basic. That was my induction camp.

McIntosh: Right. I was gonna say—

Severa: My basic training took place in Big Spring, Texas. Air Force had their own airbases, and it was a bombardier base, training base for bombardiers.

McIntosh: By that time did you—were you headed to be a bombardier right from the beginning?

Severa: No, I had no idea what I was going to be at that time because I knew I wanted to fly, and I used to kinda cheat on my eye exams so I could pass them. I memorized charts and then do 'em by rote when I got into the exam office, and I guess I fooled enough people so they said I could fly. They cleared me for air combat. So then I went to Gunnery School at Laredo, Texas [sound of something falling and breaking].

Joan: Oh.

Severa: Oh, I'm sorry dear. Was that my quarter collection?

Joan: No, that was the lid to my pretty little dish.

Severa: Oh.

Joan: Darn it.

McIntosh: So after Gunnery School, then where?

Severa: I went to Gunnery School in Laredo. When I graduated from there got my sergeant, buck sergeant, stripes, and course we were trained to shoot air to air and ground to air and moving base to moving targets and fixed base to moving targets with skeet and trap shooting and everything. And after that, then we went right into phase training. They sent us home for a little leave, and then we went into training for crews, and I got into heavy bombardment as a replacement crews for—see, the 8th Air Force had incurred quite a few losses by that time, by 1943. Matter of fact, the bomb group they attached us to was almost wiped out. They were the lead group on that [second] raid on Schweinfurt [Germany], what they called “Black Thursday” in October [14th] of '43. And we got over there in November.

McIntosh: Where'd you pick up your plane?

Severa: We never did. We went over on the [RMS] *Queen Mary*.

McIntosh: And when was that?

Severa: Our group commander was afraid to fly, I think, I don't know.

McIntosh: When did you go to England?

Severa: Went to England in November of '43.

McIntosh: And where in England were you stationed?

Severa: After I got assigned to an airbase it was in Podington, P-O-D-I-N-G-T-O-N. I was with the 92nd Bomb Group.

McIntosh: That was the next question. 92nd?

Severa: Mm-hm. George, will you please get down?

Joan: Oh, I put him out. I just didn't shut the door on him.

Severa: Why not? It's cold out.

Joan: George, you're going outside to stay.

Severa: Oh, no, you wouldn't do that, that's cruel.

Joan: He's all right.

Severa: He's only a cat.

McIntosh: Now your plane was a "17" [Boeing B-17, "Flying Fortress," heavy bomber]?

Severa: Mm-hm.

McIntosh: And that's where you met your crew the first time, right?

Severa: I met my crew in phase training in Ephrata, Washington. That's where they formed the crews, and then we virtually lived together after that. There were six enlisted men and four officers. I got the job as a radio operator because I went to school out here at Truax Field.

McIntosh: Oh, when did this fit in?

Severa: That was before I went to combat training. See, I went to Radio Operator and Repair School here, and when I graduated from there they sent me down to Monroe, Louisiana to Selman Field. Non-existent now, of course, and I worked on the line repairing, you know, tuning units of sets on AT-11s [Beechcraft twin engine trainer planes] and things like that. I got pretty bored with that so I figured when I found out there were openings for combat crews I signed up.

McIntosh: Where did this relate to Gunnery School?

Severa: Where?

McIntosh: I mean when. I'm out of synch here.

Severa: Oh, oh. Let's see, that would've been—I would think it would be probably in August or July of 1943.

McIntosh: So that was after Gunnery School?

Severa: I know it was hotter'n Hell in Laredo [Texas] at the time so it had to be summer [laughs].

McIntosh: You went to Radio School in Madison?

Severa: Yeah. I went from Lubbock [Texas] to Madison to Monroe, Louisiana and then to Laredo. In that chronology.

McIntosh: So, your assignment then when you got to England was as a radio operator.

Severa: Mm-hm. Yeah, that was my initial assignment.

McIntosh: Okay. When was your first mission, Jim?

Severa: The first mission was in December—

McIntosh: '43.

Severa: I would say probably, yeah, December '43. Probably about around Christmas holidays, somewhere 21st, 22nd somewhere in there.

McIntosh: And was that experience a surprise to you, or did it turn out approximately that you had envisioned it?

Severa: Surprised? No, I was there for a war [laughs]. I don't understand what your question was. Why would it be a surprise?

McIntosh: It's your first mission against the enemy.

Severa: Oh. No, I think things happened pretty much the way they said they were going to. We were shot at, and we fired back. We had caliber .50 machine guns, and I had a gun of my own in the radio room that was a—

McIntosh: I was gonna say—

Severa: [inaudible]—

McIntosh: Besides you were a radio operator you also were a gunner, right?

Severa: Yeah, right—

McIntosh: On one of the side openings?

Severa: No, I fired up through the roof. Took the hatch off and had a gun that would slide down on a cradle and would fire up and back about, oh,

maybe 120 degree azimuth [an angular measurement in a spherical coordinate system].

McIntosh: Was that a twin .50 or a single?

Severa: Single. No, the twins were in the tail and the ball turret and the upper turret. Those were all powered turret guns. Everybody with a handheld gun used a single .50.

McIntosh: Mm-hm. Where were you in relation to the turret above?

Severa: In relation?

McIntosh: You said you had twin .50s up on the tail and the ball turret, the gunner below.

Severa: The ball turret was below and behind me.

McIntosh: Right, and above was what you said your—

Severa: The top turret where the flight engineer sat was a power turret, and that was just behind the pilot and copilot's cockpit.

McIntosh: I understand that, and I'm tryin' to figure out where your position was.

Severa: Behind the ball turret. Between the ball turret and the waist gunners. You didn't take a trip of that, a tour of that B-17 this summer, did ya?

McIntosh: Not this summer, but I've been in [B-]17s and [B-] 24s—

Severa: The radio operator was right behind the bomb bay on a 17.

McIntosh: Okay. And so how many missions did you make?

Severa: I made eight before I was shot down.

McIntosh: You were shot down on your ninth mission?

Severa: On the eighth mission. We had dropped our bombs so I considered the mission complete. We bombed Frankfurt, the railroad yards at Frankfurt am Main.

McIntosh: Yup, been there. Okay, tell me about that day. How'd that go?

Severa: Oh, we had dropped our load and turned back with the group and got hit by some antiaircraft fire and lost a couple of engines, uh, eventually two

engines and couldn't keep up with the rest of the formation. So the deal is if you can't keep up, they leave you. They're not gonna jeopardize the whole outfit for one airplane or somethin' like that. So we were on our own for probably all across France, and the navigator took about a 270 [degree] heading which he thought would take him over the English Channel, and uh, we didn't quite make that. We had been losing altitude all the time, to the point where we were firing stuff over just to lighten the ship, you know, figuring we might be able to make it to England. So some of the things we threw out were defensive, and we couldn't protect ourselves. The German fighter Me-109s [Messerschmitt fighter planes] jumped on us because we were alone. That was their favorite tactic.

McIntosh: Mm-hm. Okay. [rattling noise]

Severa: We broke somethin' in here now, Joan.

McIntosh: God Almighty, how did that happen?

Joan: What?

Severa: I don't know, whatever it was got pulled off of that saucer there and dropped down onto the rug.

Joan: Is it wet? I think it was pretty much empty. Thank goodness it must have been empty. A wire broke it?

McIntosh: Yeah, I was movin' it forward and this—

Joan: Mh-hm.

McIntowh: Sorry about that.

Severa: Anything break?

Joan: No, and this was empty so it didn't even spill.

Severa: Oh. Gee, I was hopin' we could get the decorators in here before we left.

Joan: [laughs] Don't tempt me.

McIntosh: So, you got close to the [English] Channel?

Severa: We got to Belgium, Tournai, Belgium which is just across the line from Lille, France, and we were probably about 2000 feet above the ground. They were shootin' at us with rifles and everything else. Here, I mean, you could see farmers down there firin' at ya.

McIntosh: Farmers?

Severa: Yeah.

McIntosh: Belgian farmers?

Severa: That's right.

McIntosh: Why would they be firing at the people who are on their side?

Severa: Well, they probably were watched by the Germans, I don't know. I didn't try and figure it out. I just know that we were being shot at by people on the ground.

McIntosh: I'll be darned. Okay, so where did you come down?

Severa: Uh, in—just outside of Tournai.

McIntosh: Okay. In a field?

Severa: I've been contacted by people from there that think they identified, you know, parts of our ship and stuff and wanted to interview me, but I never bothered with it.

McIntosh: I see. The landing was okay?

Severa: I don't know, I jumped out. We abandoned the ship.

McIntosh: Oh, I missed that part, I thought you crash-landed.

Severa: No, no. No, we jumped out.

McIntosh: That's 2000 feet—

Severa: Barely got the chute open.

McIntosh: I was gonna say, at 2,000 feet—

Severa: At 2000 feet, you don't get—

McIntosh: That's a quick jump—

Severa: You sure as hell weren't countin' to ten, I can tell you.

McIntosh: No. The pilot decided he couldn't crash land it?

Severa: Yeah, he didn't think he'd make it to the Channel.

McIntosh: Right, but I didn't whether he could pick out a field.

Severa: Yeah, no, he gave us the order to bail out.

McIntosh: Everybody went?

Severa: Everybody but two, the navigator and the upper turret gunner who was a replacement, unfortunately. Both were killed in the plane.

McIntosh: And why didn't they jump?

Severa: They were dead.

McIntosh: They were dead from the, from the—

Severa: From the fire, the antiaircraft—

McIntosh: The antiaircraft that brought the plane down.

Severa: And machine gun fire from the planes.

McIntosh: That was my next question, who got wounded?

Severa: Yeah, I don't think anybody else were wounded in the plane. My wounds came from German Luftwaffe [air force] people after I was on the ground.

McIntosh: So, when you were hit by the antiaircraft fire, two of the guys got killed right away?

Severa: Well, yeah, but, I mean, I don't know what the chronology was. We were all pretty busy, and, uh, somebody said that I heard that "Waxy" got it. Now he was the navigator, Gordon, and "Waxy" got it and then Strickmatter got it.

Joan: Would you like a cup of coffee, Jim?

McIntosh: No, thank you.

Joan: No?

McIntosh: Okay.

Severa: So, uh—

McIntosh: So when you—

Severa: When we got out there were eight of us, anyway. Four with the underground—

Joan: But, you didn't know it for a long time, did you?

Severa: What's that?

Joan: You didn't know it till long after how many got out 'cause none of 'em were with you.

Severa: Well, eventually Anderson and Wilson and Cranford caught up with me, they were the four of us that were captured.

McIntosh: After you hit the ground, then what happened? Tell me about that.

Severa: Well, I was knocked out. I was fallin' pretty fast and rolled over on my back and must've hit my head on the ground or a rock or something, I don't know. And when I woke up there were people standing around me with rifles. And they were all Luftwaffe personnel so I found out that I was on the ends of one of the airbases that were—that were fighter base in Belgium. So that probably explains why the people on the ground were firing at me.

McIntosh: Where did they take you?

Severa: They took me to, eventually to an interrogation camp outside of Frankfurt. Rechslar, I guess it is. Or Weslar. Ah, Wetzlar, W-E-T-Z-L-E-R or somethin' like that, outside of the city of Frankfurt, which I had—took us down there by train from Belgium, and when we disembarked from the train, we could—we were in the very station that we—train station or bahnhof [German for train station] that we had bombed. So, the damage was pretty extensive. We were—we weren't too popular with the civilians down there. They called me a Chicago gangster 'cause I was from Chicago originally.

McIntosh: Were your mates with you still?

Severa: Was I what?

McIntosh: Were your mates still with you? Your crew members.

Severa: The three others that were captured were with me, yes, we were put together in Saint-Gilles prison in, in uh, Brussels [Belgium]. They moved

us to Brussels, and we were incarcerated there until they could arrange for transportation to take us down to an interrogation camp.

McIntosh: And tell me about that experience.

Severa: Well, we were—started with the usual questions about who you were, and where you're from, and so on, and then, as was the practice, because of their intelligence, they started telling me what happened to me. The idea being that, "What the hell, you might as well tell 'em what you know because they know more than you do about it". But it didn't work. We were told to give 'em name, rank and serial number, and that's what we stuck with. We didn't want to jeopardize anything else like where we were from or what base or anything.

McIntosh: Of course.

Severa: And, uh, then after that wound up in about three or four days, they sent us by train to East Prussia to a permanent camp they had just finished constructing.

McIntosh: Just a second. Hold the phone. Okay, it's still going.

Severa: Okay.

Joan: Ow [sneezing sound].

Severa: You all right in there?

Jean: Shadow was cuddling.

Severa: Oh.

McIntosh: So, then everybody went through that pretty good, nobody was picked on particularly? Everybody—rather boring in the interrogation camp?

Severa: Not that I know, we kinda compared notes on the train on the way down.

McIntosh: Sure, get your story straight.

Severa: Just pretty much got the stories the way they were.

McIntosh: Your pilot, was he put in a separate group elsewhere?

Severa: Well, he was never captured. He went with The Underground WWII resistance movement in several countries]. He got picked up by The Underground, and there were four people that were just shuttled from barn

to barn, you might say, tryin' to get to Spain so they could be returned. I found out much, much later that they didn't get out of Germany and France any sooner than we got out of POW camp. So they didn't get back to England any earlier even though they were with The Underground.

McIntosh: So, eventually they put you in an NCO prison camp, right?

Severa: That's right.

McIntosh: And that was, what, Luft, Stalag Luft?

Severa: VI.

McIntosh: VI, okay, and where was that?

Severa: As I say, it was in East Prussia, almost on the border with Lithuania. The Port of Memel [now Klaipėda, Lithuania].

McIntosh: You were there for how long?

Severa: From February of 1944 until, let's see, I think it was—probably May of '45. Then we were moved to Stalag IV and were there again until the Russian lines got close to us and that was about—oh no, we were recaptured in April of '45, what am I saying? So it had to be around the holidays, I think, was at the time we Stalag Luft VI. This is all fifty-eight years ago, it's a little hazy now.

McIntosh: So it was from February of '44 till Christmas of '44.

Severa: Round Christmas of '45, yeah.

McIntosh: Christmas '45, and then they moved you to VI?

Severa: Moved us to IV, from VI. And IV was also a new camp. We were in what they called a "D-Lager", or the fourth lager that they built, compound. And there were quite a few people that were with me that were all moved by these coal boats from VI on the Baltic [Sea].

McIntosh: By boat, that's unusual.

Severa: Yup.

McIntosh: By boat.

Severa: They were really coal boats, is all they were, just freighters with open holes that they dumped coal in. And that's where we stayed. It took about a week.

McIntosh: Your accommodations, your accommodations pretty plain and simple on both those prison camps? Wooden barracks, wooden floors?

Severa: We moved by train most of the time. See, I was on this march to IV from—after we docked they took us to a little town called Kiefheide, or at least that was the name on the train station. I understand they renamed it Gross Tychow now [although close to Gross Tychow, Kiefheide is now Podborsko]. It's in Poland. At that time, it was in the Pomeranian area of Germany.

McIntosh: I see.

Severa: And they had a little, red-headed captain who was training air cadets for the Luftwaffe, and he decided to teach them how to treat the enemy, I guess. So they double-timed us. They literally ran us for the three-and-a-half, four miles that we went to camp from where we got off of the trains. And a lot of us who didn't help, you know if they fell behind or, they were either bayoneted or they put dogs on 'em or somethin' like that or machine gun them. So, uh, it was our equivalent, I think, of the Bataan [Death] March. At least it made the *Chicago Tribune* that way.

McIntosh: So, how many guys did you lose on that trip from the Baltic port to your—

Severa: I have no idea.

McIntosh: Luft IV.

Severa: I have no idea.

McIntosh: Was that a new camp?

Severa: Yes, they were just completing the lager that we went into when we got there. They were building it.

McIntosh: Your accommodations the same as the other camp?

Severa: Pretty much, yeah. The tarpaper huts, you know, built on wood structures, on stilts of course.

McIntosh: What did they feed you?

Severa: Usually a combination of soup that was made out of dehydrated vegetables that were bagged in 1933. Soon as Hitler became chancellor they started puttin' up this stuff, I think they were preparin' for war at that time.

McIntosh: That was—you got, what, one—

Severa: Well, they were—yeah, they were dried, and they put 'em back in water and cooked 'em, you know.

McIntosh: Right.

Severa: That's what we ate. That and some bread that we had that they'd give us, black bread.

McIntosh: You get that once a day?

Severa: No, we got it usually about twice a week, and we'd slice it so thin that you could almost read through it. To make it go around.

McIntosh: You didn't get the soup every day?

Severa: Got soup once a day, yeah.

McIntosh: Right.

Severa: But not the bread.

McIntosh: Was there any other food that was offered?

Severa: Red Cross parcels that we'd—when we got 'em. 'Course, the tougher things got for the people who lived in Germany because of the, you know, the restrictions of supplies and so on, ruining their railroad transportation system. They'd appropriate a lot of these for themselves; we never even saw 'em. But I sure remembered 'em because they were the things that really kept us alive.

McIntosh: Red Cross parcels?

Severa: Yessir. I've been a staunch supporter of the American Red Cross ever since. I never forgot that, and I never will.

McIntosh: Were you allowed to write home?

Severa: Yes, we had a special mail system they called Kriegsgefangenenpost [Prisoner of War Mail], and it was a sort of a form letter with lines on it.

You couldn't write anywhere but on the lines because they'd censor 'em pretty heavily before they'd let 'em go. So you couldn't talk about anything.

[End of Tape 1, Side A]

Just tell people you were all right.

McIntosh: Your folks found out that you were a prisoner then?

Severa: Quite a time of almost six months after I was shot down.

McIntosh: Did they know you'd been shot down?

Severa: They just knew I was an MIA [missing in action].

McIntosh: Did the Air Force tell 'em that you'd been shot down and you were missing?

Severa: Yeah, that I was missing. They didn't know I was a captive until about six months after the fact. At least so my mother told me. She said it was somewhere around August of 1944 that they found out that I was a prisoner.

McIntosh: Did the food ever get better any time?

Severa: No.

McIntosh: Did they march you out of that camp, or did you stay in that camp until the Russians arrived?

Severa: I was wounded in that camp so I was sent out on a train. I didn't march. Many of the people did, however, including two of my crewmates.

McIntosh: You were wounded in camp? What happened there?

Severa: It was a rifle butt. Somebody decided to hit me in the left knee and banged it out pretty badly, and I walked with a limp pretty much after that for a long while. Then it got better; now it's worse.

McIntosh: So, you didn't have to do any work then while you were in camp?

Severa: No, noncommissioned people of the first three grades didn't have to work. Sergeant and above.

Joan: Can you believe I lost that cup of coffee? Ah, careless [laughs].

Severa: You can't miss it, dear. It's in a brown cup with moose on it.

McIntosh: When were you released—when did the guards disappear, I guess that's what I'm—in May of '45? Shortly before the war was over?

Severa: This was April 29th of '45. There was a P-51["Mustang," long range fighter plane] that flew across the camp and dropped an American flag. We knew by that time that we're gettin' pretty close to recaptured, and lo and behold Patton showed up in the camp right after it happened. He was looking for his son-in-law who was in a different camp, and he had assigned the 14th Armored Division, which was attached to his army. They were called themselves the "Liberators" 'cause they used to break into all the prison camps in the area where they were, and lo and behold the lead tank that knocked down our front gate, one of the guys in the tank was a fellow who with whom I went to school later at the University of Wisconsin. Didn't know it for years, we used to sit near each other at games like basketball and football, and finally my cousin came over, and he said, "Who'd you say the group was that liberated you guys in Germany?" And I said, "The 14th Armored". He said, "Well, I got somethin' to show you". So he called me over and introduced me to Chuck Vogts, and he said "Show him your membership card." Here's Vogts with the 14th Armored, and he was the guy that was in the tank that knocked down our front gate.

McIntosh: Small world.

Severa: At Moosburg [Southern Bavaria, Germany], I'll say. That was a pretty emotional day.

McIntosh: Oh, I'm sure. Were you surprised—

Severa: I had found out that he belonged to our church here. I go to Midvale Lutheran. He was a church member, and he graduated in the same class I did in 1949 at the University [of Wisconsin-Madison], and we just kept sideswipin' each other all this time, you know.

McIntosh: Amazing.

Severa: Really was.

McIntosh: This was the 29th of February in '45 when you—

Severa: No, of April.

McIntosh: Of April when they arrived. I have 29 April.

Severa: Mm-hm. Yeah, I've got a—my face is in that book [*The Greatest Generation*] of [Tom] Brokaw's, you know, in a big group shot of the Moosburg camp [location of Stalag 7A, Germany's largest POW camp] on the day of liberation.

McIntosh: I'll check that out when I get home.

Severa: Yeah, please do.

McIntosh: Did you suspect that the war was coming to an end? You must've had some contact with the outside world. Did you have a radio in the camp?

Severa: We had radios, yeah, we'd hear news. Guys would move from barracks to barracks and tell you what they heard. It was kind of a makeshift deal. The radio was not in our barracks, but it was close enough by so that we'd get the news almost on a daily basis. And of course we got a German newspaper which was called *OK* ["Oversea Kid," German-published four-page propaganda newspaper for POW camps], and that was printed in English for our benefit—

McIntosh: Well, that was nice.

Severa: Pretty slanted on who was winning, of course.

McIntosh: Right, yeah.

Severa: You didn't learn much there.

McIntosh: No. So it really wasn't—

Severa: Although, they made a big deal out of the [Battle of the] Bulge.

McIntosh: They did—so it wasn't much of—

Severa: They were gonna drive us into the Atlantic on that one.

McIntosh: It wasn't much of a surprise then when the Americans showed up?

Severa: No.

McIntosh: You knew there would be—someday here, or in a day or two or three or somethin' like that?

Severa: Yeah, but, yeah, I was gonna say, after you wait that long you just get anxious, but that—

McIntosh: Right.

Severa: You never know when it's gonna happen until you start hearin' noise that is gunfire and stuff.

McIntosh: Did the attitude of your captors change durin' those days?

Severa: Yeah, they got a little friendlier.

McIntosh: A little nicer, yeah—

Severa: A little nicer to you, and 'course at the time that the tanks came they were gone. They had taken off.

McIntosh: Oh, I'm sure.

Severa: Yeah.

McIntosh: I'm sure. So then after that the 14th arrived. Then what? They start—they bring in some food for you and so forth? Or did they take you away?

Severa: Well, the first food we got was thrown off, you know, the tank destroyers and stuff, the half-tracks [a military vehicle with regular front wheels and continuous tracks at the rear] that came into the camp.

McIntosh: They brought you some.

Severa: They threw us some bread and things like that.

McIntosh: C-rations?

Severa: Uh, C-rations and white bread which we hadn't seen for a year or more. It tasted like angel food cake, I'll tell you.

McIntosh: You're the third prisoner of war I've talked to that used that same expression, "It tasted like cake."

Severa: Yeah, it sure did, compared to what'd been livin' on. 'Cause they used to pack that bread in sawdust—I'll swear they used sawdust in it to extend it even.

McIntosh: Exactly.

Severa: It's a wonder how we all don't have ulcers [both laugh].

McIntosh: So, how long before they moved you out of that camp? A day or two, or more? Bring some trucks in?

Severa: It was within two days.

McIntosh: You were put on trucks?

Severa: Yeah, some of us even hollered at Patton, who was there. We said, “General, when are we gonna get out of here?”, and he said, “If I got anything to do with it,” he said, “It’ll be before the week’s over.” And, sure enough, it was. We got flown out on C-47s [Douglas C-47 Skytrain, a military transport plane based on the civilian DC-3 airliner]—

McIntosh: Oh really?

Severa: And landed in—

McIntosh: [inaudible] land from the German air base?

Severa: From the German air base to the Camp Lucky Strike [one of the “Cigarette Camps,” arrival and departure staging areas] in France.

McIntosh: Le Havre, right.

Severa: Mm-hm.

McIntosh: And there, did you get an examination? The delousing and—

Severa: Oh yeah, we were deloused and put on soft-boiled eggs and things that we could eat because they knew that we couldn’t handle regular GI food.

McIntosh: They were cautious about feeding you then.

Severa: Yeah, what to eat, what we could handle, and without gettin’ rid of it.

McIntosh: Yeah, right.

Severa: No, we were on a—

McIntosh: How much weight did you lose, Jim?

Severa: I would say probably about, pretty close to eighty pounds. I weighed 127 when I was recaptured.

McIntosh: Any illnesses? Did any of these guys have diarrhea?

Severa: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: Was that a common problem?

Severa: Mm-hm.

McIntosh: Any other medical problems that were common while you were there?

Severa: Well, not, I don't know about it in general, you know. I mean, I didn't only, you know, like you will on anything, you form a little nucleus of guys you talk to, you know, and what their problems were, if any and so on. But uh, we almost lost our ball turret gunner. I thought he—I didn't think he was gonna make it. He was pretty thin, as you might imagine, bein' able to curl up in that ball to begin with, and uh—

McIntosh: You mean from starvation you were worried about him?

Severa: I think so.

McIntosh: I see.

Severa: Yeah, more than anything 'cause we sure as hell didn't eat very well.

McIntosh: What would your days be like during the camp if you didn't have to work? Did you—have a basketball or—

Severa: We'd devise games and things like baseball and basketball. Exercise and stuff, guys would walk around the perimeter of the camp.

McIntosh: Did the Red Cross provide the baseballs and bats, or the Germans?

Severa: Yeah, yeah, International Red Cross did. No, we didn't get much of that from the Germans. They didn't know anything about baseball.

McIntosh: I understand that, but I thought perhaps they supplied [inaudible].

Severa: No, I don't think they had them to supply, really.

McIntosh: Okay. Did you start any type of—

Severa: Well, we had teams. We'd play each other, we'd play other lagers and so on. Kinda devised leagues and things of that sort. You know, when you got all that time on your hands you do a lot of things to kill it. So, we'd have what you'd call a "World Series" and everything, you know, with teams that would survive their camp's championship or somethin'. But there was a lot of that. I learned how to play bridge in Germany 'cause I

happened to be in the same barracks with a couple of guys who were pretty good at it, and they were teaching us.

McIntosh: Were there any crafts that you got into?

Severa: Not that I did, but there were people who knew how to knit and so on that would—

McIntosh: Carve things out of wood?

Severa: Get sweaters and unravel the sweaters and make hats out of 'em and stuff, you know, with earlaps to keep you warm.

McIntosh: That was another question I was gonna ask. How about your clothing? Did they give you enough clothing to keep you reasonably warm in the winter or not?

Severa: Not a great deal, no. Most of the clothing we had was what we had when we were shot down.

McIntosh: How were the barracks heated?

Severa: Or we'd get stuff in Red Cross parcels or so on once in awhile.

McIntosh: How was your barracks heated?

Severa: Heated?

McIntosh: Yeah.

Severa: By coal stoves. You know, like the old space heaters used to be in the Army barracks.

McIntosh: One of those for each barracks?

Severa: No, there were two I think, or three altogether.

McIntosh: I see.

Severa: Everybody would try and get close to the stoves, you know, in the winter time.

McIntosh: And the coal, you had to fetch it yourself, or did they bring that?

Severa: No, you just—

McIntosh: Or didn't they use coal?

Severa: Oh yeah, they used coal. But, yeah, there was piles of coal in what they called the Vorlager [the administrative and guard compound of the prison camp] that they would haul around and put in the big boxes at the end of the barracks and so on.

McIntosh: You didn't do any of your own cooking?

Severa: No, well, to the extent that some guys would build stoves and do things, you know. You'd kind of improvise on what you were given. We had pound cans of powdered milk and things like that, and some guys would bake, you know, with it and so on. If we knew a guy was havin' a birthday or something we'd try and make a thing out of it. All in all, it was—I didn't—I quit smokin' when I was in there so I used to use the cigarettes I'd get in the parcels, you know, to get favors from the German guards once in awhile.

McIntosh: What would you get from the pack of cigarettes?

Severa: Well, you'd get, you know, they'd give you things to keep you warm like mittens or somethin' like that, you know, that you'd trade for.

McIntosh: Did you get mail from home?

Severa: Yeah, what they called, oh what the hell, they had a name, they called it V-mail, I guess, Victory mail. You'd write on a normal piece of paper, and then they'd photograph it down, you know. By the time we'd get it it'd be like so. And that was about it. I'd hear from my folks or my fiancée at that time. Ironically, I broke up with her while we were there, 'cause I figured I wasn't gonna get back anyway, you know.

McIntosh: Oh really?

Severa: Mm-hm.

McIntosh: What brought you that conclusion?

Severa: Oh, just the way people were treated. I mean, we were being moved from pillar to post all the time. You know, we figured—and there were a lot of guys that the Russians captured that never did come back. So we didn't know what our future held for us, and it's pretty hard to string somebody along for that period of time. So I figured that was the best thing to do, was just to say, "You better go your way and figure out I'm done".

McIntosh: So was that the way that turned out? You never talked to her or looked for her?

Severa: Oh, I married her after that.

McIntosh: Oh [laughs].

Severa: After I got back. She lived next door to me, and finally got things goin' again after I was up here at the school.

McIntosh: Okay. So tell me about when you get to Le Havre, did you go—put you on a ship and send you back to the United States?

Severa: Yeah, we were on a Liberty ship, [USS] *John B. Hood* [a Fletcher class destroyer], and we almost didn't make it back on that. We got—we were in convoys at the time, you know, this was before the blackout had been lifted because of submarines and so on. I mean, the war ended some time before the renegade subs were rounded up and things. So we were in a convoy for about half the distance across the Atlantic.

McIntosh: So when did you get back to the United States?

Severa: Uh, on June of about June the 8th or somethin' like that of 1945.

McIntosh: Right. And then you were discharged rather quickly, or did you have to go [inaudible] more exams?

Severa: No, we went to what they called R&R [rest and recreation] camps, and they sent me down to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, and I lived down there near Miami Beach for a while. [pause to change tape] So anyhow, we stayed there. We got all our back pay at the same time for all the flight pay that we got, we earned and so on. Came to us in a lump sum, and what didn't go in a bank for a while, we just blew [laughs]. Kids do that, you know? So we had a pretty good life in Miami.

McIntosh: How long were you in Miami?

Severa: Ah, I would say almost a month, and then we went back to—went home for about two weeks, and I signed up for Air Transport Command [unit of Air Corps providing strategic airlift of supplies, equipment, and aircraft] because I was a radio operator. I figured I'd finish out the war there, and by that time they had dropped a couple of A-bombs, and told us that as ex-POWs that we would be mustered out. We had enough points to get out, and we wouldn't be going anywhere. So they said, "You take a camp that you want to go to that's close to home or whatever, and we'll put you there as permanent party until you got discharged."

McIntosh: So you went back to Camp Grant?

Severa: I went right back here to Truax Field [Madison, WI].

McIntosh: Oh, not to Camp Grant?

Severa: Nope.

McIntosh: And you mustered out at Truax Field?

Severa: Right here at Truax, that's right.

McIntosh: I'll be darned.

Severa: Got out on the 28th of October of '45 and had done a lot of the ground work to get enrolled in school because they treated us pretty good while we were at Radio School here, you know. So I knew I wanted to go to Wisconsin [Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison] to finish up my education. Started over as a freshman and in November of '45 we were the first class of GIs to hit this campus, and took a lot of short courses, and I finally got to be a sophomore at the end of a year and a half and then got out in '49.

McIntosh: What degree did you earn?

Severa: Well, I started out in journalism and wound up in geography. I figured I had a future in international commerce or something', I don't know.

McIntosh: So you get a job with that?

Severa: God [laughs], I kept the job that I got when I was workin' part time as a student in a men's clothing store up here on the Square called Olson and Veerhusen.

McIntosh: I know it well.

Severa: You do, huh?

McIntosh: Well I'm a Madisonite.

Severa: I see.

McIntosh: I've been here all my life.

Severa: I see. Well I worked for a guy named Webb Harris there after Hart Schaffner took the store over and finished out when I was a student. When

I got my degree they asked me if I wanted—‘cause they knew I had majored in advertising and marketing, so the boss asked me if I wanted to be their ad director up there. So I said yes, I had a job, what the hell?

McIntosh: Can't beat it. You got married?

Severa: Can't beat it. Nah, I didn't get married right away, about a year later. She came up here and started workin' at the Bank of Madison. She was at the, oh, Continental of Illinois, which was a pretty big bank in Chicago at that time. She was a teller there so she started up here, and it didn't take her long to get to be a teller. So we lived in a couple of apartments and so on, finally bought a house when I was a sophomore. One of the ones that were developed by Stark out on the east side near the Truax Field runways that they—I lived off of North Street on Coolidge, right by the Oscar Mayer plant. They built a lot of houses, and a lot of guys who worked at Olson and Veerhusen bought 'em. They were tellin' me what a good deal they were, so we looked at it. We had to get out of an apartment anyway, I don't know whether they were selling it or what, but they said we were gonna have to move. So I figured, well, my father thought I was crazy. He said, "My God, here you are, you don't even know whether you're gonna have a job when you get out of college, and you're buyin' a house?" [McIntosh laughs] And of course, he couldn't believe the cost of the house, I think it was about \$10,000 or somethin', and he paid about seven [thousand] dollars for a big brick bungalow in Chicago, three bedroom bungalow, and he says, "You must be crazy", and I said, "Well, we'll see how it goes." I sold about five houses over the years and wound up here. We're pretty lucky.

McIntosh: I'd say. So what about a family? When did you start raising a family then?

Severa: Oh, we had a little girl about seven, eight years after we were married. We were married eight years before she came along. Married in '46 and she was born in '54. She lives in McFarland now. She's still here.

McIntosh: Oh, good. That's nice.

Severa: I've got a couple of grandchildren now from her, that one of them is at the University of Minnesota, and the other one is just graduating from McFarland High School this summer.

McIntosh: That's nice.

Severa: He wants to go to Wisconsin.

McIntosh: Oh, that'll be nice.

Severa: Yes, it will. I hope he makes it. He's on the bubble, but I think he'll make it.

McIntosh: Great. Okay, and did you join any veterans organization?

Severa: I joined the American Legion when I was workin' at Olson and Veerhusen 'cause a couple of the guys were there from World War I and talked me into joining. The post isn't in existence anymore. And now I'm at [Post] 501 out on the far east side.

McIntosh: VFW?

Severa: No, Legion, VFW, and I belonged to the Military Order of the Purple Heart 'cause I got the Heart for being wounded in Germany.

McIntosh: Oh, do you keep track—got an active organization?

Severa: Yeah, I was the Chapter Commander of the American Ex-Prisoners of War of the Badger Chapter here for about a year.

McIntosh: How big a group is that? Is that a Wisconsin chapter, or is this even more local than that?

Severa: No, it was part of the Wisconsin department. It was the Badger Chapter which is Madison and environs.

McIntosh: How many folks are we talkin'?

Severa: Oh, what did we have? About fifty or sixty originally, didn't we?

Joan: Oh, I think it was more than that.

Severa: More than that? She was the secretary so—

Joan: No, we used to send out—fifty to seventy, something like that.

Severa: Now it's probably less than half.

Joan: You know, these guys never joined that—they never talked about their ex-POW status until forty years later.

McIntosh: Did you have any from other wars? You know, do you have any Korean veterans in that?

Severa: We recruited them, but I don't know how very many joined. We have them now, though. We've even got Vietnam vets in there now.

McIntosh: But we're talkin' about POW society now?

Severa: Yeah, yeah, they were POWs in Vietnam.

McIntosh: Okay, and there are several of those that live around here?

Severa: Yeah, who's the guy that just talked to us? He's on the county supervisor, on the county board.

McIntosh: Don Heiliger.

Joan: Yeah, Don.

Severa: Heiliger, that's it.

McIntosh: Yeah, I've done him. There's a story to tell.

Severa: Yeah, I'll say he has.

Joan: He remembers a lot.

McIntosh: I've got him in the book pretty heavily.

Severa: Mm-hm. Yeah, Don belonged to our organization, and he belongs to Purple Heart, too.

McIntosh: Oh, sure. Is that an active group?

Severa: Yes, it is. John Moses, who used to be —

McIntosh: I know John.

Severa: Head of the Veterans Affairs as our commander—

McIntosh: He's a helluva guy.

Severa: Chapter commander.

McIntosh: Neat, neat guy.

Severa: Yeah. I got a guy from Veterans Affairs right up the street here. Dave Larsen.

Joan: He wasn't even a veteran, I don't think.

Severa: —oh, I think he was, wasn't he?

Joan: No I think he just works there.

Severa: Hm?

Joan: I think he just works there.

Severa: Well, I was a veteran, but I worked, too.

McIntosh: All right. They—now I forgot what I was gonna ask you. Oh, yeah. Do you have a list of these—of the POW group that's in this area, in the Badger Chapter?

Severa: I don't know whether we still have lists or not. Have you got a file on that anywhere?

Joan: I'm not sure I do, but we can—

Severa: I think it may be in one of those—

McIntosh: 'Cause there might be some people I could interview, see, that's—

Joan: Yes, Jerry. I think you should interview Jerry. Miller.

Severa: Jerry Miller?

Joan: Mm-hm.

Severa: Yeah, he's our present chapter commander.

Joan: And maybe Lou.

Severa: No, he isn't now, is he? [Walter G.] Peterson is, or was. Peterson's now the state commander.

McIntosh: If you had a list of these people and their, you know, addresses then I could contact them.

Severa: Well, of course the list is pretty old now, and a lot of 'em are deceased. When I was chapter commander, it was, what, ten years ago now, isn't it? At least.

Joan: We can get one.

Severa: Yeah, I'm sure we can get one.

McIntosh: Yeah, that'd be nice. Then I'd like—well, yeah—this—cross out the ones that are living.

Severa: Yeah, I can get you a list.

McIntosh: Yeah, I'd like to have some other people to interview, and I'd like that if you could—

Severa: Sure, I can—

McIntosh: Send that to me. I'd appreciate that.

Severa: I can get that for you. How'd you find me? You said you bumped into somebody at Hilldale [Mall, Madison, WI]?

McIntosh: At West Towne [Mall, Madison, WI].

Severa: Or, West Towne.

McIntosh: I can't tell you who it is, 'cause I don't remember her name. I used to know her in a hospital.

[Note: The following words spoken by Mrs. Severa are not on the audio cassette. They may be on the videotape.]

Joan: You know, when I first met this group, Jim, I found out none of them have talked to their wives and none of them talked [tape stops abruptly and ends]

[End of Interview]