

Transcription of the 1999 Personal Recording of the World War II Experiences of Willard O. (Buck) Elliott

It was suggested to me at the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II that I ought to record or write down my experiences during the war for my kids and my grandkids.

I haven't talked a whole lot about it. Some people, that's all they do is talk about what experiences they had but I've never felt comfortable talking about it, not that I had it worse than anybody else. I just never felt comfortable, so I didn't do it.

I enlisted in the Army Air Corp on December 15, 1942 at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and was sent to a reception center just out of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania for shots and you got a uniform there. And then they shipped you on down to Miami Beach for basic training. It was called the Army Air Corp at that time as opposed to the Air Force now. The Air Corp had taken over the whole Miami Beach. They took over all of the hotels and the apartments and all of that stuff, and that's where they had basic training. That's where they let you know who was going to run things.

I was down there about a month or six weeks I guess. Then from there I went to radio school at Scott Field in Illinois to become a radio operator. That lasted from probably February thru June, I think. They taught you the morse code there and you had to attain a code speed of 18 words a minute. They also taught you some theory about the radio. As I recall they also trained the people who were going to operate the radios on the ground and also those who were going to operate them in the airplane. And of course I had signed up to fly, so I was going to be a radio operator/gunner.

So I graduated. I got out of there probably in June. I know I went from there to aerial gunnery school in Laredo, Texas and that was about June of 1943. I was down in Laredo June, July and August and it was hot as hell down there. Some guy took an egg out there and cracked it on the runway and it fried on the runway it was so hot. It was really hot. I think that lasted about 3 months, and then we went from there to Salt Lake City.

All of these movements were on troop trains. They got us out to Salt Lake City and they put us on the fairgrounds out there. We were waiting there to be assigned to a bomber crew. They called them combat crews. And while I was there I got a furlough. I know I went home back to Akron for about a week. I rode the Santa Fe in and then back out. And then we got back out there, back to Salt Lake, and they assigned us to a combat crew and then we were sent to Ardmore, Oklahoma.

What we did at Ardmore was called phase training and that was where you got your airplane and you formed your combat crew. That consisted of 10 men on a B-17, which I was on. They had 4 officers and 6 enlisted men. The bombardier, the navigator, the pilot and the co-pilot were all officers and they were all up in the front of the plane. Then the rest of us were gunners, we were all enlisted men, we were all sergeants. The crew

consisted of the bombardier, the navigator, the pilot and the co-pilot, and the engineer, he fired the top turret, and then the radioman which I was, had a gun position. Then the ball turret gunner, 2 waist gunners, and a tail gunner.

We had a couple of Colonels that had flown 25 missions with the 8th Air Force in England and they were trying to train us under combat conditions. We would get up in the morning and go to briefing and we would go through the same thing we did over in England. They would have a target. It might be Dallas, Texas or somewhere, Houston or Oklahoma City or something like that. And you would get in your plane and they would all take off and you'd form in formation and they were teaching you to fly real close. The theory was that they didn't want you to get out by yourself because the German fighters would love to pick off individual bombers. As long as the bomber was in a group it was more protected and they had more fire power. That was the theory, that was what we were training to do. Everybody was training to do their job.

I had to get on a radio net and send a message back to the base in code and take messages from them and that kind of stuff. The pilot we had down there was a fellow named Smith, **Robert Smith**. He was from up in New England somewhere. A real nice guy. I think he started out as a private in the Army and then he had somehow or another gone to OCS and had come out and gone to pilot training and became a pilot. He was a real nice guy.

We didn't have a full crew. We were a couple of guys short and they kept putting off part of the training down there. We had to go up and fly to shoot at tow targets from the B-17 and they kept putting that off because we didn't have a full crew. Finally, late in December, we were to go down to Galveston, Texas and fly out over the Gulf. There would be a plane out there towing a target that we could shoot at.

So we go down to the airfield and it was cold and there weren't enough planes. They didn't have enough planes to get down there. There were just a few of them that were flyable, so this one crew, I had flown with them one day when their radio operator was sick, they were going down, they had a full crew. So our pilot hitched a ride with this crew. I believe the bombardier and the navigator were good friends. They went down along with him and he was going down to pick up a plane in Galveston and bring it back up to Ardmore. Then we were going to go back down with him. They took off and about a half an hour after they were off an officer came in and told us they had crashed. There were 14 of them killed in that plane. They had a whole lot of ammo on it and it all cooked off. They weren't up high enough for anybody to bale out.

I always remember that because this guy was a super guy. Then they assigned us another pilot and we picked up another bombardier and a navigator. This guy, the pilot they assigned to us was from New Rochelle, New York and he had been an instructor down there and he was a real pain in the butt. We just didn't like him from the word go.

These two Colonels that were running the show down there had done their 25 missions over in the 8th Air Force and finished up. They flew during a time when there wasn't any fighter support. It was always tough, but it was a lot tougher then. So these Colonels told

us they wanted these combat crews, to operate as a team. If we had any problems with our pilot or anything, come talk to them. Teamwork was the key, and that's what they wanted. So after several weeks of this guy, all of us enlisted men were ticked off at him and just didn't like him, just hated him. Finally they decided, we decided among us, that myself and another guy, the ball turret gunner, would go talk to the Colonel and see what could be done. So, old Ace and I went over to talk to the Colonel. We told him what our problems were and why we didn't like the pilot.

He was real nice and he said, "Well I tell you what sergeants, you'll have a new pilot on Monday. So, apparently the pilot got the word because Ace and I were walking up the street at the base the next day and this guy comes by in a car. He stops the car and asks us to get in. So we get in and he starts trying to talk us out of it. Out of what we had done you know. Then old Ace started to waffle a little bit and I thought man I've come this damn far, I'm not going to back off now. I said nope, nope, nope, that's the way it is. By God come Monday, he's back as pilot. So we didn't get rid of him, as hard as we tried.

Anyway when we finished up phase training there, which wasn't too much longer. We flew to Grand Island, Nebraska where you got your new airplane. A new B-17, the one you were going to take to England. So we got up there and we got caught in a blizzard. I remember that we were at the base up there and had to stay a day or two. We flew the plane around there a couple days, the pilot did. Then they decided we were ready to go, so we took off for, I think we were going to Presque Isle, Maine. That was one of the jumping off places for the Air Corp.

So we started out and we had problems. We had to transfer the fuel from one tank to the other. The transfer valve jammed or didn't operate properly. We couldn't get the gas into the other tank so we had to make an emergency landing in Rochester, New York. He put it down in a little airfield that had Piper cubs on it. They thought we were from Mars this plane was so damn big. Bob did a hell of a good job putting that thing in there. Apparently he could fly alright. He got it in there boy. We had our 45s and we got out of the plane like somebody was going to attack us you know, (laughter). They took the plane from there to the nearest place that could work on it in Rome, New York. So they flew the plane over to Rome, and they put us on a bus over to Syracuse Air Base. That was the nearest air base for us, so we stayed there while they worked on the plane in Rome.

We were at Syracuse for a couple weeks while they were fixing that thing. Then they finally thought they had it fixed so we took off and we went to a Gander, Newfoundland. That was big jumping off place too, so we stopped there. We told them we were having trouble with the valve on the tanks so they said they couldn't fix it there and we weren't sure that it was fixed. We were to go from there to Scotland so what they decided to do was have us go from Gander on over to Iceland. We would veer a little bit to the left towards Greenland so in case something happened we would still have enough fuel to get to Greenland. To make a long story short nothing happened. We got to Iceland just fine.

Then from Iceland to Scotland, we landed in Prestwick, Scotland. That would have been in March of 1944 that we landed in Prestwick. They took our plane and I don't know where they went with it. Then we got on a train. We went from Prestwick to Glasgow, Scotland. I remember we were there one night. Then from Glasgow we went on over to a place called Bobbington. I think they also had another name called Hemel Hempstead that was just south of London. This was a sort of a staging area where all the air crews came. From there they assigned you to your combat unit.

So while you were there they made you go through a refresher course in your specialty. Mine was radio and they made the radio operators increase their code word speed from 18 words a minute to 20, which I did. The engineers had to go through a refresher in engineering school and so forth. But anyway, we tried to dump this pilot again. We talked to the guy that was in charge of that air base there and we tried to dump the pilot again. The guy says wait until you get to your combat unit and all this kind of stuff..

Anyway we were finally assigned to the 306th heavy bombardment group at Thurleigh, England, which is near Bedford, England. We got there early April of '44 and the policy that they were using, they would take the pilots that came in on the new crews, and they would put them in the co-pilot seat of an experienced crew. They let them fly a few missions with an experienced crew to get the feel for what went on up there, instead of putting a green horn on an airplane and have him flying around not knowing what he's doing. So our pilot and navigator went up on the same aircraft and they got shot down on their first mission. So there's our crew without a pilot or a navigator. So they split our crew up and made us replacements.

Radio operators were in higher demand than anything else among enlisted men so I got assigned to a crew right away. I got assigned to a crew that had about 18 missions in. I think my first mission was April the 18th and that was to Oranienburg a suburb of Berlin. I know we had a camera on our ship and it was mounted in the bomb bay. When we started our bomb run, I was supposed to go up there and open the door into the bomb bay and turn that camera on. (Laughing) We didn't have any fighters attack us. We didn't have any problems at all and we get over the target and I go up and the bomb bay doors are open and I'm in there and I'm turning that switch and I'm looking down there and I see these orange puffs coming up there and I kept looking at it. It was bursting and it was flak and I was so damn dumb I didn't even know what it was. It wasn't close enough, it was bursting way below us. We didn't have any problem at all and we came back from that mission and those guys, the old guys, the enlisted guys say, "Well, what did you think of that" and I said, "Why hell this ain't bad", you know, and boy it really ticked them off because they'd been through some hairy ones. You had 18 missions, you lived about 3 lifetimes in that length of time.

But then the next mission I went on, just a day or two later, was to a place called Kassel in Germany and that was a tank factory we were bombing and we got into all kinds of problems there. We didn't have any fighter attacks but I remember when we hit the initial point which they call the IP. That's where you turn on your bomb run and the bombardier, he flies the plane in conjunction with the bomb site so he can line up the plane with the

site and everything on the target. I heard him say over the intercom, "Do we have to fly through that stuff?" He was talking about the flak and apparently they'd gotten the right altitude with the flak.

Boy we hit that stuff and it felt like, it sounded like, guys were out there beating on that airplane with baseball bats. Then the navigator screamed over the intercom, "I'm blind, I'm blind!". They'd taken a hit up in the front. The bombardier was hit, he was hit in the chest. He had a flak suit on. It didn't kill him. It knocked him unconscious. It sprayed Plexiglas all through the nose up there and that's what got in the navigator's eyes.

So then I heard the pilot say, "They got number 2, they got number 2", so I look out the little window there and it's on fire. They had an extinguisher built in there and he got the fire out but he had to feather the prop. So now we were short an engine on that wing and about 2 minutes later he hollers, "They got number 3", and that one is on the other wing. It was spurting oil out of it so they had to feather it. Now we're flyin on 2 engines and we're trying to stay up with the group. You didn't want to be out by yourself because that's when the Germans would jump on you big time like gnats on a fly, or something like that.

The pilot called me to get a magnetic bearing to fly back to our base, so I had to encode a message to send back there. I encoded it and sent it. Then you held your key down, your radio key. You would hold that down and it would send a constant sound and they'd pick that up and they could tell the bearing you would have to fly to get home. That was really all that a radio operator was on there for basically.

I got the message back and I relayed it up to the pilot. We kept hooking on to these groups until there weren't any groups left. We couldn't keep up. By the time we got to the French coast we were by ourselves. We got back over the channel and we were losing altitude. We finally got on back to base and we shot off the flares to let them know there were wounded aboard. Everybody else was home by then. We start to land and we're coming down. The door from the bomb bay opens up and the smoke comes flying through there and the engineer is there and he says, "Come on, come on up front with me. We've got a fire on the hydraulic motor". This is right behind the pilots seat.

So I went up there and we were beating on the fire. We had some rags and we put the fire out but it was smoking. And we're landing at the same time and as soon as we hit the ground I heard the pilot say, "Jesus Christ we don't have any brakes". I guess the hydraulic fluid had leaked out of them. We're rolling down this damn runway and down at the end of the runway there's a grassy field. I didn't know it at the time but there was a grassy field and then there was another runway going the opposite way from us. There's a bunch of ground crews sitting there on a damn truck. They didn't know, they assumed the thing was going to stop. Well this old pilot's hollering, "Get out of the way, get out of the way!". We didn't know what the hell he was hollering about. We ran down into the field before the damn thing stopped.

Then they got the bombardier off of there and he lived. I don't know how badly he was hurt because about 3 more days and I was gone. We had a new bombardier and a new navigator on the next mission. Well after that mission I knew damn good and well there was no way in hell I was going to finish 30 missions. I went back to the barracks and I got the stuff I had and just wrote on there where I wanted my pictures sent, and all that kind of stuff because I was thoroughly scared, I really was.

I can remember we lived in quonset huts and they would come, they'd get you up, real early. I want to say 2:30 in the morning. A guy would come through and he'd have a list of the crews that were going to fly that day and he'd stop in each barracks and he'd go in there and turn on the lights and wake everybody up and read off the names of the crews.

Man, after that mission I'd lay awake and I'd hear him 2 or 3 barracks down, you know. He would come to ours and I'd hoped to Christ I'm not going. He'd come and he'd call off those names. Then you would go to breakfast. Then the radiomen went to the briefing room with the pilots and the co-pilots. I don't know whether the engineers went or not but the other gunners didn't have to go. They'd have this big curtain up there and the C. O. would be up there. They got everybody seated and everything and he'd open this curtain and there would be the map and there'd be a piece of yarn on there from Thurleigh to wherever the hell you were supposed to go that day. (Laughter) You always wanted to see a short piece of yarn but it was always LONG, you know. Then after briefing you'd go out and load up.

Anyway our 3rd mission was to Hamm, the railroad yards. That wasn't a very long one. We didn't have any problems with that one.

Our 4th mission was on April the 24th. The 1st one was on the 18th and the 4th one was on the 24th, so I didn't have much time in combat but what time I had was kind of hairy. I remember when we met at the airplane after briefing. The pilot, this guy's name was James. We were flying over to around Munich, and he says, "Boy if we get in any trouble today we're going to Switzerland", (laughter). So we take off and as I recall it was a pretty nice day. Those missions were long though. You would take off at maybe 8 o'clock in the morning and you wouldn't get back until 5. Just real real long. This one was a long one.

We were getting over near Munich. Our target was a place called Oberpfaffenhofen, a real crazy name. It was the Dornier Gearworks for Dornier aircraft. Out at 3 o'clock you could see there was a group getting hit out there. There were fighters attacking that group out there. They were quite aways from us. But then all of a sudden I heard somebody up front say, "Here they come, 12 o'clock!". I'm looking out at 6 o'clock, I'm looking out toward the back end of the airplane. These guys are coming from the front so I never see them. I just see them after they're going by, you know, and shoot at them.

What they were doing at that time, the Germans decided that they would attack in formation instead of sending one or two down through there. They would gang up and maybe send ten or fifteen at one time. They'd meet your formation with a formation of

fighters. These fighters were ME109s and they were a damn good airplane. The Germans had another good fighter, the Folke-Wulf 190, a real good fighter. They crippled us on the first pass. We were done because they hit the central power system, the electrical system went out. Of course, I was looking out the back and shooting. I remember seeing a big hole in the horizontal stabilizer. It was peeled back like a banana. It must have been a 20mm that hit that thing.

We started down. One of the waist gunners and myself were trying get **Earl Wynn** up out of the ball turret. **Everett Minto** was the waist gunner. Minto and I were trying. It's an electrically operated turret but the electricity was gone. We hand cranked it up and got Earl back up into the airplane. The other waist gunner was **Jim Copeman**. He went back and got the tail gunner, **Walt Lastinger**. He had to crawl back there and get him. He couldn't use the intercom cause the intercom went out too.

With the intercom out we had to talk face to face. The engineer comes back from up front. His gun position is top turret right up behind the pilot. He came back and he told Everett and I that everybody is gone up front. Everett and I to this day presumed he meant everybody was dead.

We all jumped out of the waist. I remember **George Vogt** was the engineer and he says "Let me, let me go before you Everett because I'm afraid I might not jump". I found out later that a lot of guys froze. They just wouldn't jump. They just went down with the plane. So George got in the doorway and he stood there a little bit too long and somebody booted him out. Then we all went out after him.

We had been trained. I shouldn't say trained. We never had any damn parachute training. You had a chest chute, a small chest chute, that paratroopers used. We would wear our harness and then we would clip this chute on it, this little boxy thing. We were instructed to delay opening the chute until the objects on the ground became distinguishable. They didn't want you in the air too long because they said the Germans had been known to shoot you while you were in the chute. I delayed my jump as long as I could.

It seemed like an eternity but I finally pulled the rip cord and it worked. It was a beautiful day out. I remember it was sunny. I don't think I was in the air too long. I landed in a plowed field and I was trying to gather up my chute. While I was gathering that up a farmer came up with a gun and that was it. That was the end. That was the end of my flying anyway.

From there they took me to an air base and put me in a cell by myself. I was there for a day or two. Then they took me out and they put us on a train. I found out they gathered up the other enlisted men. I don't think the pilot, the co-pilot, bombardier, navigator, none of those guys were with us. The rest of the enlisted men were there. They put us on a train and took us to Frankfurt, Germany for questioning.

About 40 years later, **Everett Minto** ran into the guy that was flying co-pilot on our aircraft. His name was **Vandermerliere**. Vandermerliere told him about what had

happened to the guys up front. The bombardier had a broken leg and I guess Vandermerliere had gotten hit and he was supposedly the last guy out of the ship. Apparently those 4 guys got out too. Everett and I thought for years and years that when George said they were all gone up front, we both interpreted it to mean that they were all dead. Apparently they all got out. That was a blessing.

Getting back to the story, they took us to Frankfurt to a place called Dulag Luft. They took all the air prisoners there to question them. On the way there we had a very hairy experience. They have two German non-comms taking about six of us. They picked up a Mustang, a P-51 pilot, and I remember his eyes were real red. I don't know if he'd been in a fire or what but the whites of his eyes were red, like he had a tremendous hangover. He was with our group too. We had to change trains in Augsburg, Germany and it had been bombed flat pretty much. The 8th would hit it in the daytime and the RAF would hit it at night. The railroad station was just a bunch of rubble.

We had all this flight stuff on. Everybody knew we were air crew members because we had heavy boots and heavy jackets on. The little guy was a corporal and I think the big guy, big sort of dumb guy, was a private. The little guy had to make train connections and he went up somewhere there in the station to get the connections taken care of. He left us with this private. And we're sitting there and he had us sit on this big pile of rubble there. It was dirt and rock and busted glass and stuff like that. We're sitting there and this train master, a guy in a uniform, of course he sees us, and he knows right away what we are. He starts ranting and raving and pretty soon he's got a damn crowd there and by God the crowd's going to lynch us. They're coming after us. It's getting worse by the minute and just about the time they're going to make a move the little corporal comes back. He gets there and he takes us into some kind of wash room and locked the door. Somehow or another he got those people calmed down. If that little bugger hadn't gotten back there that could have gotten awful bad.

But then from there we went on. I remember we stopped in Mannheim. We got there at night. We were on a regular passenger train. We were in this passenger compartment and there were other civilians. The trains were packed. There were other civilians outside in the isle. The RAF came over and they had an air raid while we were there. They pulled the train out of the station right outside of town. They had guns on top of this thing. You could hear them shooting guns off the top of this thing, That was kind of scary.

Then we get into Frankfurt. Frankfurt was all bombed out for miles before you got in there. There were burned out railway cars, and stuff like that. I'm sure they rebuilt the track hundreds of times. But then they took us to a little place outside of town that they called Dulag Luft where they questioned all the air crew members. They would take you in there with a guy who spoke English.

They told us what to expect there, when we were in England. They said they will want to know what your target was and what your altitude was and what the bomb load was and they'll ask you all that stuff and they'll tell you it's a Red Cross form and all you were ever supposed to tell them was your name, rank and serial number. Sure enough I get in

there with this guy and he could speak English better than I could, and he starts asking me this question and just for the hell of it I said is this the Red Cross form and he said yeah. (Laughter) And I said "Well I can give you my name, rank and serial number", and he said "Well I guess we'll just have to shoot you as a spy because we don't know whether you are from the U.S. Air Force or not". He gave me a bunch of garbage like that. Then he told me he'd been a bank clerk at Hackensack, New Jersey. He spoke great English.

Anyway, then they put you in solitary. They had so damn many prisoners coming in so fast they had to keep you moving. I was in there at the most two days. Then they moved you down into a compound with other guys that had gone through what you had just gone through. Then you waited there for your boxcar to take you to a prison camp.

It's kind of interesting because while I was there, I saw this guy's name, this pilot of the crew I came over from the states with. The one we were trying so hard to get rid of. Well, we all thought back at the base that he had been killed because nobody saw any chutes come out of his airplane. I saw his name on the wall there so I knew he was still alive. So he'd made it. That happened in a lot of cases. When you came back from a mission they would ask when you saw a plane go down how many chutes did you see and you'd have to report how many you saw. Some planes went down, blew up so quick that people would say "no chutes, no chutes". But I saw his name on the wall so I knew he had made it.

But funny things with the Germans. They segregated the officers and the enlisted men and they segregated the air force personnel from the infantry. They had separate camps for the enlisted air force crew members and then they had separate prisons for the officers of the air force and separate prisons for the infantry.

I was sent to Stalag XVIIIB which was in Krems, Austria. We got on this boxcar at Frankfurt and there must have been 40 or 50 guys on there. If you got up to go to the door to take a leak you lost your place. It was that crowded and some of the guys were wounded and their wounds were infected, it was terrible. The guards put a chain across about a third of the car. They took a third so they had all kinds of room there for about 3 or 4 of them with machine guns. I'm not sure how long it took to get to Krems. I want to say about a week because they'd move us over to the side and let troop trains go by. We finally made it to Krems where Stalag XVII was located. It was about 30 miles east of Vienna, Austria.

When we got off of the train there they marched us out to the camp. It was either a mile or 2 miles from town. The first thing they did when we got there, they took a picture of each one of us with our German serial number, our prisoner of war number underneath it. Then they shaved our heads, took all of our clothes off and showered us. Then they sprayed powder, some kind of delousing powder on us. Then they marched us down into camp.

They had about 4,200 American prisoners in the camp. They were all air force crews, and they were all enlisted men. As we entered the camp they made us march down through there in a single line, so the old guys who were there could see if they recognized any of their buddies.

Stalag XVII was originated in Oct of 1943. They had moved a bunch of prisoners over from Stalag VIIA at Moosburg. So some of the guys in the camp had been there since maybe 1942 because the 8th Air Force started bombing Germany in 1942. I think late 1942.

It's kind of difficult to tell you what camp life was like. I can just vaguely touch the high points. It wasn't a lot of fun naturally. They didn't have any mess hall or anything like that. The barracks were crowded. We had around 320 in our barracks and I think they were made for around 200 or 250. I think there were 3 American compounds and there were like 4 or 5 barracks in each compound. You could go from one compound to the others but they had gates so they could shut the compounds off. There were other nationalities in the camp also and they were in separate compounds.

The Russian compound was right across the guard path from our barracks. I was in barracks 29A. We could look out our window across the way into the Russian compound.

The meals were bad. We would get sometimes barley soup. They would just bring it in a big pail. They'd put it up in the front of the barracks and then you would go up there one at a time. We ate out of tin cans that we got out of the Red Cross parcels, when we got them. We made our own dishes, so to speak, out of those tin cans. Every now and then they would have some boiled potatoes and once in awhile they would have some horse meat. There was a lot of barley soup and sometimes it would have worms in it. You would just brush them aside which was no big problem. The bread was kind of strange. They had some kind of brown bread. Like some kind of rye bread. They never put wrappers on the bread. They would just throw it on the back of truck and it had a real hard black cover. Boy it almost took a saw to saw through it. It was interesting, depending on the amount of bread they would have. They would say 10 men to a loaf. You'd get one loaf and you'd split it among 10 guys. I remember it being up as high as 18 to a loaf. That doesn't make a very big chunk of bread.

The Red Cross parcels were great but we never got what we were supposed to get. They would sometimes split those up. There might be 5 men to one parcel. Very seldom did you get one parcel to yourself. Toward the end of the war we didn't get hardly any. They said it was because we were bombing the railroads and I'm sure we were doing that. I'm sure that was probably a legitimate excuse.

As American prisoners, and being non-commissioned officers, according to the Geneva convention they couldn't make you do any work. So, we didn't do any work. We always felt like we would have preferred to have been working like somewhere out on a farm because I'm sure we would have eaten a lot better. It got kind of boring. The bad thing

about it was you didn't know if they would just come in some day and decide to shoot you all.

In April, early April, we were seeing a lot of bombers go over. You could see the contrails. We would watch them in the daytime, that would be the 15th Air Force out of Italy because it was too far away for the 8th Air Force to be down there. We would see them fly by practically everyday. You could see the contrails for miles and miles. But one day they made a turn and it looked kind of funny. By God we always said they will never bomb Krems because they know there's a prison camp there. So one day these suckers come and they make this turn. They had trenches out there you could jump into if you had to. Boy these suckers started and it looked like a bomb run and it was, so we jumped into those trenches. They bombed Krems. Nothing hit near the camp but according to the guards they tore up Krems pretty bad. You could see the damn bombs coming out of there and you could hear them. They made sort of a funny noise coming down. That was somewhat scary. That took away some of the boredom, I tell you that.

That was in April of 1945. The war was coming to a climax. The Russians were coming in from the east. They were coming in like gangbusters. They were coming in through Hungary, Romania, and Poland. All those Balkan countries. There was a road that went by there and you could see people with all their belongings, pulling carts. They were ahead of the army trying to get out of the way.

Then the Germans said they were going to move us. They wanted to surrender to the Americans. They were petrified of the Russian Army. I think it was probably because they knew how badly they had treated the Russians when they invaded Russia. They knew damn well the Russians were going to pay them back and they did.

Our camp commander, the American guy in charge said when they come to move us we are going to have like a sit down strike, we're not going. The Russians got to Vienna. We could see they were fighting down there. Part of Vienna was burning. Then we started to hear tanks and by God one morning they said we're moving. So we just sat still. Old Shultz came through there and told us to get up and nobody would. We just stayed there. My bed location was right in the middle of the barracks. We sat there and they were raising hell about getting us out of there and nobody would move. All of a sudden somebody said here comes the Captain. I didn't see it but I heard this gun go off about 5 or 6 times up in the front of the barracks. 2 or 3 guys dove out of the window and I went with them. We dove out in between the barracks there and everybody was jumping through the windows. So we all got lined up and everybody was ready to go then. We just needed a little push. I don't think they shot anybody. Somebody said they just shot into the floor or up in the ceiling. I wasn't close enough and didn't see it, but I got the message alright.

Anyway, that was around April the 10th. They started marching us west towards the Americans that were coming from the west, the Russians were coming from the east. The first night they just put us out in the field and it had rained and rained, there was no shelter, no tents, no nothing, and soaking wet. Whatever you had to carry, that was wet.

The next couple of nights it was like that. Then finally a guy from the Swiss delegation of the Red Cross, some big shot, he came through. From that time on they tried to put us in barns. Stop in places where there was a barn you could get in.

Hell, they were moving, I don't know how many thousands of prisoners they had. We had 4,200. I don't know how many English or Russians they had. I don't think they even knew. Anyway, there were a hell of a lot of prisoners. From then on pretty much at night time we at least got into a barn somewhere.

We were all hungrier than hell. I remember when we were liberated I was down around 120 pounds. I don't want to by any means compare it to what the Japanese prisoners had. They really had it bad. We had it good compared to those guys. Don't ever misunderstand that.

I can remember one time we stopped by this potato field. This guy just planted this huge field of potatoes. They were letting us go out and use that as a latrine out there. Some guy says, "Hey go out there and take a crap out there and get in between the rows. On each side they planted those potatoes". So we'd go out there and scrunch down there and stick your hand out into the row and dig down in there and pick out that half of potato. We picked out 2 or 3 of those, hid them and took them with us so that helped.

Then one time we were at some damn farm house and they had a manure pile there. I remember I was digging in that. I saw a rutabaga. I didn't even know what the hell it was but it looked like a big turnip. It was half rotten but I got that thing out of there and cut half of it off and ate that. I think that was the only rutabaga I ever ate in my life but it was good. It was good.

Another thing that happened on this march. The march was around 290 kilometers is what they estimated. We wound up at Branau, Austria. But on the way I remember a few things interesting happened. They said that our Air Force fighters were strafing the roads. If they found troops on the road or trucks or anything on the road they would just blow them off. The Germans said if you see any airplanes coming straight down just stay in ranks and don't move, they'll know you're pows. So hell there's a P51 came down through there and he no sooner got started and everybody hit the ditches. Nobody got shot. I think he pulled up. I don't think he even shot. I think he knew what we were.

Then I know when we went through Linz, Austria which is a fairly large city. They got us up real real early so we could get through there before they started bombing them. They were bombing them about every day, the 15th Air Force was. We damn near got through it when the damn air raid sirens went off but we got through there okay.

They marched us up to about 8 kilometers past Branau, Austria. It's on the Inn River and it happens to be the birthplace of Hitler. They put us in a woods out there and they cut trees down to make guard paths and they put the guards there. You stayed in the woods. It rained while we were there. We got a Red Cross parcel while we were there which helped immensely. It rained and God it was dripping. It would rain for an hour and it

would drip for 10 hours. We were all wet and bitching. We always said it was going to be a race between General Patton and pneumonia whichever one got there first.

We were in the mountains most of the time. Small towns I never heard of. One time we went down and we got down by the Danube and we saw this group of prisoners coming towards us and it was a bunch of people from a concentration camp at Mauthausen, Austria. It was one of the prominent concentration camps and these guys, they were horrible looking. We were bitching all the time about stuff, the Americans were. We bitched all the time anyway. These Jews were coming and they were going in the opposite direction. Boy, they were just like the pictures. They were nothing but skin and bones. I saw one guy holding another one up with a stick to keep him from falling. They had SS troopers on trucks, sitting on the fenders with machine guns. As soon as a guy fell they shot him and they would keep on going.

I counted 18 of them in the ditch along the way. I tell you, there wasn't much complaining from the Americans. We didn't bitch for a long time after that but then I think we got started up again. Everybody was quiet for along time. I remember that. That really registered. We thought we had it bad but those guys, that was something else. I don't know where in hell they were going but it didn't look like any of them could go 10 miles. I know at the end of the war when we got back into Allied control they asked if we had seen any atrocities. I made out a report about it but some of the guys just said the hell with it. I made it out anyway and that summer when I was home on leave some guy from Army CID interviewed me. He said they were interviewing anybody that filled out those reports so they could use the information at the Nuremburg Trials that they had later on.

Anyway getting back to Branau. I think we got there May 2nd. We were probably liberated around the 6 or 7th. We could here the tanks. They had airplane engines, they sort of sounded like airplane engines. We could hear those.

Then an American officer came out to the camp. I didn't really see him but they said it was he and another guy in a Jeep. They said they were on an American spearhead barreling down through Austria. About that time they were going about 40 or 50 miles a day. This was an advance unit and he said you guys are no longer prisoners of war but I want you to stay here. The infantry will be up through here tomorrow they'll take care of you. So, several of us were hungry. We were going to go out and find something to eat.

I know my waist gunner **Everett Minto**, we went together. We went out into the country and we went up to this farmhouse with a whole bunch of other guys. Hell, there were guys running all over the place. It was kind of interesting. It was a big farmhouse. Their barns were made funny. They were made like a square and the center of it was an open area. The stalls all opened into the open area. Up in one of these barns there had been a German command post of some sort. When the Germans left, they left their rifles and they took the bolts out of them. They threw the rifles in one pile and the bolts in the other. Well apparently bolts aren't interchangeable. You have to have the right bolt for the right rifle. I wanted a gun, so did Everett and so did everybody else. We all wanted guns so we got in this pile and tried to find a bolt that would fit in a gun. There was ammo there. I

found one that fit in there pretty good and I think Everett got one and we went out to shoot it. So help me God, I put this cartridge in there. I held it up to shoot it and I didn't aim. Thank God. I'd be blind today if I had aimed it. I turned my head sideways and shot it and the damn thing exploded. It didn't hurt me bad. It pock marked my face and I had a whole lot of shrapnel in my cheek and in my thumb. It was such a dumb ass thing to do.

Anyway we went back to the camp and nobody was there. They had taken them all. The Army had come in. We stayed overnight at that farmhouse. We went back to the camp and they were all gone. Somebody said they are back in Branau. The Infantry took them back there in trucks to a big aluminum factory there that the Germans vacated. So, we went in there. This was a huge aluminum factory, they had railroads running through it. They wanted to get us into some shelter and they issued us some C-rations or K-rations.

An interesting thing happened there. I was in there, a guy came by, a lieutenant. Somebody said, hey, somebody is looking for you. I thought who the hell is looking for me? He finally found me and it was **Dick Swope** a friend of my brother from Reading, PA. I had met him in the spring of '42 when I worked in Reading. He was a lieutenant in one of those infantry groups going through there. I don't know how he knew I was there. He picked me up and said, come on, get in here, we're going into Branau. We went in to Branau and so help me God we went to the house Hitler was born in. It was like a museum type place. They had some stuff there that they sold. Everybody was in there ransacking the place and taking stuff. I picked up some postcards with pictures, part of an arm band. There wasn't much left when I was there. Kind of a freakish thing to be there.

We were only there a day or two. The war was over May the 8th when the surrender was signed. They were trying to move us back to France to some of the camps they had back there for the returning allied personnel. They took us to an airfield near there and put us on a C-47 and flew us. We stopped in Belgium to gas up and then on over to Le Havre, France. They had a replacement depot there. They had a bunch of camps. They were called RAMP camps (returning allied military personnel) mostly for prisoners. They were named after cigarettes, Camp Lucky Strike, Twenty Grand, Philip Morris. They had several camps like that. I think I was at Lucky Strike near Le Havre.

They put us on a diet. You'd stand in line to eat for I don't know how long, hours you know, but we didn't complain. Then in the middle of the afternoon you could go get a milk shake. They were trying to fatten you up so you didn't look like death warmed over when you got home. I looked pretty good when I got home. I put on a lot of weight before I got there.

I can remember back at the aluminum factory when they gave us those K-rations. One of the cans had bacon in there and I think I tried to eat the whole can and it came up two or three times. The first two or three times you ate, I don't know whether you over ate or what happened but I think your stomach shrinks. Then when you eat too much, I don't know if we didn't do it smart or what. Most of the time whatever you ate came right back up. They got us settled down pretty well there at the camp though.

I saw Eisenhower there. He came through that camp. I got to see him, just a glance as he went by. I ran into a fellow, the tail gunner on our original crew that came over from the States. In the beginning they broke us up to be replacements. This guy's name was **Gordon Slocum**. He got shot down late in 1944. He was telling me what happened to all of the rest of the guys on the crew. Five of them were prisoners of war, three of them were killed, and two of them finished up. That's what happened to the ten guys we left the States with. So you can tell by that that it wasn't a very safe place to be, let's put it that way.

There were so many to go and every day they'd say you're going on the next ship. I don't know how long we stayed at camp Lucky Strike but we were waiting for passage home on the boats. Of course there was a priority system. They had to move the troops first and then the wounded. We had a pretty high priority as pows.

A funny thing happened on the boat coming home. These were Victory ships. I don't know what the total capacity was, something like 3,500 or so. They were doubling up the capacity. They said we could go faster if you doubled up so we said yeah we'll do anything. We'll half swim if you'll let us. So there were two men to a bunk. You were supposed to work it out any way you wanted with this other guy. This guy was from New York or somewhere and he says do you want to flip for it, so I says yeah let's flip. So we flipped and I won. I never saw him again. He went up and slept on the deck. That's where I'd have been if he had won so I didn't feel too sorry for him.

It took several days to get home on that old bucket. We landed at Boston. We went into Boston Harbor. Then they took us to an Army camp, Miles Standish I think it was called. Then from there we went to Camp Attebury in Indiana and got some clothing and partial pay. Then I went on home to Akron, Ohio. My folks had moved on from Steubenville to Akron during the war. Mom, dad, Nancy and Barbara were working in the aircraft plant at Goodyear. They were making the Vought-Sikorsky Corsair called the F4U. It's the airplane they use on this tv program called The Black Sheep Squadron. I can't think of the guy's name. That's the airplane they made at Akron.

I got back home, I think it was on father's day, in June of '45. I got a 60 day furlough. Then I reported back to Miami Beach for what they called recuperation period there. They ran some medical tests on you. Then they shipped you out to the nearest base to your home. I was shipped to Lockbourne Air Base in Columbus, Ohio. Then I got discharged in October of 1945.

Just to give you an idea, it's kind of incomprehensible the figures that are involved with World War II. There were over 5,000 B-17s lost in combat in the 8th Air Force flying out of England. 5,000 of them. That's just B-17s. They also had another heavy bomber called the B-24. They had a lot of those over there. I don't know how many of those they lost. I read in the Air Force history that the casualty rate for bomber crews in the 8th Air Force was 52%. I wasn't over there very long before I knew that figure was true, very true.

It was a bad time to be growing up. My generation, I think partly what helped is that we'd grown up through a depression and maybe that helped make kids a little tougher or something for when this thing came along. God, there were over 325,000 Americans killed in that war. The whole world was at war. It wasn't like just one or two countries.

The best memory that I have of the whole thing was how the country was unified. It was just beautiful because everything was geared to the war. Everybody was involved in the war. The women were working in the defense plants. If a soldier had a uniform on, no matter what kind, Navy, Marine, Army, Air Force, you couldn't walk 3 steps on the street without somebody wanting to pick you up and take you wherever you wanted to go. They couldn't treat you good enough. You had all kinds of friends that were killed and missing. Everybody knew somebody. Yet the country didn't suffer like other countries. There wasn't any fighting over here and there wasn't any destruction to America itself. It just makes you wish you could get that spirit back. If the country could get that back, boy there would just be no way that anybody could ever touch us here. It would just be so superior. We'd be so much better off, but that's not the way it works.

I remember back when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, I was living in Steubenville, Ohio. It was on a Sunday. I was over at a park, a recreation field there. Somebody came running over and said, "The Japs bombed Pearl Harbor." I said, "Where the hell's Pearl Harbor?" I didn't even know where it was. From that moment, that changed the lives of just about every American citizen for the next 4 or 5 years. It really, it really changed America. It was interesting. Everybody wanted to do something. The draft was already in progress. That started in 1941. I know in the summer of '41, our 3rd baseman at Welch, West Virginia, I was playing baseball down there. His was one of the first numbers drawn. He had to go into the Army then. Everybody wanted to do their part.

I know the Air Force was sort of glamorous. You wore the silver wings on your uniform and everybody thought you were hot stuff. If you were half smart you might think about maybe that's more dangerous or something, but you didn't. When you're young you think you're indestructible. Had I known what it was going to be like I just don't know if I would do it again or not. Probably not. I don't know how many the total number of prisoners of war in Germany there were, but when you stop to think, just that one camp had 4,200, just enlisted Air Force guys in there. They had those camps all over Germany. There were thousands and thousands. Well, 5,000 bombers lost. Losing that many bombers and it's 10 men on a bomber. The casualty rate was terrific. I think the 15th Air Force nearly 26%. It was half of what it was in the 8th because the 8th was bombing more German targets. Especially the Ruhr Valley was a tough target. They had it heavily guarded.

When I came out I went back to baseball. I played 2 years before the war at Welch, WV and Bradford, PA. Welch in '41 and Bradford in '42. Then I went into the service when I enlisted in Pittsburg in December of '42.

That's about all there is to say. I don't know what else to say so, Adios.

