

# **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

## **Interview with Robert Bedford**

**April 26, 2013**

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### PREFACE

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Transcribed by Susan McIntyre, National Court Reporters Association.

## **RICHARD BEDFORD**

**April 26, 2013**

Question: It is Friday, 26 April 2013. It is 1430 hours in the afternoon. We are here with Mr. Richard Bedford, interviewing him for the Oral History Project of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Steven Meis is conducting the interview. Mr. Bedford, can you tell us your full name and when you were born?

Answer: Richard L. Bedford, April 17, 1922.

Q: Where were you born, sir?

A: I was born in Rochester, New York.

Q: Were you raised there as well?

A: Pardon?

Q: Were you raised there as well?

A: I grew up most of my years in Rochester, yes.

Q: What was your childhood like?

A: It was pretty much, I guess, like anybody's childhood. I lived in a rural area. I was mostly surrounded by farms, and that's about it.

Q: What did your parents do?

A: My mother was a homemaker, my father was an oil mechanic, and I think that's the only job he ever had, actually.

Q: Did you go to school there in Rochester as well?

A: I went to school in Rochester. I started kindergarten in the City of Rochester and later in life I moved to one of the suburbs and went to high school in a town called Webster, New York.

Q: Which high school did you go to?

A: Webster High School --

Q: Right.

A: -- in Webster, New York. I graduated from there in 1940.

Q: Did you enjoy high school? Did you participate in any sports or...

A: No. I'm not a very good sports person. I did play a little baseball, and that's about it.

Q: Right. And 1940, when -- did you go on to university from high school or what happened after high school?

A: I did not go to college or university. I did go to night school, taking courses one at a time or two at a time. Kodak paid for any -- I worked for Eastman Kodak, by the way, and they would pay your tuition if you took some course related to your job. But I didn't actually get enough credits to get a college degree.

Q: Okay. So did you start working for Eastman Kodak immediately after of high school or what did you do?

A: Immediately out of high school I went to Kodak and was hired.

Q: What did you do?

A: A little bit of everything. I started out at Kodak working in a stockroom, a chemical stockroom, where we used to fill orders for various chemicals for the

chemistry departments of various universities. And I worked there up until I went into the service.

Q: Did you enjoy working for Eastman Kodak?

A: Oh, yes. Yeah. Actually, if you lived in Rochester you worked for Kodak.

Q: Gosh.

A: Almost everybody worked there.

Q: Are you married?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you meet your wife before or after the war?

A: I met my wife in high school.

Q: Tell us about that.

A: My wife went to a Rochester high school. She was in a class after me. I went to a high school in a different town. And my wife's cousin was a grower of flowers and also had a flower shop and I used to work in the greenhouses and my wife worked in the store -- on the retail store, selling flowers and corsages and different things like that. We went to the same church. I knew my wife through my sister, I think, primarily, because they were in Girl Scouts together. Our church sponsored a Girl Scout troop and a couple of Boy Scout troops. We did go to the same church. She was in Girl Scouts with my sister and I was in Boy Scouts.

Q: So you actually knew her from a very young age?

A: I knew her from -- oh, golly. She was probably 16 or 17.

Q: When you first met?

A: When I first started taking notice of girls.

Q: Right.

A: Yeah.

Q: And were you attracted to her straightaway?

A: Oh, yeah. She was a very pretty girl, yeah. And I think part of her family -- my wife's father was a World War I veteran, and the fact that I was -- ended up in the service, he thought I would be a good match for his daughter.

Q: What's your wife's name?

A: Doris.

Q: Doris?

A: Yes.

Q: What's her full name?

A: Her first name?

Q: Her full name.

A: Her full name was Doris Petroff, P-E-T-R-O-F-F.

Q: When were you married?

A: Married in 1943.

Q: 1943. Okay.

A: Right after I got out of flight school.

Q: Right. And did you start a family straightaway or...

A: No. No. We were married in November of '43 and was married about five weeks and I went overseas.

Q: I see.

A: Yeah.

Q: Were you married at that church that you --

A: No, no. I was stationed in Tallahassee, Florida --

Q: Okay.

A: -- and we were married in Tallahassee, Florida. And I went on the base one day and never came home.

Q: I see.

A: Yeah. She knew I didn't come home for dinner and I said I'm on my way to England.

Q: Very good.

A: Yeah.

Q: About the war. When you realised, did you -- when you realised that America was entering the war, did you enlist, were you drafted? Tell us about how you entered the service.

A: I did not want to be drafted. I had a couple of reasons. One, I had an interest in flying and there was the aviation cadet program. And I looked into that and what attracted me to that, other than the flying aspect, was aviation cadets were paid \$75 a month versus 21 as a drafted private into the Army. So it was partly monetary and partly my interest in flying.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: And what were the qualifications?

A: The qualifications to get into the cadet program was two years of college or they said the equivalent. I didn't have two years of college but I did pass the entrance exam on various subjects that allowed me to join the aviation cadet program.

Q: And did you study up for that or did you simply take the exam cold?

A: I simply took a test.

Q: Okay.

A: I -- I don't want to say I was fairly intelligent but I had a fairly good knowledge of many things. I did fairly well in high school and had a good knowledge of English and chemistry and physics and most of the subjects I took in high school were in sciences.

Q: Did you go to a recruiting station?

A: No. There was -- I don't think it was called a -- I don't know, it was probably the city hall where they were giving exams for aviation cadet recruits.

Q: Was that the city hall at Rochester?

A: At Rochester, yes, uh-huh.

Q: When was that precisely, do you remember?

A: That was '43, I believe.

Q: How long after taking the test did you realise that you were accepted?

A: I probably knew almost immediately --

Q: Okay.

A: -- that I had high enough grades in taking the test.

Q: And were you given shipping orders at that time? Did you know whether you were going to training?

A: No, it was probably five months later that I shipped out to -- or I shipped into a place for classification.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: And what was that experience? What was your very first military experience when you entered?

A: Oh, it was different. When I boarded a train, went down to Nashville, Tennessee, we were reclassified -- actually we took some basic training down there, we learned how to march and do KP and all the things that usually new recruits do -- and took some tests down there to see -- we were in the Air Corps and to see what we would be classified as. And I had a preference of being a pilot and passed enough of the tests that they classified me as a pilot recruit.

Q: And how did they establish that preference? Were you merely asked or did you fill out a form? How did you express that you wanted to be a pilot?

A: I think the fact that we joined the Air Corps we wanted to be a pilot, period.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah. And along the way they would classify you, depending on a number of tests we took we would be a pilot, a navigator, bombardier. So I wanted to be a pilot and expressed a desire to be a single engine pilot. And there's a series of tests, I think, that we took that they determined and sent us on for further training.

Q: When did you -- when were you informed that you had been selected for flight school?

A: I think from Nashville, Tennessee, which was sort of basic army training, we went to Mitchell Fields and basically just went to school there. We studied meteorology, navigation, map reading. We learned reading of code. They gave us basically a -- almost a two-year college course in a couple of weeks.

Q: Right.



A: They just crammed us full of knowledge, yeah.

Q: Was it mostly -- what was the environment like? Mostly in the classroom, mostly in the cockpit or all classroom?

A: It was all classroom. We hadn't even seen an airplane yet. Yeah, it was certainly all -- and a lot of military training, doing what you were told. The cadet program was like West Point, it was very, very strict. What we would do, we had to do a lot of parade stuff and we were classified as underclassman for a while and had to do -- we got hazed by the upperclassman. It was basically like West Point, you know.

Q: I see. What was the biggest challenge for you academically? Or was there any academic challenges for you?

A: I can't think of any that bothered me. Most all my training came easy. I tried to stay out of trouble. One of the fears was if you were caught in a lie or doing something, they would wash you out. You just never wanted to do anything that was not proper. We were trained to be officers and gentlemen --

Q: Right.

A: -- and we just tried to keep our nose to the grindstone, because we didn't want to get washed out. Flying pay was good, we all had a desire to be pilots. Yeah.

Q: Did you have any classmates who you felt were struggling, that you had to help out?

A: Never got close to any of the classmates.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah. At least I didn't. But in the thing they told us to look to your right and look to your left, one of you are going to get washed out. The washout rate was fairly high.

Q: Did that prove to be true?

A: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. A lot of the cadets were washed out early. They couldn't meet the academic standards or did some infraction or something like that.

Q: Where did they go when they were washed out? Do you know?

A: I have no idea. I think probably went back into service someplace.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah.

Q: So after you completed that part of cadet training, then did you go to flight school?

A: Yes.

Q: Okay. And where --

A: After I finished that I went down to Avon Park, Florida.

Q: Uh-huh?

A: There was a private airfield with private instructors. They were civilians, they were not military pilot instructors. It was a primary flight school. You flew open cockpit bi-planes. It was a Stearman, with the wind flow --

Q: Right.

A: Yeah.

Q: What year was that?

A: That was in '43.

Q: '43.

A: Uh-huh

Q: Okay. What was that experience like? Take me back to the first time you climbed into a cockpit either alone or with another person. What was that experience like?

A: It was sort of scary. I had been up in a small aircraft a couple of times prior to being in the service but it wasn't in an open cockpit-type plane. I was a little bit subject to air sickness, and I remember I used to carry a lemon in my pocket and sort of squeeze lemon juice into my mouth to keep from being too nauseous. But that went away with -- after some flights with the instructor. And we did more and more crazy manoeuvres. We did loops, we did slow rolls, and I soon grew accustomed to various positions in an aircraft.

Q: Did you enjoy it?

A: Yeah, I did. I thought it was great. Here I am, a hot pilot. But one day the instructor jumped out and said, "Take it up. Try not to kill yourself."

Q: And what was that like?

A: It was fine. I had no problems at all. I taxied out, did a circle around, came in for landing. It was very good. I had no accidents, no problems at all.

Q: Was the same sort of aircraft, a bi-plane open cockpit --

A: Yeah, I soloed in the PT-13, a Stearman was the aircraft.

Q: Right.

A: It was nice. And we still got a lot of instructions. We learned aerobatics, unusual positions and recovering -- stalls, recovering from stalls. We learned all the basic things of flying. And I got through that without being washed out, so...

Q: You finish up at Avon.

A: Right.

Q: Now what happens?

A: Then I went to basic.

Q: Where?

A: I went to Macon -- no -- yeah, Macon, Georgia. Yeah, I went to Macon, Georgia, for basic air training. Primary training in Florida, then basic training. And got a bigger aircraft. It had more things about it. It was a low-wing monoplane, a closed cockpit versus being in an open cockpit aircraft. Still had a -- I don't think I had a -- I think I had an Army Air Force instructor. And, again, it was a plane that was different. We had, I think, a two-speed propeller. There were more controls on it. I think we had flaps. It was a low-wing monoplane. A lot more horsepower than the primary trainer. And, again, we went through the same procedures of landings, take-offs, short field landings. Just learning the basics with a more powerful aircraft.

Q: What was that step-up like, to step up from the bi-plane into that monoplane? Was it a huge experience?

A: Oh, yeah. It was more powerful and you were enclosed in the cockpit. You had more controls. It was -- it was nice. You thought you were on your way to being a great pilot.

Q: You enjoyed it?

A: I enjoyed it. I enjoyed flying very much.

Q: You finish up there, then what?

A: Then I went to advanced training.

Q: Okay. Where was that?

A: I think I went to (?Molta?), Georgia -- I think one was Macon -- did I say Macon?

Q: Yes, Macon.

A: Macon, and then I went to (?Molta?), Georgia, and we flew AT-6s, which was the Texan -- had anickname, "the Texan." Again, more advanced, more controls, retractable gear. We had flaps. We had -- each one became a little bit more of a challenge. But it was not like learning everything at once. From primary to basic to advanced, each aircraft was a little bit more complex. And we did -- I think it was the first time I did a night flight. Up to that we had never done any night flying. And in all these flying schools we did all kinds of manoeuvres. We learned instrument flying. Put a -- had a hood put over our heads so we see nothing but the controls in front of us. And the instructor was still with us, he could see what we were doing.

Q: Right.

A: Yeah. So we learned instrument flying where you've got to rely on your instruments. You can get very disoriented. If you do some manoeuvres, your ear kicks off and you -- sometimes you can't see anything. You don't know if you're right side up, sideways, you don't know if you're losing altitude or gaining altitude. So each step along the way became more complex.

Q: Was it frightening? Flying blind, you know, with that hood over?

A: It -- I didn't find it difficult. We had some time in Link Trainers. Do you know what a Link Trainer is?

Q: No.

A: A Link Trainer is a little aircraft that's in a stationary position where I'm in there, you're telling me what to do, and you have a \_ showing me what I'm doing in the aircraft. It's a way to learn blind flying without being in an aircraft.

He'd basically tell you what to do and you'd do it. And you're just looking at -- you got to rely on instruments, you can't rely on your ear and stuff like that when you're learning to fly. You got to believe the altimeter, the artificial horizon, the RPMs that the motor's -- you got to rely on your instruments because you can't always see the ground.

Q: Right.

A: Yeah.

Q: So throughout this entire process from basic training, to Avon, to going to Macon, to going on to the AT-6, blind cockpit training, what have you, what length of time are we talking about there, this entire time?

A: Two-month intervals.

Q: They're cramming a lot into a short period of time.

A: Oh, yeah. I went from not flying to six months later I'm a pilot.

Q: Right.

A: Yeah. All our training was in two-month intervals.

Q: Up to and through the AT-6 training, is there any training involving combat engagement up to that point or is it purely flying at that?

A: At advance training we did some aerial gunnery. We had a ship that towed a big target and we shot at that. We had to be fairly proficient because they'd count the holes. A number of us would be shooting at -- the AT-6 was the first aircraft that we had a gun, and our ammo was painted, the projectile. So if we shot at the target, as it went through the screen it left yellow or red, so that when you dropped the target you could see what your proficiency was in aerial gunnery.

Q: Sure.

A: Yeah. So we did that in advanced training. Advanced training was the first time we flew a combat-type aircraft. Part of our training was to go down to Avon Field in Florida, and they had P-40s and we flew a P-40. That's the first aircraft I ever flew with no dual time. Just sat in the aircraft, looked where all the instruments were and took it off. No training whatsoever on -- the P-40 was the old war hawk that was used, basically, in China. A very powerful aircraft but sort of obsolete by World War II standards.

Q: Yeah.

A: Right.

Q: But, still, what was that first experience like, getting into that P-40, no real exposure to the aircraft before, going up in it, what was the --

A: It was scary. Because when you put the throttle forward, the airplane moved and it was very manoeuvrable, but -- I don't know, it was exiting. It got your blood going like mad.

Q: At what point during your training did you realise that you had been slotted and selected specifically for fighter pilot training?

A: Oh, it was in the very beginning. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I knew when I started flying that -- well, probably basically at advanced they made up their mind you were capable of being a combat pilot.

Q: Sure. How long did you spend with the P-40?

A: Probably less than 10 hours.

Q: And then on to what?

A: Then I came home on leave.

Q: Okay.

A: Yeah. At that point I graduated from flight school. I got my wings. My wife came down, pinned my wings on me. I went home for 30 days leave and was a second lieutenant, single engine pilot.

Q: What month, what year?

A: August '43.

Q: August '43.

A: Yeah.

Q: All right.

A: I was in the class of 43H, H being -- A being January, B February, so I was in the class of 43H.

Q: What happens after your leave is expired and you have to report back? Where do you go? What do you do?

A: I went down to Tallahassee, Florida and learned I was going to fly P-47s.

Q: What did you think?

A: Oh, it was great. I mean this was a big aircraft. It was -- it had more horses behind that propeller, 2800 horsepower. It was a big aircraft.

Q: Were you thrilled?

A: Oh, it was great. I mean we were just hot pilots --

Q: Right.

A: -- you know.

Q: Do you remember the first flight? Do you remember getting in the first time?

A: Not really. It seemed pretty natural. Because I had flown the P-40, which was the fighter aircraft but sort of obsolete. Went down to Tallahassee -- and, again, it's a single engine fighter, there's no dual time. You sit in the cockpit, you learn where all the instruments are, you know where all the controls are to pick up the wheels, the flaps and everything you need to know, and just go ahead and fly it.

Q: How much training did you have with the P-47?

A: None.

Q: None. You just -- that's it, you were in.

A: That's it. Yeah. Yeah.

Q: From the time that you were first exposed to the P-47 to then deployment to Europe, presumably, how long was that?

A: Oh, golly. I was flying the P-47 in November, I went overseas in December. So I had maybe two months training in the P-47 before I went overseas.

Q: How did you get overseas?

A: Ship. Boat.

Q: Where did you arrive in Europe?

A: Well, first of all, after I finished my training in the P-47 -- well, my wife and I got married then. I mean we were married in November. And one night I didn't come home for dinner and she knew I was going out. I never said good-bye to her. My gear was all at the base and they closed down the base. I got a train up to Boston and a boat to England and she's sitting in Tallahassee waiting for me to come home for dinner. And she knew I was going overseas because all my gear was on the base, so...

Q: Were you trying to spare her the pain of separation?

A: No, she knew I was going to leave.

Q: Yes.

A: I mean I think during World War II all the wives knew that their -- in the air corp -- were going to leave. They didn't know when, but it's going to happen.

Q: Sure, but why did you choose to do it in that fashion, not come home for dinner that night?

A: I felt bad because I couldn't say good-bye to her.

Q: Okay.

A: I couldn't make a phone call. They just closed down the base, put us on the train and we were on our way to England.

Q: So it really wasn't your choice, you were sort of --

A: It was not our choice, no. I didn't know if I was going to go to eastern -- or to Japan or to England. I went to England.

Q: How did you explain it to your wife? Did you write her a letter?

A: Eventually I let her know, when I got to England and could write. Communication was bad during World War II. It took a long time. She really hardly ever got your letter because if you wrote your wife it was photographed, 16 mm film, went back to the States, and it was printed out on what they call V-Mail, have you heard of V-Mail?

Q: Absolutely.

A: So she gets a little 4 x 6 copy of the letter that you wrote, so...

Q: That was so that the sensors could have a look at it.

A: Yeah. Right. They looked at it, it was photographed, blocked out any reference to where you were in England, and she'd get a little photocopy of your letters.

Q: How long did it take you to get to England?

A: I think it took probably seven days or so. It was a slow trip. Went over by boat. I think it was the EMPRESS OF AUSTRALIA or something likethat. It was pretty nice ride over because as officers we had a nice stateroom, we ate in a nice dining room, we had a table, we had tablecloths. And it was a troop ship, and a lot of the troops were down in the hold under terrible conditions, I thought. I found that being an officer had a lot of privileges. It was amazing, you know.

Q: Where precisely in England did you land?

A: I landed, actually, in Scotland. I think we landed at Liverpool.

Q: Okay.



A: Yeah. Landed in Liverpool. I went over as a replacement pilot. I did not train for the squadron or a group, I went over to England as a replacement pilot and didn't know where I would be. So we went into this pool of pilots. And they said, "Okay, we need two fighter pilots for Europe, we need four for there," and you just sort of picked out where you wanted to go. And I had a buddy that I trained with, and we went over to England together, and we found that the 353rd Fighter Group only needed two versus somebody else that needed six or so. So we figured the guys that needed the least pilots were probably better, so we chose that fighter group to go with. We had a choice.

Q: Right.

A: Yeah.

Q: So where exactly -- which squadron were you with? Where did you end up?

A: I signed up to go to the 353rd Fighter Group and I was in the 350th Fighter Squad.

Q: Which air force was that? Was that Ninth Air Force? Which air force?

A: Eighth.

Q: Eighth Air Force?

A: Eighth Air Force. So the one we picked out was the 353rd Fighter Group and after getting into that group, then we were assigned to the 350th Fighter Squadron. The fighter group had three squadrons to it, it had the 350th, 351st and 352nd, and we were assigned to the 350th Fighter Group. This was the P-47.

Q: Right, the Thunderbolt.

A: Thunderbolt Group.

Q: What city? Do you remember what town or village you were stationed out of?

A: The first base I went to we didn't stay there very long, but I ended up in a town called Raydon, R-A-Y-D-O-N. It was in the eastern area of England, in the East Anglia area of Great Britain.

Q: What did you think of England?

A: Didn't see any of it. I mean at that time. We just took a train, we got off at this town of Raydon and went on to a base.

Q: And did you spend most of your time when you were not in the aircraft on that base or...

A: Yes. Yes. Oh, we did get leave. We did go into London and stuff like that on a few occasions.

Q: What was your sense of how the English people accepted you or your interaction with them?

A: I had basically no contact with them. On leave -- I only was on leave a couple times and went into London. And London was strange because it was a blacked out city. You were there with a little tiny flashlight, they had a little (?slit?), that you didn't bump into people going around the town. Food was scarce in England at the time. I did know a family in England through Boy Scouts. As a Boy Scout we used to sponsor -- or we used to go up to Canada and visit -- sort of an exchange with Boy Scouts, and when I went up to Canada this family had a family in England who I contacted and had occasion to visit them. We used to take them some food items scrounged from our base because they were limited in what they could buy. Food was scarce in England. It was pretty much rationed.

Q: What was your job as a pilot with the 350th? What were you tasked with doing?

A: Whatever the mission was. First of all, when I joined the 350th, that was in January, I really didn't get to fly my first mission until almost March because this fighter group wanted to train new recruits on how they did things, how they flew formation, how they attacked something and just what they did, so you were comfortable and didn't run into each other in combat. So --

Q: And what was that few months like for you?

A: It was fun. It was good training. We did some dog fighting, we chased each other, tried to evade. Just to learn how to do stuff as this group did it. So -- and after that then I flew first mission.

Q: And what -- I want you to tell me all about that. What was the first mission like? When was it, precisely?

A: The first mission, if I recall -- I went overseas in January, first part of January, I didn't fly my first mission until, I think, March. The biggest thing I remember is I was breathing hard because I had never seen these little black puffs coming up into the sky, the flack.

Q: Yes.

A: And I found that I got pretty low on oxygen, because I must have been breathing very, very hard. It was scary but exiting. And it was uneventful. It was just sort of a milk run or escorting bombers into Germany.

Q: What sort of bombers were they? Do you recall?

A: Yeah, mostly all the bombers that we escorted were B-17s sometimes B-24s. And we couldn't stay with them very long. I mean they flew fairly slow compared to us. So they'd be flying along and we'd be just sort of zigzagging because it was -- get ahead of them. So we could only stay with them for maybe 15, 20 minutes before another squadron would come in to take over and escort them a little bit further. So most all our missions in the beginning were escort missions, high altitude, 28 - 30,000 feet, escorting bombers. Some of our missions later ran into the area were low-altitude missions where we'd go in and dive bomb a bridge, dive bomb a tunnel, shoot up a train, whatever our mission was. But most of them -- probably I'd say 60, 70 percent were escort missions and some were just "let's go in and target of opportunity." You see something moving, try to stop it from moving. Yeah.

Q: Do you recall your first combat engagement?

A: I only had one.

Q: Okay.

A: The day I was shot down. I actually went through 55 ... 55 missions, something like that, and never tangled with anyone. They were all escorts or dive bombing missions with no opposition at all. It wasn't until after D-Day that we started tangling with things.

Q: Tell us about the day you were shot down. Do you remember the day? Do you remember what month it was? The year?

A: Yeah. The invasion was on June 6, that's when D-Day was. I flew three missions on D-Day, mostly just trying to shoot up anything that was moving, targets of opportunity. They were landing on the beachhead. I flew early morning -- it was dark -- probably three missions on D-Day. Go over, come back, refuel, go over and try to stop convoy coming into the front, this type of thing. That was on June 6th. And I flew a number of missions in between there. And on June 12 is when I was shot down. We were, again, looking for targets of opportunity on the ground and actually saw no enemy aircraft. They were just scarce. So they were just like milk runs. And June 12th, out of the blue came probably 30 ME-109s, and out of the 16 aircraft they shot down 12 of us. I mean you couldn't turn anywhere without having a 109 on your tail, you

know. Fired at a couple of them, did not bring them down. Got a few bits, that's about it. Scared. I really got hit badly.

Q: And you were going down?

A: Yeah, I bailed out. Aircraft caught fire.

Q: Right. What was that experience like?

A: It was pretty natural. I didn't give a second thought of going over the side. I mean if an airplane's not flying and I'm in it, I don't want to be in.

Q: Sure.

A: You know. And my squadron leader was shot down and he said, "I'm going away," and he died, he crashed on the -- he just hit the deck. And they shot down a number of us. And now I'm in a foreign country, I'm in France. I'm not quite sure where in France I am but I knew I was on the ground, you know.

Q: Do you recall what altitude you were -- roughly what altitude you were when you bailed out?

A: I was probably 1,400 feet, 1,600 feet. The chute opened and I hit the deck. I just went over the edge and pulled the cord. I was in the air very little before I hit the ground.

Q: Where were you when you hit the ground? In a field, in a --

A: I landed in a field, in a farm area. Did the best to -- not bury my chute but keep it under some brush, and before too long there was a fair few Germans looking for me, and I just laid low and hoped I wasn't caught. Had the Germans had any dogs with them I'd of probably been captured then, but they did not find me.

Q: Where did you hide?

A: Pardon?

Q: Where did you hide?

A: I just hid on the ground in some brush area. I could see them looking for me but they didn't get near where I was.

Q: How long did that process take when they were looking for you when you were lying down?

A: Probably a couple of hours I saw them in the area and they disappeared.

Q: Could you hear them? Could you hear them speaking?

A: No. No, I could not. No.

Q: But you could hear them moving about?

A: Other than they were looking for me and they didn't find me and I just stayed low and tried to stay under cover.

Q: When did you move from that position?

A: During the night. During the night I left the position. I had a pretty good idea of where I was and I just headed towards where I thought the beachhead was. This was just six days after the landing on D-Day. So I was basically going west. We had a -- we carried an escape kit with us which had a compass, had some pills for -- I've blanked on that word -- purifying water. We had morphine which we could inject. Had we been wounded badly we could inject ourselves with morphine. We had some maps, we had some phrase books, we had some money of the area that we were flying over. So I just headed towards the beachhead.

Q: With the idea that you were heading towards American forces?

A: Right. Right. Yeah.

Q: What happened next?

A: What happened next, I saw a farmer in the field and went up to him and in my broken French I told him I was an American pilot and if he would help me. And he was scared, but he did. He got me some civilian clothes. He got me some food. He got me some maps of the area. He did not think I had enough money, so he finally gave me 500 francs or something, because the cost of living in France was fairly high, and sent me on my way.

Q: Where did you go?

A: I started towards -- I kept going west and approached another farmer that took me into a town and put me in contact with the mayor of this town. He got me some papers. In England we carried our photographs in civilian clothes before. We started flying missions we were photographed in civilian clothes that we could put on any sort of papers that we might need if we were shot down.

And he got me some papers and took me to a farm where I stayed for two months. I stayed on this farm hoping to get into Switzerland or get into Spain. It was German occupied, German soldiers were all over the place. But I stayed

on this farm and kept a very, very low profile. And I lived with this family for a couple of months.

Q: And they provided food for you and...

A: Food, yeah. And then, as the Germans came close, they moved me into a wooded area. There was a little makeshift shelter and I stayed there for a week or two. And during the night they brought me food and some wine and some Calvados, which is sort of an apple liqueur. And I stayed there for a while. And they came one day and said they had a passage for me. And I went to the side of the road, I was picked up by a French couple, take me into Paris, and they're the ones that turned me in to the Germans. They were collaborators with the Germans. And went into Paris, had an apartment there, and I was thereabout a day or two and the Gestapo came one night and arrested me, threw me in prison.

Q: Must have been a pretty horrifying experience knowing that they were at the door.

A: Yeah. Yeah, it was. Because I didn't know what they were going to do with me. They interrogated me. I didn't -- I couldn't tell them anything. I had already been out of contact with the troops and what was going on in the war because it was -- because -- two months, shot down in June and I wasn't captured until August, so...

Q: When the knock came on that door in that Parisian apartment, did you know straightaway that it was the Gestapo or was it --

A: I didn't know who it was. They just came in and arrested me.

Q: And were they uniformed?

A: They were not in uniforms. They -- like you saw in the movies they were dressed basically in black. Maybe that was the Gestapo's uniform.

Q: Right.

A: And they had pistols. And they just told me I was under arrest and called me into Gestapo headquarters and interrogated me for most of the night and threw me in prison in the morning.

Q: Did they interrogate you in English then?

A: In very good English, yeah. I think it was a major, German major, spoke very good English. Knew an awful lot about the United States. Name, rank and serial number is the only thing I knew.

Q: How did they treat you during the interrogation process? Were you struck?

A: I was hit a couple of times with like a rubber truncheon on the back of head, but they weren't extremely mean to me at all. They just tried to get me to tell them something. But I was already out of the war for several months at this point. I didn't know what was going on from June until August when I was captured.

Q: How long were you under interrogation? How long did that process take?

A: Probably 10 hours or so. Yeah.

Q: At the end of it, what happened?

A: When I was handcuffed -- they picked up a young boy and I was sort of handcuffed to this young boy. I don't know what his relationship was. He was in the apartment that I was captured in. I don't know if it was the son of somebody or -- but I was handcuffed to him all night long. We were thrown in some room. And in the morning I understood he was executed, this boy. And I just was interrogated some more and went into prison, Fresnes prison, which is a big old prison in Paris.

Q: Who was there with you in prison?

A: I was in there first with four -- three other prisoners who were French speaking and later on I was put into another cell with English -- four other English-speaking prisoners. We didn't talk too much to each other because we didn't know who was a spy and who was a good person. Because they would try to be friendly with somebody that maybe they'd get some information out of. So we really didn't really talk too much to each other.

Q: How long were you there?

A: Maybe three weeks. Because the troops were coming close. After the invasion, by August they were getting pretty close to Paris. And one day they just evacuated the prison and put us on boxcars and we left Paris.

Q: What was the boxcar experience like? How many men were put in there?

A: A lot. We were in those \_ nights. Eight hours, forty men. They were able to squeeze 100 of us in a boxcar.

Q: That was designed to accommodate 40 men?

A: Yeah.

Q: So you all were standing up then?

A: We were all standing up, some laying down. Took turns.

Q: Right.

A: We were pretty crowded in there. We had a couple of pales, one with water and one for used water.

Q: Uh-huh.

A: It was very crowded and very unsanitary. They had given us a loaf of bread and we were in that boxcar five days.

Q: A single loaf with 100 of you?

A: No, a single loaf for each of us.

Q: For each of you for the five days.

A: For the five days, yeah.

Q: The doors open up, where are you?

A: When they opened up -- well, they opened up a couple of times to let us relieve ourselves on the way. When they finally opened up we were in Buchenwald concentration camp.

Q: How do you know?

A: I think some knew where we were. We thought when the doors would open we would be in a POW camp, except I knew POWs didn't have striped uniforms, were not emaciated. They were like walking ghosts. And we just knew we were in Buchenwald but we didn't know too much about Buchenwald. I didn't hear about concentration camps when I was growing up. I didn't know what they were like. And they were bad places. And these prisoners were all -- well, they were Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, whatever Germany didn't want went into a concentration camp. And they stripped us completely naked, shaved every hair off our body, doused us with disinfectant, gave us a shirt and a pair of pants -- was probably from somebody who died, they were civilian-type clothes-- we had no shoes, no socks, and we slept outside, just on the ground for probably five or six days. And this was in October. It was getting pretty cold. We finally did get into a barrack type thing and we slept on these shelves and they had four tiers high and probably five men on a shelf. I lost 68 pounds in the concentration camp. You got a slice of bread in the morning, we



got a little bit of watery soup, and you got coffee, maybe a slice of bread at night. We were pretty much bitten by fleas and lice. It was -- Buchenwald was a horrible place. I know you've probably been to the Holy Cross Museum. It -- it was bad. We were there until November.

Q: You said when you arrived you knew it was not a POW camp.

A: Yes.

Q: What did you think it was? Where did you think—

A: I had no idea, except all these guys were in sort of grey and black striped suits, they were like walking ghosts. We didn't know where we were. We did very quickly know that we were in a concentration camp, but I didn't know what a concentration camp was. I wasn't alone, there was 168 of us that were picked up in one day in Paris. They just swept through the city. They knew where they were and they just decided to pick us all up. We were Americans, British, Australian, New Zealanders. All airmen, some officers, non-comms. All trying to evade capture, and they picked us all up in one day in Paris.

Q: When you identified that you had other allied servicemen with you in the camp, did you do your best to stay with them or did you -- what was that like?

A: Well, they kept us together. Yeah. We were together. We were always together. We didn't talk to each other very much because we really didn't know if there was a spy planted in among us. Because we didn't know each other. We were only just -- I think some of the airmen knew each other, some of the Brits probably did. And we just stuck together as a group, tried to act as a military unit.

Q: Explain that. What do you mean by "tried to act like a military unit"?

A: We tried to stay together. We tried to stand at attention. We tried to act like soldiers. And just weekly I think we had formations. We tried to just act like soldiers should rather than wander around the camp trying to steal somebody's shoes or something like that. It was a -- we were a pretty motley crew at this point. As I say, there was 168 of us, so we all spoke English. And that was the other thing, language is a terrible barrier. And there were Poles, there was some Germans or some French, there were some Danish, there were all kinds of people, gypsies. All men, there's no women there. They did have some women in parts of the camp, some children in parts of the camp. It was a horrible experience because we did find out shortly before we were moved to a POW camp that we were scheduled to get executed. We just missed it by a few days. When we got there they said the only way out was up the chimney --+.

Q: Did you know that they were murdering people?

A: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Q: How did they go about doing that? Did you witness?

A: I did not, no. I saw some people that were hung. I saw some people who were pretty much beaten to death. If they went into a \_ we didn't know, we were just a separate English-speaking group of people. We were in one area.

Q: And why were they being hung? Why were they being beaten to death? Were these infractions of the rules or --

A: Infractions. The concentration camp was guarded by prisoners. There were some pretty mean prisoners who got extra rations, they got extra benefits by keeping the prisoners in order, and they would not hesitate to beat somebody to death. Concentration camp was just -- saw very few -- saw very few German guards or anything, they were all civilian guards. They were called "kapos."

I guess it's some name, probably is an abbreviation for something, whatever this word "kapo" was. But it was just a bad place.

Q: You said there were children and women there. What were they doing there? Were they the wives and children of some of the administration of the camp? What were they doing there?

A: I think they were prisoners. I think they were prisoners. They were in separate areas.

Q: I see.

A: So sometimes you'd see them being transported to one part of the camp. The camp was sort of segregated into various groups of people. Some may have been children. There were some women prisoners there. There were some children. The children were treated pretty nicely. I didn't see underfed children. And not a lot of children, you'd just see them on occasion.

Q: Were you made to work?

A: On one occasion. There was an air strike -- Buchenwald was next door to a small factory and there was an air strike and the factory was hit and they made us pick up fire damage, carry away some of the debris. And I think we maybe did it for something to do. We didn't work very hard. Some of us carried the stuff out, some carried it back in, to make it look like we were busy. But they did force us to supposedly work. And that only went on for a few days.

The air strike did not hit any of the prisoners. I think there were a few

Germans killed in the air strike. That's as close as I want to be to an air strike, air raid.

Q: It's frightening?

A: Yeah. Yeah. Bombs make a lot of noise when they go off.

Q: Sure.

A: It was a little bit away from our camp, where we were, so...

Q: Did you ever identify yourself -- knowing that it was not a POW camp, did you ever identify yourself as an American pilot, as an American airman --

A: I think we all did, yes. I think they did know. Because we were classified as POWs, I think, in French prison in Paris. But when they evacuated Paris we were just now political prisoners. They declared us political prisoners. Concentration camp, I don't think they care what we were. We were prisoners, period. As I say, they did have us scheduled to be executed.

Q: It may sound like an absurd question, but did you make any friends in camp?

A: Any friends?

Q: Uh-huh.

A: Not really. I made a few American friends. Some I stayed in contact with for quite a few period of years. There's not very many of us left any more. Over 168 strong, we're probably down less than 20 now around the country -- or around, even, you know, Australia, England, because we were all together. So...

Q: Was there a leader? Was there a single man or a couple of men who stood out as sort of the group leader?

A: There was an English officer who outranked us and he became the leader. And I can't remember his name. I did have it written down, but ... but he had no -- he tried to keep us as a military unit. But once we got out of the concentration camp into a POW camp, then there were leaders there. When we got into Stalag III there were some high-ranking officers that took charge.

Q: When you were at Buchenwald did you try to escape?

A: No. No. I don't know if you could. It was pretty much enclosed in electrified fences. And where do you go? You're in Germany now.

Q: Right.

A: You don't have any allies like perhaps in France. No, we made no attempt to get out. I think that would be a death sentence if you were caught.

Q: When and how were you transferred to Stalag III?

A: A German Luftwaffe officer came into camp. And I don't know what he came into camp for, but it was either an inspection team or something. And he declared that we were airmen and did not belong in the concentration camp, we belonged in the POW camp and shortly after that we got moved out. But it was a German officer that declared that we were not political prisoners, that we were prisoners of war and belonged in a POW camp.

Q: Why do you suppose he did that?

A: Pardon?

Q: Why do you suppose he did that?

A: I think the fact that he was a German Luftwaffe officer, we were airmen, he was an airman, and he just knew what was right.

Q: Did you see him?

A: Yes, we saw him because he walked through the camp.

Q: Did you interact with him?

A: No, I did not. Our leader may have. I don't know.

Q: How long after he left the camp were you transferred?

A: Probably less than a week. Less than a week they put us on the train, we ended up in Stalag III.

Q: Did they tell you where you were going?

A: No.

Q: What did you think?

A: Basically we were going to a POW camp. I didn't know which one or where. We went there to Stalag III, came in, were greeted by a bunch of prisoners. They declared they never saw such a ratty bunch of people, because some of us had shoes, some of us had clogs on, some of us were bare-footed. We had raggedy clothes and we were dirty because we got no showers. We went a couple of months without being able to shower. We were pretty smelly. We

had -- our clothes were basically rags. After Stalag III -- and they greeted us and first thing you know we were washed up, we had shoes, we had socks, underwear, had uniform again. I'm American, but I had an Australian uniform. But it was a nice uniform, it was warm clothes. Had nice warm barracks to sleep in. Everything was pretty good. This was end of October, I think.

Q: Were you at all sick or hurt?

A: No. I had diarrhoea a couple of times but that was about it. I had a short bout with jaundice, but nothing bad. I was never wounded or had no broken bones or anything.

Q: How much weight did you say you had lost in Buchenwald?

A: Sixty-eight pounds.

Q: Did you start gaining it back at Stalag Luft III?

A: Yes. Oh, yeah. Yeah. I got back a good share of that weight. Yeah. It was good.

Q: Was the food acceptable?

A: Pardon?

Q: Was the food all right?

A: Food was great compared to what we had. We had Red Cross parcels. Even though -- we were supposed to get a Red Cross parcel every week and we were on half parcels. And we got foods from the Germans. We used to get potatoes and turnips and sometimes a hunk of meat of some sort. We ate very simply well in the POW camp. We were in a room, each room held eight prisoners. We put all our Red Cross parcels together. So even if we had four parcels, because we were on half rations, and we just sort of planned our meals. We had one cook stove. Each room had so much time on the cook stove. We started in the morning -- each room got one or two brickets. We'd start a fire and we'd keep it going and each room would take time to prepare some sort of a meal for your room or they would do it through their room. Or sometimes you ate a meal early, sometimes you ate a meal late, but it was just taken you only had one kitchen and you took turns using it. We cooked as a group of eight men using Red Cross parcels and what the Germans gave us.

Q: And were the Germans running the camp?

A: Yes.

Q: And guarding it?

A: And guarding it.

Q: Did you interact with them?

A: No, I did not. And I don't think we did. Other than to line up for a pill in the morning and be counted and go back about our business.

Q: And were you made to work? What were your days like?

A: We were not made to work at all. Our days were going to school. We tried to run some classes. I tried to run some classes in photography, because my background was chemistry, photography, I worked for Kodak. Other people would try to teach a language. We had a library of many books. Some of the prisoners put on plays. This was a -- one of the old-time POW camps. It was mostly British, Australians were in there. We as Americans were the minority. And a lot of the prisoners had been there for five years. They were picked up in boats when the Battle of Britain went on very early in the war. And these were old-time Brits that were prisoners after five years and we were the newcomers. And they were just recovering from the execution of all the prisoners that tried to escape for The Great Escape when they executed -- because The Great Escape took part -- some of it started in the barracks that I was in. And there were mostly Australian and British airmen in our barracks. We had basically just one room of Americans in this particular barracks that I was in.

Q: Did the long-timers talk about that escape?

A: No. No. They didn't talk about it at all. We didn't talk to them very much. The group of eight Americans that were in my room, we just talked to each other, basically. We didn't correspond or talk to the Brits or Australians.

Q: And was that for the same reason, for fear of infiltration or...

A: No, it was just -- it was just the fact that we were Americans, they were Brits, you know.

Q: Did the Germans at that time treat you properly?

A: Yeah, they left us alone. Other than counting us twice a day they did not bother us at all.

Q: Did you have any sense of what was going on in the war after being shot down and all the way up to the point you were in Stalag Luft III?

A: We -- you would get a news report almost daily. There was a clandestine radio someplace and word would be passed along how the war was going, you know. Where this radio was I had no idea. These old-time prisoners were pretty innovative of what they did and where they hid the stuff. Because I think it was disassembled every time and put in various parts of the barracks. But we'd get a news report, yeah. We pretty much knew what was going on.

Q: When did you know the war was over?

A: Pardon?

Q: When did you know the war was over?

A: When I was liberated. We were down in (?Luisburg?), Patton's army came in and liberated us.

Q: Do you remember the day, month or year?

A: It was -- I want to say 29 April '44 -- was it '45 I think the war ended? Yeah, the war was over with. Germany was defeated. Patton's army came in to -- we had been -- I was at Stalag III and then we were force marched to another POW camp and then we were force marched to another place. We ended up in southern Germany and then Patton was coming up from the south and liberated us.

Q: What was the forced march like? Was anybody hurt along the way or killed along the way?

A: I think we -- talking about killed, we did lose one man in Buchenwald concentration camp. We had one lieutenant, L.C. Beck, he got pneumonia, was put in the hospital in Buchenwald and he died there. He was the only fatality we really had of prisoners that I knew or prisoners that I was with. I stayed in correspondence with his mother for a number of years. Every time the allies got close they'd force march us out. And the first one was in the dead of winter. I think we were given two hours to get ready to march in the end of January. And it was a blizzard. We were trying to put together every scrap of food that we could put our hands on. We tried to take apart our beds to make a sleigh to haul, our bedding -- anything that we could carry. And I think it was probably two o'clock in the morning, in a blizzard, they force marched us for 30 kilometers to get out of the area.

Q: What was the purpose of this?

A: The Russians were coming in. They were going to liberate us -- not liberate us, but they would have liberated us. They just did not want us to be put back in

service. They wanted to keep us as hostages, perhaps, for some negotiations later on. But they did not want the camp to be overtaken and have us liberated. So they just emptied the camp. Gave us an hour or two to pack up and they just marched us -- we ended up marching all the way down to Nuremberg over the period of a month or so.

Q: So when did you see Patton's army?

A: Oh, April 29th, something like that. Yeah

Q: What was that experience like?

A: We knew we were liberated but we were still captive within the thing, they just did not want 100,000 kriegies -- "kriegies" is prisoner of war in German -- they just didn't want a bunch of kriegies running around the countryside liberating everything they put your hands on. So we were still held captive. But we had a lot of food then. We started getting some army D-rations, whatever they called them. So they just -- they kept us enclosed.

Q: How long were you there?

A: It may have been a week or so. And they started moving us out into France, to a place called Camp Lucky Strike where we were interrogated by our forces and, you know, what it was like and what we did and who we were. And we got some army uniforms again and started looking like soldiers and made arrangements to get back home. It took me 30 days to get back to the States.

Q: Where did you go from France? Did you go back to England or --

A: Went back to England. Got a -- scrounged a ride on a Liberty Ship that was the going back to Boston. It was unorganised. It was just -- we scrounged a bunch of food and we went back on a Liberty Ship and went home. We had had orders in France to whom we had to report back to -- to fly, I think it was Fort Dixon in New Jersey that we had to report within 30 days or something like that.

Q: And you said you came back to the United States via Boston?

A: Yes. Uh-huh.

Q: What was that like when you saw -- when you came ashore in the United States again?



A: It seemed good. I don't have a -- because I was already free for some period of time and -- it was good to be home. What was strange, they just give us a train ticket to our home. I came into Rochester and didn't have any money, got a cab driver to drive me to -- because my wife at this point had gone back to her mother's house. And I just walked in on them. Communication was bad. We didn't have telephones. Long distance was costly. We didn't have any money. It was -- it was a strange situation. But we did have orders to go back into the service for a period of time to get mustered out, you know.

Q: What was that experience like walking in on your wife?

A: Everybody was in tears. They were happy to see me. They were glad that I was home. There were a lot of parties and, I don't know, it was just a good feeling.

Q: Did she know that you had been in a concentration camp? Was she informed?

A: My wife did not know what happened to me for -- I went down in June and I think it was late January before she knew I was even alive. I was just MIA all this time. But she did finally get word that I was a prisoner of war, and that was about it. I never -- never heard from anybody for a whole year. Had no communication. I didn't know if my mum and dad were alive, I didn't know if my wife was alive. There was just no communication at all. There's certainly no mail in concentration camp. And, as I say, mail was slow, you know. So I just walked in, everybody was happy to see me. I said at the time I have to go back to Fort Dixon in 30 days and get mustered out.

Q: How long did that process take? I mean you waited the 30 days, went back to Fort Dixon, and then how much longer were you in before leaving?

A: My official discharge didn't come into effect until October, but I was not in any place. I had built up some leave and I was paid through, I think, October.

Q: Did you return to Rochester at that point?

A: Went back to Kodak, yes.

Q: How long did it take before you -- did you at any point speak to your wife or anyone else about your experiences at Buchenwald or Stalag Luft III.

A: I think I -- oh, yeah, yeah, I think I talked to a lot of people at the time. I did some talks for the Red Cross. I did some talks for some civic organisations back in Rochester at the time. Got some newspaper publicity. Even today I talk to school kids if there's any occasion that they would want to know about World

War II. I had one of the girls at the schools ask me, she said, "When you were shot down, did you call your wife and tell her where you were?" All these kids have cell phones today.

Q: Sure.

A: Here I am 91, I don't even have a cell phone.

Q: How long did it take before you went back to Kodak?

A: Almost immediately. It was a couple of weeks.

Q: Was it a difficult adjustment returning home or to work?

A: No. I was looking forward to it. Because I had 30 days leave and I did a lot of stuff, got a lot of things in order. It was way past due on my income tax. That was what killed me, that I had to pay income tax for all the stuff I was paid when I was in the service and was a prisoner. They didn't give me a free rein on paying taxes.

Q: Sure.

A: There's a lot of legal stuff to go through and get back into civilian life. The time I came home, then my discharge official was in October.

Q: Did you ever fly again?

A: I flew once or twice -- I had a customer that had an aircraft, he and I went up a couple of times. Flying a \_ is not like flying an airplane. I was used to a high-performance aircraft. So I never flew any more. I had it out of my system.

Q: This interview is going to become part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's permanent collection. It will be used by historians as well as students of the Holocaust for many years. Is there anything you'd like to say in closing?

A: Nothing I can think of other than the fact I'm extremely proud that I had an opportunity to serve and I think I did some good during World War II. I have no ill feelings towards my -- the people that captured me and treated me -- my nature is not to be ever angry at anybody, I'm a very happy person. I have no ill feeling towards Germany. One thing I have to say, I did get some good compensation from Germany after the war. One was for forced labour. As a POW you were not supposed to work. I got that from the German government and I got a settlement from the German factories for labour I had put in and various aspects of being a prisoner. Both were around \$50,000 each. As I say, I

have no ill feelings for -- war is not healthy. It's something we do. You have to do for patriotic -- that's all I have to say. I'm proud I served. It was an experience, so... That's about it.

Q: Thank you for the interview, sir. Thank you very much indeed.

A: Glad to be operative on the ground.

Q: Very good, and we're glad to have you. It's 1555 hours.

#### Conclusion of Interview