Back in 1944, I was so darn sick, [INAUDIBLE] all over me all. Different groups, whether they wanted-- I ended up [INAUDIBLE]

In June of 1945?

Yeah, I was supposed to be in--

And the war was over when?

May 8.

Of '45.

I got my first [INAUDIBLE]. I have another one. And when I came out of [INAUDIBLE]

What's this?

[INAUDIBLE]

OK, that would be good to show.

Because that shows--

Yeah, instead of showing that one.

They ripped the bandage off my head.

I'm Sally Weinberg. Today, we are interviewing William McKee, Senior, prisoner of war survivor. The project is sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section. Bill, could you tell me when and where you were born?

I was born in New Rochelle, New York, February 18, 1924.

And that makes you how old today?

60. I'll be 61 next month.

61 next month. And tell me when did you enter the American army?

I was drafted on February 17, 1943.

OK. And what was your military rank in 1945?

In 1945, I was discharged as a staff sergeant in the United States Army, Air Forces, staff sergeant.

I see. And what were your duties then?

At that time, I was still trying to recuperate in 1945 from my injuries and the treatment I received while being a German-- or a Nazi prisoner of war for 14 months.

Do you know what your army serial number was?

32807932.

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Did you receive any honors from the Army or Air Force?

Yes. I have--

What were they?

My highest award was Flying Medal. I have reference here, various one.

Can you turn it around so I can see that?

I'll turn this side here. And this is a copy of my discharge. I have the Air Medal, the Purple Heart, and a Victory Ribbon for European Victory, a European Battle Ribbon with two Bronze Stars and American Theater Ribbon because I flew in defense of anti-submarine patrol before going overseas, and the Army Good Conduct medal. This medals were all awarded prior to my being shot down and captured.

Bill, do you have any pictures of yourself in uniform?

This picture was taken 1943 when flying training and anti-submarine missions, both on the West Coast. And we ended up on the East Coast prior to being sent overseas.

And what were you doing prior to 1941?

Prior to 1941, I attended school. And I left school. I mean, I was the sole support of my mother and worked in various jobs because that was the end of the Depression and things were hard to get, jobs. And then I was drafted--

And you were living where at that time?

In New Rochelle, New York.

And what was your occupation after World War II?

I came back because just a year or so-- I should backtrack a little bit. Before I went into the service, I was a special army courier. I was stationed at Fort Slocum. It's an island off of New York Harbor. And I handled all the shipping orders after Pearl Harbor for the men going overseas from the New York port of embarkation.

And after the war I came back to that civil service position. And I was too nervous to go on with my civil service career because they wanted me to be a firefighter. I was a firefighter. And with the tests I took, I was the lieutenant on the government fire department. I left and came to Ohio. That's how I got here. And I couldn't settle down.

You couldn't settle down?

No, it's hard very hard because that was nobody that could understand what had happened to former prisoners of war. Things at that time-- I lived in New Rochelle, which is 17 miles outside of New York City. To get a physical examination or anything required days. Madison Avenue was a focal point for the VA to examine and get medication. And I just lost too much time from work that it was impossible, although I was discharged with a service connected disability from the head injuries and part of the beating thing too.

And are you employed now?

No, I'm on disability Social Security due to several injuries I incurred working at the Chrysler plant. I worked there for 18 years.

Chrysler plant--

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In Twinsburg. Yeah.

Twinsburg, Ohio.

I had back injuries from--

OK. Now, let's get back to your army career and your time spent with the Air Force. Tell me, when did you land in Europe?

I was sent overseas on New Year's day 1943, right out of New York Harbor. We couldn't fly because we'd lost too many planes. The reason I was sent over to the European theater was we lost the 39th States Air Force on two raids into Germany. And so I had to go by ship. I went-- and it took seven days. And I was assigned to one of the original four bomb groups there after going through various staging areas, 91st Bomb Group.

Where did you land in Europe?

Oh, originally in North Ireland. And we were sent down into London and its different staging areas. In those days, why you'd probably only spend half a day at one staging area before they moved you out. Things were very rapid with combat crews.

Were you in a division or regiment?

The 91st bomb. group was one of the first-- one of the first four bomb groups in England and part of the 8th, the United States Air Force. And that was based at Bassingbourn, which was a permanent--

Could you spell that for me?

Bassingbourn, B-A-S-S-I-N-G-B-O-U-R-N-E, if I recall right.

And that's in what country?

That's in England. That's about 50 miles northwest of London. And that was a RAF base. That was a permanent base. I mean it had concrete runways and hangars and everything else, whereas the rest of our bases were only temporary things that-- and we were lead bomb group.

Eventually, I flew to first two raids on Berlin. And I was supposed to be off after six raids, when they award the Air Medal. And the day I got shot down, I was in a plane was supposed to be scrapped out because my own plane was shot up so bad over Berlin. When they came in to London, we were the only people in combat in that section of Europe because of the air-- this was long before the invasion.

And who was your commander?

My pilot was Edgar Downing. He's from Rome, New York. Our commanders-- we suffered such a high casualty rate that it's hard to say. When I left to go on pass, General Doolittle had come in to our base because our base is the only one that could accept the B-29, which is the heaviest bomber. And that's the first time they flew a B-29 into England, which they use against the Japanese, because as I said, I was trained to fight the Japanese. And it's kind of rough to end up in England with a machete in the middle of January. That's very bitter cold over there.

They took General Eaker, who was in command of the 8th Air Force, and they replaced--

Could you spell that name?

E-A-K-E-R, if I recall right. We suffered-- the 91st bomb group, we lost 197 planes. But we were lead group to lead the

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first wing, which is-- the maximum air strength at that time was 500 planes if we got them all flying-- into various targets, whether it be Schweinfurt or Berlin or anything else. We flew all over Europe. But, of course, with today's air travel, it's hard to realize that we were flying 9, 10 hours over enemy territory. That was all occupied Europe, of course, everything from the coast on in.

What were your personal feelings at that time about fighting in the war?

Well, I'd heard various things. And prior to my leaving high school, I'd worked during the summers up in the Catskills, where we had a summer home. And I run into something there when I was 15, 16 years old, the German American Bund. It was hard for a teenager to get a job. You could get a job, room and board and $1 a day.

And one time I was sent to one of these training camps that they had up in the Catskills outside of Liberty and Monticello in New York because I had spent a great deal of time with my childhood up there. My family had a summer place up there. And I seen what the ideology. I was there only about a week, and I just quit because I was born and raised in a very ethnic neighborhood. The place that I lived most of my time was an 85-unit apartment house with all professional people, on the first floor dentists, and what have you, and doctors' offices.

And I had a lot of friends and a lot of acquaintances that were Jewish. And I'd known people. I grew up with them. And the original block that I was raised on two blocks away, before we lost our house during the Depression moved to the apartment, 35 of us in World War II. Only nine of us survived. And I was the only prisoner of war. We lost a lot of those fellows in those days. That area was similar to Cleveland, being a melting pot of all the people.

And you're talking about back in New Jersey?

No, New Rochelle. New Rochelle.

New Rochelle?

Yeah. And I often wonder why these various groups, they were following the Nazi ideology. The German American Bund, they went to the old Madison Square Garden, you know. And they filled that thing to the rafters. I don't know. I'd have to go back, but tens of thousands of them there. The ideology was very strong in some areas. They were all picked up, of course, after Pearl Harbor when, as everybody recalls, Germany declared war on the United States.

So when you were in the army and fighting, you were thinking back about those--

I thought about that because basically I-- ironically, I was trained and most of my training was duplex to cover both theaters of war. And I keep heading west and flying anti-submarine patrol and training against Japanese-type defenses and flying against Japanese fighters and everything else. Why I thought that I'd end up fighting in the islands. And as I said, after they lost a large portion of the United States Air Force in Europe, well, we turned around and ended in Europe.

But I had heard things. There was very little print here in the United States. You couldn't even get a weather report in those days in the paper. You couldn't turn on a radio and know whether you were going to have a blizzard as we have now or-- all that was confidential.

And I thought something was strange. The sidearms, we were allowed to keep our own personal arms if we were going to go into the Pacific. They bought us back. And I ended up in Savannah, Georgia, a staging area. And they stripped us all the jungle equipment. And took our guns away.

When was that?

That was in-- let's see, that would be around Thanksgiving 1943, some where just the first weeks in November. I was taking up different, other types of training. Although I was in heavy bombardment, my various schooling was I was a first armor on a B-17. I was in charge of all the machine guns and the bombs.

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But I also was a photographer and operate as a gunner in defense of the plane 10-man crew. And I was hoping to transfer over. And they just took all of us and took us to New York port of embarkation.

Were there any Jewish men in your unit, in your--

Not then. But there was a-- as I said, we suffered so many casualties. My co-pilot, the original co-pilot I went through all the training, got the flu, which is disastrous in those days. And he was kept in New York Harbor. He couldn't go overseas with us.

So we were assigned various co-pilots. And this one man, this Lieutenant Tannenbaum, I had only met twice. I don't even recall his first name. And I tried to get it from other crew members because they only flew with us the day we went down. And he was a co-pilot, Tannenbaum. And I don't know the gentleman's first name. And he's Second Lieutenant.

But basically, you were supposed to have four officers, six enlisted men. Well, we had such a darn good bombardier, they kept him at the base to train, become a group bombardier. And we had enlisted men flying as bombardiers.

You didn't know from one day to the next what your target was. And the only thing is if you got leave, they'd come and get you because you all had to wear a certain emblem. We were the only combat people in England that was flying into occupied Europe.

They would not go into depth as if you would be captured. There was different things for-- or be shot down and captured.

Is that what happened to you?

Well, we were hit so bad over Brunswick that we limped out.

Where is Brunswick?

Brunswick in the northeast quadrant of Germany, northwest quadrant of Germany. And we made it out over the Coast of Holland. And we couldn't fly any further. Everything was shot open, our bomb bay doors. And everything was a drag.

We had two engines on fire. And we got those out. And we ruptured our oil line on two remaining engines. And we flew until there was no further altitude. Then we crashed because--

We couldn't bail out. We elected to stay with the plane because my chute with two other men chutes was shot full of holes. And we couldn't bail out over the continent. And it's extremely bitter cold in March in the North Sea, very, very cold.

Is that where you ended up, your plane--

Yeah, we crashed--

--ended in the North Sea.

Yeah, and the of my pilot kept us from being all killed. We all survived the crash, although every one of us-- I had my head busted open. And--

How many were in the plane?

10 of us.

And you all survived?

The crash, the initial crash.

Mm, hmm. And who rescued you?

Well, technically, we were in the British zone. But, of course, things were so fluid in those days that we were floating around out there. I had lost my clothes when the plane crashed. It tore my pants off my flying suit. The plywood just rips open.

And I'd gone up and struck my head on the impact and cut open the top of my head. And I didn't wake up until the plane flooded with the water. And, I knew I was going to drown. So I managed to get out one of the escape hatches. And I have a paper here if you want to review that on that. But they--

What is the paper on?

Well, this is one of the statements of one of the crew members, of one of the four men. Because of the heated boots with the heavy sheepskin boots over them, we had electrically heated suits flying, I was going down like a rock when I went into the water. And I managed to get one boot under the water off. And my Mae West-- when I pulled the other side because you pull one side when you know you're going into the ditching, as they call it--

What's a Mae West?

Mae West is a life preserver, which I have in that one, you wear that underneath your parachute harness. One of the life rafts was floating away. These are two 5-man life rafts that you pull the cord when you're crashing that they come out of the side of the plane and inflate, 10-man.

I managed to swim and get that thing back. The plane didn't-- with all the holes, it sank in a couple of minutes. And it was an older model plane. It wasn't the type that we normally flew in because, like I said, it was all out effort.

And the crew managed to get into that plane-- into the-- out of the plane and get into the life rafts and brought one back. And we lashed them together. We didn't have our emergency radio. We lost that. And we didn't have anything but the Very pistol because we lost our rations. Everything was torn up in the plane, all this equipment, which sank.

Approximately what date was this?

March 29, 1944. And as you're aware of in that time, England was undergoing extensive air attacks. The Battle of Britain had been over. But the German Luftwaffe had continually-- they kept pounding us at our air base. They continually attacked. And they used to come in at just over the waves to get under the radar.

And we went down about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. And they came through the fog bank and the ice there and spotted us. And we fired a Very pistol. So they must have reported our position, the JU 88s.

What is JU 88?

Those are German bombers. They were on their way to attack England. Well, later that night, we could hear diesel engines. And we were hoping that we'd drifted far enough that we'd be in a British air rescue area. Technically, we were supposed to be. But our radio transmitters were shot out. And we had no way to notifying where we were going down.

And this boat just kept circling and circling. You can hear it off in the distance. And--

A large boat in the North Sea was circling you?

Yes, it was a torpedo boat, a patrol boat. And their boats were very similarly camouflaged, the same as British boats. Well, there was nothing you can do when you're floating around on a life raft. And we had no sidearms or anything. The

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one 45 that my tail gunner had he dropped over. And they were German, the German Navy.

So we tried to stay warm. It was so bitter cold that the only thing we had was a bailing bucket and a couple of candy bars with us, the guys had in their jackets. And you could-- only way you can stay warm is to urinate in the bailing bucket and use it like a hot water bottle inside your clothes.

But we were all frozen to the life rafts. And they got a hold of us and took us in. And--

Who is they?

The Germans. And this is a torpedo boat. And they searched us and put us all down in the hold of the ship and bounced us back. Well, I didn't know where exactly we were going. And I found out that-- I'd passed out several times. And they bandaged my head and they treated two other men that were injured from the plane crash, the Navy did. And we were taken to the sub pens at Rotterdam.

To the what?

The submarine pens at Rotterdam. They had blindfolded us. And the way they handled prisoners so that they won't see anything in case they escape, why, they blindfold you. And you put your hands on the man in front of his shoulders and lead single file.

Well, my head would soak this bandage pretty well with blood and seawater and everything else because I couldn't get warm. And I was walking around in my underwear with just a shirt on and heated electric boots in my pants went. And I marched through these massive corridors. And I could understand-- fortifications are awful, awful heavy. There's no way you could bomb them out of those places.

The machine shops, we go down these corridors, took the bandage and slid the thing down. And I could see when we go in these large rooms where they have all lathes and milling machines and everything else. And the one place wasn't occupied.

Now, at the base of every machine were chains with leg irons. Now, I didn't realize, because I was busy fighting the war and everything else, what transpired in regards to slave labor or anything else, as anybody alive at that time, there's very limited information coming in to the United States. And I did go by a room where they could have 20 machines in there. And there was 10 men, people, turning out parts. They used skilled trades people from various countries. There was no way of telling whether they're Jewish or anything else at that time. And one guard-- one guard-- could supervise 75 to 100 of them as long as they're chained to that machine. If they had to go to the bathroom or something, I don't know what the devil they did because they just were working within the radius of that machine.

And from there, we were transported to Amsterdam. And I was put in a city prison in solitary confinement in Amsterdam, each one of us. It was ironical, the Dutch people, seeing we were Americans, they tried to throw us combs of honey and everything else because they see we were from the-- captured off the coast. And the Germans instead of turning their guns on us, would just threaten them with machine gun fire. To get in the 1934 Ford truck, as an American, and go into a Shell gas station to get a filled gas so they can haul you to a solitary confinement cell or something, that I'll never forget. But that's the way it was.

And the civilians, they didn't care. I mean, they all had bicycles. They'd-- and these main streets of Amsterdam, they, the kids, would wave at you and cheer and give you the V for victory sign and everything else. But we were kept there in a--

But the Germans were the ones that kept you there?

Oh, yeah. Yeah, we were kept by the Germans. The Germans had complete authority. They'd taken over everything in Amsterdam. The city prison was headquarters for the Gestapo and everything else.

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By what month by that time? When was that?

Well, that was-- let's see, we kept one day sub pens. We were there for two days. It would be March 30, 31.

Still in March?

Yeah. From there, we were taken down-- there was no interrogation or anything. They just looked at the bandages and different things. And they'd continually search you. I didn't run into any English-speaking guards. But they did assign one. And--

Were you ill treated at that point?

Not then. They took us down. And they put us to the train terminal at Amsterdam and took us from there on the main line all the way down through the Ruhr Valley because-- they sealed up the windows. It was a common practice of German civilians to lynch aircrews that were shot down.

Windows of what?

The car, the railroad car. We had-- the 10 of us had four guards with a sergeant in charge. And he spoke a little English. And he said, if we were to expose ourselves, that they'd find out that we were Americans, they undoubtedly would lynch us, take us off the train because Cologne-- there was no Cologne. Cologne, I peeked out of the crack. Only thing in the middle of cologne, from the RAF, was the cathedral. But Cologne was just as flat as a pool table. They destroyed everything, the RAF had.

Was bombed?

Was bombed. And the hatred for-- we were the only ones that had been into Europe, of course, the air forces. And they were so incensed, the German civilian population, that they would-- and later, of course, they did hang people where I was that were shot down over Frankfurt. But they--

We went from there to Frankfurt on the Main. And Frankfurt on the Main had also been destroyed, which was a medieval type city prison they kept the prisoners of war in, all Allied prisoners of war from the air crew. And they set up a temporary camp at Wetzlar interrogation camp. Wetzlar is just outside of Frankfurt on the Main

How do you spell that? Wetzlar, W-E-T-Z-L-A-R. Now, Wetzlar is an interrogation center, called-- part of what they called Dulag Luft, which is the air interrogation center for the German Air Force.

Gulag, did you say?

Dulag, D-U-L-A-G, Luft, L-U-F-T. All the air crews, were they the British, American, or French, or the Free Polish forces flying with the RAF or the Canadians, were all sent there as a central place to be interrogated.

Is this water? Excuse me.

Now, at Dulag Luft, you are again separated in a solitary confinement. And my head was killing me very bad. And I couldn't keep the bandages. There's no water. No way of getting more bandages. And running around of course in my long johns with electrically heated boots and a shirt and a towel-- I always kept a Turkish towel because your oxygen mask used to freeze up from your sweating during combat. And you used to take the towel and massage your oxygen mask and get the perspiration off your face, otherwise you cut your own air off while you're flying.

And I tried to lay down on a bunk. And the bunk was rotten. And I fell through and struck my head.

Well, I'd hung a shirt in those long corridors. There's a wooden lever that if you had to go to the bathroom, you pull down this lever. It lifted an arm outside so one guard could see from these solitary confinement cells who had to go.

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Well, I must have grabbed that thing. And I passed out. Well, the guard find me. The only thing I can remember is that he started kicking me and everything else.

I'd lost two or three pieces of my teeth on my left side from my head striking this radio set in the plane. And a couple of teeth were loose. And he did a pretty good job. And he dragged me down the corridor.

And for some reason or not, he threw me in front of an interrogation officer. And he tried to talk to me. And my head was really bleeding bad.

Well, it's hard to understand these different guards because they lost families and they had their towns destroyed by our bombers. And, of course, we were the focal point of hatred. We were the Luft gangsters. And actually, I probably wouldn't be here today, but a senior officer came through. And apparently he was from World War I.

A German?

Yeah. And a Luftwaffe. And the stuff that they had on their intelligence was just so excellent that they didn't need any information from any of us. They just wanted to confirm it. As I said, I was at a permanent RAF base. And they had labor out there clearing the brush and everything, civilian labor.

And he's telling me, Sergeant, just tell me where you were? And I just kept quiet. And they pull out a file and this giant picture. We were out there for award ceremonies. We were all on formal formation.

And he takes a little magnifying glass and goes over and he said, that's you. There I was. The Irish Republican Army had cooperated with the Germans to the extent-- and the Nazis-- that they had a picture of me taken months before and just after I arrived in England. And here I am in Frankfurt. I'm just outside Frankfurt an the Main looking at my own picture.

Well, this officer that came through ordered me under guard, with two guards and a driver, to be taken out of there. And I passed out. So he put me in a car. And they drove me through Frankfurt. And I didn't know even what direction we were going. I was trying to sight the sun. And it was snowing and everything else and couldn't see anything.

And I get to this big estate. It'd be like something up here in Bratenahl. You know huge entrance with wrought iron fences and huge gates, all beautiful trees. we go up this thing, take me in there. And he said something to the guards that were around the place.

And the next thing I know, I'm in a padded cell. They put me in an insane asylum. And this insane asylum was their way-- and that was at Homemark.

How do you spell that?

That's H-O-M-E-M-A-R-K, if I remember right because-- there was no one that spoke English. And there was some Catholic nuns there. They were very elderly. And the only ones that are there are RAF prisoners of war. They were very badly wounded, burned. Their planes were wood, you know. And once they got hit, they caught fire. They burned up. And there was another wing to that where they had German soldiers they brought back and were being treated for their wounds from the Russian front.

But I was kept in that solitary padded cell there for several days. And then the walking wounded were used to go down and help move things. And I had to go down-- and there had been an air raid on Frankfurt. And they shot down a couple of RAF planes. And civilians got hold of them and hung them, aircrews.

So they'd go on in the town. And they'd hang them on the lampposts in the city streets. And we had to bring those bodies back.

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And I was in there for two weeks, which part of the statement here. And I didn't see any of my officers again. I had no clothes. And the British Red Cross got me an RAF uniform. And I got a couple of basic essentials.

You're still in Germany though?

Oh, yes. Yes, I'm in Wetzlar, actually Homemark, I beg your pardon, Homemark. And I was in there for two weeks. And they came and took me back to the holding pens at Wetzlar. Well, after two weeks in solitary confinement, these men that I knew, plus others had gotten shot down before that I knew from my group, I couldn't even recognize them, you know.

What had happened to them well?

Some of them were very mistreated and beaten. Some of them had refused to cooperate with the Germans and caused ruckus. And any time you cause any problems, why, you're going to get it. And others were just in shock, you know. But they just look like animals.

Here I am, I'm clean shaven. I had a new bandage on my head and an immaculate blue British uniform. And I got in that place. And it was just a total pigsty because it was so overcrowded. There was no facilities for these men.

So they ordered us all out and marched us to the railroad station and had cattle cars there. And these small cattle cars, they seal you up in. Now, these cattle cars were not cleaned, leavings of the animals. They'd post one guard with each car. And they moved us out of the railroad station. And we just started traveling.

Well, you're sealed up without windows, and you can't tell where you're going. And there's nothing but rumors. And these men from their wounds that weren't treated were there. And the ones, of course, from the wintertime, they had acquired dysentery and diarrhea already. And there was no place to lay down. The ones that were wounded, why, it just defecation on top of the wounds and everything else. Here I am, I'm probably the cleanest one out of 500 or 600 that were in that train.

Every time the train stopped, they'd set up machine guns off the platforms. And that's when I started seeing these people going to these-- well, I found out-- concentration camps and everything else. The priority, of course, of German railroads was in munitions and movement of war materiality. And civilians going to these camps, as well as prisoners of war, were way down the list of priority. So you could stay out on a siding for hours or best part of a day.

I mean, it took us from Frankfurt on the Main to get where we were going at Krems, Austria, just outside Vienna, it took us well over a week. And every time we disembarked that train, they'd feed you or anything. And you weren't allowed to use any of the facilities in the thing. You had to relieve yourselves right there on public-- in front of these women, in front of these kids, and these old men.

And the old men were very polite. Sometimes they'd sic their dogs on the guys who are on the edge. And the Germans were not very compassionate about treating the wounds of these guys because they were all Luft gangsters. They were all air force.

We eventually arrived-- I noticed that the very few places on those stops that these people, these civilians, were ever allowed out of their cars. But I knew they certainly had to be as cold as we were because the closer you get down there to the Bavarian Alps, at that time, why, even a year later when the war ended, why, in May they had 18 inches of snow I was walking around in. I mean it's unimaginable. It's beautiful, but it's deadly.

They got us to Krems. And we had to march--

You know when that was?

Well, that would be middle or latter part of April. I didn't go back through my records. I have it--

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1944?

Yes, ma'am.

And how do you spell Krems?

K-R-E-M-S, Krems.

That's in Austria?

Yes, that's just outside of Vienna. It's to the west of Vienna. It's the main marshaling yard for the railroad in that area. Of course, with the canal, with boat traffic on the Danube there, it's just above the Danube, on top of--

And how long did you stay at Krems?

Well, I was at Krems for very close to 13 months, just over a year. It was April '45 before I left there.

And what happened when you left Krems? Where did you go?

Well, I didn't know whether they wanted to see this picture or how they do that when they take you in. But I couldn't--

What is the picture of?

This is how when you go into a prison camp or same any place else, they have side and front views of how they identify you. I was in RAF-- they tore the bandages off of my head. And that's why my head is still bleeding there from that.

And they took the Americans there-- I managed to get in my electrically heated flying boots because the wires inside were what we made secret radios with in the prison camp. We lost quite a few men trying to escape. Stalag 17 was well known. We had probably 50,000, 60,000-- it went by influx of labor.

This is at Krems?

At Krems, yeah. It was 4,300 Americans. It was about the same complement of British. And there was several thousand French. And the rest were of all nationalities. And slave labor, they kept moving in and out and everything else. And mainly in the military compounds, they used military personnel.

Did you have jobs there?

Germans did not abide by the Geneva Convention. Being a sergeant, a non-commissioned officer, I was not supposed to work. But had I worked, I had probably done better, fared better, because I probably could have stole food. You had to barter with anybody that was out working or occasionally with the Red Cross parcels that came because you just didn't get any extra food. You were on German, what they call, field rations, which was nothing, to subside you when the Red Cross parcels didn't come through.

They had barracks that were built for 40 men on each end with a washroom in the middle. And after Salerno and Anzio and after the invasion of Europe, they started shipping everybody. This is a Luftwaffe camp. This is just for air force personnel. But they brought people in from other divisions, infantry, and everything. We got crowded to the point where it was 365 men in a barracks.

And originally there were how many?

Well, it was built for 40 by the Bosnian army in World War I. So that goes back a little ways. And a lot of things transpired there that they made that film of it. Part of that was true. Of course, Hollywood has its license that movie they made. But they--

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Which movie?

Stalag 17 with William Holden, made William Holden a star. And I think that was produced in 1951. If I may, I forgot to show you this.

One year captured-- all American GIs have two dog tags. Now, the original dog tags were issued during World War II had your name, your army serial number, when you had your tetanus. Like my mother was sole survivor had her name on it, her address, your blood type, and your religion. P for Protestant, C for Catholic, and H for Hebrew.

Now, Germans take that away. And they issued their prisoner of war tag. My prisoner of war tag is 106246 so that-- out of 95,000 German prisoners of war, show you how far back it goes. There's over 95,000. These are tags are issued me after the war.

But I had men come in at camp. There was a Schwartz from Long Island, because being a native New Yorker is-- captured in the Battle of Bulge. And he was wounded very badly. We tried to dress his wounds.

We had a Lazarett, which is a hospital there. But the Lazarett, the Germans stripped of all the medical supplies. Before the invasion, it wasn't too bad. The medical supplies were coming through periodically.

But after the invasion, anything they could do to make it worse for you and to use what was sent us-- I mean, one time we got a whole truckload of ping pong balls and we got hockey sticks. And we were out of food. We were told to go down-- we to make our own labor-- and march 5 miles down to the railroad siding. There were supposed to be food parcel. We went down there with five box cars loaded with toilet paper.

Now, after the invasion and just prior to it, to prevent our escaping, if you've got a can of Spam or something in a food parcel, because it took months-- and the communication is so bad for your family to find out you were a prisoner or anything, they'd send your stuff. Well, the Germans run on a bayonet through so you couldn't use it to escape.

And we had an awful time trying to save food for these new coming prisoners because we didn't have enough food for ourselves, let alone these bandages. You wash, and there's no wood to heat, no coal or anything else.

By that time, were your wounds healed on your head?

Well, my wounds had healed what they could. But I had developed abscesses from these broken teeth and from my beating. And I asked the barracks CO if I could go to Lazarett. You had to ask an American. And he'd go. You had a chain of command you had to go through. He'd get a hold of the compound commander. Herr Hoffman Milacobra was a compound commander. He was a World War I veteran with a wooden leg that took care of 1,200 men in our compound.

And they grant me permission. Of course, you have to get guards because you have to go through certain areas. You just don't walk around like--

And I got there. And they'd already stripped the dentist. We had American dentists there. We had American doctors. We had American Catholic chaplain. The whole crew was captured at Kasserine Pass in 1942 by Rommel. And they were all sent there as prisoners of war.

And they did their thing, that the Catholic chaplain did a marvelous thing for all the people. They had services for everybody, for the Protestants, the Catholics, and the Jews in that camp. And that just irated the Germans to no end.

It was what?

It just made him furious because we had to swear that the barracks that we made into a chapel would be never used for an escape. And that barracks was up against a side line wire, which was adjacent to getting out to the woods. There was a little block of woods there where they buried our dead. They were killed there and died there.

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And whether it was any religious time of the year and religious calendar, and Father Kane would give a service and invite-- they send out notices that the men from such and such a barracks could go over there. And he would not have the German guards come in and stand at the back of that hall.

And ironically here, it was back-- that would be about in the last 10 years. We had a group of former prisoners of war meet over in Pittsburgh. And Father Kane retired back to Ireland and died there. And the first one-- they started a memorial for Father Kane in Ireland-- was one of the Jewish survivors to start the memorial for Father Kane.

Well, that's very interesting, Bill. We'll take a break now and come back with your story in a few minutes.

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