

Wisconsin Veterans Museum

Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

ROBERT L. AYER

Gunner, Army Air Corps, World War II

1999

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Ayer, Robert L., (1923-2000). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 120 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 120 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Robert Ayer, a St. Paul (Minnesota) native, describes conducting missions with the 465th Bomb Group of the 744th Bomb Squad and his prisoner of war experiences in World War II. Ayer recalls obtaining his parents' approval to enlist and basic training experiences. Ayer recounts crew camaraderie, being hit by flack during a mission, and subsequently having to manually pump the flaps in order to land. A nose gunner in a B-24, Ayer describes being shot down, parachuting into France, his initial attempts to avoid capture, and being captured by Germans. He recounts his initial conversations following capture, discussing the war with a German officer and being interrogated by Germans. Ayer describes in-processing at the POW (prisoner of war) camp Stalag Luft IV, how the prisoners organized themselves, trading with guards, and methods of smuggling contraband. He describes being escorted by the Germans away from the approaching Russian Army, the little food they received, and staying in farmers' barns. Ayer relates meeting a German mother of six soldiers and trading a pair of shoes for bread. Later during the several hundred kilometer march through the German countryside, Ayer traded the watch he received from his parents for his high school graduation for a couple loaves of bread. Ayer describes events leading up to and following Russians overrunning the German line at their location. He relates an incident of an American sergeant being hung by American prisoners and Russian soldiers raping German women. Following the end of the war, Ayer relates experiences trying to get transportation out of Europe, his frustration not being able to return home immediately, and having to remain in both Scotland and England waiting for transport. After the war, Ayer returned to Wisconsin and attended Madison Business College before working for Monroe Calculating. Ayer is a member of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

Biographical Sketch

Robert Ayer (1923-2000) enlisted in the Army Air Corps and was assigned as a gunner in a B-24 before being shot down over France and becoming a prisoner of war. Released following Russian liberation, Ayer returned to Wisconsin and is a member of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999.

Transcribed by Kathryn Jagow, 2000.

Transcription edited by Hannah Gray & John McNally, 2007.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT:

McIntosh: So now we get back to the beginning. You were born in St. Paul, Minnesota, and you worked as an assembler in an aircraft factory on a (unintelligible) project.

Ayer: Well, in '39 I went down to an aircraft school in Lincoln, Nebraska, and took a sheet metal course.

McIntosh: I see.

Ayer: And which was (unintelligible). And from there I went up to Omaha, and is now (unintelligible), and has been for years. But at least for we tied six of us together in Baltimore and flying to Omaha, and then that would be, oh, a lot of us (unintelligible) put pilot and copilot, etc. And then when they got done they towed across the railway to the seventh corps area headquarters (unintelligible).

McIntosh: I see. That was before you were in the service?

Ayer: While I was there, I enlisted in the Air Force.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: I was always going to go in the Navy.

McIntosh: Oh, really.

Ayer: And I got the bug. A lot of us got the bug watching those B-26s. That was before they added almost three feet in the wing spans.

McIntosh: They needed that.

Ayer: The (unintelligible) pilots before that pick up a plane out of Baltimore, set down in Omaha, Indianapolis for Tuey Field (phonetic). They take one look at it and walk away and say, take that son of a bitch. It was too hot. It was -- I found out in talking to guys that were on 46's, they took a pilot's pilot to fly that thing.

McIntosh: Because it was clipped because of the short wings.

Ayer: Uh-huh. But while I was there, an Army officer took a B-26 up and took one hand and flew the whole length of the armory, (unintelligible). And then we started that engine. He did it just to prove that it could fly on one engine.

McIntosh: Right. (unintelligible).

Ayer: (Laughter) That's right.

- McIntosh: So when you enlisted, you probably went right up the ladder quickly because of your experience?
- Ayer: No, I didn't. I listened and re-enlisted in the cadet program, and they told me I wouldn't be called for about three or four months, and at that time I was 19. So I had to get my parents' approval to enlist. And I wrote home and said, well, my home was up in Goodman, it's up in Marinette County in the northeast part of the state. And so I said I wouldn't want to be -- I won't be called in for three or four months and I want to enlist. They wrote back and says, okay, if you come home before you go in, and wait for the call. So I enlisted and took my oath on Friday the 13th (laughter), but then I went home and it wasn't until the sixth of February. I notified the Air Force, and I went home and they switched me from seven to six corp area out of Chicago, Fort Sheridan, and sent the letter out on the first of February. And I report again in Chicago on the sixth of February.
- McIntosh: Where did you get the letter?
- Ayer: Down at Shepard Field (phonetic) for basic training. Which is for me, they were -- (unintelligible). I had two weeks of basic training. I don't even-- never learned the Army, you know, and from there I went to Texas Tech and the college program for three months.
- McIntosh: Tell me about that.
- Ayer: Well, it was -- I think it was an IQ test anyway. We had regular college courses and we had a district course, really short professor, and every Friday he would teach us history way back. He'd say, "This is what's going on in the world." And it was fantastic. (Laughter).
- McIntosh: That's great.
- Ayer: After the war I came down here to school, and I met a couple -- Bob's dad ran the Dr. Pepper bottling plant here on University Avenue. It's a gun shop now. And he had run Dr. Pepper plants from (unintelligible) to the Pacific. But later a friend of mine that was familiar with the industry said, "He's doomed." He said, "I could show you a Dr. Pepper bottler in St. Louis and in the summer runs 24 hours a day." And he says, "Dr. Pepper is an idiot."
- McIntosh: Oh, really.
- Ayer: And it didn't go. And then after about five, six years they went bankrupt here.
- McIntosh: Oh, yeah.
- Ayer: Yeah. So --

McIntosh: So what took you from there?

Ayer: Well, from there I was at Lubbock at Texas Tech, and then I went to -- they shipped out to Panama, classification. I watched cadets. And then I was shipped to Denver, and went through armor school which was about three months. Well, I got there on the 4th of July, right around then, and stayed until a week before Thanksgiving. And then they shipped us about 250 down to Kinder Field (phonetic) in Florida, and I went through gunnery school. And got there right a week before Thanksgiving and graduated around the first of the year.

McIntosh: That was in Florida.

Ayer: Yeah. Got a 10 day TDY and referred back up in Springfield, Massachusetts, where they formed a crew. They were formed -- they would form 30 crews at a time. And in our case 30 crews, that's 300 men, B-24s. And then they shipped us to Chatham Field outside of Savannah, Georgia, for RTU, replacement training units. And we were there three months. And then we went up to Mitchell Field on Long Island and staged for overseas, picked up a brand new B-24, flew it for about six, eight hours, and then we went the sailing route, Mitchell, Palm Beach, Puerto Rico, Doxti Islands (phonetic), British Ghana, Poland, Littell (phonetic), Dakar, Marrakesh, Tunis, then across the Mediterranean cabinet.

McIntosh: How long were you there for? (laughter) It sounds like you (unintelligible) --

Ayer: We had to come in fast at Palm Beach to beat a thunderhead. God, it was up 30,000 feet. Just a hammer, you know, dark blue. And when we get there the navigator's eardrum popped. So they threw him in the hospital. But that's a story in itself. Levine's father's got a clothing store in Edger Hollow. Levine was Jewish and he had a big mouth. He'd been kicked out of three or four crews. Personally I think he engineered it; he didn't want to go to combat. I think he knew what was going on in Europe with the Jews. The story that we got --

McIntosh: This is a navigator, you said?

Ayer: A navigator. And he went through, he did not go through Air Force schools. The Air Force contracted with the Panamericans like a (unintelligible) show, and they said, you S.O.B., you're going to combat this time. So he gets on a crew, and he went with us to Italy, and the pilot was a Texan, and they love Jewish people, and when he got in the officer's club and started a row, out come all the navigators who weren't at least first lieutenants. And the pilot went to the group operations officer and said, "Get that S.O.B. off the crew. I can't stand him on the ground, I can't stand him" -- I'm sorry. And the group operations officer said, "Keep him." He give him a sheet of paper and a ruler and take us from here to (unintelligible) on the button. In fact, when we made the hop from Littell to -- what the hell is that, the city on the coast, the west coast of Africa.

McIntosh: Dakar?

Ayer: Dakar. We predicted the beam 600 miles out and then we pick up Levine from Dakkar. And Levine says the plan is, he says, "You can follow the radio instruments, you know, (unintelligible), let me do it. If I get way off course, way off the beam, okay." He took us right straight across, we came out 10 miles north through Dakar. And then we flew from there up to Marrakesh up in the desert. When he was in the -- at Palm Beach he had to go in the hospital and let his eardrum heal.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: The whole crew. We couldn't go no more. And here's the field and here's the road. And Levine's in the hospital. So at night we'd walk -- oh, I'm sorry, the beacon would come around. We went under the fence, we'd run about 40 yards, come off the trees because it was a golf course, and then watch for the beacon and run again and we'd go up and go in. And we went up again five days and six nights.

McIntosh: This is before you got on (unintelligible).

Ayer: This is POE leave, we're not allowed off the base.

McIntosh: I see.

Ayer: So we came back on the final night about eleven o'clock, just got in bed, and they came through with the flashlight. Levine or "Hill's troop, get up, you're taking off for Puerto Rico." Well, we was down in the front line and Hill wasn't with us, the pilot. And so he talked like hell, and he said, "Look, I've been in the officer's club for five hours. I can't fly to Puerto Rico tonight." So he said, "Okay, it's as of nine o'clock tomorrow morning clear the field." And what happened is Levine got in a fight with a nurse at the hospital, and she says, "I outrank you." And he says, "The hell you do." They were both second lieutenants, and she outranked him on time. So he got thrown out of the hospital. And then we started our trip overseas.

McIntosh: With him.

Ayer: Yeah. We took him along. But he was not with us the day that we got knocked down.

McIntosh: (unintelligible) the silly (laughter). You flew in from Morocco?

Ayer: Yeah. We flew up to Marrakesh in the desert and up to Tunis and then across the mountains to the 15th Air Force in south of Italy and then picked up our bomb group designation of where we were going to be, stayed there overnight. And a pilot came down, and he handed us the last 150 miles to the bomb crew.

McIntosh: Where was that?

Ayer: In Italy, Zaradogan (phonetic).

McIntosh: That was your base?

Ayer: That was the base.

McIntosh: That was the 15th Air Force base.

Ayer: That's where most of the B-24s in Italy were located. The B-17s were north of us.

McIntosh: Yes.

Ayer: So, uh --

McIntosh: Now, before you get involved in the next step, tell me about your crew; how did you get along with them?

Ayer: Very good.

McIntosh: Nice guys?

Ayer: Yeah, hell of a crew. They had a hell of a crew.

McIntosh: You got along with Levine okay?

Ayer: Didn't see him. That's the pilot that used to come down to our camps.

McIntosh: Oh.

Ayer: You know, which is they had officers and enlisted men. And he'd come down, about six o'clock and we'd say, "What the hell's up?" We asked him, "What's going on?" "And what the hell you doing down here (unintelligible), he says (laughter) "Oh, I just wanted to see how you guys are doing." And we'd talk.

McIntosh: He was a good skipper.

Ayer: Yeah. And finally --

McIntosh: His name was what?

Ayer: Ben Hill.

McIntosh: Where was he from?

Ayer: Texas. And finally we were going, we were flying, and we were in this one squadron, it's two squadrons, one here, one here, one here, one here and one right in the middle. We were in this squadron, Levine shot us both out from there, rank, we've got rim loaders, diving across the fields within the same bomb crew. But that day, that bomb group put up six B-24's, and five of them got knocked down off of Vienna. So we got transferred across the field and we got a brand new plane. They had taken ours away, but we got -- when we joined the bomb group, they take it away and give it to the older guys. We were flying old battered things that could hardly hold up. So we really start flying, and when we went north of a 30th meridian, we got credit for a double. And we were going so good we got credit for seven missions in four days. We had three gunners.

McIntosh: How'd you do that?

Ayer: If you drive a big arc from Italy north of this point, Vienna, Bucharest, that was north of the 49th, I think 39th meridian, and you get credit for two. We had to put 50 in.

McIntosh: That was the 50 missions? (unintelligible).

Ayer: That's right.

McIntosh: Fifty?

Ayer: Fifty. So we were at that point, 10. And we got credit for seven in four days. So they was coming down and they talk it and said, okay, the way things are going, by Thanksgiving we'll have our 25 in and then you go (unintelligible) for a week. So we figured by Christmas we'd be home. Well, two missions more, a week to the day that I got knocked down we went up to west of Marseilles, this is about the 14th of, about the second week in July.

McIntosh: You went to (unintelligible).

Ayer: After (unintelligible), west of Marseilles about 40 miles and we bombed it, and there were pieces of flak, a little tiny fragment came into the top of the wing, one, two, three, four. That's the position of the engines. The third one, the first one to the left of -- to the right of the fuselage, that controls hydraulic pressure, and a little tiny fragment of flak came in about like that, it was J-shaped, came down through the doc's skin and cut four lines. That was all the hydraulic pressure we had to lower the flaps. We got back to the base and we had to circle, and the copilot is trying to manually pump the flaps down, and he could reach up but he couldn't push down. And I saw what was going on, and just like that, we were standing there right behind the pilot, copilot. I says, "Come on, get over." And I laid down on the floor and he would pull it up and I would pull it down. And we manually pumped the flaps down and landed the plane and went clear to the end

of the runway before it stopped. He had one application to make brake pressure, and by the next morning, the crew chief on the ground had that repaired. In fact, he gave me that piece of flak that fell on the inside of the skin of the wing. But just a couple days in that week, we hit that marshland and went back up on the same area a week later, and there was -- what was I going to say, oh. The pilot came down and we got talking about how we were going on missions. And like I told you, we figured by Thanksgiving we'd have half a tour in. And by Christmas we'd be back in the States. And these two guys got talking, I mean, Hill said, "I gotta be home this fall." And Hollis says, "Me too." "Well, why?" Then it comes out that both men's wives were pregnant. Okay. But we're flying around and we were -- the crew is united. I mean, we have melded into a crew.

McIntosh: What was your duties?

Ayer: I was lowest gunner on the armor. I keep the nose on the B-24. And, okay. We went up, we got hit. We went back a week later and we went in between Tulan and Marseilles. And we were just south of Ravenna (phonetic) which is north of Marseilles to hit a railroad bridge. And we hit it, and then we rallied to the left to go back to the Mediterranean. Beautiful day, sunny, bright. It was a no crime, easy. And he navigated us, took us right over that marshland that we did a week before. And I saw three (unintelligible), just the flak ahead of the plane. And all of a sudden, boom, when I turned it was plastic from here out. A piece of flak hit that plexiglass, cracked it and the whole thing flew off and I was just sitting there --

McIntosh: Oh, man.

Ayer: -- up in the air. And immediately we got hit, we got hit in the left inward engine between the engine and the fuselage. And I heard the pilot holler out, engineer cry out, oh, my God. And the pilot called back on the intercom, you know, "pilot to engineer," and there was no answer. And right after that we got hit on the right inboard engine. So now we got two engines. And we're dropping back from the formation, and we went back out over the Mediterranean, and then we turned around and we were going to follow the coast of Spain because the pressure is building up. So we got -- I could see Marseilles for probably 10 miles off the course. And when we got west of Marseilles the pilot says, okay, he says, "As soon as we get over land we bail out. This thing's going to blow up." So most of us went out through the cabin hatch back in the waist, the engineer's in his turret, dead. That leaves the pilot and copilot in the plane. The copilot we picked up at Mitchell Field because the original one that went through training with us said, "I got to have my tonsils out. When I fly on oxygen I can't breathe." He married a beautiful babe at Arkansas and filed cadet training. That's why. So we pulled him off and they gave us Jerry. So he really didn't have a hell of a lot of time on a B-24 (unintelligible).

Now comes the final day, and these two, the plane is on automatic pilot, slowly coming down, light and level, just the pilot says, "Okay, Jim, go." We go out

through the engineer's hatch down over the wing. But Jim says, "The hell with you, I'm not bailin' out." The pilot says, "That's an order." Jim says, "You want to bail out, you bail out; I'm going to ride it down," which is shit. I mean, we had films before we left the States if we ditched in the ocean, if you come down nose down, you go straight in the water. If you come down tail and it hits and tilts and you go down. So it's got to be set down perfectly level. So the pilot goes out, Jim goes back and takes it off automatic copilot, picks out a pasture and belly-lines it. And we -- I gotta wait for a day, when I was shot down.

McIntosh: The field over in France?

Ayer: In France, I was in France. I gotta wait for a day. Jim got pinned to the wreckage and (unintelligible) away the size of a ship and pulled him out and the Germans came over the hill and he went to Germany with with the rest of us. He was so damn lucky he wasn't killed. Take that damn plane with only two engines and belly-land it in a pasture, you know. Even if a pasture is flat, it's difficult.

McIntosh: (unintelligible) (laughter). You'd never done that before.

Ayer: Better turn that off. What we used to stand in the water and tighten up the leg straps on our harness, you know.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Ayer: Till you could hardly stand up, and if it was too tight we'd loosen them, did that all the time. I tried to get mine loosened, I bailed out head first, did a somersault and your body falls ahead. So I'm coming down like this and I pull the rip cord. And it was -- there was this battleship pulling the rest of us, the boots, and it opens and I had a testicle under the strap on my right leg.

McIntosh: Oh.

Ayer: And boy, did I do a dance. And then hustling and I pulled the trow line so I come straight. And then by then I could hear rifle fire, and the chute (unintelligible) from the ground. So I let it go, and I kept looking at the ground like I had a long ways to go, and then all of a sudden, boom, here's the ocean, here's the strip of land maybe 50 yards wide and the back water. The tail gunner first out, he came between the shore and the edge of that mine field for 50 yards ahead was a wire that had a cork full of bottles, sitting two by two pegs above ground with a trip wire about 18 inches and then a lower main wire. I came down on the north side of that damn mine field. And I didn't know it until I'd been there about 20 minutes and all of a sudden I saw those wires. But I just came down on the ground. I landed on hard pan (?) Because it was back water. I cut my chute and I ran for this big clump of grass, you know. Big clump of grass, you know, like sedge grass.

McIntosh: Sure.

Ayer: And I buried my chute. Then I went in the damn mine field, and I watched them get three guys in and I was going to be a hero, I wasn't going to give up. Well, in that -- later that night I crawled on the edge of that mine field so I could be on the beach side of that back water, and I took off and I started walking in the sand dunes about four high. And finally I laid down to sleep. Then I woke up the next morning and I'm on the edge of the back water and I watched two German patrols, walkin' along the damn shore line, poop-shittin' like a bunch of GI's, you know.

McIntosh: Sure.

Ayer: And I thought, holy cats, we had orders, don't try to contact the underground till you're 50 miles inland, you know. I thought, (laughter) so it's about 2:30, I better get some rest, kind of a cat nap. And I had these two sand dunes and I was watching these two men patrol. And I was just kind of dozing and I heard behind me, Achtung! And I just rolled over like this, and here's a guy with a rem rock (phonetic), a German Army cap, shirt to the waist, tanned, very white pants. And I just -- he kept the rifle on me, I slowly get up, then I had this (unintelligible). Which he said to me, "Wahr gonsket?" (phonetic-German), and I said yeah. German? Ney, ney, ney, ney, ney. (laughter) (unintelligible), I finally figured it out. He's a Russian kid and about 16 years old, captured at around Leningrad by the Germans, the whole damn company down there and posted in the German Army. I often wondered what the hell happened. But anyhow, he took me right back to where I came down, and right in the middle of this mine field was his command post. And we went past, and the German agent, gave that Russian a quart of cognac and two packs of cigarettes for flashing me down, capturing me. So I made the telephone call to ask for what happened to my parachute and I pointed. I think they were about to go out and get it and dig around, you know. And I walked up a ways, maybe a half mile and they came to the donkey cart, two wheel cart, and I rode in that for an hour. Got up to an intersection, it must have been the command post for that area. Beach zone defense. And they took me into a room and here's all these Germans, and they're trying to talk to me, and I wasn't even trying to answer. Then finally they threw a mattress in the corner which was a burlap bag with wood shavings about that thick and they said, that's where you're going to sleep. So I was tired and I laid down and all the guys cleared out of that room and it quieted down, and all of a sudden I heard the door open for another 150th time and I heard very precise English, "Get up." You know, English, English. I looked up and it was two German officers. This is contrary to every damn thing that the Army says.

McIntosh: What happened?

Ayer: They said, "You don't talk." And it was like a mess hall for these guys. And they says, "Sit down." They sat on this side. They said, "Empty your pockets." Well, my brother had given me a New Testament about this high and about so long wide

with a piece of metal on it. I carried it in my coveralls. I put my Zippo lighter down, I took my escape kit out of the pocket, I put that down. I didn't even -- because the night before when I was -- I didn't open the escape kit to get the compass, I kept looking at the North Star pointing to the Big Dipper. So I put it on the table and then the one officer, he was the one that did all the talking. (unintelligible) you're a dumb shit, pardon me. And I was trying. I had laid out all day in that hot sun down there. He said, "Would you like a glass of wine?" I said, "Oh, all right." So there's only these two officers and me and the sergeant sitting by the door. They were -- they spoke in German to the sergeant and off he goes, and in five minutes he comes back with a quart of orange brandy and three glasses. Just by the door, and we sat there for about an hour and drank that damn brandy. I didn't get drunk. And I wondered, what the hell's coming off. Is this an interrogation? Well, he looked at that New Testament and he said, "I used to read this 30 years ago when I was in school in England, but I haven't had any time since then." And eventually he got around and he says, "What do you think of the war?" Number one, I used to sit and listen in '38 and '39 on the radio, the news broadcasters with my dad in the evening from (unintelligible) and London. I used to go up to the (unintelligible) room in Italy and six o'clock and listen to BBC. I just wanted to know.

So this guy says, "Well, what do you think of the war?" But first he says, "Why would you bomb our hospitals?" I said, "I never had an order for a combat mission on a hospital." I said, "If I was living in a war like if I was given an order like that I would refuse to fly." I don't know why I said it. I don't know why I said it but I said it. I think he wasn't impressed with it. And I said, "All my targets have been military, not hospitals." He got a little quiet. Then he said, "What do you think of the war?" Well, this is where listening to the news, you know, came in. Now, this is the 17th of July, 1944, D-day is six weeks before that, roughly. We were down in South America when D-day happened. So I said, "Well, captain," I said, "we just were breaking out of Normandy to just -- they were just starting and they got a hell of a battle at Cannes, we had just taken Rome. I said, "I could see St. Peter's from my nose turret as we came up across Italy. We had just taken Rome. The Russians have started the summer offensive up in western Russia, eastern Poland." He said, "Well, so what." I don't know how or where, all this bickering came playing back and I said to him sincerely, I says, "There's gonna be some big battles coming up. If you win, the war's gonna last a little bit longer. If we win, it's gonna be shorter." I said, "They're coming out of France, the Russians are coming, they're coming up at night." He just said, "Uh-huh." So tell me, Roosevelt stands for one thing, foot on Hitler's body and shakes hands with Stalin.

McIntosh: Then what?

Ayer: The smartass Ayer says, "Hell, captain that's when we quit to go home." He said, "Thank you, that's what I said." That was the end of it. But then we talked generally about the war. You know, I gave away no military secrets. We're talking about the battles. And we drank that-- seriously, bottle of peach brandy, wasn't

drunk, he told me, "Tomorrow a truck will come down, you'll have to pick up all the parachutes, put them in it and you'll join your crew. They'll be held and you'll be going in to Germany. For you the war is. And next morning a truck came in about seven, and I packed up all the parachutes and harnesses and put them on this truck, and rolled up, stopped by the command post, had lunch, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, got south of Evian on the edge of the town there was an old Prince Ag college and they had it made. They had a square, they had about 20 solitary confinement cells, like concrete blocks with iron doors. So I got there, oh, about five o'clock in the afternoon. And I was counting chutes of a plane that got knocked down that we were coming up almost on the barn run. In fact, the pilot says, "Shut up. We're on the IP now." I counted five chutes or something. So when I got to this facility, I said to the Germans, "Comrade". They took and opened up a cell door and it was a guy out of the other crew. And I said hi; I said, "Nichts, nichts." So then he knew I was off the other crew. So okay, he locked him and opened another door and it was the waist gunner. And now he says, "Geez, we thought they killed you, Bob, while you were on the mine field." I said, "No, I'm all right." So then -- okay. Then they locked it up, around 8:30 they opened it up, both crews came in the courtyard, an officer said, "Come on, Wendy, it's seven o'clock, you leave for Germany." And that's what happened.

McIntosh: Is that all the crew down?

Ayer: We had all the crew that was left and the other crew.

McIntosh: (unintelligible question).

Ayer: That's right. In fact, how funny history is, later after I got out of prison camp I talked to the old radio op, and he had talked to the copilot, and the copilot said he met a guy in prison camp, in officer's camp, in Luft one, and they established -- Jim was off this crew, the guy says, look up, he says, "You lost a guy by the name of Harliss?" Yeah. Well, the Germans buried him and put a wooden cross and they nailed his dog tag to it. The Germans buried him down there. And so when Jimmy got out of prison camp and went through Ruhrgebiet (phonetic), which was a recovered allied military personnel up in Lahar (phonetic). All executed members followed through that. He drove him. He made a report, and he said, "This is where you will find Harliss's body." And I read since then that his wife had his body brought back.

McIntosh: Now we're in Bermuda.

Ayer: We were blowing up the Rhone Valley. Well, we went to Evian, we hit Marseilles, Evian and way up here is Dijon. That's the seat of an ancient trade route from Czechoslovakia, way back in medieval times. We came up and as we got outside of Dijon, you could see the pictures of the bombing. The tracks were all blown up. But the Germans put ties and rails together in two different sections. And here was an apartment building four stories high and the courtyard's right

below the railroad tracks, and here on the edge of the roof of the damn apartment building is a section of track, and they only had one line going in and one coming out from that depot in Dijon. And the whole damn round house was (unintelligible). It was just a twisted metal, bricks, and we kind of looked at each other, you know, because we're in compartments in European style. And then the train went east and when we got to Mohols (phonetic), the Germans said, "Now you're in Germany." And then we went up to Frankfurt on the main, and then we instead of going it's like going into the main depot in Chicago and taking the interurban out to the suburbs because we went through interrogation there at Frankfurt. Go into solitary confinement. They take you out and question you. I tell you, they knew more about everybody. We had a briefing before, (unintelligible) they said, "Watch for this if you get knocked down." They're calling out for questioning, and they haven't been feeding you very damn much and you're hungry, and you walk in and here's this Kraut sitting with a saucer full of grapes. And very deliberately he eats one at a time. Then they start asking you questions, and he's eating those grapes and relishing them.

McIntosh: What did they tell you then?

Ayer: It happened to be -- I said, you son of a bitch.

McIntosh: Just exactly like (unintelligible)--

Ayer: (laughter) Exactly. But they knew our colonel of our bomb group had left two weeks before then to go back to the States and perform another drill. They said, what's your bomb group? I said, I don't have to tell you that. Name, rank and serial number. He says, "Don't give me that shit," pardon me.

McIntosh: In good English.

Ayer: In good English. "I can see by the marking on your tail that you're all the 456th bomb group." He said, "Your Colonel Steve left two weeks ago to go back to the States to form the new bomb group and bring them over." And that's exactly what he did, what happened. Now, they knew so much, it was fantastic.

McIntosh: What did they really want from you?

Ayer: They didn't want so much from me, there was some new radar equipment, they really went over the pilots and the radio op to try to find out if we had that new equipment. And both guys said, "I don't know what the hell you're talking about because Jimmy belly-landed that plane in a pasture, you know, it didn't burn."

McIntosh: So they could have things they didn't even know.

Ayer: Sure. In fact, I'll tell you something that I just -- (unintelligible) I am one of two national service officers for (unintelligible) Douglass for the state of Wisconsin.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: I am right now.

McIntosh: I see.

Ayer: I brought a national officer home. As such I can -- if I am working on a case -- (unintelligible). I was nominated, went to our national service officer in Missouri. The VA at that time said says we have operation outreach, we're going to talk to every ex-POW in the state. And here's your ruling, and here's all about the rating department from the VA and St. Louis. Took them two years. And our good thing, a friend of mine that we were visiting were in the same room in the corps.

McIntosh: In the prison camp?

Ayer: That's right.

McIntosh: Hold this up right there if you can.

Ayer: Okay. What the hell. So this guy calls me from Park Falls. He's got 90 percent and he wants to file for unemployability. You know about that?

McIntosh: No.

Ayer: If you have over 60 percent and cannot work anymore.

McIntosh: Disability.

Ayer: Disability, VA disabilities. They grant you unemployability which would take you to the hundred percent. And our 60 percent is a dollar-wise is about \$725 a month, a hundred percent if your unemployability is about \$1950 a month. So this guy is going in, he's by order of the VA boards up in the northwestern part of the state and the guy says, "Bob, I don't know what the hell they expect or, I got some problems." And I says, "Okay, let's talk about it." And I was gonna go up next Tuesday and talk to them. But he's now being called down to Tomah for another examination, and they got doctors down there to talk to him. And he says, "I'm scared of them." And I said, "What the hell, why?" He said, "What the hell is he going to ask me?" "I don't know what he's going to ask you." I said, "Tell them what the hell you know. You can't work anymore."

McIntosh: Really.

Ayer: "How old are you?" "Well, I'll be 76." I said, "What's your physical impervities?" "I got a bad back. My shoulder's all shot to hell." Well, then you can't work. And this is why they have the unemployability. I says, "Shit, you can't even cut pulp

anymore. He had his own company. He had a fishing tackle.

McIntosh: What's -- let's get back to the prison camp. Tell me about life in the prison camp. That's what I want to know.

Ayer: Okay. From Frankfurt we went to Wetzlauer (phonetic). From Wetzlauer they separated us, all officers go to either Luft one or Luft three. Luft one is on an English border and Luft three is down at Saigon in the Salesian (phonetic) part of Germany, eastern Germany. Air Force they went to man-cam, man commissioner's officers camp. We went to Stalag Luft 4 which is just -- they had -- there are practically three lagers. Lager is a compound. They had two of them were built and working with the fourth one. Have you ever seen a map or a picture of what a prison camp looks like?

McIntosh: I saw one, but I don't remember exactly what it looks like.

Ayer: All right.

McIntosh: Now is this down (unintelligible)?

Ayer: That's what the hell it looks like. And I was in -- when we got up there, we were jumping. We're gonna have to go real fast and because we aren't going to get all this in an hour's time. You have A, B, C and D compound. C is a building. We went into A, we slept in a tent on the ground for the first four months. Then they built C and moved over to that compound. From when we got off the train at Keefine (phonetic), which is a little town, that's about two-and-a-half, three kilometers from the camp, we got there in the evening, we had to stay in the train because at six o'clock the guards couldn't come down and get us. We got 200. The next morning the guards on the train came through and says, "When the captain says do something, move." He's in charge of security of the camp, okay, and was a real son of a bitch. We got out, we filed in ranks of three. We had a little suitcase of (unintelligible) like a kid used to send my laundry home in. We got the Red Cross and when we got out of interrogation in Frankfurt. It's got underwear, shirts, carton of cigarettes, a carton of gum, etc.

McIntosh: Who gave that to you?

Ayer: The (unintelligible). We started out, we were walking 20 steps and we ran 20 steps all the way to that prison camp. We got there and out here's the four lager, and they said okay, just flop on the grass. We'll take you here. They went through a strip search. So the camp got a jack board room and I had Hal Blonik (phonetic), the ball gunner, out on the grass, and Hal looks like he's gonna pass out. And we said, "Hal, what the hell happened to you?" He said, "Well, I was in (unintelligible), rolled back, I fell in a ditch. The guards beat me with their gun stocks and worked me over with their bayonets."

McIntosh: Oh, my God.

Ayer: We run into the exam. We had to strip. They had a table, a bench here, if you didn't sit down on the big scoop of damn German guard would come down and hit you on the fuckin' face. And then the guy behind the table says, we're not -- not allowed to sit down. Well, what the hell's this bench here. How we gonna get our shoes off. Well, you have to get them off. So Jack and I undressed, Hal, and his back was like hamburger. And we went out from that and into A compound and stepped over the landing wire. The doctor, McGill, captured in North Africa, stepped up.

McIntosh: American?

Ayer: Threw him over his shoulders like a sack of sponges. They had a little hospital in two rooms in the one barracks. There was 10 rooms in the barracks. We visited with Hal, we were in there, we were in the same compound. They had 80 men there, cuts to the back.

McIntosh: Wow.

Ayer: He didn't feel like eating so they would put his food at the head of his bunk. The Germans came through and said, "We gotta confiscate this, this guy is planning an escape." McGill says, "In my country we don't call that confiscation, they call it stealing." They call in front of the commandant and says, "You don't talk to any German like that or we'll forbid you to practice." He died a few years ago. But we eventually got to C compound and all of us in the tents, 25 got in a room together in C compound. They were from all over the country, Jim was from Javelin, Missouri, Huey from Louisiana, I was in Wisconsin, Jack the juggler was from Buffalo, New York, you know. We were United States of America. You know, like the pilot was from Texas and the copilot, of course, they're up in the officers' camp, they were from New Jersey. Hell, it was really like the way they made crews up. So we were there until the sixth of February in that camp. Now, the first ones in this camp (unintelligible) crew which is up in Lithuania, have you heard about that?

McIntosh: No.

Ayer: You can't have prisoners within 30 miles of hostilities, Geneva Convention. So the Russians are coming through Lithuania. They took these guys down to Regan (phonetic) or Remul (phonetic), they put them on barges and brought them down across the Baltic (unintelligible) where it empties in and then by train. When they got up to a T-fight, the depot, that was about a month before I got there. They're handcuffed by pairs. And then they were riding out and bayoneters, and then we followed and a couple other groups got bayoneted and then we really got the Swiss, the protecting powers that came in once a month, and they raised hell with the Germans. It was a big game that was going on. Things got so bad at

Heydekrug, the prisoners were trading with the guards. D-rationed chocolate bars from the Red Cross food parcels for apples and onions. Well, then now you got the damn guards blackmailed. Now you start, I want a radio tip, I want this, I want that, I want a camera, I want film. Oh, no. Let's go see the commandant. It got so bad up there in Luft 6 they brought a Gestapo in, and one of the guards hung himself because one of two things is going to happen. He's going to be shot or he goes to the Russian front. So we elected each barracks, a barracks' captain, first a room captain, then a berth captain and then 10 barracks in the compound.

McIntosh: How many men did you have there?

Ayer: 250.

McIntosh: To a barracks?

Ayer: To a barracks. And then all the whole camp we elected one of our chaplains. This is the guy that represents us to the Germans. Because rank didn't make a damn bit of difference. In fact, when we got out of the interrogation at Frankfurt we went up to Rensselaer about 40 miles away where the separation took place. And they were -- they wanted to get enlisted men to go up there as aides to the officers. Well, we found out what the other aides has to do in the prison camp, they had to polish the fuckin' officer's shoes and do his dishes, make his bed. And we said, "We got together and talked to them," we said, "Look, those bastards are in the same row we're on, and we're gonna go up there and be a maid on top of it? No way. So none of us went up there. So we had to vote, and the Englishman by the name of Dixie Deans had trained a guy by the name of Paulus, an American, he's in retirement in Florida right now, as our man of confidence to the Germans. He represented the whole camp, and Paulus was a sacrotech sergeant. And him and colonel, commandant, said, "If I find any radioes in this camp, I'll kill every man connected and 20 hostages." We had two radioes. I had BBC read to me six days a week in my room, always by the same guy, who used to put on a skit.

McIntosh: Who put the -- where did you get the radio? (Laughter.)

Ayer: Don't ask me.

McIntosh: Why not?

Ayer: Because I don't know.

McIntosh: Oh.

Ayer: I could tell you.

McIntosh: But not from the barracks.

Ayer: I can tell you.

McIntosh: Not from the barracks.

Ayer: Shit, you can find a paperback. See if you can find a paperback called, what the hell is the name of it, Escape Factor that was on the edge of Washington. They would take a playing card and slice it this way and put a certain mark on it and ship it through the prison camp. And in this book, The Escape Captain, they mentioned that they took a revolver apart and shipped it through the food parcels and clothing parcels from next of kin. And it got through.

McIntosh: So you didn't get it from the guard then?

Ayer: No, we don't. But we had them all back there. We had everything else that they wanted, chocolate.

McIntosh: Chocolate, that's the thing.

Ayer: Chocolate, the onions for apples, and then now you got 'em blackmailed and now you can start making demands. And back to one time in New Jersey, he had them bring a camera in. Then they'd take the film out and get it developed and bring it back. (Laughter) He had written several books while I was over there, the damn thing, O'Donnell.

McIntosh: He was in or just-- (unintelligible).

Ayer: He was a member of this camp.

McIntosh: Okay.

Ayer: In fact, when we get together at national conventions, a guy in Indianapolis by the name of Len Rose, he was an analyst the Ford Motor Company, he was in B lagger and before we left the camp, there's 10 rooms in the barracks, he got the name of every guy in that room that wanted papers. And they sewed all these names inside the lining of the coats -- overcoats in case the Germans had a strip search in the barracks, which they used to do. Take everybody out and they just go through the whole damn thing. And strange as it was -- as it seems, in C compound, I was in barracks two which is the second one from the gate. And they never did it. They used -- they would come in -- we would fall out for roll call in the morning and gates would lock up immediately. While we were out on roll call, this special crew would come in from -- put a guy at one end and the other end of the barracks, and they would shake down the whole damn thing looking for contraband, looking to see if you were taking bed slats or chocolate. Well, I got there about the -- around the 20th of August, let's see, July, shot down the 17th of July. It was around the 1st of August. And right after that we -- we weren't trying to escape. But it never came out, sit tight. About six weeks later they said, don't

try to contact the state committee. They got orders to sit tight. The Army said, run through France. Hell, they're saying that the war will be over by Christmas, you know. So the orders came out, again we're escaping. We have orders. And we're way in the hell -- we're 70 miles east of where von Braun was at Petermunde (phonetic). Now, --

McIntosh: Where would you go if you got out?

Ayer: What the hell. We don't even have any-- all our clothing is OD'd. The Russian front is 150 miles east of us. And I'll tell you, in that country everybody carried their damn passport, you know. You wouldn't get on the train if there's any question an official come up and say, let me see your passport or ID. And you had to show it or they'll throw you in jail. So I mean, the last order that you're supposed to remember is that you're supposed to escape, you know. Well, that's very well. Name, rank and serial number, but by the same token when we got out of interrogation, then they gave us like a postcard with that date, a letter told us about that wide and about this long, and now you can write to your family. And I was looking to see if I had some -- I know I've got a few of them because I sent a card to my folks. And I said, "I'm well again, alive and everything. Help the Red Cross as much as you can because they were the conduit for bringing in the food parcels, YMCA for sports equipment."

McIntosh: Anything else?

Ayer: No, no.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: No. So name, rank and serial number, and all I get is a postcard and you put your return address on it. Ayer, POW #6500, Stalag Luft 4, Mr. and Mrs. O.L. Ayer, Ripon, Wisconsin. Well, guess what, it said on the front, "Dear folks, I'm alive (unintelligible) (laughter).

McIntosh: Yeah. This is the part of the ridiculousness.

Ayer: They were very strict on how passing information, and guys would get talking and just spill their guts.

McIntosh: Most in the Air Force but individual, tell me about that.

Ayer: In our camp, it was an Air Force camp, an NCO camp.

McIntosh: What was in it?

Ayer: Both sides. And one of the guys that I met when I got out of prison when we evacuated that camp, it was in February, he found a little notebook and about six

reams there. And on each page is about this wide, and he put on the date when we started out and how far we walked that day. And I guess he's Giese in Florida. He's -- we used to send postcards-- Christmas cards back and forth. And then I saw him about three years ago. Spent a couple days with him. And he showed me this, and I looked at it, and I said, hey, Giese, sixth of February till the 27th, 29th of April, we were never lower than 15 miles apart. We were parallel and we both ended up in Magdeburg and got liberated by the Russians there in that locality. And I never knew that he was that near, that close. You get on a high hill you could see prisoners walking in every direction under guard. And this is so -- I call Giese the next day and I said, Giese, I'm not writing a book. But we talked last night, I said, we were that far apart. I'd like a copy, he says, sure, Bob. So we met and we had breakfast and put it on a commercial printer that had a copy machine with reduction, and I made a picture of every damn thing, and it turns out that just about 700 kilometers.

McIntosh: You can walk that.

Ayer: That we walked. Yeah.

McIntosh: Tell me about your release by the Russians, how'd that happen (laughter).

Ayer: We were sitting in a -- we're way in the hell down in at Tetroff (phonetic) (untelligible).

McIntosh: (unintelligible question).

Ayer: No, hell no. We evacuated Luft 4.

McIntosh: Because the Russians were coming?

Ayer: Because the Russians were coming. And we had been told that the Russians kill us before the Germans could themselves. Then we go out to the east and down to Odessa and get a ship and come back. But the Germans waited, and there was the rumor we were going to evacuate. One night, well, on the sixth of February they said the lights in the barracks can be on until eleven o'clock tonight. Pack your stuff for evacuating this camp. We're only gonna walk on the road for, oh, three, four days. We're going west. So we left the lights on, every time. We'd been told about it. In fact, the best thing we could backsack on was an RIF shirt. It only had four buttons down and it was big enough to be like a tent. And we rolled the shirttail up and sewed it across and sewed the sleeves to the side and put the four button front on the back and that was our backsack. And when we left the camp, when we went out this gate, all right, I'll give you another figure here. You got ten barracks, you got five on this side with the common latrine. And how big is this damn thing. And when I thought about it for a long time. But it was a warning rail, if you stepped over the warning rail, the guards here or here or here or in the middle could shoot you. So I walked as close as I could to the warning

rail. There was about 250 paces by 450. That was inside reaches of the lager of that compound. And, okay.

McIntosh: Tell me what you did when you left.

Ayer: The next day we walked on. And we walked and we slept in barns, second night out we slept on the ground because we were getting near the freedom. You couldn't have any fires. Because of air raids and (unintelligible). We slept on the ground, we ate on the ground the rest of the times because of that. And/or if we ran into a village, then you could in America in 1950s the guy had his barn in the backyard and he went out to work his fields. The same thing in Germany. So we'd have 200 men in this barn and we'd have 300 over here, you might have 500 over here, and we would walk and sometimes we'd lay over (unintelligible) for 12 straight days.

McIntosh: (unintelligible question).

Ayer: Shit, it got so bad we couldn't even (unintelligible) (laughter).

McIntosh: But you were heading away from the Russians.

Ayer: We were heading away from the Russians, but then, hey, the Americans are over here somewhere. In fact, we got way up from the (unintelligible) wall and across the top of Germany, just south of the Baltic. It would be 40 kilometers and it looked just like the area up around Eagle River and Three Lakes, the lakes and the birch trees and everything. I wondered what the hell would it be. Oh, what was going to be the conditions when I got out of that camp. I knew where in the hell we were, you know. But what's gonna happen the last day I walk out of that damn prison camp and I could see that great big German flag and the swastika. That just -- we left in the morning (unintelligible). I had two pairs of cotton socks and four pair; I never took them off for three months. I never got out of my clothes for three months. My shoes I took off every night. Me and my buddies, we shared our food. The Germans are supposed to give us bread. Hell, we get to our barn, you know, a farmer had water tanks where he would do his slaughtering of his hogs so they had had to cook potatoes and we'd each get several potatoes. That's what we got for the day. And we were supposed to augment it with our Red Cross. Well, shit, we ran out of Red Cross food supplies.

McIntosh: You must have -- well, you had potatoes.

Ayer: And rye bread. When I walked out the main gate they had a great big vacuum case like this, this high, full of brand new GI shoes. I just had my shoes resoled and reheeled by our own shoe department in the camp. And I had 'em broke in. I was gettin' ready for this. And as I walked by that box, I reached in and I found a pair of nine and-a-half D, my size exactly. And I picked 'em up and I tied 'em to my back side. And I carried those damn shoes for about six weeks like that. And

I (unintelligible) together. So finally in three months we got told we were going to have bread, seven guys on a loaf of bread. So you got about that much of a loaf, a kilo and-a-half. I was gettin' very hungry. I went up to this farm house, just because we fell out by eight o'clock in the morning, we came out of the woods. I knock at the door, and the German wife came and she opened it and she says, "Nicht wasser, nicht wasser, kaput, kaput."

McIntosh: No water.

Ayer: No hot water. They used to give us hot water to go with our soluble coffee out of our food parcel. And she said, "Nicht wasser, nicht wasser." And I had my toe in the door and I had my hand on the shoe and I said, "Brot?" "Nichts wasser, nichts wasser, nichts wasser." "Brot? Brot?" "Nichts wasser, nichts wasser." "Brot?" Damn. She took me in the kitchen and there's her husband, they were about I'd say 55, and her mother who was probably 70. Nice, warm, got an old coal burning kitchen range like we had when we were kids, you know. And we haggled over that pair of shoes. She wanted to give me a half a loaf of bread, I said, oh, shit (laughter). We haggled and I sell them for two-and-a-half kilo loaves of bread. But I hadn't brought in my backpack. The husband tried to untie it from over my straps, and he was so excited, I looked, he had more patches on his shoes than he had original shoe and he couldn't -- and she pushed him aside and she untied them. They had like (unintelligible) in the kitchen. And she had pictures up all around. And I says, "Can you?" "Ya, ya." This one's in France, this one's in Bucharest, this one's in Italy, you know. She had six sons in the service (unintelligible). And she's telling me this. And I start to get the feeling of who's the captor and who's the captive. Really. She's like my mother, you know. A human person, she had six sons and the war's going to hell on a one way ticket. And she's worried. Then I start moving around, and I don't know what the hell to say. I got up to the door and I looked at her and I said, "Der kreig be scheisen." You know what that is.

McIntosh: No.

Ayer: The war is shit.

McIntosh: Oh.

Ayer: She says, "Ya, ya." And I went out the door. And Jim came across the courtyard, you know, they had barns on three sides of the house across there, and he came running and he said, "Bob, where in the hell were you?" He said, "I thought you escaped. What the hell, I've been lookin' for you for a half an hour. Where in the hell -- where in the hell's your shoes, Bob?" I said, "Shut up. I just traded the fuckin' shoes off." He said, "What'd you get?" I said, "I got two-and-a-half loaves of bread. And you and I are gonna share it." We didn't care. Then later as the march developed I traded my watch that my folks gave me for graduation from high school, a Hamilton wristwatch, 17 jewels, Jim traded his watch that his folks

gave him and for a couple loaves of bread. This is how we kept going. And what we could steal, the bread, potatoes, kohlrabi in the gardens.

McIntosh: How could you do something (unintelligible).

Ayer: Everybody was doing it. You were in this barn but you had --

McIntosh: Even though --

Ayer: Well, you had the body functions. And at night you'd holler, "Guard, posten, posten," he knew you wanted to go to the bathroom so the guy would come and you'd go out by the pile of manure. Some guys took off, they wanted to escape. I said, "You're crazy." I said, "Look, we're going west to get away from the Russians. What's between us and the Russians? The SS, they're mopping up. You think they're going to put you back with another bunch of Krugies comin' through? No, they shoot you." I says, "We got more strength with a group."

McIntosh: Right. Exactly.

Ayer: Exactly. So then we got way the hell into north central Germany and they put us on a train at (unintelligible) that made horses, we had 82 men in our boxcar for two days. And we got down to around Magdeburg on Maundy, Thursday, Easter time of '45. They had like a big circus tent, big flap, you know, seat a whole 400 guys and they put us in there. This is inside the barbwire, and they said, "Okay, everybody shut up. We're gonna give you a news report." Well, listen. So they said the Americans are only about 45, 50 miles west of us and the Russians are about 75 miles to the east of us, you know. Just sit tight. They were so inconceivable, we couldn't figure out how in the hell both armies got so close. We had been on the road for damn near three months. We couldn't believe it. We said, "shut up. Get the hell out of here. You don't have to come in here and give us that bullshit because we don't believe you. Our own guys." Five days later the Russians came through.

McIntosh: (unintelligible question).

Ayer: They came through, first the Russians came through on the motorcycle, then a couple bicycles and then manned troops and then (unintelligible) -- they were going north because we were near Berlin and they wanted to get around the fighting in Berlin.

McIntosh: What about your guards and those guys?

Ayer: Shit, they had disappeared a couple days before that.

McIntosh: So for two days you were totally unaware, is that right?

Ayer: We finally -- Jim and I had left the group from Achterburg (phonetic) they started to hit the road again. And they said, if you can't make it on the road, go down the street about four blocks and there's a compound. We went down there. Okay, now this is another part of this whole continuing story. This was a four story building with barbed wire around it. But it was a hospital. Now, if you were French, English, American and battle-wounded, and so bad that you're up for repatriation, you haven't been saved by three German doctors from your prison camp. And then they sent you to this compound and there you had an exam by three Swiss and three German doctors. And if you're still so bad, then you were put on a hospital train for Switzerland and they exchanged. And this is what this camp was. And it was like a hospital and then huts were all on the ground, about 30 huts. And we got talking with the English there, they were lots of English. Some of these guys had been captured at Dunkirk, some of them in North Africa, give you an idea how long they've been prisoners.

McIntosh: So you stayed there until the Russians came?

Ayer: Well, we stayed there four days. And the Russians came through.

McIntosh: And the guards, you said were gone, too?

Ayer: The guards were gone.

McIntosh: So they (unintelligible).

Ayer: We left the camp and scrounged around town. And --

McIntosh: But people were still there or did they leave too? (talking at the same time--unintelligible).

Ayer: Right next door was outside of a fence was a two story brick house where the Russians came in, they checked that house, that was a German dentist. He was married and had two kids. The whole family was found in the house. They killed the two kids, he killed his wife, then he committed suicide. The bodies were laying there because the Russians come, they're going to kill everybody.

McIntosh: (unintelligible question).

Ayer: They gave a mixture of it. What the hell, we were -- oh, God. They came through and a German mole surfaced. You know what I mean?

McIntosh: Yup.

Ayer: And he took a Russian officer all around that town and showing them where the Germans had supplies, material, food, war material and tore that town up. And we were staying -- by then we left and we walked about 15 miles down towards

another POW camp. They had about 160,000 people out on command working on factories and farms because part of the Geneva Convention part of the PFCs and corporals had to work on nondefense, nonwar production. This camp, the conference was American tech sergeant. They had people out for about 50 miles working on factories and farms. They were losing 15 Americans a week of malnutrition and they took the fuckin' American tech sergeant was like that with the Germans first. He was turning Americans in. So help me, this is the truth. He was turning Americans into that fucking German.

McIntosh: Did they give (unintelligible).

Ayer: The Russians relegated that camp, and within five minutes that son of a bitch was hung up to a telephone pole.

McIntosh: How did the Russians get him?

Ayer: The Russians didn't know. The Americans did. (talking at the same time). The prisoners themselves, the Americans, they hung him. That is the truth.

McIntosh: Tell me about that.

Ayer: Well, they were so mad at him. He had turned his own buddies in to the Germans to curry favor. They couldn't wait for that day to come. And they hung him.

McIntosh: Did you talk to any of these Russian soldiers?

Ayer: We lived with them. We lived with them for about two or three weeks because the Germans knew all the British soldiers (unintelligible) and the Americans met the Russians on the Alps and then they pulled back to a temporary line of demarcation, about 45, 50 miles a way, the Molden River (phonetic) and we walked it. An American lieutenant came through and he says, don't go straight through because the SS are holing up in that fine forest. You go around it, stay in the open fields. So we did it.

McIntosh: (unintelligible question).

Ayer: We walked the first day about 12 miles and we were in a town like Oregon used to be. There was four of us, all Americans. One guy -- Jack and I slept in the same barracks and down in Georgia we were at training before we went overseas. And we wondered really where in the hell to go. This town is just crawling with Russians, and this guy comes up, and he says, would you like a place to stay, a bed for the night?

McIntosh: Perfect English?

Ayer: We talked to him, he said, yeah. He says, okay. Come and follow me. And he took

us, there were five of us, he put Jim and I in one building and then the other three guys about two blocks away. And that happened to be VE night. The next morning where the other three guys are is about 50 Russians over there, and this is why they wanted the Americans in the damn building. Because when the Russians came in looting and raping, they said, oh, the Americans are here. The Russians said, well, we can't get this house. We go and find and tell us their own place. But this time they didn't. There was about 40 Russians, and they had food and vodka and everything and a radio. And these guys are listening to the radio and it's coming Russians, and Russians and the Americans are tuned into the Armed Forces Radio and get the VE news, you know, and listened. Then pretty soon the Russians said, hey, that's English, not Russian. But they had three or four women, they had a couple bedrooms, and they had a gang bang that was going on until five o'clock the next morning. Our guys said, shit, it went on in a steady stream of guys. And about one o'clock in the morning one babe said, that's enough. Enough, enough, enough. One of the Russians, he grabbed one of those little tommy-guns, he went in there, there was some screaming and hollering and the Germans and the Russians and he comes out, they start filing in, both women were raped at least 10, 15 times each that night. When I got back, I says, America couldn't stand the Russian occupation. They're (unintelligible), but hey, this is what the Germans did in Russia.

McIntosh: Right. (unintelligible).

Ayer: I heard one report that they made a German father sit in the corner of the bedroom while his daughter was raped, and she was raped 39 times in one night.

McIntosh: I'll bet that was horrible.

Ayer: Yeah.

McIntosh: Let's get back to --

Ayer: Okay. We got -- now one funny thing. All right. There's three guys are there, the two of us are here, we hear some shouting and hollering downstairs, and the German housewife comes and said, "Bob, Bob, come, come, come." I went down, and here's the Polish woman. To make a long story short, she worked as a domestic in this apartment building. Now she's free and she's going home to Poland. But she brought something upstairs. And I can't understand her. Come, come, come, come. Up to the third floor she goes back in the closet, comes out with a vacuum cleaner (laughter). She goes all over the floor with that damn vacuum cleaner. Honest to God (laughter). I said, get the hell out of here. And the German little housewife, she looked at me, and she -- there's nothing she can do. She's damn lucky that she can didn't get her hide taken off. Well, the Russian woman, the Polish woman went out the door with the damn vacuum cleaner. But then we walked about three days and we saw signs on each as you come close to a little village, the Allied Military Governments in English, German and Russian.

No German is allowed to leave his home community without a pass from the Allied or Military Government. So the guy that we went in -- that got us these rooms that I told you about, he was the asthmatic corporal in the German censoring as far as where the American and British mail went out and came back in. He was a censor there and his home was in Bremen or Hamburg. And he hadn't heard from his family in three months. So he wanted get out of the Russian zone and he wanted to walk -- he wanted to walk back to Bremen. And so we made a deal. You get us free meals and a place to stay and we'll take you through the (unintelligible) Englishmen's jacket, remrock (phonetic), pants, German Army shoes and he posed as an American. We don't like-- there were thousands.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: Sure. So he said okay. And that's what he did. And for three nights he did (unintelligible). We stopped at (unintelligible), killed a couple of big fat chickens and made a great big pot of chicken and dumplings, and six of us sat down and ate the whole damn thing. (Laughter) Now we get up to a ridge and down below is Alulger River (phonetic). This side is the river. They had pulled back, a temporary line demarcation. This side is Russian and there's a Russian guard down there. We went down and we said to the Russian, Americanski, ya, ya, ya. American, Americana, you know. Can we go over there? He says, yeah. You're supposed to -- all traffic is supposed to go from nine o'clock in the morning till eleven. This is about 1:30 in the afternoon. So we went across the bridge and across -- while we were up on the hill looking down we could see the Russian guard down there, we can see the American flag flying in the breeze. Boy, tell me about the American flag. And this was a quartermaster up at headquarters, this was in Frankfurt. There were outfits, so we went over and they were in this factory, it was a guy said, "Upstairs on the second floor, that's where the office is." So we went up there and we got this damn Kraut along with us, and we said to the lieutenant behind the desk, we said, "We were to report in, lieutenant." "Well, who the hell are ya?" "Well, we're Air Force men, 815th, 12th Air Force just coming out of eastern zone." They say, "You hungry?" We said, "Yeah." He said, "Go down and get to the mess hall, then come on back up here."

McIntosh: Still had the German with you.

Ayer: So we went down and went to mess hall and we had -- (laughter). And so we took it. (Laughter) They're out in central Germany. And we said to them, "Look, you would never make it walking from here to Hamburg."

McIntosh: Did he speak good English?

Ayer: Oh, yeah. He understood, we said, "Look, at least let us turn you in to the Americans."

McIntosh: Yeah.

- Ayer: And with your asthmatic condition, you won't be turned over to the Russians.
- McIntosh: Right.
- Ayer: We talked about that for 45 minutes. And we went back up, we finished eating. We were back up, then the lieutenant said, "How was the chow?" We said, "Boy, we ate-- (laughter), we each ate a loaf of rye bread, tasted like cake." (laughter) He says, "Okay, now go down and get these off. You go through the post and you go in and then you come out on the other end. There's a foot gun and DET and you go where you all belong. Okay." He said, "Glad to see you back." We said, "Glad to be back. (unintelligible) We got a prisoner to turn in."
- McIntosh: Who said that?
- Ayer: We did. To him. We said, we got a prisoner to turn in. (Laughter) Yeah, it's comical. He looks up, and he says, "Well, bring the son of a bitch in." (Laughter) We said, "Lieutenant, he's here." And he looks up, you know, two, three times, he's perplexed. Man, this was so beautiful, you couldn't exchange him. Finally he says, "Well, bring the son of a bitch up." The guy comes in, he was an interpreter in the mail center for American and English mail going out and coming in. And he's got us food and whatnot for about four or five days, and he wants to get up to Hamburg to see his folks, he hasn't heard from them for three months. He says, "Take the son of a bitch downstairs, we got a little one room cell, lock him up. You come on back up." But the thing is we went back up and they said, "What's that shit about that guy?" And we said, "No. Because we've been together about a week now and we've talked with him. And yeah, he's an asthmatic." And in fact after I got home about a year later I had a letter from him. You know, I think it was '46, '47, that tough year, and he's been released by the Allies. And he wants to know if I can send him a couple cartons of cigarettes. Well, that's the king's ransom over there at that time. And I said, "Fuck you, yeah. Yes." Because he showed us a picture one time, we said, "Who's this?" "That's my son." "Well, where's your wife?" "Well, that's the Hitler baby." Hitler provided girls for recreation. I thought, you got yourself in the mess now you best get yourself out of it. I never answered his request for a damn thing. I figured we did enough to get him out of the Russian zone. He's just damn lucky he's got his whole hide. Now that's an overview of the whole war experience.
- McIntosh: (unintelligible).
- Ayer: From there, we launched and a couple days later they took us by Army six-by-six, it was prisoners coming in, we had a whole Army six-by-six truck. We had 28 guys. And they took us up to Holland. Holley was an airfield on the central Germany German defense. We got up there and here's groups of them by 25, 26, down two sides of that field, I'll bet that stretched for a mile and-a-half. And all English and deloused, reclothed, waiting for transportation out. And I had a truck

driver drove right up to the front of the line, and the English howled like hell, "back of the line, Yank, back of the line." And we stood there and the pilot came out, this is honest-to-God truth. The pilot came back and he stood in the doorway of this C-46, and he says, who the hell are you guys? And I mean we still looked like a rag bag (laughter).

McIntosh: There was how many of you?

Ayer: Twenty-six. We said, "we're 8th and 15th Air Force, and some 12th Air Force guys, just coming out of the east zone. Oh, and then he says, "I had a friend, I'm from the 8th Air Force originally, and I had a friend that got knocked down and no one saw his chute come out of his plane. I think the whole damn crew perished." And he said his name, and one guy in the truck says, "Was it lieutenant so and so?" "Ya." I processed at the same time, he's alive. He's up on Luft 1. He was up at Luft 1 which is the officer's camp in the Danish border. And I was at a non-com camp. This was the first he knew that his buddy was still alive. Then about that time one of the guys in the truck says, "hey, lieutenant, when in the hell do we get out of here. You know, with all these guys." He says, "Get your ass off those trucks and get on this plane." We had 26 or 27 guys, and we're English and us getting on that plane, howled at us, back of the line, you know, and all this and that, favoritism and everything. We got on, that was about one o'clock in the afternoon. And we flew to Rheims (phonetic) and you would think the Irish went through the day before. The trucks had to snake their way down through the streets. They had threw just enough bricks out to make a passageway, but we went from Army camp and the mess hall and we talked to the cook, and he says, "Who in the hell are you?" "Ex-prisoners." Go from here go up to the ramp camp. He said, "We're shorthanded, can you help us? We're feeding about 18 hours a day. Can you help us? Just serve on the line, you can eat all you want." We said, "Sure." So pretty soon some of these ensigns raised hell that we got on the plane, you know. They came through and several of them were right near the front of the line and recognized us. And one guy said, "Weren't you the Yanks on that truck that got out ahead of us?" We said, "Yeah." And now we got to work to feed you guys. Because they -- from Holley, they flew to Rheims, they processed for one day and then C-46 to England. They went home that fast. And the fella -- it was two months before I got home.

McIntosh: You were there two months?

Ayer: Well, I went to Lahar and Jack and I were together and we got there, there's 65,000 guys ahead of us. Number one priority is sick and wounded back to the States. Number two is the units going to the CBI, to the Orient directly. Fourth priority was to the States furlough and ship out for CBI and then ex-prisoners of war. And there were 65,000 ex-prisoners in this camp waiting for a boat. And Jack and I talked it over and we could get a seven day TDY to the UK. So we signed up for it. And they flew us from there out to (unintelligible) and then we had a going plane up to Presswick (phonetic). We talked with the operations

officer at Presswick who said, "Who in the hell are you guys?" "Well, who are you?" "Well, we're ex-prisoners." "Out of where?" Well, we're both from the 15th Air Force. We explained it to him. He said, "You want to go home?" We said, "You're damn right." "Let me see your orders." So we showed him our orders. Seven day TDY in the UK and at the expiration we put in at at Grossmeyer Square in London for the first available surface transport home. He says, "Shit, I can't put you on the damn plane." He said, "Look, that plane is going down to London," he said. "Get on it and I'll call my buddy that you're coming through and you see him tomorrow morning, and he'll change your orders from surface transport to flying and then he'll fly back up tomorrow night and I'll put you on a plane at nine o'clock tomorrow night for the States." And I looked at Jack and I says, (laughter), I said, "Jack, you want to do it?" He says, "I don't know, Bob. We're up in Scotland now, what do you think?" "Well, I don't expect to come back here for 40 years. Aw, hell, let's stay here." So we thanked -- and explained to the officer, you know. He says, "Don't worry a damn bit." And so we took the train in to Glasgow and over to Edinburgh, spent about a week there and went back to that B-17 base, picked up our luggage and went down to London. And I had about a week in London and then we got 200 bucks at lucky strike. I'm about broke. So I said to Jack, "I'm going to turn myself in. I'm broke, I'm ready to go home." He said, "I'm going to stay. In fact, I'm going down to the Red Cross truck and wire home for money." So we parted friends. So I went down, I reported him, they sent me to Southampton. I was there about three -- between three and four weeks, and here comes an order to go back up to Scotland to catch a damn liberty ship and then supposed to leave at seven o'clock that night, and at 6:30 in the gate comes Jack from London. He says, "Sure, shit, I thought you were back in the States." I said, "I'm leaving tonight." I said, "What the hell?" He says, "Well, I wired home, they sent me money, I had a hell of a time, now I'm ready to go home too." And it took me 13 days from Boston, the next day they took Jack and sent him up to Plymouth and he beat me back to the States. My folks met me at Pembine which is 18 miles from my hometown, and then my mother says, "Bob, we got a telegram." I said, "I got a what?" Because I had a 90 day furlough.

McIntosh: Right.

Ayer: I said, "What the hell does it say?" It says, "Dear Bob, arrived home safely, family's fine, love and kisses, Johnny." My mother says, "Did you get mixed up with a WAC?" (Laughter) I was driving the damn car around and around in the ditch till my arm was sore, and I had to explain to them about my friend Jack.

McIntosh: Where's Jack now?

Ayer: Never heard from him. He lived on Long Island, I have never heard from him, and once we split --

McIntosh: You don't know where he is?

Ayer: No, I don't know. And I looked in our directory.

McIntosh: Yes. What is that directory?

Ayer: All ex-POW's that belonged to the organization. But I -- hell, I didn't know there was such a thing as an ex-POW organization until about 1985.

McIntosh: Oh. Is that the organization you joined after the war?

Ayer: I joined the legion and I quit within a year. I didn't like the way they were going nationally. They were too damn conservative.

McIntosh: How about the VFW?

Ayer: I didn't join any.

McIntosh: I see.

Ayer: And then I had some problems, I had some physical exams, and I had been told, hey, if you got a claim, get ahold of the DAV. And I did. And I've been a member of them ever since.

McIntosh: Are they Disabled American Veterans?

Ayer: Yeah. And I belong to DAV, and I was up north, my hometown, one of my friends from Milwaukee was there, and we had breakfast. And he said, "Bob, before we finish breakfast you're going to be a member of the VFW." And I says, "You go to hell, Millie." Well, I was a member and I took a life membership out.

McIntosh: Tell me what did you do after the war for work?

Ayer: I went to school. Two years at the U and two years at Madison Business College, and I started working for Monroe Calculating down here with a guy by the name of B.J. Caswell. He's still alive and he's 90 years old. He's in the same building I'm in. And about a year here and I wasn't any great success. I was running a business so I pulled a transfer to Wausau which was a sub-office of Oshkosh. Wausau was the entire Wisconsin River valley. I had the territory myself and one serviceman. Mechanical calculators, adding machines, bookkeeping machines. That made Ayer. I put on four days of 45,000 miles a year. I had a very good friend who worked for American Fleet and we both had a meeting in Minneapolis, I says-- and we were both active in the Jaycees so I said, "Rog, ride with me." So we went up and coming back we got talking, and I knew that Rog was kind of nosy, "Bob, how much money you made?" Because I got a (unintelligible) you work with. So finally I told him, I said, "Well, I'll tell you, Rog, I don't get any mileage, I don't get any expenses, I run 10 counties. I put on between 44 and 50,000 miles a year. So out of my gross has to come my costs of doing business." I said, "last year I

made 17,000 and I had \$3,000 in car expenses and everything else."

McIntosh: That much.

Ayer: Yeah. But for a friend, this was way back in the late '60s, early '70s.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: I did. I did 17 in my -- and my expenses took me down to about near 12. See, I told Rog that, he says, "You're shitting me, Bob." I said, "No." "Why?" He said, "You make more damn money than the bank president here in town."

McIntosh: I'll be darned.

Ayer: I said, "You're kidding." He says, "No." Well, what do you do.

McIntosh: (unintelligible).

Ayer: That's -- now that's a roster of our Badger Chapter. There are eight chapters in the state. These are the ones in the Madison unit, and it gives a name as you can see, the present address, the prison camp they were in. I gave this -- not only this list but the other list with the membership to Judy Alexander at the VA Hospital so she could make a mailing to members all over the state on the aneurysm tests that they were running here for about three years. I got one of the first mailings on it, and I got in on it and a year and-a-half later I had the operation.

McIntosh: Oh, my goodness. (unintelligible).

Ayer: And I called my buddy up in St. Paul, he's five days younger than I am, and I told him about this test, you know. And he says, "Am I glad you told me. I've got my annual physical." He worked for 3M all his life. And so he asked his doctor, and his doctor said, "Well, yeah, I checked you for that." And Bill says, "How?" He says, "When I give you a procto." Bill says, "You're a lying son of a bitch because you can't check that with a procto."

McIntosh: No.

Ayer: And they got in a battle, and then the doctor admitted, he says, "Oh, I have to send you to a specialist."

McIntosh: Right.

Ayer: They detected it on Bill, they watched it, and about six months after I had my operation, Bill had his operated on. And then he told his brother-in-law who's a mining engineer out in Utah, and he had the same surgery. So --

McIntosh: So this is the Wisconsin chapter of POWs?

Ayer: This is only Badger Chapter, our chapter around Madison.

McIntosh: Oh, right.

Ayer: This is -- these are all ex-POWs and this is one of eight chapters in the state.

McIntosh: Okay. Can I make a copy as long as you got it there?

Ayer: That's the reason I brought it with me.

McIntosh: I appreciate that. All right. Any last words?

Ayer: Amen. (laughter).

McIntosh: Is that it? Thank you so much.

Ayer: I want to say one thing. I know I talked--

[End of Interview]