

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOSEPH PECK
Bombardier, Army Air Corps, World War II
2005

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Peck, Joseph. (1921-2014). Oral History Interview, 2005.

Approximate length: 1 hour 56 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Joseph Peck discusses his service with the Army Air Corps in Italy during World War II, his training to become a bombardier, and his time as a POW. Peck describes joining the Army in 1942 and being put to work unloading boxcars before joining the Air Corps and being sent to Texas. He outlines the many stages of training he went under in the Air Corps: ground school at Ellington Field School in Houston, aerial gunnery school in Laredo, and the advanced school for bombardiers in Midland. He explains that he was then commissioned as a Second Lieutenant and then sent to Tonopah (Nevada) and introduced to the B-24. At Tonopah, Peck's crew was assembled and they underwent phase training. He describes being assigned a brand new B-24 in San Francisco and flying to Florida to receive their orders to go to Italy. Peck details the kinds of missions his crew did in Italy and explains the duties of a bombardier and how all the different bombs worked. He then describes crash landing somewhere in Yugoslavia, and being picked up by Tito's Partisans. Peck discusses the mission over Ploiesti (Romania), having to escape the plane after that mission, and being captured by men and sold to the Germans. He describes all the different prisons he was sent to, including Stalag Luft Three, becoming ill with dysentery, being questioned by German officers, and his liberation from Stalager VII-A. Peck outlines the liberation process and his trip home on a freighter. He then describes returning to America, his time spent in hospitals, and the struggles of returning to a civilian life for World War II soldiers.

Biographical Sketch:

Peck (1921-2014) served with the Army Air Corps until 1945. After being discharged he worked as a design engineer for various places, including Kitt Peak Observatory and Motorola.

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2005.

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2012.

Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract written by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Transcribed Interview

MacDonald: This is an interview with Joseph J. Peck, who served with the United States Army Air Corps during World War II. The interview is being conducted at approximately 9:30 a.m. at the following address of [REDACTED] Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of April 2, 2005. And the interviewer is Terry MacDonald.

Now Joe, can you give us a little background about your history as to where you were born, the year you were born, and where you grew up?

Peck: Yes. I was born in Emporia, Kansas, in 1921. But after only about three or four years, I was moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where essentially I was raised—in Milwaukee. And from there—my parents had been separated—my mother eventually moved back to Iowa, her home town. And my father was a sailor and a Navy man. So, after the war, of course, I was on my own.

Now, as far as what I did—I attended a tech high school and a trade school and wound up as a tool designer for the A.O. Smith Corporation. And it was at A.O. Smith Corporation where I had a 2B industrial deferment. However, at that time everyone was gung-ho to go into the service, and I was one of those.

MacDonald: You were deferred because of the type of job you had with the defense industry, then, right?

Peck: Oh, yes, very much so, very much so. A.O. Smith was tooling up for bombs and bomb fins and propellers and things like that. And I was a tool designer at that time working for them on all industrial things—a lot of overtime—and things of that nature.

But I was impatient, just like anybody else at that time. I was mostly interested in boats, the Merchant Marine, but I wasn't allowed to go to that.

MacDonald: Why was that?

Peck: That's a civilian job. I was also interested in the ALCAN Highway [the Alaska-Canadian Highway]. I wasn't allowed to go to that, either. So I interviewed with the Navy, and the Navy said, "Yes, we can take you. I can take any military." But, at that time, you had to sign up for a six-year tour of duty, and I didn't want to commit to six years.

MacDonald: What year was this that you were looking to go into?

Peck: This would be 1942—October 1942—I had just turned twenty-one. But the Navy also wouldn't let me choose what I did in the Navy. I didn't want to line up at Great Lakes down there, just handing out uniforms for six years.

So I went to the Army. And I asked them, what if I joined the Army, what would happen? Where would I go? They said, "Well, you'd go to Fort Sheridan tomorrow." So I did that right off the bat. And, sure enough, I had the examination in Milwaukee and went to Fort Sheridan the next day.

Now, Fort Sheridan was coastal artillery. And I didn't have much of anything to do there. I was unloading boxcars and work like that.

MacDonald: Was this your basic training, too?

Peck: Oh, no. Oh, no.

MacDonald: You didn't have any basic training, then?

Peck: Not there, no, nothing.

MacDonald: Okay.

Peck: And then, they came around and said, "Does anybody want to go into the Air Corps?" And I took that, I wasn't overly interested in airplanes—I was interested in boats. But I took it. And from there, I got a different type of piping on my hat. Coastal Artillery had a red piping, and I got the, I guess the blue and yellow, or whatever you call it, for the Air Corps.

I was sent to Hondo, Texas, which was a brand new airfield. And it was for the training of navigation students. And I was a buck private on the line, maintenance for airplanes, with the navigation students. Well, I thought I was going to be a mechanic, but not so. I was just a maintenance man, just a grunt around the airplanes, cleaning them up and sweeping and polishing them and things of that nature.

And I was there for—oh, I don't know—must've been three or four months. And I decided, "This is ridiculous." So, I applied for the cadetship. But, in the meantime, at Hondo, there, I did a lot of night duty—wind and dust—and I got what they called pleurisy. But as time has gone by, I don't think it was pleurisy. I think it was valley fever, which is not uncommon down there.

MacDonald: Okay.

Peck: And then I was taken off the line, and I spent the rest of the time at Hondo in a supply station handing out supplies and equipment for the navigation students.

But—I forget what month it was, I finally—I think it was March or something like that when I was accepted into the cadets—passed all the physicals, was sent to a field at San Antone [*San Antonio, Texas*]. I think it was an auxiliary field somewhere near Kelly Field. And there you went through more examinations, interrogations.

MacDonald: They were pretty strict on their selection process, then.

Peck: Oh, they were. Oh, they were very strict, very strict. And then you wrote tests, and you had a choice: bombardier, navigator, or pilot. Now, it happened that I passed well in all of them. But I had a very good friend that had gone into pilot training, and he washed out. And I always considered that friend far superior to me. As a matter of fact, now I'm married to his sister.

But I chose bombardier. There's a couple of reasons for that. And that was, my mother was a dependent on me. And my GI pay, she got a little money out of it, and some of my pay too went to her. And, you know, when you get fifty dollars a month, and then they take part of that out for your dependency, you know, I had only had a few bucks left in the month.

MacDonald: Did you get any extra money for flying?

Peck: Well, I wasn't flying then.

MacDonald: Okay. All right.

Peck: But I wanted the uniform and I wanted money. Flying was a secondary thing. So I chose bombardier because the wash-out rate was considerably lower than pilot. So that put me in the classification for bombardier. And from there I was sent to Ellington Field outside of Houston. And, at that place you had what they called ground school, went through all the theories of bombs, bomb sites, bomb tracking, and the, you might call it, ballistics of dropping bombs. And it was quite a long course, strictly ground school.

And then from there I was sent, hopefully, to the advanced training for bombardier. But that didn't happen. There was apparently a pipeline of bombardiers and, to take care of that pipeline that was getting full, I was sent with many others to a aerial gunnery school at Laredo, Texas. And I had the exact same course as any aerial gunner. And when I got out of

there, then I went to Midland. And that was the Advanced School for Bombardiers—Midland, Texas.

MacDonald: Uh-huh. During this time, your living quarters, were they regular barracks, good living quarters? They treated you well?

Peck: Oh, yes. Oh, the military always treated us well. I might add that, going into the cadets, I had to disclaim any dependents. My pay, then, went to seventy-five dollars a month, but you weren't allowed to be married. You weren't allowed to have any dependents. You had to sign that all off. So, that was an incentive to make sure I got the commission [laughs].

But, bombardier training, I found it very interesting. We would fly in twin-engine Beech aircraft, and we dropped hundred-pound practice bombs. And there would always be—we would take turns holding a camera and photographing the bomb hits, the person up there, and then they keep a record. Then the record—they have what they call a “circle of error,” how you're doing on that, and you're graded on that.

Then also they had devices to where, in the hangar, you had a regular bomb site, and it crawled across the floor and it would punch a little mark on a moving target that was also crawling across the floor. So you had the two motions, and that got you used to the idea that the airplane's moving.

But my circle of error was very good, and my hits were a little less than fifty percent. But that was still pretty good. I don't know what constitutes a hit, but the most important thing was the circle of error—how big a circle did all your bombs drop in. And mine was pretty small. So I had no worries about getting the commission or graduating.

I had a few discipline problems, doing a lot of “tour walking” for discipline. And I thought maybe I wouldn't get the commission, and I would get Flight Officer. But it turned out I did not. I was recommended for commission as Second Lieutenant.

[Break in recording] [00:11:00]

Peck: From Midland, after I graduated and you got the new uniform and everything, I got to where I liked being an officer. That was pretty good. I could reestablish an allotment to my mother and got a leave to go home and visit and things like that. And from there I was sent to Fresno, California. I really don't know why, but at Fresno there was a lot of young officers. And they were distributed to different places where they called phase training.

And I was sent to Tonopah, Nevada. And at Tonopah, Nevada, was my first introduction to a B-24. Now, Tonopah was some five thousand feet above sea level, and it was winter, and it was cold, very cold. So, at Tonopah, we were assembled into crews—the captain, the pilot, copilot, navigator, bombardier, and six gunners. That was the crew that, we were going to stay together.

MacDonald: That was, more or less, you stayed together the whole time then, huh?

Peck: That's right.

MacDonald: Okay.

Peck: And we went through all that phase training. Sometimes it was so cold we had to walk the propellers through to get them loosened up to where you could even start the engines. And then we had to practice bombing from high altitude, which disappointed me, because I was in hopes I could go to the South Pacific.

But, at any rate, there was pleasure in that too. We did some navigation runs to Bakersfield, California, and Phoenix, Arizona, for navigation practices. And when we'd get there, we would assign somebody to stay on the airplane with a .45 and guard it. And the rest of us could have a ball, go to town. That was party time.

But at the end of phase training in Tonopah, Nevada, our crew was sent to Hamilton Field in San Francisco. In Hamilton Field, they gave us an airplane, brand new airplane. Had to sign up for the bomb site and the .45, and you got the Mae West [A life jacket] and everything that you were going to need. And you were fully equipped.

And the airplane, like I say, it was shiny brand new. It was not painted. They stopped painting the B-24s by that time. It was just shiny aluminum. There was all little notes in it from the girls that assembled it, and all that. Now, our airplane was made at Willow Run in Detroit by the Ford Corporation, and the engines—I forgot who made the engines. They were Pratt & Whitney fourteen cylinder engines that the B-24 had.

But we finally got orders to fly to Florida. But on the way, our first hop was from San Francisco to Robins Field in, I think it was, Georgia—yeah, Macon, Georgia. From Macon, Georgia, we went to Florida. And there they got orders, we probably got orders, to be opened up after we leave the United States. And the orders were: Italy.

MacDonald: So, were you flying by yourself, or were you flying with a group?

Peck: Oh, no, no—all alone. And our first stop was in San Juan, Puerto Rico. But we didn't stay there long. The next stop was Georgetown, British Guiana. That country has a different name now. The bombardier—I was in charge of insecticides for de-lousing the airplane every time we stopped.

And also I was given pigeons and shown how to take care of the pigeons and put a little note of latitude and longitude on their little leg capsule they had, and how to release them if we released them in the air.

MacDonald: And what was that for?

Peck: In case you go down, they want to know where you went. So every time we went to another station I got a new set of pigeons.

MacDonald: And you'd release them and fly them back to wherever they went?

Peck: The pigeons would fly—

MacDonald: Right, yeah.

Peck: But, you see, in order to do that—it was interesting. You take the pigeon and you can put that little, like a cigarette wrapper, in his leg capsule. And you put him in a paper bag and throw him out and let him fight his way out of the paper bag. If you threw him out without the paper bag, it would kill him.

MacDonald: Oh, is that right?

Peck: Oh, yeah, you'd blow him apart. You see, at least in the paper bag he slows up, and by the time he gets out he can fly.

MacDonald: Okay. Hmm.

Peck: But we went down to Fortaleza in Brazil from Georgetown, British Guiana. And at Fortaleza we got orders to go ahead and fly to Dakar, Africa. But a good portion out over the Atlantic, he had trouble with one of the propellers. So he turned back and went to Belem, Brazil, where they had more facilities for repair, and things of that nature. And we were there for—I don't know—maybe ten days, maybe a couple of weeks.

MacDonald: This was an American airbase, then?

Peck: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Now, it was either in Belem or Fortaleza, I forget, was a great big aerodrome, and on the top was the swastika, the German swastika, and the eagle and all that, because the Germans were there

before us. They built these huge air bases in South America. But we had a ball there in Belem, swimming and around town.

MacDonald: You said, “One of the propellers.” How many engines were on the B-24—four?

Peck: There was four engines. Yeah, four engines, each one of them with twelve hundred horsepower. So we had 4,800 horsepower.

But we went on to Dakar, and we didn’t get to town. We were always advised, “*Don’t go to town.*” And from Dakar we went to Marrakech, Morocco. Also advised, “*Don’t go to town.*”

But from Marrakech we went to Tunis in Tunisia. Now, there we had some time. We did have a chance to go into town. And everybody’s hanging all over us, and they’re telling us where we’re going and what we’re going to do. They seem to know more about it than we did. And they were trying to sell us everything. I even bought a couple of gold images of some kind.

[Break in recording]

Peck: —hanging around us all the time. From Tunis, we went on to where we were going to be stationed, and that was Chernoia [??], Italy. It’s somewhere kind of central, toward the south end of Italy. We had a nice ride. We enjoyed all those trips. They were fun—around Modena and all those things; very interesting.

MacDonald: Were you going to be assigned to a unit at that time, when you got into Italy?

Peck: Yes, yes. But I didn’t know. I didn’t know what, or anything. I knew nothing of what was going on.

So we landed, and it’s a big farmer’s field. And you’re flying off a steel mat laid on the ground—one runway. And we landed, and they gave us a place to tie down the airplane and a tent: “Go pick a spot.” And we were told, “Don’t pick a spot near the airplane, because if the Germans come strafing, they’re going to be strafing airplanes.”

Now, one thing that I found interesting: by that time it was the end of February, maybe the beginning of March. And we were in a field that was covered with poppies, red poppies, solid red. Like, we have dandelions up here; they had poppies down there. It felt a shame to walk on all those poppies to put a tent up.

Now, the officers, they have a tent. And the enlisted men, I don't know where they were. We were separated. Well then we had trouble with not enough tents. So then we did wind up with a tent that would hold eight people. That was two crews. And we had quite an enjoyable time there.

MacDonald: Now, was this a fairly big air base, then?

Peck: Oh, no. It was just a farmer's field.

MacDonald: Okay.

Peck: Yeah. Now, I'll tell you about that air base, airfield, not an air base at all. It was United States during the day. And the United States were flying B-24s out of there, only B-24s. And then at night, the British had a big compound on the other end, and they flew at night. And you could go to bed and then you'd hear, one at a time, the British would be taking off. They flew single at night. And they had a medium-sized bomber. And then toward morning you'd hear them coming back and landing. Then, from then on, then the Americans took over.

Now when you're assigned to go on a mission, you're up—oh, maybe four in the morning or something like that. You have to get all ready, and you have a light breakfast. Then you go to the Ready Room. In the Ready Room then they unveil where you're going.

MacDonald: Now, did all the officers—like the pilots and the navigator and the bombardier—go to the same meetings?

Peck: Yes, yes. And they show the route, the timing, and everything, the target. And you're totally prepared, dressed and everything. And when you leave the Ready Room, you're watched and escorted to your airplane. You can't talk to anybody. You can't go to the toilet. You're on the way.

Now, there's something that was different in World War II. I look at what's happening in the Army over there now. Everybody's walking around with a cell phone and a camera. We wouldn't dare be caught with a camera, and there were no cell phones. Your only contact home was by letter-writing.

And letter-writing, every letter had to be censored. And we officers used to take turns. You'd get a box of letters, and you would have to censor the letters and sign them off as being okay. Everything was quite restricted. Now, I don't know how much good that did, 'cause it seemed to me everybody knew where we were going anyway. But we didn't, only coming out of the Ready Room.

And from there we would take off, and they would be circling and assembling into your squadron. And then your squadron would eventually assemble with a group.

MacDonald: And roughly how many planes, could you tell us? Do you have an idea?

Peck: A squadron was normally twelve airplanes. Sometimes we only had ten. And the group would be four squadrons. And that's all I could see. You were lucky to see that many. For one thing, you don't see very much out of the nose of an airplane.

But after you take off—let me explain a little bit about a bombardier. There's a lead bombardier. He's the man that's really going to drop the bombs.

MacDonald: Is that on the first plane?

Peck: That's on the first plane. And he has a deputy lead in case something happens to the first. There's a deputy.

The other bombardiers, they have their sight all ready if they need it. And one of the reasons for that is, if you leave and you can't keep up with the outfit, and all of a sudden you're flying alone, they don't want you bringing bombs back home. So, you're allowed to take what they would call a "target of opportunity." They didn't want us to do that in Italy and Yugoslavia, but they said Germany was free rein: "Have at it."

MacDonald: A target of opportunity would be, like, a train or a bridge or industrial plant?

Peck: A train, a bridge, or right down the middle of town if you want. It's up to the pilot, who's really the captain of the trip. But, as far as the bombardier on an airplane: he, essentially, is in charge of the gunners. So before you even go to the Ready Room, you check the guns and the ammunition and see to them. You check the bombs to make sure that you're satisfied that they're racked properly. Most of our bombs were five-hundred-pound general-purpose bombs. We also dropped incendiaries sometimes.

The first bombers over a target would be general-purpose, and then followed up by incendiaries. And we had some pretty sneaky incendiaries, because the Germans were getting pretty sharp at putting out fires. So then we were dropping incendiaries where a certain number of the incendiary bombs were explosive. And that would discourage them from running in there with their buckets of sand and trying to put fires out.

We also dropped some anti-personnel bombs such as we dropped in back of Anzio from low level—Anzio was a beachhead by then. It occurred while I was there. And our first narrow bomb was, oh, maybe, four inches in diameter and maybe twenty inches long. It had a very long nose on it for the fuse, so that when it hit the ground it didn't try to bury. The shrapnel would be up at a level it could spread. And they hit more deadly in that way.

But most of our bombs were general-purpose, and a lot of our targets were railroad yards. There were some warehouses and some factories, but railroad yards were a very important thing for us.

But getting back to what a bombardier does: after he's satisfied and you're well under way—the bombs have a fuse in the nose and a fuse in the tail. And those fuses have a propeller on them and a cup. And that propeller is on a threaded shaft in the fuse. And that cup has two tabs sticking out of it. One tab has a cotter pin in it, and the legs are just slightly spread so you can pull them out. And the other tab takes a stiff wire that's attached to the bomb rack.

And when you're on the way, and you're not going to be going back for anything, you take those cotter pins out. But you don't throw them away. You keep them so that—what happens is, when the bomb is released, that wire on the rack, that comes out of the other tab, and the propeller spins off in the wind—and then there's some fly weights that go out too—but that cup then is removed, and that's gone. Then the nose in the fuse is exposed. And the next contact, it explodes.

Now, it's already been timed, whether it's contact, or a twenty-fifth of a second, you know, depending on target. It's already been done by the armorer group that loaded the airplane.

Now, if something happens that you're separated and you're gonna drop the bombs, for one thing, they didn't want us dropping them in the Tyrrhenian Sea or the Adriatic Sea, explosives, because people are fishing. You put the cotter pins back in.

And also the navigator, he has areas on every mission, he has areas where partisans would be on the ground in Yugoslavia. And we would drop the bombs, and you could drop them from four or five thousand feet and they wouldn't go off. And the story I have is that they would remove the fuses and set the bombs up on stone or brick and heat them, and melt the TNT out of them. Now, TNT is somewhat like brown sugar. And they would use that for making bombs of their own.

MacDonald: Now, how many bombs did you have to activate in a typical bomb load?

Peck: Well, my memory serves me kind of poorly, here. We could carry twenty, but sometimes I think we only had sixteen. But twenty was our full load. Now, in order to do all this, the catwalk between the bomb racks was only about nine inches wide.

[Break in recording][End of Tape 1, Side A]

MacDonald: —Tape one, Side B, and he's talking about the bomb bays on the B-24 bomber. Go on.

Peck: In order to get back to those bombs, you had very little space. So, in my case, I never wore one of those heavy fleece jackets. I had on a pair of underwear, and then I had pants. And then over that I had my flight suit, which was like a big, long jumper jacket with pockets and all that. And then I had a leather jacket on and then, of course, you had the Mae West. And then you had a parachute harness. You had all kinds of things on you.

And because of that, to go back through the bomb racks, I never took an oxygen bottle, and I never took a parachute—wouldn't fit. So I would be pretty quick. Now, if you're only at fourteen, fifteen thousand feet, there's no worry. When you get up around twenty thousand feet, though, it begins to get a little shaky. That's the one thing. If you're all relaxed, that's fine. But if you're nervous and sweating and working like that, you're a little more vulnerable for the lack of oxygen.

MacDonald: And what's the temperature at that height?

Peck: Well, the temperatures at twenty thousand feet—bombing altitude, average—would be, oh, somewhere between fifteen and thirty-five below zero. Now, there's a few factors in that "below zero." For one thing, you got to remember the air is thinner. So I don't think the cold penetrates like it would be at thirty below zero on the ground.

But thin air does a lot too—even the sound is different. Even your earphones, you don't hear as good at twenty thousand feet as you do at five thousand feet. But that thin air, that is something. At eighteen thousand feet, the air pressure is approximately one-half of what it is at sea level. And at thirty-eight thousand feet, it's about one-fifth.

We never went up thirty-eight thousand feet, but that would mean that, if you're at thirty-eight thousand feet, in order to have the proper oxygen level in your blood, you would have to be breathing pure oxygen. Now, our oxygen supplies had a barometric control on them so that we always got the amount of oxygen that we needed for the altitude that we flew at.

MacDonald: So at fifteen thousand feet, when you were doing this and you weren't on oxygen, that was—

Peck: Yeah. You're pretty safe at fifteen thousand, yet, yeah. When you start getting to twenty thousand, twenty-one thousand, everything is scrambling and everybody's nervous and tense, you know. That's a little more trying on you. So I always was in a pretty good hurry to get back up to the nose.

Now, there are some oxygen outlets that you could hook into, but I would rather just hurry up to the nose. Now, to get to the nose, you're crawling through a pretty small tunnel. That's another thing. You can't be walking around with a lot of clothes or a chute. The chute is a chest chute. It's smaller than a watermelon, but bigger than a loaf of bread. But it's a very small chute, really. And it just clips onto your harness and it's on your chest.

MacDonald: Okay. Now, I got to ask you this: did you ever practice jumping, parachuting before you flew?

Peck: Oh, no. The first jump has to be perfect. When are you going to practice?
[Laughs]

MacDonald: [Laughs] Okay. It better work.

Peck: Yeah. And then, as far as in flight, if somebody had a television camera on me, they'd probably laugh and wonder, "What kind of guys have we got flying in these airplanes?" Because we could get what they call flak suits, and it was like a armor-vested thing—back and front. It was made out of all little shingles of steel.

I never used one of those. But I took them, and I would lay them on the floor where I'd be kneeling by the bomb site area. And alongside of me was two great big canisters of 50-caliber ammunition with the projectile facing out. And I had a GI helmet, a regular soldier's helmet, with great big portions cut out so I could put it on over my earphones. So, if they were to see me kneeling in that thing, riding between the ammunition with a GI helmet on, that does not look like a gung-ho aviation flyer.

But we weren't cowards; we were cautious. Now, as you flew along—you wonder about the pads on the floor—as you fly along and you're looking at flak, you're always in hopes that you're going to see flak be a little high of you. Level is bad. But when an anti-aircraft shell bursts, the shrapnel from it goes up in somewhat of an inverted mushroom. And so if you're looking forward and you see the flak hits are coming a little under your altitude, you might have a lot of trouble, because those are the guys that are going to get you. And, of course, the shell doesn't come up straight.

It's always on the slant. But you're always a little safer if they're aiming and they're bursting above you.

MacDonald: You could see that for quite some—when you were going into it, correct?

Peck: Oh, you bet. Yeah.

MacDonald: Somehow the Germans had your altitude figured out ahead of time.

Peck: Oh, sure. They had very fine equipment. You see, the first groups that would go over, they wouldn't see that—but as you follow, you see when they show pictures of all these black bursts in the sky, they look scattered. But when you're flying, you're looking at them edgewise. So, yeah, they were real concentrated then, because you're not looking from up or down. You're looking straight at the level that these guys are shooting at you from.

MacDonald: Uh-huh.

Peck: But in the nose, the bombardier sets up what they call an intervalometer on his instruments up there. He has all the instruments that the pilot does. But as I wasn't going to be sighting on many of the targets, that intervalometer sets off the timing between each release. And that spaces the bombs on the ground. And every time another bomb goes out a red light goes off, so the bombardier, he can tell whether all the bombs went out.

However, once you're off the targets, it's up to him to go back and look and see if one of them is hung up. But that's about the way a mission would go. Some missions were milk runs. Some of them were tough.

MacDonald: Did you ever have fighter escorts on any of your missions?

Peck: We had fighter escorts, to the best of my knowledge, on *all* of them. Usually P-51s on the way out and P-38s at the target and P-51s back. But I really didn't see a lot of them, because they're not flying with us. They're flying in the area and usually higher than us, because if they're higher they can pick up speed.

Now, the German Air Force was lacking in airplanes and fuel. So we really didn't have too much trouble with fighters. We had a few skirmishes. We had shots at them, but we didn't shoot anybody down.

We did pick up some holes one time, but nothing happened. These guys were shooting some pretty heavy equipment, too. What we saw were ME-109s. That was the German equivalent, you might say, to the P-51.

But on these missions, when you got back—like I say, some of them were milk runs. I remember even once we bombed a truck terminal and storage buildings in northern Italy. There was not a shot fired, nothing. We had some of those.

MacDonald: Could you just describe what a ‘milk run’ is for us, what you call a ‘milk run’?

Peck: Well, a milk run was where there was very little defense, not many guns.

But as you got into the northern targets, what was happening was, as Germany was withdrawing from Italy, they took the guns with them. So when you got farther north, they had more guns.

One raid was against Wiener Neustadt. That might translate to something different. It was right outside of Vienna, and that was an aircraft assembly plant. And that was a *fierce* raid, very, very bad one. And that one we got a Presidential Citation on, which was a blue ribbon with a kind of a gold rim around it.

MacDonald: Was that because of the danger of the raid?

Peck: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was a bad one. We had a bunch of holes, and some were missing. That Vienna was a bad, bad target.

But, there was guns spotted all over. Like, if we went over Yugoslavia, it would have guns that you didn’t expect. You weren’t at a good altitude yet and, all of a sudden, there’d be flak. Then you went for the guns, and they would move them around. They would kind of figure out what would your course be coming off of Italy. And they would place these guns, and then they would move them. And they were pretty ‘cute at that, because you wanted a good altitude to stay away from them. But, I don’t know what to say more about the actual missions.

MacDonald: How long a flight—from the time you got up at four o’clock in the morning, and then you had your Ready Room and you went out—approximately how long was a typical flight?

Peck: From four to seven hours. Now a B-24, it had these four engines. Each engine consumed sixty gallons of gas per hour. So at normal cruising, if everything’s fine, we’re burning 240 gallons of gas an hour. Now, to the best of my knowledge, our airplane carried 2,700 gallons. So that meant, if you had a ten-hour mission, some guys might not make it back. There was alternate landing places for them to land. But, ten hours was the very maximum. And some of those going up into southern France, those were just about ten-hour missions.

When you got back from the mission, you're hot, very hot, because you're dressed with all that stuff. And the Red Cross, bless their hearts, would be there with coffee: "Who wants a cup of hot coffee?" Then, you're still shaking, and the Army is there with big shots of bourbon or whiskey. We would take that. And then they would check everybody out that's there. And then you could go back to your tent and lay down and relax.

Then later on there would be discussions of the mission, how it went, who missed, who hit, and all that. Now that was mostly for the pilot and, of course, the lead and deputy bombardier. The other bombardiers, if they didn't have the actual sighting and dropping, they could skip those mission discussions. And some of those, I imagine, could be pretty wild, because they didn't allow many misses.

MacDonald: How often did you fly, then, on the missions? How often did they rotate you up?

Peck: Well, that always depended. I forget what it was. We flew quite a few missions, I think it was five or six consecutive, which was too much. Yeah, it was too much. You couldn't hardly handle that.

MacDonald: Put lots of stress on you.

Peck: Yeah, that was real tough. But, normally, you had a few days between each one. There was enough planes and crews to do that.

Now, Ploiesti [Romania] was a prime target. That was oil refineries. That was one of the major suppliers of fuel for Germany. And Ploiesti had been hit from Africa, and that was a very famous raid where so many planes went down, and everybody was bungled up. The navigation was wrong; the security was wrong. And they flew at low level, and they were flying into smoke and everything else. That was a disaster. And that virtually obliterated that Air Force out of Africa.

And then it was let alone until the 15th in Italy could take over. And I was on, if not the first, very close to the first one after that, over Ploiesti. And it was one of the toughest targets in Europe. Well, I went over Ploiesti four times, always Ploiesti. I don't know why, but every time it was Ploiesti, I was called.

But, before we got there, we were way up in Germany somewhere with our regular crew. And we didn't get home. And we went down somewhere there in northern Yugoslavia. But we scattered, and before hardly any time at all we were picked up by Tito's Partisans.

MacDonald: Well, when you mean you went down, did you have to bail out?

Peck: No—crash landed.

MacDonald: You crashed it.

Peck: And nobody was hurt.

MacDonald: Oh, so you must have landed in a field of some sort, then.

Peck: We did hit a tree. But we were picked up by Tito's Partisans and taken to Vis Island. Vis Island was kind of a tourist resort in the northern Adriatic. It seemed that there was a collection of airmen there, and there was a landing strip.

Now, on Vis Island, there wasn't much water. The water was watershed from concrete sides on some slopes there and reservoirs for the water. But there was plenty of wine and champagne. I was drunk all the time I was there, and so was the rest of the crew.

But on that Vis Island, Tito's had boats probably twenty feet long, maybe a little longer, with outboard motors. And they would pull night raids, because they would point across the water and say, "That's where the Germans are" and "That's where the Germans are." And in those days there was two people in power in Yugoslavia, Tito and Mihailovic. And we were under Tito's—you might say—umbrella.

But we were flown back to our base in Italy, and I thought, "Good. We're going to go back to the States and sell war bonds." Not so. We were sent to Capri Island.

MacDonald: How long did you stay on the island there? How long was it before they picked you up?

Peck: I don't know. Probably about five days, four or five days—wasn't long.

MacDonald: Oh, okay.

Peck: But then we went to Capri, Island of Capri—had a nice truck ride through Italy to get to Naples, in Naples a hotel for a couple of days, then Capri for—it must've been about ten days. And Capri was very tightly controlled. Only the people that were there or had business could be there. There was no prostitution, no guys hustling, nobody looking for information, and it was all very tightly controlled. And it had been used for the same purpose by the Germans before we were there. Because when

we got there, in the trinket shops they still had German souvenirs that the Germans were buying.

And that was a beautiful stay on Capri. Gracie Fields had a big estate down on the waterfront. And we could use that all we wanted—not in the house, but on her property. We had kayaks and swimming and all that. This was in summer.

So after that was over, it was back to the home base. And I was only there a couple of days and the operation officer, a captain, came to me and said, “Joe, we have a crew with a bombardier sick. How would you like to take his place?” I said, “Well, it would be all right.” He said, “It’s a milk run. It’s all right.” I said, “All right, I’ll take it.”

MacDonald: Can you explain? How often did that occur where other people were on different crews, because you basically kept your crew together all the time.

Peck: Oh, yeah.

MacDonald: So did that happen very often that a sick person—yeah?

Peck: Oh, yeah. I’ve even heard some people were buying off: “You take my place and I’ll give you so much money.” But this was illegal. If a man’s sick, somebody’s got to go. So he said, “This is no problem.” Well, I got in the Ready Room. It wasn’t a milk run. It was *Ploiesti* again!

So, we took off there again. I was way off from the lead. I didn’t worry about it. And it turned out that what we were supposed to do was hit a place called Campina. We were supposed to pass Ploiesti but not drop, and then bomb Campina, where they were setting up another refinery. See, they did everything possible to protect those refineries. They even set up dummy refineries to fool the bombardiers.

We got hit awfully hard, super hard. We didn’t know what was going on. We did get the bombs out, but we were badly damaged. And on the way back, I went back to see what-all happened in the back end of that airplane, and there was two out on the floor. So with help I got them laying on the side and put on the full oxygen. And I think it would be the tail gunner and one of the waists. I didn’t know. ‘Cause the tail gunner in the lower Sperry ball, and the two waist gunners were all back there.

So I didn’t stick around long. We were in trouble. Then I zipped through the catwalk and through the tunnel back up—didn’t have a parachute or anything with me. And one engine was out, and another one was running

poorly. So we were all alone. We couldn't stay with the group, with the squadron. They disappeared.

And I kept waiting for an order from the pilot to say, "Unload all the weight." Well, you can do that by dropping all the machine guns, dropping all the ammunition canisters, anything that's loose in the airplane. Even a pair of binoculars, throw them out. Everything goes out.

MacDonald: Could the B-24 fly with two engines?

Peck: Yes, uh-huh—poorly. You couldn't keep up with the group. But I never heard anything from the pilot, so we kept struggling on. And then all of a sudden—fire. Now we're on fire. So I look out and the fire is on the left wing. But you don't see fire when you're on fire. You see deterioration of the wing and a trail in back of it. After all, your speed indicator might show 160, but that's air speed. Your true air speed might be 180, maybe 200 mile an hour. So shortly after that the claxon horn went off. Now a claxon horn is a very loud horn, and it says, "Everybody out."

MacDonald: Now, does that go off automatically when something's wrong?

Peck: On, no. The pilot hits that: "Everybody out. You're on your own."

So I pulled a ring in a cable, or whatever it was, and the nose-wheel doors dropped open.

MacDonald: In the nose of the plane, now, there's an escape—?

Peck: Yeah, the nose-wheel is right in back of the level where the bombardier is kneeling. So, I got the nose gunner—he was out of the turret anyway; nobody was in the turret at a time like that; you don't want to do that. So, you have a strategy. The nose-grille opening is rectangular, and you can straddle it with your feet and your hands.

So I kind of motioned to the nose gunner what to do, but he already knew. You straddle it with your feet and your hands, and then when you're ready, you roll your hands up on your chest and you roll out head first that way. And then that way you're not going to get hit. If you tried to jump out of it, you might get halfway out and, going two hundred mile an hour, you might not make it all the way out the hole. This has always been a big danger in bailing out. So these people, sometimes they bail out and they get hit by the tail and they get killed. But I got out all right. Never saw anybody else, never saw another parachute, never saw the airplane.

Now, they say that they're supposed to drop to, maybe, a thousand/fifteen hundred feet before you open the chute. But what happens is, you leave

the airplane, maybe you're going the speed of the airplane, but you slow down. You're tumbling, but you slow down. The initial speed of a dropping body is about 120 miles an hour.

And you'll begin to stabilize, and you can—with your arms you can hold one arm out and you can roll over and look down at the ground. Then you can put both arms out, and you stabilize yourself. Your chute is sitting there on your chest, so this old cat isn't going to look for a thousand feet. I pulled that cord at maybe four or five thousand feet.

MacDonald: Can you tell us what your estimate—when you jumped out, how many feet was the plane up at that time?

Peck: I think we were seventeen or eighteen thousand feet. We were still holding pretty good altitude. And I'm sure the pilot was doing all he could so that he could squeeze it out and get back home. For awhile everybody was getting relaxed. We thought we were going home. I didn't know the crew, didn't know a soul.

But, my chute opened up with a bang, and it's a small chute. But I was swinging violently, which is not uncommon. And then, as I'm coming down, I hear gunfire from the ground. See, everything's silent up there; all you hear is air going past you. I was beginning to get a little nauseated. So I took off my oxygen mask and threw it away. And I had nothing on my head, which was a mistake to do. At any rate, now the time has gone by, or even after I got on the ground—they weren't shooting at me; they were letting me know they were there.

And I finally looked down, and there was trees. So, when I hit, I hit trees, big trees. And I hit awfully hard because, for one thing, you're not coming straight down. You're going down with the wind, so you're hitting the trees on an angle. And I hit them awfully hard, and they were big, and my chute was still pretty much up in the trees. I wasn't even quite on the ground.

So I had to slip out of the chute, unclip, and then get to the ground. And my left leg was sore. Now, I don't know—one leg strap on my harness was not fastened. That was my fault. It was either that or I hit the trees.

MacDonald: What was your thought when you jumped out of the plane? What was going through your mind?

Peck: My thoughts: "Is this thing going to work?" What else could I think? I was scared stiff. I couldn't believe it.

But that's when things started getting sticky. I got down on the ground and I could hear jabbering all around. I didn't go, I don't think I went, fifty feet on the ground. Then pretty soon a couple of dogs came, and they were friendly. They were wagging their tails, and everything. And, one at a time, about a dozen guys popped out into visibility, and they all had rifles. And they were pointing at me; and I'm holding my hands up, you know, like, innocent as a newborn babe.

And then they start motioning to me: "Take off your parachute harness." "Take off your Mae West and throw it to them." They never got closer to me than maybe eighteen feet. Throw it to 'em. Then: "Take off your shoes." Took them off, threw them to them. "Take off your jumper"—and then your jacket and then your shirt and then your pants, and then your shorts and your T-shirt, until I'm stark naked—not a stitch on me.

[Break in recording][Tape 1, Side B ends]

MacDonald: Listening to Joe Peck, and he's explaining now when his plane went down and he parachuted, and he was being captured. Go on.

Peck: Well, it's surprising how fast your heart can beat and how weak and trembly you can get, because I didn't know what was coming. I certainly wasn't thinking of mother, Jesus, or God. I was keeping an eye on these guys, but I was having difficulty doing it.

But then they started laughing and chattering, pointing at me. And I felt a little bit better. And I still didn't know what was going on. And they put down their rifles, but they were still there and handy. And then they took the laces out of my shoes and threw my shoes back to me. Then that was a very good sight for me.

I was still trembling, nervous. But then they took the belt out of that pair of pants, and they threw my pants to me, and they threw my shirt to me. And then everybody was kind of relaxed, and I was beginning to come back to being a human being again.

They had a lot of trouble getting my chute out of the trees, but they got that down and they bundled everything up all together. And then we started walking. No problem: you can't walk very far or do much with a pair of loose shoes with no shoelaces and almost no clothes. So they weren't afraid of me.

MacDonald: What time of year was this?

Peck: This was August ninth. I don't know how far we walked. It couldn't have been more than two miles, maybe three miles. We came to somewhat of a

clearing. In that clearing there was posts and cloth covering it, a shelter over the ground. None of these guys had any shoes. They were very ragged. Their feet were bound with rags, and they carried sticks and rifles and ammunition. I had guessed that the rifles were Italian, because they had a small-caliber bore, and the ammunition, the bullets, had the long bullet in the cartridge.

But, at any rate, we got there, and they tied my hands up in back of me, which was very uncomfortable. And they sat down, and then they— language barrier. Everybody's talking. I was thirsty; I was hungry. They didn't give me anything, but eventually they did. And they untied me, and I could sit there. But they always kept an eye on me.

I never saw a female. I never saw a kid. I saw a few goats, but that was it. And, as time has gone by, it turns out that they were Moslems, and I was told by somebody that they had come up from Greece and were up into Yugoslavia there. But I was introduced to what you would call pizza. In the evening, the men would sit around and they brought in on a big—I wouldn't call it a platter, but it was like a table top. And it was a big irregular-shaped thing. But it would look like you would expect pizza to look. You broke off a piece and ate it by hand—no utensils, no anything like that. Unfortunately, no water again.

And the guys, they all laughed and they all chattered, and everything like that. And when it was over they had tobacco and cigarette papers, not too much different from our Rexall papers here. And they gave me a paper and some tobacco. I was a smoker then, of course. And I lit it up, and it was so strong it took tears to my eyes. And these guys, they got the biggest kick out of that. They laughed and laughed at me trying to smoke that darn cigarette.

They treated me very good. There was a pit for defecation with a post—not to sit on, just so you didn't fall in the pit. And things like that I remember, but not much. I do remember one of them was talking to me, and he was trying to talk, and he was saying, "President, president," or something like that. And I told him, I said, "Yeah. President Franklin Roosevelt. United States of America." And he banged me with his hand, not a fist, but a hand. His hand was about as soft as a cast iron skillet. And I rolled back on the ground, and I decided, "I ain't going to say anything anymore. Silence." But later on I figured out he was probably trying to say, "Prisoner." And he didn't talk right, and I didn't hear right.

But that went on for several days. Then back to walking again. They got the big bundle with them. And we got to another clearing, and there was—if I remember right—not a truck, but a big car with Germans. And they had short pants on, like shorts. And on their hat was a little flower. But

they were Germans. And then a lot of haggling with these people who captured me; then they gave them some money, and I was sold to the Germans.

So they took me to an office there where there was German officers, men, and everything. And they showed me my dog tags and wanted me to verify that that was me, those were my dog tags. And then they gave me my clothes back, the clothes that I could wear. They give me those. And I wanted my wristwatch. “Oh, no.” That’s—nothing like that. And they took any insignia off that I had, which was all right. I didn’t care about that anyway. And then I was put in a military barracks, and I had a room by myself, my cot. I slept very comfortably and sound.

MacDonald: And there was no other—just the Germans there. You weren’t aware of anybody else?

Peck: I didn’t see any other American, just me. And that lasted for another, I suppose, four or five days. I was treated very nice, but ignored. Nobody tried to contact me or anything like that. In that office, nobody talked English.

MacDonald: Did they feed you?

Peck: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. I can’t even remember what, but I was fed. And then—again, I don’t know if it was a car or truck—then I was taken to a jail, and that was in Pristina. Pristina now is Kosovo, but in those days everything was Yugoslavia. And that jail was not bad, but not good, and there was a bunch of other Americans.

And then, I don’t know how we got there, but then I was moved again to Skopje, and that’s in Macedonia. That jail was very bad, filthy. And I was put in a cell with a pilot, a firing pilot, I forget what. And I asked him, “What’s going on with all these blood spots on the wall?” He said, “Well, you’ll find out.”

The cell was bare. We had two buckets, one for defecation and one for water—no blankets, no nothing. And at nighttime, he said, and we saw, the bedbugs come out at night. You bang your shoes against them on the wall. And some of these people are sensitive to bedbugs. I am not, but this guy he had welts on him from where he had these bedbugs. The bedbugs, when you squash them they have kind of a stink. Kind of smells a little bit like strawberries, maybe. But that place was total filth.

I was there for—I don’t know—maybe a week. And then a group of us were taken to a railroad station, and we were put on a train with guards. It was a regular train—women, children, and everything on this train. We

quickly learned the word, “Setzen—Sit!” And there was guards on the train with us. We traveled some distance on the train, I don’t know how far. And then we were transferred to another train into a boxcar. Every time we transferred, there was a collection of more soldiers. By that time, I was getting sick, real sick. Well, that train went on through—I guess it was Yugoslavia, or somewhere. Then we were hitched up to another train, and that was electric and went *very* fast. And that was in Hungary. And we wound up in Budapest.

By that time, I was getting weaker and sicker with dysentery, very bad dysentery. And in Budapest, we got in the truck, and the guy there, the guard, he gave us the tour and he explained Pest and Buda and all that stuff. And the railroad station was a huge railroad station—structural steel, like, but you could see where it had been bomb-hit.

But then that was a huge penitentiary. The only name that I can remember that I saw there—spelled out, it looked like Hazusbalia [sp??]. But there I had a single cell, a very small one, with a high window. And I don’t know how long I was there.

But that’s the only person that really hit me. Airplanes were going over, and I hung up on some bars to where I could look out the window. And the guard came, and he came in the cell. And he jabbered at me, and I jabbered back. And he hit me with a little leather pouch about the size of a deck of cards. In there, I don’t know, could have been lead shot or something. And that really hurt, and I went to the ground. They always said, “If that happens, hit the ground. Don’t do anything.”

They fed us there. Prison inmates took care of the cleaning and the feeding. And the prison inmates would take you to the latrine and back.

Then I was put in an office with a German officer. He gave me a cigarette, talked real nice to me, asked me if I’d ever personally met Colonel Twining. I says, “Never heard of him.” Then he says, “Well, you were over Ploiesti.” I said nothing. He says, he reaffirmed my serial number, my dog tags. Oddly enough, he knew my mother lived in Iowa. So he had a whole dossier on me before I even got there. He was sharp.

And then I just said, “You know, I’m just a little boy. I don’t know anything. You got to talk to somebody better than me.” And then he kind of lost his patience. He took the cigarette back and sent me on my way.

MacDonald: Did you ever find out how they knew?

Peck: I have no idea. I have no idea. They apparently had their listing of personnel of some kind. But, from there, back on another train—very crowded, and that rumbled on for quite a while.

MacDonald: Did you regain your health a little bit?

Peck: No, I did not. It got worse. When we finally got off the train, it was dark night, and I fell unconscious. And the next time I was conscious, I was in a somewhat of a makeshift infirmary at Stalag Luft Three at Sagan. Now, Stalag Luft Three is that prison camp that was so famous for that—big escape was made and all those, you know Steve McQueen and all that.

MacDonald: The Great Escape.

Peck: Just lately, PBI had a series on excavating those tunnels. PBI said fifty men escaped. When I was there, they said it was only forty-seven. But only three of them ever got out, and the rest of them were collected around the country. They were scattered and, as they collected them, they executed half of them and sent the other half back to say, “Don’t do that again.”

So that was quite a bit before I got there, and that was usually out of the British compound. I think there was only one American in there. But when I got there, things were pretty strict. That was not going to happen again. For example, in your bed, you could never have more than five bed boards. And the examinations were always very strict in the prison camp.

But when I got better, I was assigned [??] to a room and a barracks and sat down with the guy. And he said, “Hey, do you want something to eat?” I said, “No, I don’t want to eat anything.” They couldn’t understand that. How come I’m not hungry? Man, I was sick! But, slowly, I did get better, but I really didn’t get over it.

But life in the prison camp was really not bad. You were deprived of food that you would want, you were deprived of bath facilities. Finally, I had a roll of toilet paper. I found out during these travels that toilet paper is one of the most important things in life. I was even given a toothbrush and a Gillette razor—you know the old-fashioned with the flat blade? And things were getting to look up.

MacDonald: Now, did they separate you from the enlisted men?

Peck: Oh, yes. They were all officers, and they were all flying officers. Stalag Luft was a prison—air prison—and that was quite a famous camp. Prison life there was not all agony. We laughed, we joked, we played cards. This,

compared to what I hear about the Oriental camps, was like a picnic in the park.

And we had a library, and we could check out books. We were expected to get that book read in just two or three days, you know. But it was really a big, big help, those books.

MacDonald: Uh-huh. Now, did the Germans provide all that?

Peck: Oh, no. Now, I don't know how true it is, but I had heard that those books were provided by the YMCA. If that's the case, we owe them a debt of gratitude for that.

Now, the Germans did provide us with food and water, a minimum amount. And in the room there was a stove that you could cook on, and you would get a certain amount of coal. There were like briquettes, only about half the size of a brick, and each room would have a certain amount. And you had Red Cross packages, not to individuals but to a room. Each one of them weighed eleven pounds. And in there was a quarter of margarine, chocolate, powdered milk, a small pack of cigarettes, and crackers and raisins. Raisins was another one, because I remember that the guys were trying to brew whiskey out of the raisins, and things like that.

And I learned how to play bridge, and you kind of team up with a partner. I teamed up with a very close partner, and we memorized each other's home address and the name of the parents in case anything happened, if somebody didn't survive.

But, like I say, it was a matter of deprivation. At night, everything was shut down, and they released dogs into the camp so nobody can leave the barracks at night.

MacDonald: They let them run throughout the camp.

Peck: The dogs? Oh, yeah.

MacDonald: They weren't, like, within a fenced—you know?

Peck: Oh, no. They're walking around the camp. They're trained to walk around.

MacDonald: Like a German shepherd, or—?

Peck: Doberman pinscher, yeah. And during the day, they have the Germans walking around. They were called "ferrets." They were peeking around at everything, under the barracks and around the barracks and around corners and in the latrine, which was—the latrine was a great big pit, very well

equipped. Every now and then a honey wagon would come in and empty it out and haul it away.

But the ferrets, sometimes they would talk to them. They weren't allowed to talk German. We weren't allowed to learn German language so, anybody came in, they had to talk English.

Now, on the perimeter, there was a wire maybe twenty feet from the fence and the curled barbed wire. And that wire was maybe only a foot off the ground. And they had these guard boxes all around, and they had various types of armament in there—machine gun, rifle, rubber bullets. But if you stepped over that wire, you were vulnerable for gunfire. You didn't get to any fence, or anything like that. That's out.

So people were very critical. If a ball goes over that wire, you don't go get it. Arrangements have to be made with one of the ferrets or through maybe your commanding officer. We had a commanding officer. I never met him. His name was Colonel Goodrich.

But we were instructed: we had to be clean; we had to behave. We had a certain amount of vermin in there, and they tried to delouse that every now and then. But the main thing is you're always thinking of food. Guys talked about food more than they talked about girls. They wanted food—boy, a malted milk or a steak or anything like that.

And the days were long. You did a lot of walking as long as you could do that. But then winter came, and things got tougher, colder all the time.

MacDonald: Did they provide you with any winter clothing?

Peck: Well, no, you had your regular clothing, and you did have winter clothing. I was fortunate. I got a French overcoat, and the French overcoats were real long, and you used that for your bedclothes and you slept in the same clothes that you lived in. Once in a while you could rinse out your shorts and T-shirts, but very limited. I can only remember taking a shower once. That was very limited. There was a wash room, though.

But that winter things were getting tougher all the time. The nights were very long up there, because that camp was about fifty kilometers southeast of Berlin, and that would—the latitude that would be like in the southern Hudson Bay over here. The sun came up very low. And past our camp were pine trees, and the sun barely came above those pine trees during a winter.

And so, winter bore on though. People get a little edgy. But shortly after Christmas, they came in and said, "Everybody out. Grab your blanket.

Grab whatever food you can carry, and line up out.” And we had been hearing the guns of Russia and Germany for several days, and we thought we were going to be liberated. This was on the Oder River in the east. There’s two Oder rivers. This was the Oder River in the east.

So then we walked and we walked and we walked. And we were escorted with old men. They called them the ‘Volkssturm.’ It’s the old man’s army, or something like that. But they were in uniform, and they brought the dogs with them. The dogs didn’t bother us. The dogs had a hard time, as we did.

A lot of snow, bitter cold—I remember one time we had the privilege of walking through a glass factory just to warm up. I can remember sleeping alongside the road with my partner. We took turns with the blankets. I remember sleeping in a farmer’s barn covered with straw. We were still cold, even though there was some cows in the barn. You’re always cold.

And this Volkssturm, some of them, on their belt buckle it said, “Gott mit uns.” That told me a little something about religion [laughs].

MacDonald: And what did that mean?

Peck: “God’s with us.” That was an eye-opener.

But at any rate, we finally got to a train, another black train. And we were taken down through a town, Moosburg north of Munich somewhere. And from there we walked again to a huge camp. I think that was called the Stalager VII-A [seven-A]. Everybody was there. There was so many there that I didn’t even get in a barracks for awhile.

And my feet were all blistered and swollen from frostbite from walking, you know, same shoes, same socks, everything. But finally I did get in a barracks. But in that camp we had Russians, we had every country. It was all packed. I don’t know how many thousands. There must have been twenty or thirty thousand in there. Food, of course, was very minimal.

But Patton was on the run at that time. And, as a matter of fact, Patton did come in with his entourage. And everybody outside the barracks was cussing him and calling him all kinds of dirty names. And he left with a few of his own, with his entourage, and they left.

We were in hopes that Munich would surrender, but there was no surrender. And then at one in the morning the tanks and the Infantry come floating through. And some of them even came through the camp. And as the Infantry was marching, we were without food then. As the Infantry marched by, we were standing at the fence hollering, “Hey, how about a

K?”—K-ration. Once in a while they’d throw a K-ration over, and there’d be a big scramble, who could get it, you know. And that was really fierce.

And my partner, my bridge partner—who is dead now—was fortunate to get into the headquarters there. And he got my original prison record and identification for me and him too. They raided everything. You know, the Germans were long gone, but wherever there was a German guard, there was a GI guard. *Nobody* was to get out of that camp.

MacDonald: Well, why was that? Do you have any idea why they did that?

Peck: Sure. You turn twenty or thirty thousand people of every nationality out, it would stop up the whole military operation. He had to move men and equipment. He didn’t want to be bogged down for that.

So, we put up with that for—I don’t know—four or five days, not any longer than that. But when the shooting started, everybody was down on the floor and hiding in back of this and that, because it was an awful lot of shooting going on.

But from there we finally were bunched into groups and taken up to Regensburg, which was a huge German airfield. At Regensburg they had beautiful three-story, maybe four-story, quarters, but we weren’t allowed in them because they hadn’t been inspected for booby traps. So we had to just do what we could on the grounds. We tore shutters off and doors out, things like that, had big bonfires. We waited there for we didn’t know what.

After a few days—oh, when we were there it was interesting that, every now and then, a German airplane would come in and surrender. Some of them even had wife and kids with them.

MacDonald: Oh, really?

Peck: The war was over, and they were surrendering. And we, roaming through the aerodrome, we would go through and they had airplane engines and all that. And the machines and engines, they were all smashed as far as a guy could smash, you know—crank cases and cylinders were all beat up apparently with sledge hammers and all that. So they smashed whatever they could when they left.

[Break in recording][Tape 2, Side A ends]

MacDonald: —about his liberation out of a German airstrip at this time.

Peck: At Regensburg there, the landing strips were all clear and everything. And this DC-3 picked us up. There must have been maybe twenty in that DC-3. It really wasn't equipped for carrying passengers. And the pilots, they were jovial. They even flew us around the Eiffel Tower and all that. And I remember he threw a couple of oranges back, and he wouldn't believe the scramble that went on to get those oranges.

But we landed at a field near Le Havre, France. And we were put in a place called Lucky Strike, Lucky Strike Camp. Now, at Lucky Strike they took away all our clothes. We went through a line to de-louse us. We were lousy. And they did a lot of shaving—armpits, hair was short, even pubic hair. I don't know if they did that to everybody. But they did it to my group. And then we were given a minimum amount of clothes to wear.

And while we were there, we had a regimen of eating. Food was very bland, no seasoning, and you could only eat what they gave you. And then in the afternoon they would give you, like, an eggnog or something like that so we could get used to eating again.

MacDonald: Okay.

Peck: I still had dysentery, but it was getting better. We went through that, and then we got even more clothes. And then we were given a hundred dollars, you know, against our pay. Pay went on all the time. I see, as far as the pay, with my mother as a dependent—I allocated almost all of my pay to her. People did that, because if they were killed or shot down that pay continued until you were verified. So I had a very minimal amount of pay.

But at any rate, we got a hundred dollars on that, and some guys that were fit were allowed to take a pass to go to—they called it “U.K.”—England. And then others were put on a ship, and they and my bride partner were put on a ship. It was a C-2 freighter—it was a Santa Barbara—and I think it was the Grace Line. And we had a real fine cabin, everything stainless steel, comfortable. And the hold in the ship was equipped for taking German prisoners to the States, but instead it took liberated enlisted men.

Well, me and my partner, we ate with the officers. And there was a limited amount of water on there. And I remember there was a kind of a little commissary there, and I bought a Baby Ruth bar. And I said, “How many of these can I buy?” “As many as you want.” I said, “Well, I'll take the whole box.” I got deathly sick on Baby Ruth bars.

But that was a North Atlantic crossing—that would be in June. And some of the weather was rough. There was even a day of solid fog; it was interesting how they handled fog. And then the ship was blacked out at

night, because there's submarines that were not accounted for. The Navy men still went through their deck gun practices and everything.

But during the day, we could wander around a certain amount. There wasn't too much deck work on that kind of a freighter. But we got to New York. It took a long trip, because we were in convoy, and they weren't all fast. We saw one tanker that still had airplanes strapped onto its deck. They'd taken hold of them and were bringing them back, no more use for them. We got into the harbor and, gee, the fire boats were squirting water and everything, you know, "Welcome home."

MacDonald: And where was this, New York?

Peck: New York. And they dropped us off at Staten Island. There again, we were under guard, and we were taken to, if I remember right, it was Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. And then New Jersey, and they went through a lot of paperwork and examination, to see who was who—if there was any Germans that came along with us—it was important to them. And there, again, we had the opportunity of getting more clothing. We were getting back to normal. And we had a new set of dog tags.

And I was to be sent to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, and I was put on a troop train. And then they put me in charge of one coach of the troop train with guys. That was all right, except we got to St. Louis and we all got off the train, and walking through St. Louis, I was petrified. I couldn't handle the traffic. I was scared to death of cars and traffic or anything moving. And I was in bad shape. So I got to Fort Leonard Wood, and they said I could go home for thirty days and then report to Miami Beach.

I went home, but I couldn't stay long. And I went to a naval air base in Ottumwa, Iowa, and got transportation to Miami Beach. I reported in Miami Beach, where my orders told me, and they put me in a beachfront hotel. It was the Caribbean Hotel. The next day a doctor examined me, and he said, "You can't stay here." And then I was put in a hospital in Coral Gables. Now, it was a big hotel, and I think it was called the Biltmore, in Coral Gables. And I stayed there for, oh, quite a while.

The war in Japan ended. And then finally they had me fairly stabilized, mentally as well. And they let me go to town a couple of times. And then they came through with a note, "Does anybody want to leave the service?" And I said, "Yes." So then they gave me orders, and that sent me to Fort McClellan, I think it was Anniston, Alabama—interesting place. And they counted up all the medals and points and all that, and I had plenty of points for discharge. And I took the discharge.

MacDonald: And what was your rank at that time?

Peck: First Lieutenant.

MacDonald: Okay. How many missions did they count for your flight?

Peck: I had thirty-seven, but some of them were doubles. When you had a nasty one, they would give you credit for two.

MacDonald: Okay.

Peck: See, what happened was, originally, England had twenty-five missions, and they were tough. And Italy had fifty. But as Italy's got tougher and tougher, they gave us some doubles to compensate for—England had twenty-five, and then we had to do fifty. It really wasn't fair.

But I took my leave. I got all kinds of separation leave and the Ruptured Duck. I got on a train. I don't know, I really didn't want to go home, but I did to Sigourney, Iowa, where my mother was living. I lived with her, and I tried to get along pretty good. But then I still was sick; I had all kinds of infections. So then I checked in at the Schick Hospital in Clinton, Iowa. I stayed in that hospital for awhile and then got back to Sigourney.

I even bought a beat-up old '36 Ford car, and I didn't know what to do. I did a little work for a guy that was running a stockyard, handling hogs and loading hogs on boxcars and stuff like that. But I had an awful lot of good friends there, because my mother was well known in the town.

But, in the meantime, A.O. Smith would give me thirty days after my final leave expired to report to work, take it or leave it. So, not knowing what to do—go to school or what—I went back to Milwaukee, got an apartment—or a room, I should say—and went back to A.O. Smith.

At that time they were frantically re-tooling for the new cars rolling back into production. So there was a lot of work. Now, I wasn't particularly welcome there by the other people, because some people who had been there through the whole war were getting laid off. And I came in, having been gone three and a half years, didn't know what the hell was going on, but they *had* to take me.

MacDonald: Uh-huh. You weren't the only one. I'm sure there were a lot of others, too.

Peck: Yeah. But, you know, the veteran coming out of World War II, he did not have it easy by any means. They had that—what was it—fifty-two/twenty club? You got twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks. You know, this is not what you can live on. They struggled. There were always, you know, they'd praise and, "Wonderful to have you back," you know. It's,

“You’re back. Now go back to work”—that attitude all over. But then, shortly after that, I got married to my wife. We got married in July of ’47.

MacDonald: What was her name?

Peck: Lorraine Jung was her maiden name. And Robert Jung was this man that I went to visit in Waco one time after I got a commission. I had the authority to go to the Transportation, get transportation, and go to Waco to visit him. He was a sergeant down there in Waco, Texas. That was the guy that convinced me maybe I shouldn’t be a pilot.

MacDonald: You married his sister, then, huh?

Peck: Well, I knew her well before the war. We—see, we played in a German band. This was way before the war. And that German band, we’d always practice, sometimes at his house, sometimes in the Masonic Lodge across the alley.

In those days we even had a gig for the bund, this place where the Germans met, there’d be an American flag on one side and the swastika on the other side, you know. And then they would have their meetings of the German bund. This was before the war, you have to understand. Everybody, you know, was, “Support the Fatherland. Support the Fatherland.” But that didn’t last long, come the war.

MacDonald: So you got married in ’47? Did you raise a family, then?

Peck: Oh, yeah. We’ve had three children. But later, it wasn’t too long after that, I got a pilot’s license, bought an airplane, then bought another airplane, then bought another airplane. I got to liking airplanes. We don’t have one now. We haven’t for some time. Private flying was getting expensive.

MacDonald: At the same time, you’re still working at A.O. Smith, then?

Peck: Oh, no. I worked at A.O. Smith, then I worked for numerous places—Square D, and job shopping. A couple of times I even freelanced on my own. And then, finally, I worked for Blossom [??] Corporation. And then I moved to Arizona and designed instruments for telescopes at Kitt Peak Observatory. But that’s bringing us close to up to date: from Kitt Peak Observatory I went to Motorola Corporation in Phoenix and then retired. We were in Arizona fifteen years, and then I didn’t want to live in Arizona—back to Wisconsin.

MacDonald: Now, how did you find Sturgeon Bay, then?

Peck: Well, when I was working at A.O. Smith my mother, bless her heart, had excess money, so she sent us some money. And I came up and I bought this lot up here in Sturgeon Bay. It only cost me a thousand bucks. She thought it was very foolish, but I wanted it. And we built this cottage, [inaudible] at a time, one brick at a time. And we bought this in 1955.

But this was what you might call a summer home, it's where I could bring the kids. You could shoot a .22; you could shoot a bow and arrow; you could fish. With the kids, it's very well ingrained into their memories; it's their childhood. When we moved to Arizona for fifteen years, we didn't sell the cottage. We just kept it, and we would come up for five weeks every year. At Kitt Peak I got five weeks of vacation. At Motorola I took five weeks.

As you see it now, when we left Arizona—we also had a home in Mexico on the water. But when I quit at sixty-two and a half, we sold everything in Arizona. Then in 1993 we sold the house in Mexico. Then we had only the cottage, and we didn't know exactly what to do. But we liked the cottage, so we winterized it. In the meantime, my son had done a lot of work winterizing this, too. And this is what you see now.

Now, if you look at this cottage and the way we live as cottage people, compare this if we were to go into a one-bedroom condominium. This is light years ahead of doing that.

MacDonald: Yes. It's a beautiful setting right here on Lake Michigan. When you got out of the service, did you join any veterans' organizations or anything?

Peck: No, I was bitter about the whole procedure; never joined any of them, not even the Barbed Wire Club. I will admit one thing, though. I applied for that free license plate from Wisconsin. That's free for the rest of my life.

MacDonald: The P.O.W. plate, you're talking about.

Peck: Yeah, yeah. But, no, I never joined any of those organizations. I was somewhat anti-war and anti-military. I think it's a bum rap.

MacDonald: Did you use any of the G.I. Bill benefits at all that they come out with after the war?

Peck: Yes, yes I did. I first started my pilot training to get a pilot license. I used part of it for that, but then I dropped that. And—what was it—I had kidney stones one time, and I went into the V.A. Hospital down there. They took care of that.

And just recently I had a crown put on at V.A. Now, as a prisoner of war, I have free access to dental work for the rest of my life. But it's so difficult and so hard to get service that I won't do that again. I'll pay the price.

MacDonald: Uh-huh. Did you keep in contact with any friends that you made during the war?

Peck: My bridge partner, he wound up in the East, and we visited him shortly after the war. His name was Gil Carlson; he was a navigator from the Eighth Air Force. And he lived in Rhode Island—Providence—and we visited him, had a fine visit. And then he came to Chicago a couple of times. He was working for General Electric, and I visited in Chicago. But outside of that, no, just occasionally by phone, and not much.

And then he got out of General Electric, and he bought a marina and he finished up in that marina. But then he died of cancer. He was selling the marina, and he was telling me that he was going to put an oar over his shoulder and start walking west. And the first time somebody says, "What is that?" that's where he's going to live. But he didn't make it. He died. I imagine most of the guys in that group are dead.

MacDonald: Did your outfit in the Air Force, Air Corps, ever have any reunions or anything that you're aware of? Or did you attend any?

Peck: Well, I don't know what ever happened to my original crew. I have no idea. I know nobody, not a soul. They did try to have a reunion with some of these people in that prison camp, but I wasn't in favor of it. I wanted to get out of it. I'm done; I'm not going in any more.

[Phone rings][Break in recording]

MacDonald: Go ahead.

Peck: No I never went to any reunion. They tried to assemble one with some of the men from that barracks in Stalag Luft Three, but I didn't bother going. One man from the barracks was badly burned, his mask had burned on his face. But they did a pretty good job. He lived in Minnesota. He came and visited me one time. But I didn't reciprocate.

No, I'm not against soldiers; I'm not against military. I'm against what they're using them for. I just can't visualize what I would have felt in 1947 that we would have soldiers in Germany. I feel that I was just a demolition team to help them build up a stronger country. It goes against all my thoughts of what the military is for.

MacDonald: Looking back, how do you feel about your military and war experiences overall?

Peck: Awesome. Awesome how much you can pack in three and a half years. But I don't care for these people who sit around with their old uniforms and hats and firing guns at a funeral and stuff like that. I'm going to be cremated, and the ashes are going to be out here in the back yard. I don't want any military recognition or any military funerals. This is the first time ever we've submitted to anything like this [*the interview*], and probably the last.

Now, my children wanted to know, and I compiled a list, not of details, but of where I have been. And it took, what, forty-five pages for that—writing it all down.

MacDonald: That's very impressive that you put that together for your children.

Peck: Well, see, I only described where I was. I didn't try to describe my feelings, or specifically, the missions, and watching the bombs explode on the ground and who was going to get killed and who wasn't.

MacDonald: Do you have anything else you'd like to mention about your time or your experiences or anything—World War II?

Peck: No, not really. In the prison camp, I got to be pretty good at making sheet metal things, which I will show you. I still have some. I still have my prison dog tags. And I'll show you my prison identification, and my discharges. I got the, uh, that Presidential Citation—it was four stars of campaigns in Europe.

MacDonald: Do you recall what was your total time in the prison camps, how long that was?

Peck: Well they got me bogged down at nine months. It was a little more than nine months.

MacDonald: Joe has in front of him right now a leather-bound folder.

Peck: Personal file, yeah.

MacDonald: And it was a personal file of all his records when he served in the military, compiled from the time he went in until his discharge.

Peck: No, it was the time I was commissioned an officer.

MacDonald: Excuse us—from the time he was commissioned as an officer—it was a personal record for officers.

Peck: On here are the campaigns where the—European, African, Middle East Theater Medal—four bronze stars for Rome/Arno Air Offensive, Balkans, Northern France and Air Offensive over Europe. I got the Distinguished Flying Cross and three air medals and a Distinguished Unit Badge.

It also does list here on my—this is a separation of active duty—that I did get the flexible gunnery, also, besides bombardier.

MacDonald: That's some valuable pieces of paper that the family will have for years to come.

Peck: You don't get what you call an 'honorable discharge.' This is a certificate of service. It's the equivalent to an honorable discharge.

MacDonald: And it says you served in the military from December 4, 1943, to December 13, 1945.

Peck: Yeah. You see, that's when I was commissioned. This is only for the officer rank.

MacDonald: Okay. Thank you very much, Joe.

[End of Interview]