

Baker, Warren H. Interview 11-7-96

[Speaker 3]

Testing, one, two, three, testing. This is an interview with Mr. Warren Baker. Mr. Baker, when were you shot down?

July 12, 1944.

[Speaker 1]

What was your rank and position in the bomber? I was an engineer gunner on a B-24 bomber. Where were you shot down?

Shot down in Munich. We were bombing Munich. They had hit it several days before, and they were doing a good job on it.

How were you captured once you were? I figured it out. We were shot up pretty bad, and we knew that we couldn't make it back to the coast, back to England.

So we headed for Switzerland, which is an alternative that you had. We thought we were in Switzerland, and there was a cloud cover, a nine-tenths, eight-inch cloud cover. And when the peaks began to come up through the clouds, the pilot decided it was time to get out of there.

So we were losing altitude. We bailed out. He dropped down through a hole in the clouds, and we bailed out.

And it was in the Bavarian Alps. I hit a little below the tree line. In the Alps, of course, you go up so far, and the trees, they quit.

So I hit a little bit. I hit, personally, a little bit below the tree line. Came down through a great old big, I don't know what kind of tree, fir tree, pine tree.

And we got out all right. We counted all shoots. So everyone survived?

Everyone survived. Everybody got out of the airplane. We had a problem.

Our radio man never did show. They said that he hit in the river. And that's possible.

If he did, it wasn't a good place to hit because it was rocky. The river was quite rocky in the mountains. And we never did hear from him.

The pilot inquired, and several people have inquired, and nobody ever heard anything from him. So who actually picked you up when you landed? I was picked up.

I don't know how long I laid on the ground before I knew what was going on. Feet injured? Yes.

Knees and foot all over. And there was a tree line in my shoe the size of your foot, the size of your leg. And when I hit the ground, I don't know whether I immediately got up or how long I laid there.

But it wasn't long before the, I don't know, it was their Army protected guards and so forth came and picked me up. And of course we thought at the time, we thought we were in Switzerland, which would have been beautiful. But we didn't make it to Switzerland.

Didn't get quite that lucky. No.

[Speaker 2]

Where were you taken after they captured you?

[Speaker 1]

They let us lay there for a while. We had two boys with broken legs. And they had to be taken care of.

And by us, they didn't offer any help and so forth. And everybody was beat up and in pretty bad shape. You don't, you don't, our crews didn't train to lay that airplane.

So when you hit you, and of course you couldn't, didn't have, you didn't know where you were hitting. It was rough ground. We had boys that came down through rooftops, pilot landed and came and stuck his broke feet down through a slate roof.

And this was, he wasn't hurt apparently. His legs was always getting up. I don't know the extent of this.

But they soon moved us out. In two or three days they moved us out. Put us on a train.

Took us down to Innsbruck. Innsbruck is the northern part of Brenner Pass where you go down into, down into Italy. The, since that time we had the Olympics, Winter Olympics in Innsbruck.

Took us to Innsbruck and put us on a train. We were given to meet the public then and it got quite bitter. How did the civilians treat you?

They treated you called, their favorite word was swine. And then we found that out later when they called you a swine. You'd be pretty low down on the toilet.

And they, they got pretty, not too much. They were loud. And it was frightening.

Of course you didn't know what they were going to do. Did the soldiers let them harm you or throw rocks at you? No, the soldiers there kept us apart from them at that time.

And they finally put us on a train and headed us north. And when we got up next to Munich, they took the two boys with broken legs off. And said they were going to take them to the German hospital.

And later I found out that they did. And took good care of them. They, our, we stayed on the train and ended up in Frankfurt, Germany.

Frankfurt, Germany was quite a, they had been bombed. It really was as torn up city as I ever saw. As far as the damage was done.

And we got to even go through Berlin after this. But the, Frankfurt is a big, had a big beautiful rail station. And it had a big covered glass, glass, well it's covered with glass.

We backed into it. Backed in on temporary rails and you could tell. The minute they found out we were there, things got quite rough.

Even the guards got afraid. And I could, you could look around and you could look at their, there was not a building, a decent building standing. Everything else had been shot down.

Of course this was in July. We got shot down on July 12th. So it was in, I tend to say, six or eight days after that that we went into there.

And they had been hit two or three days before. Because we backed in on a temporary rail. And they took us off and this is where we changed trains.

And it was, well, it was quite frightening. They, they do a little spitting and a little kicking and so forth. And the guards around us, as I said a minute ago, the guards even got afraid.

[Speaker 2]

Did they take you to get your leg treated?

[Speaker 1]

No, no treatment, no treatment here until, we didn't have any more medical treatment until we got to Wetzlar, Germany.

[Speaker 2]

Is that where the interrogation?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, that's in Dulag Luft. Dulag Luft, and they took us there. And then there we were, after you went through your interrogation, which was not a mild thing, they...

How long were you there in Dulag Luft? We were there a week, ten days. How were you treated while you were there?

There, you were, everything was fine. After you got through the interrogation, the interrogation was there. And that's when they put you in one of the little, put you in your small cells and threatened with, they wanted the information who you were and all the, everything about you, what your targets were and the...

What was your, what was your cell like? I mean, it was just a little room. It was a small room, a small room with nothing in it but, no, nothing, just a, like a closet.

And there they, they were... I heard sometimes they turned up the heat inside up there. They, they were, they were quite, quite better.

They were quite smart. I mean, the only, the only thing we, no, that's the only thing we ever heard. All you tell them is your name, rank, or serial number.

And he argued with me quite a bit. Your interrogator? The interrogator did.

He interrogated me, and when he got to talking, he asked me all the questions. He asked me where you lived and where you were from and said, told us before, we know you, you're not a soldier. You're in here to do, do damage to us and so forth, once he...

He tried to trick you a lot of times? Yes, yes. Now, after the second time, he let you go think.

He threatened you with a stop log. He told you that he was going to, as far as he was concerned, that you had nothing to do with the 8th Air Force. And you wasn't, you didn't fly in on a bomber and a bunch of stuff.

And he was... Because you'd been a spy, I guess. Because you'd been a spy, and he threatened you, continued to threaten you with turning you over to the Gestapo.

We'd heard enough of the Gestapo to know that they were pretty mean. And finally, he decided that he didn't really, didn't want you to tell him anything. He just wanted you to confirm some things that he knew.

He pulled down a notebook off of a shelf, and it had our tail markings off of our group of ships. And you identified that immediately. I mean, you knew what he was...

you had an idea. He had a copy of our orders that we shipped overseas in that book. And he was up to date, up to within...

Well, this was the middle of, say, the 20th of July. So he knew a lot about you when... He was within 20 days with his information.

Our operations officer had made major on the 1st of July. And he told us, you know, told me the only thing, the only difference in this picture, and he had a picture of it, in this picture, is that the major made... The captain made major the 1st of July.

So he was within 20 days. And this is kind of to be trained the way we were trained and told what we were told, that you had to keep your mouth shut, nobody knew where you were going, and you didn't tell anybody where you were going, and a bunch of stuff. And they knew all about us.

A little bit disheartening to see that. And soon after he'd done that, he was through with me. We went into...

They sent us over into the... What did you worry about the most while you were in there? Well, you didn't know what was going to happen.

Yeah. You didn't know what was going to happen next. It was a constant threat.

The civilians threatened you, your guards threatened you, and then interrogation threatened you. And you had no idea what was going to happen.

[Speaker 2]

What was your trip like to your permanent... Well, let me ask first, what was the POW camp they took you to?

[Speaker 1]

What was your trip like there? The trip, the trip to... They loaded a whole bunch of us on, and the days we were on...

Two or three days we were on a 40-8 boxcar deal. And that's where they'd hand me in. I don't know how many men was in there, but they had everybody that could stand, everybody that could get in.

And they took us and headed us north. Got to Berlin. We spent the night in the, they called them, marshalling yards in their rail yards in Berlin, Germany.

And the RAF, which was the English Air Force, bombed it that night. And we got to experience an air raid of our own. Pretty scary ordeal, huh?

They, of course, you didn't know. You could look out that little window and see. The RAF bombed them.

They'd drop a flare. And then they bombed on that flare, the lead ship. They didn't fly.

We flew formation flights. They flew single. We'd just take off and fly single across.

And they'd pick up that flare. It was dropped off by the lead airplane, and that's what they bombed on. And he wasn't far along, because we could see the flare, and we were in the marshalling yards.

We were in the rail yards in Berlin. And that was kind of rough. They shook the whole train.

The whole train, yeah. And you didn't know the next one might be us. What did they feed you while you were there?

Feeding there, of course, the food. Of course, the Americans were fed pretty good. We were fed good when we left England.

And then from that time, it continually got worse. I mean, they'd feed you soup. They'd feed you a watery soup.

They'd feed you a potato soup. And, of course, on rail, you didn't know too much about when you were going to get it. And we picked up a Red Cross parcel at Dubai Blue, like the German.

And food continually began to go down.

[Speaker 2]

So you went to, I think you said Stalag Luftburg? Stalag Luftburg. When you got there, did the Germans give you a speech on the rules and procedures of camp and make a file on you?

[Speaker 1]

They had most of that information. We missed, and I don't know whether you'll run into this or not, any of them. I went into Stalag Luft A.

I mean, not Stalag, but went into Lager A, and they built two after that. In fact, we ended up being moved to one. And the boys who was there originally, it was a quarter to a half a mile from the rail's head to the camp.

And they had run them in. I got to see some of the boys that they'd run in with dogs and with German Marines, with bayonets and so forth. We were quite lucky.

We walked in. I don't know, the good Lord looked not at me. What did they do to you?

They run them.

[Speaker 2]

Dogs on them?

[Speaker 1]

Dogs and the German police dogs that you see, that we've always talked about, heard about, and always seen.

[Speaker 3]

Like dalsations, I think.

[Speaker 1]

That's the ones that they run through our, through the campsite all the time to be sure that nobody was out running around at night. And that's the dogs that they ran them in with. And several boys were pretty bad.

Several boys were, I don't know that any of them were actually killed or actually led to death, but they pricked them with bayonets just to keep them running. And of course, we'd been down two, four weeks, three weeks, and nobody was in a shaker. And this, as I say, we missed that.

The ones before us that went into the camp, they ran them in, and we missed them. When you got to the camp, did they give you a chance to clean up? They had pretty good facilities.

The camp was full. They immediately rigged up a bunch of tents, and we slept outside. We slept in tents until cold weather.

This was in, as I say, we laid in these tents and slept in these tents. They had pretty good facilities as far as cleanliness and clean up and so forth. So it was pretty sanitary there, huh?

It struck me that it was. They treated you, well, you stayed in pretty good shape.

[Speaker 2]

When you got there, were there like a group of POWs that gave you kind of a rundown on watching out with who you could talk to or what the procedures were at the camp?

[Speaker 1]

I'm not particular. I don't remember too much. I ran into some boys that I knew.

I ran into some boys that I'd been in training with. And I ran into some fellows from Knoxville. I ran into a group.

There were four fellows from Knoxville that I knew that I was good with, and they took us under their wing pretty well and took me under their wing and took good care of me.

[Speaker 2]

What about, did they have any kind of organizations like escape committees or committees that collected escape tickets?

[Speaker 1]

There probably was. There was a lot going on that you didn't know about. You didn't bother about.

You didn't, well, you didn't run around sticking your nose in other people's business. You just kept quiet? You just kept quiet.

Did you ever meet your German camp officer before? No. You would see him once in a while on inspection, but I never had.

[Speaker 2]

How did the Germans treat you? Like the guard, were they friendly towards you?

[Speaker 1]

Most of them. One of the fellows ran into his butcher from Saginaw, Michigan. The butcher that was in the butcher shop down the street from where he lived.

And he'd been missing, I don't know what period of time, and he ran into him over there, and he was the guard. And, of course, he came across the sign that he happened to go back to Germany and they wouldn't let him leave. But most of them, all of them, all of them spoke English.

[Speaker 2]

How did you treat the Germans? Did you ever talk to any of them?

[Speaker 1]

No, I don't know. You did talk to them. Later you did because you traded with them because after we got, when we were there for a period of time and we went on the march, we had, you were with them day and night.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, what kind of stuff did you trade with them?

[Speaker 1]

Cigarettes were their bread. You had the money, huh? Yeah.

Yeah, you bargained with them. And they liked our cigarettes. Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

How was it? Disappointed in the camp by the Germans? How were people punished?

[Speaker 1]

You had your rules. You knew exactly where to go. You knew where to be and when to be at a certain time.

And they, they paid for keeps. I mean, it wasn't, it wasn't, and if you, I didn't have any problems out there but some of the boys did. What would they do to them?

Most of the time they'd take them out. Take them out of the camp. You really, sometimes you wouldn't see them.

They didn't, probably wouldn't see them anymore. They may move them to another logger or something. I don't know, I don't know that they ever did actually.

They put them in a, I heard about the cooler. Yeah, they took them out. But we had one old fellow that, his nickname was Big Stoop that was the bouncer for the guards.

Six, four, five, great old big, biggest hand you ever saw. Big Stoop was, he ruled the roost. Nobody, nobody crossed him and it wasn't right.

He'd grab you by the head and pull you up and jam you down in the ground and so forth. Like a post or something. Yeah, yeah, like, he was, quite a feller.

And Big Stoop done an awful lot of their pretty random things. He was just a, He beat up on some of the prisoners?

[Speaker 2]

Yes, he did. He did.

[Speaker 1]

I mean, if somebody talked, we got roughed back with him. I mean, we got roughed with him. He'd handle it real well.

Of course, he were pretty much at a loss if he started beating on you. Yeah. Have you seen anyone ever get shot?

Doubt I've seen, when we got on the road, after we moved out for the march, they shot over our heads quite a bit. And this was to scare us more than anything. Of course, you didn't know that.

What the heck. Yeah. When you were stealing their potatoes and stealing some of their food.

Living off the land there.

[Speaker 4]

Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

And we did quite a bit of that. He hadn't even had to survive.

[Speaker 2]

So, how was it? Because the compound, I guess it was pretty crowded the hour it came over. It was full.

And did it become more crowded as the war progressed on?

[Speaker 1]

As, well, an example, they'd, if they lost 60 airplanes a day, that means 600 men were shot down. And four of the ten on the crews were enlisted men. I mean six on the crews were enlisted men.

And they'd fill that pretty quick. There was 10,000, they estimated it, 10,000 airmen in the camp we were in. And, of course, when they were shooting, they'd shoot them down pretty rapidly.

[Speaker 2]

What kind of things did you have in your compound? Like, say, furniture or whatever?

[Speaker 1]

Very crude. Very crude. Of course, we didn't get that.

Cold weather. It was cold weather before we got out of our tents. And the only thing you had in a tent, you just stacked your stuff up on your, head of your, and they called them sleeping bags or tote bags.

Tote in German, as I understand it, is dead bags. In other words, they used them as their, for their, if someone dies, body bags.

[Speaker 2]

Body bags.

[Speaker 1]

And they called them tote. And that's what we slept on. Very little excelsior.

Little excelsior, little, very little. Very little. And we slept like that for, I don't know, cold weather, probably September, October.

But then we moved in one of the new compounds. Brand new compound and everything in it was new, but it was still very crude. Very crude.

It was just bunk beds. Wood stoves and stuff like that. Well, yeah, they were big like a big old stovepipe.

And you used their, you heated it with their processed coal. But it was a lump of coal that looked like that. They were all shaped the same.

I don't know, they'd taken something, they'd taken everything out of it they wanted, but just left enough just to fire it a little bit. And you had one of those. Hard to light up.

Well, you never let it go out. Yeah. Were you ever issued any kinds of personal items like a toothbrush, a razor?

You got those at Dulau Gluf. You got those when you first got shot at because you had nothing.

[Speaker 2]

Did they take any personal items from you when you were at Dulau Gluf? Rings and watches.

[Speaker 1]

Did you ever get those back? No.

[Speaker 2]

How often did you get a chance to shower or shave?

[Speaker 1]

You could shower and shave. Most of the time about every other day. Oh, really?

What about doing your laundry? Laundry, extraordinarily, if you planned it, you could get it and it didn't get too dirty, if you know what I mean. You didn't get too dirty back in the laundry when you didn't have enough variety of clothes.

And they had to dry, of course. You could wash if you wanted to. You could wash your clothes if you wanted to.

You could shave if you want to bathe.

[Speaker 2]

What kind of medical treatment or did they have medical treatment there?

[Speaker 1]

I never received any. Never received any. Well, I didn't have need to.

For one part of the, I don't know, it was November, December, December probably. We spent a month quarantined by our barracks. We didn't get out of the barracks.

They carried everything to us and diphtheria. In other words, there was a case of diphtheria in the barracks and they took him out and when they took him out they quarantined the rest of us. And I don't know, I think they were done about the best they could.

[Speaker 2]

You didn't have a lot of pneumonia or dysentery in the camp?

[Speaker 1]

Dysentery, well dysentery is there was a period of time you got over it. Evidently your body got used to it while you were still at the camp. Now when you get to March, dysentery was very, very common.

I mean it was sickeningly common. Everybody had it.

[Speaker 2]

Is that from lack of food or the kind of food you were eating? You said you were just mainly eating off the land which you could find? While we were on the road we did.

[Speaker 1]

On February they moved us out and we walked and slept out. If you were inside you were in a barn. A lot of the time we'd run about 50-50 and a lot of the time you were on the ground.

[Speaker 2]

How often did you get to eat while you were in the camp? How many times a day? In the camp you'd eat once a day.

What kind? What did they serve you?

[Speaker 1]

Well they fed they had a kohlrabi that they used and they'd make you a soup out of that. They had a for your first meal was a barley soup. Barley and we'd probably call it cereal.

It was a watery barley meal and of course with your red cross parsley you had some sugar that you kind of sweetened it up and would make it bearable. What did you get in your red cross parsley? Red cross the red cross parsley came came out of Switzerland.

The American government furnished them and they they would come in and you'd get I don't know as I ever got a full parsley. Most of the time you split it in half. You got a buddy and you got one with your buddy and then you get it you get it down and they got real scarce they got down you'd split you'd cut it eight ways.

So they came less and less as a warhead? That's it. Yeah they did.

In fact there was a period of time that we didn't see any red cross parsley.

[Speaker 2]

Was that in the camp also or just on your board?

[Speaker 1]

No when we February the 6th they came in they came in on the 5th and told us that the next we'd be moving to make preparations and you took a shirt or an undershirt or something that made you a bag put all your personal belongings in it and because when you were leaving they said we were going to leave march out and of course it was it was it's winter time Baltic the camp we were in was 15 miles from the Baltic Sea So it's colder colder and wet than it was and it a lot of times it would snow before that we were up two and a half feet off the ground so they could run the dogs in underneath the bags and of course that didn't help for warmth and in the winter time it got real cold but then when they moved us out when they moved us out it was strictly winter time Did they ever ever issue you any kind of clothing or We got some clothes I got a GI overcoat I traded a fella an Eisenhower an Eisenhower flight jacket which is a beautiful piece and you see you used to see them in all the pictures that you see of the GIs at that time the officers and so forth and it was it was a good looking thing

[Speaker 2]

Did they did they take your flight suit away from you when you got there No

[Speaker 1]

That was part of my flight suit Oh yeah Part of my flight suit They didn't like that and anyway they wanted to put us on and they gave you you had other shoes that you wore but I had my I took I bailed out with my GI shoes I didn't have none I had them strapped to the to the shoes and that I don't know I don't know how the boys made it without that but I traded I went in with an old boy that he could not stand that he wanted one of those flight jackets and he had a fatigue jacket a kind of like tanker jacket and I got the best end of that bargain Yeah I traded with him

[Speaker 2]

That kept you warm didn't it

[Speaker 1]

Kept me warm turned the water turned a lot of the water and then it it carried you you feel I had it filled full of stuff you carry that was your pack was that jacket I had and there was very few people that had them I just they wore what they wanted and I wore what I had

[Speaker 2]

I like you While while you were there in the camp what was probably the most irritating aspect of being there besides maybe the lack of food Not knowing

[Speaker 1]

Not Not Not Not Not Knowing We went through the we had a radio there was a radio and we get we get the news daily Is this something that y'all snuck

[Speaker 2]

or kept A daily

[Speaker 1]

I understood that it came in in a saw pile from Red Cross It was a crystal set radio and somebody somebody knew it was coming in and somebody knew the story behind it but I didn't know and it was pre-tuned to BBC BBC was the British broadcast that came out of London and there they were strictly news people and we had a nobleman in our library that was a Shakespearean actor and he got so he could memorize and he would memorize the news he'd listen and tell you and then somebody he'd done an awful lot of walking around the compound and the different people walked with him at different times and he relayed the news to them and you got the news very rapidly and a lot of it was propaganda or we thought it was propaganda we didn't know but we got the news and of course the Battle of the Bulge we heard about it we were still in camp in the Battle of the Bulge that was Christmas time and we didn't believe it but we found out that it really did happen very very clearly

[Speaker 2]

so I guess not knowing that was probably the thing you

[Speaker 1]

worried about the most you didn't know what was happening at home you had no idea I got a few letters in December and then I knew that they knew that I was about to die but I didn't know that they knew I knew I was alright they didn't know how did

[Speaker 2]

you receive mail

[Speaker 1]

I got mail two times a couple of times got no packages with my brother every time they let him pack one pack a package to send with everything all kinds of tobacco chewing tobacco and everything going he'd pack it but I never got any some crap got it

[Speaker 2]

what uh did you notice any of the prisoners having any kind of psychological problems yes yes yes they uh

[Speaker 1]

we called it black happy you know we had one little boy he Detroit that every time an airplane go over he'd climb a log and they miscarried him that way and he had a right to he'd been he'd been treated pretty rough but uh you run you run into people that had that had problems did you know he might have heard that we had we had one boy that run to the run to the bar you gotta you gotta walk way around mentioned a minute ago that you walk around the compound but you didn't get too close to the fence they had uh just like probing zeroes yeah I mean it was exactly one of them was probably in there but you didn't get too close to you didn't get past that wood shot and there's one of the boys attempted and uh we thought well maybe he just committed suicide and they

[Speaker 4]

did it

[Speaker 1]

but I didn't we had one of that we uh that committed suicide in our compound somebody knew him and somebody got to him just exactly like you see in the movies they got to him and got his information from him and they got they found him in our in our train and they

[Speaker 2]

and he

[Speaker 1]

was he was talking

[Speaker 2]

oh you've been too friendly to him yeah how did you deal with you know just problems no I

[Speaker 1]

had uh a lot of faith sometimes I'd say that I didn't have sense enough to worry about it in other words everything was going to be alright and it was were you bored while you were there well you got bored you could uh you can get bored in the crowd or you can go off I'd say no I wasn't bothered by that what did you do to pass the time

[Speaker 2]
while you were in there

[Speaker 1]
did a lot of walking did a lot

[Speaker 2]
of card playing did you have your cigarettes

[Speaker 1]
like poker oh yeah that was I had my everybody buddy he had a buddy and my buddy was a card chart we had all the cigarettes we don't smoke we bought our food I had cigarettes when they moved us out I bet I had as many cigarettes as him cause that little fatter was a poker and he uh I was his bank I carried I kept his cigarettes to go out there

[Speaker 2]
what do

[Speaker 1]
ya'll talk about most of the time

[Speaker 2]
while you were in the camp

[Speaker 1]
well he'd fly a little and tell the truth a little bit and everybody would argue about who had the best airplane we had some boys in there and they said between the boys I never asked you, what kind of plane were you in?

[Speaker 2]
But you knew, just like, you talked about a lot of things. Did you ever do any work while you were there at the camp or outside of the camp?

[Speaker 1]
No, no work. That was part of the Geneva Convention. That's the difference, when you hear about the Royal Academy, the Japanese part of it.

The Japanese did not have it at the Geneva Convention. And the Geneva Convention kept them off of us. Now, what you could do and what you didn't do.

As far as working, as far as we were concerned, the commission officers and non-commissioned officers. A lot of boys did work, and you would have probably been better off. And I found out later that it wasn't, that's not so.

They fed those who worked better. Oh yeah? And they were better to stand it when they moved them.

Better health out? Yeah, better rations. And we didn't get that.

And I didn't know that. There was an article in one of our magazines, and I'm going to give you a copy of it. Oh, thank you.

That breaks down a lot of this. And it basically, the march, when they moved us out.

[Speaker 2]

Did they ever supply you with anything? Like books to read or instruments to play or things to play with?

[Speaker 1]

YMCA sent stuff in. YMCA sent stuff in. This Shakespearean actor, well he had plays and all kinds of drama and so forth.

There was church services. Did they have any bands? Oh yeah, bands.

And of course they had that many people. You could find those who could play.

[Speaker 2]

Did you take any hobbies or anything like that?

[Speaker 1]

No.

[Speaker 2]

What about sports? They all had baseball equipment, football. Yeah, softballs and bats and so forth.

I always had a game with them.

[Speaker 4]

Yeah?

[Speaker 2]

What about boxing? There was boxing gloves. I didn't know it wasn't a boxing glove.

Did you have tournaments? Yeah, they had tournaments. They worked it pretty well.

[Speaker 1]

They was pretty well planned. I mean, the Americans basically planned it. I mean, it wasn't the Germans' idea.

We got the things in from YMCA. There was a Red Cross, I guess. That's where we got our radio.

And I guess they didn't know about it. They sued you because the propaganda they wanted out, they wanted it to be theirs.

[Speaker 2]

They ever get any propaganda or anything?

[Speaker 1]

No, not yet. Well, they even issued the German papers. One of my crew members spoke fluent German.

Read fluent German. His grandmother. He never heard her speak any English.

He was German.

[Speaker 4]

Oh yeah?

[Speaker 1]

And he was, we used him all the time when he was with us. He was one of the boys that had a broken leg. He said he didn't know more about what they were talking about than they did.

I guess they came to release him. They didn't know that he could. Oh yeah?

It was, I don't know, they decided early that he would not talk to any of them. He would just listen. And he'd get them out.

He would tell you what they were talking about. They couldn't figure this out. They couldn't figure the Americans out.

[Speaker 2]

Oh really? How so?

[Speaker 1]

No, when you were flying, you'd send a thousand planes over a day. And they'd shoot down a hundred of them, shoot down sixty of them, and by tomorrow they'd be a thousand back. They couldn't figure that out.

[Speaker 2]

Did you or any of this play tricks on the Germans, like mess up roll call? I read that with the Germans, a lot of times they'd try to listen in on the conversations over the barracks.

[Speaker 1]

Just things like that. You know, they would feed, when we got to Wexler, we got to Duval and Louvre.

[Speaker 2]

So they gave you medication?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, castor oil pills, something like that. Didn't have pills, it was the biggest thing. We had more fun out of it.

And when we were on the road from Wexler, Germany, up to the camp, and all that stuff, the temple day, somebody got the big idea of giving the German guards some castor oil pills.

And it worked. In other words, you'd tell them, I'm going to make you strong, you'd pack the muscles and so forth.

They would give it to you, like the vitamin pills and so forth.

[Speaker 2]

What were they like? They'd make you run. And of course, they were just like we were.

They didn't have a chance. They didn't get off of the train any more often than we did. And when they'd have to go to the bathroom, they'd have troubles.

[Speaker 1]

And we fed them so good.

[Speaker 2]

Make you strong, y'all, y'all. We done a pretty good job on them.

[Speaker 1]

Had a boy down in Atlanta. He was adopted by my aunt down in Atlanta. And the only shoes he got was considerably bigger than he needed.

And he was the last man in the count line, going down in the count line. And they'd start off in the German guards, and he wouldn't look you in the eye. Very few times would they ever look you in the eye.

But when he was counting, he'd look at your feet. So McRae would take his shoes off and reverse them. Don't put his left one on his right one.

And that German cop would go down there. And of course, he'd count maybe 150 men down through there. And he'd get down to the end of it, and that'd shake him up, and he'd lose his count.

Oh, he'd get mad. Every time you got a new guard, you got their shoes changed. The good fellow would change his shoes.

So we kept that going pretty good. And we'd laugh at them.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, it helped you pass the time, huh? Yeah. Did you get to celebrate a holiday while you were there?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. Celebrated Christmas, celebrated the holidays. Of course, it was Christmas.

We had a little Thanksgiving, wasn't it hard? Of course, everybody knew me. You can figure it.

Somebody had a smart enough to set up a calendar. You knew what day it was, when it was, what time it was. Christmas.

We had a really quiet Christmas. Yeah. Did you get any?

Fixed up a pretty good meal? I fixed up a save for Christmas. You saved your meal for Christmas.

Yeah. Saved your sweets for Christmas.

[Speaker 2]

Well, actually, when you were evacuated, what was it like when I evacuated? I guess you were telling me that's probably the worst part of it.

[Speaker 1]

That definitely was the worst part of it. They moved you out. Snow was on the ground.

And it colder than it is. And the first day out, we walked better than 20 miles. We walked around the compound a few times.

Your feet got wet. You got blisters. And then they took us to an open field that had been cleared.

A woodland that had been cleared. And that's where we spent the night. And things were just terrible.

I mean, you didn't know when you were going to get your next meal. You was carrying what you could carry. And you were cold.

You were, well, a lot of people wasn't dressed for that weather. None of us was dressed for that weather.

[Speaker 2]

Did the Germans mistreat you like they did anybody?

[Speaker 1]

No, they didn't do anything to anybody.

[Speaker 2]

They had no problem.

[Speaker 1]

We were pretty well told that you would survive better if you stayed in the group instead of running out. So, you did that. A lot of boys did escape later in the war.

Later when, after they'd been on the march a lot. Some of the boys stayed buried in the straw at night. Or the next morning, we'd leave it out there.

And then run maybe the next night.

[Speaker 2]

Did anybody die in the P.A.W. before they got there from like a food or medical condition?

[Speaker 1]

They had a, they told you if you fell out of the line that they'd shoot you. That was the rule. And I believed that they would.

I mean, I had no reason to believe that they wouldn't. I had no idea what would happen to you if you did. Dysentery was bad.

I mean, it was, because we had to stay pretty clean. You had, let's say you had two pair of underclothes. And you messed up one and the few didn't have someplace to wash it.

You can't. You had to. Dysentery started pretty bad.

No water. You'd melt snow if it was snowing. Which you drank.

There was no water available. The food you were eating was what you would eat. And then it got down to the place where they'd walk you into, march you into a barn or into a barnyard.

They fed their cattle on chomped potatoes. Like you were lucky if they steamed them. They had big steamer, big steam vats.

They'd take the steam through there and cook the potatoes and then feed them to the hogs. And if you got in there in time to get the hogs fed, what you got, you got hot potatoes. And they were good.

If not, and you had stolen some, you carried them. Nothing was strange about that potato. I mean, there was no, it was not washed, it was not cleaned.

Rotten potatoes and so forth. And you were hungry enough to eat anything. And they begin to get sick and they begin to fall out.

And it is, they told us then if you fell out and didn't, and you'd see them just fall out the side of the road. Most of the time a buddy would carry a buddy or carry his pack and he could. Because you knew you'd be sick next.

And that's happened. The boy I had was peaking. You'd think he couldn't stand it.

I don't know. He got sick and I carried his stuff for a period of time. But that old fellow made it.

And I heard from him after the war and he has applied for compensation from the government. And I hope he got it. I didn't hear from him.

But he was due and he was, he was, he was.

[Speaker 2]

Pretty bad, huh? Pretty bad. How far do you think you had traveled?

Or how far did you walk a day?

[Speaker 1]

You would walk, everything was in kilometers. And you were lucky if it was just 20 kilometers. Because that was about 12 miles.

But you moved, you moved from one village to the next or the one area to the next. What they were doing, they were afraid, they were actually afraid that the Russians were going to get them. They were moving us away from the Russians.

The camp we were in was the Czechoslovakian. They wanted to move us over into Germany properly. And then they wanted to, and they moved us across the top part of Germany for a period of time.

And that was the cold section. And then up in March they hit us down. But they got us over into Germany properly.

Real good. We walked, I'd say we walked 12, 15 miles a day. So you're figuring kilometers up to.

How were you finally liberated? Liberated by the 104th Infantry. And the 26th day of April.

Where were you? We were at Bitterfield, Germany. Down south we had traveled.

They say that we traveled over 500 kilometers and we traveled over 300 miles. It was 86 days. That you were on the march?

That we were on the march. You spent some time, you'd get in a place and stay overnight. They took us to one camp, Stalag 11B.

Which is out from Magdeburg, Germany. And we knew from there, we pretty well knew things was getting tight. Because there was a rumor that a GI tank had gone in and circled the town square of Magdeburg the night before.

And we knew things was getting pretty bad. And then they moved us. We stayed in 11B, Stalag 11B for a period of time.

Which was a melting pot of everybody. Everybody that ever fought the Germans was there.

[Speaker 3]
All nationalities?

[Speaker 1]
Africa, a lot of Africa. Turks and everything. And it was quite a, if you hadn't been filmed so roughly, it would have been a shell to see.

And they, we traded them out of their meats. They couldn't eat it, they were vegetarians. We'd have them eat the vegetables and we'd eat their meat.

And that went on. And they fell out after that. They moved that camp out because they weren't getting close.

And we went, just kept going south. Went down across the old river on a barge or on a pontoon bridge. And dynamite was already set on both sides.

In other words, it was already ready to blow. We walked out and walked a circle around up the side of the hill going from there and it blew. So we knew that they were getting close to us.

The Russians were getting close to us. And they didn't want any part of that. We knew the war was pretty much closed.

[Speaker 2]

How were you taken care of when you were liberated? What were you sent?

[Speaker 1]

The boys, 104th Infantry was still very active. In other words, they were scouting. They were hunting Germans.

And they sent us back as soon as they could. Of course, the area they were in was strange to them. They'd scout it out and see if it was all right and bed us down and feed us hay rations and so forth.

And medical care if you wanted to. I tore up one of my shoes and they gave me a little pair of shoes. I don't know what happened.

I was wearing that pair of shoes. But I got a pair of shoes. When we got there, they had a toothache.

Sent me out to a field dentist and I got a tooth pulled. That was when I had the toothache for the last six or eight weeks.

[Speaker 2]

So after that, were you sent somewhere in France and then sent home? Sent to Camp Lucky Strike.

[Speaker 1]

Went to Camp Lucky Strike. And there you run in. It was a little homework.

You run into everybody. Of course, you had no idea what happened to people. Even the crew members, you had no idea what happened to them.

You run into some of your old crew members you'd been in camp with, been in service with in the States. You run into people out of your outfits. I caught a C-47.

We caught a fellow, caught a C-47 flying out of there and flew to England. So they were waiting there to board a ship to go out. And we traveled around for two to three weeks in London, around in England.

We went back to my base and my base was, my people had already gone. My outfit had already come back to us. They'd already gone to Spain or headed in the South Pacific.

And we went back to his base, which was a 17 base. And we got royal treatment. They had to take good care of us.

And then arranged for us to do what we wanted to do.

[Speaker 2]

One thing I forgot to ask you while you were in camp, did they have any kind of like classes, like mechanics or language class or anything?

[Speaker 1]

You had a chance to because you had people that could have taught it. We had everybody, other than what they did, they just entertained themselves. They were teaching Shakespeare and things like that.

They would have their plays and so forth. And they put on a good show. They had fun.

They would, the American, you'd put him out on a rock and he'd look pretty wet. He would come out in pretty good shape.