

James, Dan Q. Interview 12-2-87

[Speaker 3]

The following is an interview with Mr. Dan Q. James, Post Office Box 1466, La Follette, Tennessee. Interview conducted by Dr. Charles Johnson, University of Tennessee History Department, and the Center for the Study of War and Society. Interview conducted at Mr. James' home on December 2, 1987.

[Speaker 2]

Usually what I like to do is just to have people tell me a little bit about what their life was like before they went into service, where they're from, when they were born, just to get a kind of idea. Were you from this area originally?

[Speaker 1]

Well, I came here in 1940 from Loudoun County. And I married my wife December 25, 1941.

[Speaker 2]

Right after Christmas Day, right after the war started.

[Speaker 1]

And I went to work then for the PBA up at Cherokee.

[Speaker 3]

Working on the dam up there?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I was a public safety officer. And in July, I was drafted into the Army.

[Speaker 3]

That would be July of 1942.

[Speaker 1]

Right. And I had always had an interest in aviation. And I had taken a real correspondence course in all the theory of flight and everything.

So when they had me to take an IQ and all the examinations, they sent me to Miami Beach, Florida. And of course, I took exams there. And they asked me what I wanted to do.

Well, I said, I want to fly somewhere out there. So they sent me to Amarillo, Texas, where I went to school. Well, when I got through there in January, the top ten percent of the class got to go to Seattle to the Boeing Aircraft Factory school.

So I completed that. It lasted a little over a month.

[Speaker 2]

What kind of things did you do there at Seattle?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, we just studied some advanced things about the B-17 itself.

[Speaker 2]

Okay.

[Speaker 1]

And then, if you were in the top ten percent there, you were assigned to go with a plane that was being ferried to Cheyenne, Wyoming, which was a modification center. Instead of setting up their tools at Boeing, they sent them to this modification center when they needed to be changed. So I went with it.

That was the first flight I ever had. They sent me out there on the Nexus plane, and the pilot, the co-pilot had come by in a minute. So we took it to Cheyenne.

That was a cool, rough flight. We hit some air pockets I had never flown before, and it just scared me to death.

[Speaker 3]

My goodness, that must have been a real shock for you.

[Speaker 1]

It was.

[Speaker 3]

Because flying over the Rockies, I know.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. So from there, they sent me to Salina, Kansas.

[Speaker 3]

I've seen a lot of the country for a Tennessee boy.

[Speaker 1]

Right. At Salina, they, well, as a matter of fact, the first thing they done, they called me in and pulled all my wisdom teeth and assigned me to barracks. And when they healed up in a short time, they sent me to Espada, Washington, to be assigned for the made-up crew.

Well, I was assigned to Lieutenant William M. Beddoe's crew, and we took first and second phase training there. Now, he was from Birmingham, and I was from Tennessee, but he was a lieutenant and I was a tech sergeant.

And somehow or other, he took a liking to me. It was just like he and I ran the crew. Anytime anything come up, he wouldn't talk it over with other commissioned officers, a navigator, a bombardier, or a co-pilot.

He came to me. Were you a gunner? I was an engineer, top turret gunner.

So, it came along when we were to take our gunnery practice in this, I believe, second phase of this training. The gunners, they had set up in Washington, in this beautiful area where there was nothing. There were buildings that were just thrown up like boards.

So, the gunners were to make a pass at it and shoot at it. Well, everybody was hitting 150 feet behind it or above it or what have you. And, of course, I couldn't shoot from the top turret unless he banded.

So, he said, Dan Q, are you ready? I said, yeah. So, he went around and banded.

And I blew planks and fenders everywhere.

[Speaker 2]

50 calibers of big guns?

[Speaker 1]

I had two of them. And he said, good God, Dan Q, can you do that again? I said, try me.

So, he did again, and I just blew hell out of him again.

[Speaker 2]

Like shooting quail.

[Speaker 1]

And from then on, I reckon because he was a Southerner and I was a Southerner, of course, my father was from Boston and one from New Mexico, one from Los Angeles, he always came to me with problems we had or something come up. And so, we took our first and second phase of training there.

[Speaker 2]

Were you both about the same age?

[Speaker 1]

We were the same age. He was 22 in February and I was 22 in March. And for our last phase, we went to Redmond, Oregon.

And when we went through our last phase of training, and of course that was just a little more advanced gunnery and other kinds of training. My bombardier got to practice. He couldn't hit a bale of hay, a barn bale of hay, even if it had this big circle in that very desert up there.

[Speaker 2]

He couldn't even come close, huh?

[Speaker 1]

But anyway, we got our crew all together. And all except that navigator. So he come around to me one day and said, Dan, he said they've assigned a navigator to us.

He said his name is Israel Levine. He's from Los Angeles. He said, what do you think?

I said, well, Bill, those people are smart. And you know a navigator's got to be smart. So anyway, he stayed with us and he always told us that if we ever go into combat and we go down, don't look for me to be there.

I'll ride it down.

[Speaker 2]

That's hard business.

[Speaker 1]

Well, he was Jewish. And so they sent us to Scottfield, Illinois. And there they assigned us to the European Theater.

So we went from there to Presque Isle, Maine. And we were to fly the Atlantic to England, or Scotland, 500 feet above the water to stay out of the German radar. The Germans, a lot of times, had to pick some up and guide us right into Paris, France.

So, boy, it's cold. We bought everything in the world. I remember a crate of oranges and big gallons of juices.

And when we landed in Scotland, I never will forget, we got out and I come out of that crate of oranges and they're just like pool balls. They're so cold they're just frozen. I never will forget this.

He said, Mr. He said, I'd like to have one of those. He says, my son has never seen an orange. Well, I'll just give him a whole bunch of them.

[Speaker 2]

It's hard for Americans to believe that people were really short.

[Speaker 1]

That's right. And I never will forget, we went inside a little pub, whatever, what they call it there, and we were going to order, well, we all ordered a beer. And I never will forget the woman there, she just took an old dirty thing and tossed it under some water, into that foot of beer.

And I told the rest of my son, I can't drink that. So they sent us all down then to the 100th bomb group.

[Speaker 2]

100th.

[Speaker 1]

The bloody 100th it was called. Well, of course we received further training there. And of course I've got these dates down here.

Now, on September the 9th, 1943, we made our first mission, and it was at Thiel Air Base, France. It was what they call the milk run, the easy one. I think they had one fight gun is all they had.

But anyway, it was an easy one.

[Speaker 2]

To get started with.

[Speaker 1]

To get started with. That was on the 9th. And then the second mission was September the 15th, 1943, to Paris, France.

We were to hit the Renault works. And it was a very damn rough one. There was a lot of flak, a lot of fighters.

Some of us saw my first plane go down there. And then on the 16th, the next day, we went to Bordeaux, France. That was right down next to Spain.

It was a submarine and sports facility. It was 11 hours long. And on the way back, it was getting dark.

And we hit a cloud of light. So everybody just pulled out and was on their own. So we got down low, and we saw some landing lights.

So all we did was just go down and land there. We got out, and there was about four jeeps with fellows with guns. And we had landed at a British airfield.

And they didn't know who we were or what. And we told them we were hungry. We'd like to have something to eat.

They said, well, we closed the mess hall. We don't have anything for you to eat. So my pilot went in and called the base to ask them what we could do.

So they told us that would last 11 hours. So we went on back to our base that night. Now on the 17th, which was the next day, September 17, 1943, we were slated to go to Schweinfurt, Germany.

Now Schweinfurt was a primary target because all of the ball bearings were burned. Hitler had made the mistake of having all of them in one place being made instead of scattered around. Well, we knew that would be rough.

But we were scrubbed right before takeoff. We had gotten up, breathed, everything. And I provided the plane and everything.

And just before takeoff, they called it off.

[Speaker 2]

That weather over the target?

[Speaker 1]

Well, something. They got some information, secret information or something about it that they knew was coming.

[Speaker 2]

Did your bombardier improve any in his accuracy?

[Speaker 1]

Well, see, we weren't the lead plane.

[Speaker 2]
Okay.

[Speaker 1]
He'd watch the lead plane, and when theirs dropped, he'd just drop his. And on the 21st of September, 1943, we were briefed to go to Paris, France again. But it was scrubbed shortly after takeoff.

We took off and started, and they called us back. And then on September the 24th, we were briefed to go to Stuttgart, Germany. And that one was scrubbed just before takeoff.

[Speaker 2]
Get you up and put you down, get you up and put you down. How did you feel when that happened?

[Speaker 1]
No scrub? Yeah. Well, when it comes to Stuttgart and Schoenberg, I felt good about it.

[Speaker 2]
I can understand that.

[Speaker 1]
But on the 26th of September, 1943, we went back to Paris. It was overcast. The Renault works was overcast.

And we were ordered to not drop any bombs on any civilian French people, just don't drop them anywhere. So we went back and dropped them in the English Channel on the way back, because they'd already been eyeing full of pins on to make them.

[Speaker 2]
That was one of your jobs, to arm the bombs?

[Speaker 1]
Yeah, to arm the bombs. Well, on the 28th of September, 1943, we went to Emden, Germany. That was a seaport up to the north of us.

And it was very rough. It was a six-hour mission, and I mean they just shot hell out of us.

[Speaker 2]
When you say six hours, do you mean six hours each way, or six hours around?

[Speaker 1]
Six hours around.

[Speaker 2]
Yeah, three in, three out. Yeah. You had fired your guns a lot by that time?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, I guess I had. Then on October the 2nd, we went back to Emden, and it was very, very rough, and we had a lot of holes in our plane.

[Speaker 2]

From flak pretty much, or from fighters too? Both. Both.

Did you find, was there a particular kind of German plane that you didn't like to see worse than others, or was it all sort of the same?

[Speaker 1]

Well, all I ever saw was the Messerschmitt 109 or the Focke-Wulf 190. Either one of them was just bad. And then on October the 4th, 1943, we were to go to Hanau, Germany.

Now, that was a people penetration. This was the time of the war when they first started making penetration into Germany.

[Speaker 2]

Did you have fighter support on a raid like that? Were there American fighters along with you, or did you go in alone?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, we, sometimes they could go so far with us, then they'd have to turn around and maybe pick us up. So another group picked us up on the way out. But anyway, the opposition was heavy, heavy, and the lead bombardier could not find the target.

So we went over it and circled around again and started another bomb run. Well, we hit it. And when we got back, the intelligence told us we hit a damn China factory.

[Speaker 2]

Blew up their mission.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, that was, then on, that was October the 8th, on October the 8th, 1943, we went to Bremen, Germany. That was a very, very rough one. Losses were heavy.

And that day, I, I saw, in each hornse's hut, there was two enlisted crews left. One on one row, one on the other. And I saw a German Focke-Wulf 190 come in and hit those head-on.

It was a massive flame. Well, we, we, we made it back. And our plane was shot up so darn bad that they were going to have to replace the right wing and one of the engines.

[Speaker 2]

Did you have a name on the plane?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, Sexy Susie, mother of ten.

[Speaker 4]

Okay.

[Speaker 1]

So they, on October the 9th, was the longest raid of the war. We were to bomb Marienburg in Poland. Well, we had to fly up to the North Sea, across Denmark, down into, down into, across Danzig and into this factory.

Now, they told us that they're not going to hit any opposition all day today. They're not ever looking for anybody to come there. Well, we got, we were right off of Sweden.

We could see Sweden right over here. And the pilot called me and said, Dan, we've only got about five or ten minutes of gas left. Then we carried a full load of gas in these wing tanks.

It went all the way out to the tip of the wing. And I had to set the switches to get it to flowing. Well, I got out on the turret and set the switches.

And then a couple of minutes or three, I said, Dan, the damn stuff's not flowing. Get it to going. I said, okay, I'll try it again.

Well, I kicked them and I knew they were right. He said, Dan, it's not flowing. So, he told the crew to pull out formation.

He said, prepare to go to Sweden. So, the radio operators, they chewed up these cold sheets. The bombardiers were ready to throw the bombsack overboard.

And the waist gunners were ready to take their guns and throw them overboard. And I had the idea. I knew that these, remember now, this wasn't our regular plane.

It was one because I had been shot up so bad. Of the idea that there wasn't any electricity maybe getting to those. There's a sole North Titan valve.

So, I went and thought of the idea. I went back in the plane. I believe it was to the landing gear wire and cut some wire off.

And I connected these wires to the hot shoe on this panel of switches. And then it went right over to the wire that led to that valve. And I connected those up.

Bill said, Dan, it's coming now. So, we pulled back in formation. Went on.

Bombs target. We went over 10,000 feet. And I said, everybody said, oh, my God, I hope they have not any flat guns down there.

They didn't have and we just destroyed the factory. And when we came back or was on the way back, we had to go back the same way over to Denmark. Well, the Germans knew that we had to get out of there.

So, they had moved their fighter up into Denmark waiting for us. Well, we had one hell of a battle over Denmark. But we made it back and my pilot told the briefing officer and the operation officer that he wanted to put me in for the distinguished flying cause for what I had done.

Well, we were scheduled to go the next day on a 10-day R&R, Rest and Rehabilitation leave. And the operations officer told him, said, Bill, you're all saved to go tomorrow on R&R. And why don't you just wait to get back and we'll take care of it.

There's no doubt what he did. Well, we got back. We ended up hooping it up that night before we were getting ready to leave.

Well, in comes Major O'Rourke, our pilot. A little later, says, boy, I've got bad news. They've ordered us to fly tomorrow.

Oh, my gosh. Everybody was just let out. And he said, they say they'll give us a three-day pass on top of that 10-day leave if we will.

Of course, the state doesn't tell us that if we don't refuse, they can order us to. Well, of course, we finally agreed to. And we went to briefing that morning.

And we were going to Munster. Now, Munster, Germany, was like Chicago is in the United States. All the railroad went through Munster.

And the British had been tearing the dickens out of it. And they had been pulling all the able-bodied people out, fixing it back. They had some Russian POWs there that you were given extra food to, to work.

And in a couple of days, they had it back. But I'll never forget this briefing officer saying, the boy says, after today, you're going to be called women and children killers. He said, we're going to bomb the workers' homes.

He said, it's Sunday afternoon at 3 o'clock. When you go over to the sergeant, we're going to try to catch him taking a nap or something. Whew.

It's hard. I mean, I know we'll forget a little. Sergeant stood up and said, sir, what about these little babies and children?

And I'll never forget his words. He said, God damn the babies and children. They're Germans, too.

Kill them. Oh. Well, they're not going to ever buy themselves a van.

I mean, everybody's just, no, no. We didn't come over here to fight that kind of war. Our radio operator, Tech Sergeant John L.

Sutherland, of course, to the very end, he just said he wouldn't do it. But he finally did agree to. And they got us off the ground.

Now, they told us, said, we're going to give you a fighter escort. To within 15 minutes of the target. And we're going to have another fighter group to meet you 15 minutes after the target.

There's a difference of 30 minutes. Well, everything was going along all right until they had to go back. And I was in the top turret.

And the Germans, and they had told us that now they could have 600 flak guns and 200 to 250 fighters. And just quick as our fighter protection turned back, I was in the top turret. Here comes a damn fighter.

Flaks fly. Man, they tore into us. And planes were going down.

And when we went over the target, there was only six of us. There was 21 planes of us left that went over the target. And I had seen back behind a row of Germans, 10 or 12 bombers, two engine bombers.

And each one had four evidently rockets, one under each wing. And every once in a while, they would let one go and get hit. And off you go.

Well, I just cut loose on them. And I did manage to send one down smoking. And drove them back.

They did. They backed up out of range. And about that time, the co-pilot told me, he said, At about 3 o'clock, here comes four in after us.

So I turned and looked, and there was four. They just missed. So I cut loose on them.

I blew one up. And I sent another one down in flames. I didn't smoke, rather.

And about that time, I felt the awfulest jar that I had ever felt. And at that time, there were only three of us left.

[Speaker 2]

Three planes left?

[Speaker 1]

Three planes left. I didn't know what happened. But just as that jar comes, I said, Get out and get out fast.

Well, it was the first time. They preached to us all the time about a parachute strap. Always keep them tight.

We heard that preached to us. But we were so wound up, that day I just said, I'm going to loosen mine. I'm going to loosen mine.

And I had a chest-type parachute. And I had it laying. I said, I owned it down on the floor next to me.

Well, my job, first job, in that parachute, got hung under the turret. I got it out and got it on. And I was to open the bomb bay door for the radio operator.

Now, he had evidently already been killed because we heard him screaming. And he probably had an intercom on or fell on it or something. And it didn't last a minute.

He just died away. But anyway, when I opened that bomb bay door, the flames were just rolling. I mean, it was so hot you couldn't.

So I slammed the door shut.

[Speaker 2]

You were on fire forward then? Forward of the plane?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, forward.

[Speaker 2]

Forward part of the plane on fire?

[Speaker 1]

And I went under my turret. And I saw Bill. Best friend I ever had in my life was Bill Benhoe.

Just giving it all he could. Well, with those flames and some fire like that, it had evidently burnt the patrols up. Because all at once, it just, phew, down and started.

Now, I don't know whether it was the grace of God or what. But if I had been one foot further back or one foot further forward, when the plane started down, it threw me through this little escape hatch right to an escape door down the bottom. But if I hadn't been exactly where I was, I wouldn't be here today.

But I managed to just pull myself out. And I was worried about that debris, you know, falling. I didn't want to open up the chute then.

I was afraid I'd get tangled up in it. And I guess I fell 2,000 feet. And then I thought, oh, my God, that's a loose parachute strap.

So I was floating on my back. And I pulled it. And it, of course, it opened up.

But boy, how it hurt my back. But, of course, pain then didn't mean nothing. And the experience I had of floating down, and I guess we were flying at 28,500, I believe, probably about 26,000 when I opened up, was the absolute quietness.

I mean, the noise, there just was no noise or nothing. Well, no, no, let me back up here. Bill called me when there was just three of us left.

Even to the end, he relied on me. He said, Dan, what are we going to do? I said, Bill, there's only two things we can do.

You can give it, which is 45 inches of mercury, which is full throttle, and we'll try to get in that 95th roof up ahead. Or we can dive and hit the deck and try to fly back about 100 feet off the ground. You know, it's hard for a German fighter.

He said, I believe we'll try to get in. Well, that's when this shudder came. I felt flak as far as I could tell.

[Speaker 2]

You think that's what it was, the flak?

[Speaker 1]

No, I didn't know. I had no way of knowing. Until about seven years ago, an author in England got into the records of the 100th and found out my name and everything and started writing me letters about what happened.

I've got a whole stack of letters in there from him. And I found out from him, he went to Germany and interviewed German pilots that were on that mission and everything, that what happened, a German plane come and hit us and the other fellow was hugging right close to us and he hit both of us head on. That's what happened.

So, of course, when I got to the ground...

[Speaker 2]

Were you the only one who got out?

[Speaker 1]

No, there was four who got out. Me, the co-pilot, the tail gunner, and the bombardier. The bombardier had had his arm shot off.

The tail gunner wasn't hurt. The co-pilot wasn't injured. But there was one thing I was considering, was a damn good gunner.

Now, when I got down to the ground, my clothes was in shreds. I mean, my butt had just... I just had that splat all over my shoulder, my back, and my butt was blown out.

And I always believed they were out to kill me, not me only, because he didn't even touch the co-pilot or the pilot, which was all three or four feet from me. But they were out to kill me. Well, of course, I didn't think they were ever going to get to the ground.

And I got about halfway down, here come a German fighter, nose wind on me. I thought, oh my God, he's going to machine gun me. But he just waved and passed by.

Your navigator didn't get out? No, he didn't get out. I don't know what he killed before, so I don't believe there's something on him.

No way I know. And I saw a parachute way down below me. Well, all at once the ground came up to me, and I didn't make it.

Well, about halfway down, this hand started feeling numb, and I thought, well, maybe it's frozen. So I pulled my gloves and everything off, and I saw I had a piece of flak all the way to my hand, a little one. But anyway, when I did hit the ground, they told us the first thing to do was to try to hide that parachute.

So I started rolling it in, a little cow pasture with cows, and sticking it under the bank of this little creek. And I heard somebody say something. I looked up, and I was at shoulder with that gun.

So I knew he said something, but I didn't know what he said. But I knew what he meant, so I stuck my hands up. And he started to holler, Pistola, pistola.

He wanted to know if I had a pistol. So I told him, I do have, say, no German name. So in a minute here come all kinds of Germans.

A town burglar master who was the mayor or something. And they walked me right up to this little house, a little brick house. And I had an escape kit on me, and I wanted to get rid of it.

So somehow I got word to that soldier that I wanted to go take a leak. He took me around back and sort of wiggled. And I kept my eye on him until he turned his head, and I reached in and took that escape kit, and took a leak.

[Speaker 2]

Did you feel in danger that they were maybe going to hurt you or kill you?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, yeah. There's one man there, he's a... There was one woman who could speak English good.

She told me, she said, he wanted to go in there and get his gun and kill you, but we won't let him. But he was, oh, boy, he was giving us a fit. Well, people in the house took me in there.

Gave me a cup of, I don't know what it was, fast food, and it was the first time I ever saw that black German bread. And of course I, I ate them, I just had to force it down. And then they brought in a little wagon, pulled my horse, and put me in it.

So we started down the road. Of course, here come fallen, cold, rob of people. And my co-pilot was down there about, for three miles.

Lieutenant Brooks from Boston. He saw me, he thought they'd put him in there. He said, God damn, they shot you to pieces.

And what tickled me, he started hollering to the Germans, he said, listen, get this man to a doctor. I demanded, I'm a United States lieutenant. I said, Brooks, shut up.

Hell, they don't, they can't understand you, they don't care who you are. Just be quiet, I'm not hurt that bad. But I thought that was stupid.

And so they took us on in to the police headquarters, I guess. And they put the, I don't know what the name of it was. But they brought a lieutenant in.

And he had been hit in the groin with a 20-millimeter explosive shell. And he was begging somebody to hit him, to just take him out of his misery. Well, a doctor come in to me.

He did give him a shot. And he, I don't know. And they come and got me.

And took me down to the city jail, I guess. It was dark. I could just feel the walls.

They were just damp and mossy and stuff. And I guess it was four or five feet wide. I don't know how long.

But they didn't find so much. And I so wore out that I laid down on this board. And I had the best night's sleep I have ever had in my life.

I did. I just dropped right off. And I have never slept any better than that.

Well, they come that morning and woke me up. Put a bunch of us on a bus and took us to a German airfield. Now, where it was, I don't know.

But the first thing they done, they took me to the hospital. Found this German doctor and a German nurse and took that man. And he called something.

And it was a Polish slave worker. He made him pick me up and carry me. And they carried my leg because I did have a big gash in the leg.

And my hand. And that Polish man could speak English. And he whispered to me, he said, He said, we're going to win this war.

We're going to win. So, they took my hand. He took a piece of aluminum.

About that long and that wide. And cooked it so that my hand would fit in it. And he just, you know, wrapped it with gauze.

And did the same thing with my leg. That was the only medical treatment I ever had. Boy, it fit me.

When I got to prison, the outfit, it just had the black with dirt. But anyway, they took us in to a train. But it was all a train.

And we changed trains in Cologne, Germany. Oh, and that's where the people spit at us. And called us and everything.

I wouldn't know what they were saying.

[Speaker 2]

No, it wasn't friendly.

[Speaker 1]

No, it wasn't friendly. But then they changed trains and took me to Frankfurt. To Dulau Group, which was an interrogation camp.

Well, they put the, there was five of us in one of these rooms. And one of them happened to be Lieutenant John Wyman. He was Wyman's ambassador to England then.

He said, now boys, my daddy's ambassador to England. He said, listen, we know it's a bug. So let's not say a thing in the world about the war.

And they took him first to come in and call for him. They come in, got me next. Took me in a big fine office.

Man sitting there, big black suit with a white Red Cross badge around his arm. Said he was so-and-so with the International Red Cross. He was there to help me.

He had two cigarettes in it. I hadn't had one out whenever. I said, can I take four or five?

He said, no, no, no, just one. So he gave me this form he filled out. Form that had everything in the world on it.

I put my name, rank, and serial number. Of course, he kept telling me that he couldn't understand why I wouldn't fill it out. I said, I'll give you my name, rank, and serial number.

So, uh.

[Speaker 2]

You didn't think he was with the Red Cross? Or you just weren't taking any chances?

[Speaker 1]

He then called the guards, and they took me in to the German, big German officer. And he had the dog tag. And back then, they put my next of kin on there.

My wife's name, my father's, Tennessee. He said, that's where you're from. So you went inside them backwoods hillbillies, aren't you?

So I wouldn't say yes or no. I would just sit there. So he called the guards, and they filled me in to move.

But because of solitary confinement, I stayed there about four days. And I just bought me a new watch. I never had a wristwatch.

I bought it in Fresno, Maine, before we went overseas. Oh, and I'm proud of it. They said they'd give it back to me, but I never did get it.

They said they didn't even know nothing about it. But anyway, they put us in a boxcar, just to load us to the gills. And in about three days, we ended up in Vienna, Austria.

So we changed trains there and went back to Krems, what they call Stalag 17b. Now, it had just opened up about maybe a week before I got there. And they were going to take all the Air Force noncommissioned officers into this camp.

That was just what it was for. And it had been a Jewish transit camp, that they would bring the Jews out of Hungary and Romania and whatever, on the way to Mauthausen, where they had gassed them and burned them. So I'd been there about four days, I guess.

And our compound leader, who was an American sergeant when he'd been at B.W. a long time, came up to me one day and said, Sergeant James, I want to talk to you. I said, okay, go ahead. He said, no, in private, let's go outside.

He said, will you work on the underground escape committee? Of course, I'd been briefed about that. I went on that same trip, yes.

He said, all right. I said, you won't know anybody on it except me. He said, I'll give you your order.

So in a couple of days, he comes bringing me up a military map of Germany, Spain, the Balkans, all the way over to Spain, and some paper and colored pencil. And he said, you're going to draw an escape now. I was in.

The Germans called us out three times a day for roll call. But I found a board over there on the wall. So I could explain it out a little bit.

And I kept it here that time. I kept working on it. And then I had somebody from the back of the barracks from the Germans show up.

They just walked through there one time to holler. And I decided, well, I've done that about ten months. And at this time, I draw a blank.

But I remember telling him, I just can't take it any longer. I just can't take it any longer. I'm going to have to get somebody else.

[Speaker 2]

Too much stress.

[Speaker 1]

Stress, yes. Stress is disgusting. So he did.

But I don't know. But some of my buddies there, three of them, they said I would. This boy that's one of my best buddies there came through here about seven years ago and stayed at a campground up the road here.

And he called me. Well, me and my wife went up there. We got to talking.

He told my wife to take her off. He said they hadn't found any better. And they went to get permission to go to the German commandant, three of them did, and told him about me and would they give me any help.

He told them, no, you know, that if he touches the wire, he's dead. So then they said I wouldn't fall out for roll call. And they sent guards in with bayonets and javelins.

I don't remember this blank. But eventually I do remember. And after we stayed there until April 8th of 1945, the Russian, it was the Russian SS Division, trying to defend Vienna.

Not a Russian, but a German. But the Russians were about to surround me. Well, the Germans told us they were going to take me someplace else.

It would take a day or two. It took 18 days. I walked 233 miles in 18 days in the rain, sleeping in the mud, thighs were old, nothing to eat.

Of course, we were starved to death anyway. Our main diet was cabbage soup. It was as black as it could be.

It was cabbage that was shredded up. And...

[Speaker 2]

Black bread?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, blood sausage. I never took goodies yet. I was starving.

But anyway, it would be about that much of a one, on top of that cabbage, black cabbage soup. So... We got to this forest.

And they had cut out a... It was down in Bavaria, about eight miles from Brandenau, Hitler's birthplace. And, of course, there was a rain, and me and my other two buddies at Friedrich, each one of us had a blanket, and put two over us, and down over to the tree roots on my hip, and they killed me, and they put me in the middle.

And... And I... The Germans didn't give us a spoonful of flour.

I didn't have a way of cooking it. We didn't have. I just took mine and ate it.

And it made a dough ball in my stomach, they said. I got diarrhea and dysentery both. So...

An American tank, one day, come up this road and split our camp. Everybody, we had all run out and stopped him. His captain got out.

He said, boys, we didn't know what you asked us about, but we didn't know you were here. I'll radio back. I can't stop because they're after me.

He said, I'll radio back and you get some help. It was Patton's Army.

[Speaker 2]

Where were you then?

[Speaker 1]

We were about eight miles beyond Branagh, Hitler's first base. And the next morning, about daybreak, this American colonel with GIs coming from, I mean, there were places around there. Of course, this captain had asked the colonel, the German colonel, he said, will you defend them or will you fight for them?

He said, we'll defend them. So they rounded up all the Germans. And this colonel at night had told us that you just tell the ones in the street to come out.

And they did. So there was about four or five or eight that didn't need to tell to us. And he took those five or eight up to Branagh, gave them about a five-minute court-martial, or two minutes or something.

And the firing squad made the town fall out in the air and everything and watch it. He shot them dead. But to back up a little bit, we went by Malt House, which was a Jewish concentration camp.

And we heard the Germans didn't intend for us to see it, but there was a fence right along it. You could see the smoke coming out of those crematoriums. I'll never forget the odor of that burning body.

And we met, going into there, about 1,000 to 1,500 Jewish prisoners that was a pitiful lot of things I ever saw in my life. Their clothes were just falling off of them. They'd grab weeds along the road and try to eat it.

And if one fell, they'd just crack his head with one of their rifles. But anyway, after we was liberated, they told us to walk up here to this aluminum factory. There's an aluminum factory that they've abandoned it, but the hills and everything are still warm.

And you stay there with the Japanese Well, about halfway, I just fell. I couldn't go any further. I always thought after walking 233 miles in 18 days, I wasn't even able to walk the last mile to complete it.

[Speaker 2]

Well, there's limits that everybody's got.

[Speaker 1]

Well, anyway, they brought us food and white bread. That was the whitest looking stuff I ever saw in my life. After eating that old black bread, the Germans had got to use about 20% sawdust in it.

But anyway, of course, Patton had to, the next day, he had a plane landing about every five minutes to load us up. And then we went to the heart of France where they devoured us, fed us. They wouldn't give us but a little bit at each meal.

Of course, the Southern boys kill themselves eating when they're free. Some boys come by and they'd keep and one threw out a whole box of baby roots, I believe it was. This boy grabbed them.

He wouldn't share them. He just started eating them. And he did.

He died. He killed over dead. But anyway, of course, we got to the heart.

I'll never forget going through that chow line. This American colonel, he was a real colored boy there, the fishing I had. And this American colonel said, couldn't you give me a little bit more?

This colored boy said, listen, colonel, I always has to do what you say. Right here, I devoured you. He said, that's all you get.

But anyway, they got us fixed up, new clothes, put us on a ship, and we were in a convoy because some of the German subs wouldn't surrender. And there's about a thousand on this ship. And...

[Speaker 2]

Mostly prisoners?

[Speaker 1]

Oh, yeah. Mostly prisoners. There was 4,250 of us Americans in there.

There's about 60,000 of all Russians and French and whatever. Like now, but we couldn't intermingle. So, I never will forget going by that Statue of Liberty walking down a gangplank I got on my knees and kissed that ground and I said, I'll never leave you again.

Sitting here. I sent my wife a telegram when I got to I think it was New Jersey or something like that. To try not to contact me but it's home safe.

[Speaker 2]

Couldn't quite do that yet, eh?

[Speaker 1]

Uh, but the whole town was I come on the bus and I wait for the bus to come in. So, that was it. They sent us, me and my wife, to Miami Beach for 60 days and did whatever we wanted to.

[Speaker 2]

Hard, hard time for us.

[Speaker 1]

But, my congressman, Congressman Jim Cooper sent me this book. He read it when he was in the position of the Morristown did. My pilot recommended me to the distinguished flying college and he had been working since December 1984 on trying to get that for me.

And every time I could get a letter from the Pentagon somebody said, you've got to have four letters to tell me how to ride and somebody knows it. I just, I may just go in one day. I said, Jim, Congressman Cooper, there's an old saying, dead men tell no tales.

They're dead. Ain't nobody can fix that. Hey, but he didn't quit there.

He's still working. But now we, insurance business, I worked at it 25 years and I just, I couldn't do it no more. So, I just quit and they gave me a job to live comfortably.

But my wife has a terminal illness. She has got emphysema. She's got 15 percent of her lung fire is all slit.

To stay with her all about two years for that five and a half, the doctors escape her. The doctors here and the biggest pulmonary doctor enough for Dr. Bogart. He asked me, he told me I'm going to pay his bill then.

It's five years. That's it.

[Speaker 2]

That's hard. It's hard. You've been through a whole bunch of hard times.

Where there, there must have been times when you were in hands of the Germans that you thought you might not make it out.

[Speaker 1]

Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Sure.

I didn't know. I tell you, men never lose hope. I don't think so.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I think keeping the hope is one of the ways that people survive.

[Speaker 1]

But we've got four grandchildren now. They're all going to be here for Christmas. And two up to the University of Tennessee.

They're going to do that. And they're going to all be here like...

[Speaker 2]

I can't know about that. I can't know about that.

[Speaker 4]

No.

[Speaker 1]

But we've talked it over. What she will have done. That's the picture there.

I can tell to you.

[Speaker 2]

Nice picture.

[Speaker 1]

And she told me what she would have done with this and what she would have done with that. Who would get this and who would get that.

[Speaker 2]

It's a hard burden to carry for you though.

[Speaker 1]

I was 20 years old. She was 17 when we got married. I don't know what it would be like to be without her.

But the boys told me not to worry. One of them actually went to a pretty job in Knoxville. He didn't go to you.

He said, Daddy, I don't want to go. All I want to be is a mechanic. Well, I said, go study mechanical engineering then.

No, he said, I want to be a automobile mechanic. Well, a little booger went over to Volkswagen in Knoxville and in five years he made shop for them. He was over a man of 40-something, 50-something years old and working there for years.

But he quit. He divorced his wife. He married a gal we tried to get him not to do it.

[Speaker 2]

People have to make their own mistakes.

[Speaker 1]

But he quit his job. I'm like, oh, stay with it. Careful.

We have all agreed and all the other boys agreed that when the right one of us is gone, he gets his money.

[Speaker 2]

Well, in a way to be able to work things out does make it easier. Sometimes people don't have a chance to begin to work things out. That's right, I know.

People have to make do all of a sudden.

[Speaker 1]

That's hard too. As I told her, I said, honey, I could cope for you. I've had a heart condition and my our family doctor found it in the x-ray and sent me to an internist here.

He specializes in hearts. He doctored me and over at the VA they told me, say, you've got the heart now for young athletes.

[Speaker 2]

Did you feel you had pretty good treatment with the VA?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. Oh, yeah. They got me treated fine.

They, uh, as a matter of fact, they gave me what they call insurance for my wife which reimburses 8% of all medical expenses, including my drug bill, like 1.4 or 2.4 dollars. 8% of it back. It paid out about \$60,000.

[Speaker 2]

That's a lot. Couldn't do it without it. No.

No. Do you still remember your trip down to Miami that you took after you got home? Yeah.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, sure.

[Speaker 2]

Stayed on the beach, did you?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. We didn't have an hurricane come. Oh, really?

That's right. We got home with it. Blew off for three.

And we've had it ever since then.

[Speaker 2]

I'm interested, too, in that fellow from England who was writing about that particular raid that you were shot down in.

[Speaker 1]

Well, now, his story, he was actually one of the best civil engineers in England. And he was hired by Saudi Arabia to build some kind of interstate highway system or exchange and all that. And a drunk Australian hit him in the head with an ax.

And it paralyzed him from his hip down. He stayed in a Saudi Arabian hospital for two years. But, uh, he was smart.

He wrote history. Yes, he wrote history. He went to Germany and interviewed German pilots.

German people. That was his name. He wrote comedians.

Got everybody's name he could. He is the one that his German fighter plane hit his head on. Well, now, he gave me the name of some people in the 95th group which was right ahead of us which we was headed for.

And some of them said they only saw one parachute. And I wrote one man in Oregon who was a pilot. He said, my God, how are you living?

He said, I only saw one parachute. He said, then they popped out mine. Later on, he believed the German intended to do it and he ejected himself before impact.

And that was the one parachute some had seen. I was the right man out. Last Memorial Day, I sent my pilot, Bill Redo, the best friend I ever had.

He was buried in a sort of cemetery, Catholic cemetery in this town where the plane went down. And at the end of the war, he was removed to a military graveyard in Belgium where his mother in 1948 had him brought back to Birmingham. I had him on a stem, red rose, placed on his grave.

I too was now 66, and I rejoined him.

[Speaker 2]

He spelled his name M-E-A-D-O-W. Is it Meadow or Bedow? Bedow.

[Speaker 1]

B-E-D-O-W. But this book I don't have. I gave it to my grandson in Atlanta.

He wanted to read it. And he's got it down there.

[Speaker 2]

Have you kept in touch with very many of the folks that were in the prison or war camps with you?

[Speaker 1]

Well, we exchanged Christmas cards and every once in a while we would write each other. There were four of them. We all sent Christmas cards to each other.

And one of them I knew I could tell someday he'd be a minister. I just knew that then. Sure enough, he became one.

He's retired. Disabled American Veterans have him.

[Speaker 2]

Have you had any problems either in your hand or your legs?

[Speaker 1]

No. I'm getting arthritis now.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, it happens sometimes.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I appreciate very much you talking with me.

[Speaker 1]

Well, I hope I've given you...

[Speaker 2]

You've given me a lot, sir. I appreciate it.

[Speaker 1]

Well, I'll tell you that Jewish concentration camps and those Jews they've taken in there was the most barbaric pitiful thing I've ever seen in my life. Yeah, I've talked to people who said that Now, in the story there is supposed to be one plane made it back. Only one plane.

[Speaker 2]

Of those 21 in your group?

[Speaker 1]

He was Lieutenant of Robert Rosenthal. He didn't make it back. But let me tell you what.

He deserved to go. I saw it. He pulled in that group ahead when he saw them getting run by.

He deserved to go. But he hadn't made it back. I witnessed it.

[Speaker 2]

Probably nobody knows that but you and a few others. You and him, maybe. A few others.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, it sounds like almost every one of the missions was bad and the last one was by far the worst.

[Speaker 2]

It was supposed to be on. It was supposed to be on. It was supposed to be on a 10-day R&R.

[Speaker 1]

Of course, that meant captain or pilot. Master Sergeant was made. Of course, I mean, that didn't have nothing to do with us going.

It did.

[Speaker 2]

I was interested in the response of the crews when they found out that they were going to have to be bombing the...

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. Well, now this Rosenthal did go back and did there six months. Six months.

Eight months. And was only on his sixth mission. I was there one month and one day and that's him.

He aborted. He aborted. When they come up knowing they'd be rough, he aborted, he aborted.

[Speaker 2]

And then he ran on the last one.

[Speaker 1]

And ran on the last one. Doctor, I'm with you.

[Speaker 2]

Well, I always learn something. Sometimes I learn more than others. This has been one of those.

I thank you for the time. Well, you do.