

Land, Thomas Vernon Interview 11-9-90

[Speaker 1]

My name is Don Orvin, and the date is November 9th, 1990. And I have with me at this time Vernon Land, who has some experiences to relate just for the record concerning World War II. He is one of a dozen or so former prisoners of war now residing in Pulaski County, and he was in the Air Force during World War II.

And on another tape he has recorded briefly some of the experiences that he had during that event. But, Vernon, tell me now where you were born and where you went to school and information like that. I was born in Richmond, Kentucky, and I graduated from Madison High School.

I spent all five years in Madison High School. And from there I went to work for my mom's auto parts company as a store here for branch managers. And from there I went to Corbin.

My wife and I got married. My wife and I went to Corbin. We lived there for a year and a half.

We had one daughter while we were there. And then I was drafted from 162 there to Whitney County. And from there I went to the Air Force.

When were you drafted? That was on paper. Just about what month and what year, if you can remember.

Oh, right here. Just to make up some time there. Thought I had everything down on me.

That's harder than it is. Might be harder to do. Okay, according to your discharge.

I was drafted on March 17, 1943. Okay. And then what happened?

What was your first assignment after you were drafted? I was sent to Clearwater, Florida. St. Petersburg to take basic training down in Black Sand. Now, was that Air Force basic training or was it regular? It was regular basic training. I didn't know I was going to Air Force at that time.

Then he shipped us out to the Air Force. Then evidently after you took that test you showed some kind of aptitude. Yeah, that's what aptitude is.

And then you transferred to get Air Force training. Where was that? Easterfield, Mississippi, Black Sand.

Squadron 4. Well, it was B-24. I went to Amesville on a B-24 bomber.

Okay, so you knew from then on that you were going to be on a bomber crew. Yeah, I knew I was going to be a bomber crew. And then when you look at your discharge again, when did you go overseas as a bomber group?

We went overseas. Well, we actually landed over there in June of 1944, the 12th. We departed the United States the 5th of June.

Okay. We wound up, we went across by Iceland, Northern Ireland, crossed our way up and made the northern route. We went in the backside of Ireland.

They wouldn't allow us to fly over Ireland, so we had to land in Northern Ireland. They took our plane and inferred us in. And I actually arrived there on the 12th of June.

Okay. So a little bit after D-Day. I'm not supposed to be there for D-Day.

Okay. Due to the Isle of Air or whatever you want to be. We buzzed Cincinnati and got some trouble.

Yeah. You tell that on another tape. That's right.

Now, Vernon, you arrived there, say, about June the 12th, 1944. And then when was your first mission over Germany? About a week later.

It didn't take long. Since they got organized and got started, they needed us bad. They were losing too many planes.

All right. And then you record on another tape where you had some 19 missions until the mission that you were shot down. Had you suffered any casualties in the earlier missions?

Now, our crew, it's said that, yeah, we lost a lot of aircraft. We lost planes there. They were ready to do something.

But your crew was pretty lucky. My crew was lucky, yes. For those first 19.

Sure were. And then you had the raid toward Kassel, Germany. What was the particular reason for that target?

Well, it was after a tank factory and the workers. All right. Before the raid, was there much anticipation?

Did you know that was going to be a rough one? No, not really. What happened there, the lead pilot got off course a little bit and he gave the German fighters.

They were laying out in the background. They could hit P-51s, escort us, and we were out of the way of my escort and of course they took that opportunity to come after us. We sent about 150 fighters back.

Okay. So for some reason you— Yeah, Lieutenant McClellan made a mistake and we got off course. All right.

Did you ever drop your bombs? Oh, yeah. We dropped them on the course.

That's what we were doing when the fighters came. You got to the target then. We got to the target.

It just hadn't dropped our bombs until the bomb made oil. Okay. But you were sort of flying alone at that time.

Yeah, we were. And then you were making your way back. That's right.

We were getting back into the wing. And the German fighters hit you. How many fighters did you see?

The approximate was 150. We knocked down 28 of them right off. We brought up 28 of them.

At that time they knocked down 25 of us in about three minutes. All right. You say in a very brief period of time.

Three minutes. How many American bombers went down? We lost 25 right over the target and although we had 39 planes up and 37 of them made it to the target, one of them was flyable after the rain.

They went down all the way back to England. The majority of them went down to France, Belgium. I've got this all on paper where every plane went down.

Were they shot down mostly by ACAC or by German fighters? No, they were crippled by the fighters. They were just trying to get home.

So the fighters did most of the damage on that raid? The fighters did most of the damage on that raid. Some of them.

One of the fighter pilots even ran. One of the B-24s took it down. Okay.

Now you were heading back just a couple of minutes from your target as you dropped your bomb. We just started back. And the fighter planes attacked.

What kind of German fighters were they? It was ME-109s and Focke-Wulf 190s. Okay.

Do you recall seeing the plane that actually shot you down? Yeah. I blowed him up after I got off the wing.

About the time the engine blowed up. We hit him on fire. I had plenty of help.

I was more than a shoot man. He was close in. I could see his glove.

He had a pair of white gloves. Okay. He got you off it.

Then you got him with it. We blowed him up. He didn't make it.

All right. So he hit which one of your engines? Part of his debris hit number four.

We blew it up. Team number three off left us with two engines. Knocked him completely off the aircraft.

Then it was obvious that you were going to have to evacuate the plane. I had to do something. Okay.

Were there any casualties right at that time? They'd already killed my tail gunner. He was dead.

Okay. Was he killed from that explosion or from?

[Speaker 2]

No.

[Speaker 1]

He was killed in the fighter. All right. Your tail gunner was dead at that time.

He was dead down there. Then did you have radio communication within the craft that would tell you when to evacuate? Yeah.

The pilot told us when to do that. Okay. And then immediately?

Yeah. When we got in trouble, both engines we heard would blow up, so we just had to bail out right there. Well, to your knowledge, did all of the crew except the gunner who was killed evacuate the plane safely?

No. We had one guy that was religious. He started praying.

He wouldn't bail out. We had to bail out and leave him. We just panicked and didn't get him out.

Okay. He wasn't hurt either. He just went out on the plane.

He just panicked. Your parachute was on at that time.

[Speaker 2]

No.

[Speaker 1]

I had to get out. I had to pick it up off the flight deck and put it on. I jumped in a 26-foot emergency chute.

Most of the big chutes were 36-foot. It hit the ground a lot harder, too. And then, did you have any trouble leaving the plane itself?

Had it started a descent?

[Speaker 2]

It was still pretty level at that time.

[Speaker 1]

We were going down. We had an automatic pilot that was going down real steady, but it was going real fast. Okay.

We were losing a lot of altitude. About how high were you when you jumped? I'd say somewhere around 15,000.

What time of day was it? 10.20. I broke my watch when I hit the ground. 10.20 in the morning?

10.20 in the morning. I broke my watch when I hit the ground. I didn't do it early in the morning.

All right. You hit the ground. Was it at 10.20?

Was it at 10.20? Yes. Was it at 10.20?

Yes. Yes. Was it at 10.20?

Was it at 10.20? No, 10.20. We started moving out of the place. Okay, now I may have asked before, what was the date of that raid?

September 27, 1944. Okay, September 27th. I was wondering if the Allies hadn't moved, the arm, the ground forces hadn't moved anywhere near that point?

Not every way back. The Russians were moving in, though. Okay.

Then you got into the woods, and you were able to stay free for about how long? I stayed free for several hours. place to hide, that wood was too clean, it was like the floor.

I finally got a little brush pile in a ravine, crawled up in there and layered a dog and two German soldiers to track me down and get me out. What had you done with your parachute? I just dropped it through the woods, changed my shoes, put a little heat boots on and put my G.I. shoes on. I had broken in a new fire, we carried a new fire already, hardly saw a fish, we had to walk the Pyrenees Mountain to get a shot down in the lower part of the mountain to evacuate. Did you have some escape equipment, did you have a compass on you? Oh yeah, compass, map, flags, German mark.

You pretty well knew where you were, you were oriented. I knew where I was actually. But it was about 3 in the afternoon, it was like an afternoon before you picked me up.

Two German soldiers, two German soldiers and a German police dog. Did you think the dogs were the reason that you were found? Oh yeah, they were tracking me down.

What had been your plan? I had planned to kill both of them guards and the dogs, steal and try to escape, but then Seth Preservation came in and I changed my mind. Okay, I think that was the wise thing to do.

And then they, the two guards took you to what point? They picked me up and put me in a Volkswagen and took me to a Luftwaffe headquarter, a German headquarter, I don't know exactly where I was, I rode most of the day. And they took me to an English-speaking camp in Fulbright, I guess that's what I did there, they took my last cigarette away from me and threatened to kill me because I lost my dog tag a little bit and I broke the chain and left me in a kind of a bad place.

Vernon, did you meet the rest of your crew at that time? No. Did you meet them ever during the rest of the war?

One, one or two of the crew I met at Stalag 4, we got into Stalag 4, they didn't know we were crew members before, they did know it but they didn't worry about it, and when we put us into the barracks according to the alphabetical order, my name was Lance, he was in the same barracks, same room I was in, and Hal was in another barracks, another room, Geester, our radio operator, was over to another room in the same compound. Okay, how many are on a B-24 bomber crew?

Ten. And tell us, to the best of your knowledge, what happened to each member of the crew? Okay, now on that mission, our bombardier wasn't on board, we used to tie the litter, instead of that we'd lose so many planes, we didn't have enough bombardiers, so we had nine on that day.

Now, the nose gunner was Dale C. Mackey from Hill City, Kansas, uh, would come on up to the plane, my pilot was uh Edward Hoppin from Cincinnati, Ohio, Slater Park area, my co-pilot was uh Sniadol from Virginia, the navigator was uh Jones from Denver, Colorado, the waist gunner was uh John Tovert from Des Moines, Iowa, the other one was Hal Boyd from Indiana, and the tail gunner was from uh Lansing, Michigan. I guess I take your word for it, I was the top third gunner, I was in protection.

Okay, then what happened to each one of them? Well, after he bailed out, Geester broke a leg, and uh Jones broke one of his legs, he was a little edgy, more than edgier than he were, probably in a different category. They killed my pilot, after he got on the ground, I understand, I don't know how, but I guess I can't at the very, I didn't see him, but anyway, he's dead, and uh, the waist gunner was killed on the raid, and the tail gunner was killed on that raid, and uh, Doc, Doc probably wouldn't bail out, so, and the rest of us, uh, landed in pretty good shape.

Uh, nose gunner was wounded in his leg, but it wasn't superficial, not too bad. All right, uh, then were you immediately after your interrogation, and by the way, tell me about your interrogation, was it very thorough? Well, it was pretty thorough, but they had so many people, and yeah, they brought us out, there were more than there were even, and that's the same question, you can tell them that name, right sir, I've been threatened to shoot me a couple of times.

Well, my problem was, I had my dog, David, I had an extra oxygen mask clip on her when I went out to, I pulled a rip cord and broke that chain you do, and it was floating in the air out there. Uh, what special kind of information did they seem to be looking for? Well, really, they want to know what group you was with, what your target was, who you were, where you were from, where you, they want to know about your family, I guess, but they really want to know, they gave me more than I do.

Okay, and then, uh, you were evacuated to, uh, to Luft 4? Yes, Vialag 4. Okay.

And, uh, Grof Tischau is the correct name of the little town. Okay, now, what part of Germany? That's into the west, it's 50 miles southeast of the free city of Danube.

Okay. 23 miles from Poland. That's northeastern Europe, isn't it?

Way up in the next, oh, 23 miles from Poland. Okay, yeah, you're dominant. Um, all right, and then, when you arrived there, you were, uh, assigned a particular compound.

What compound were you in? Compound D. Okay.

Barracks D and room D, and it was incomplete at the time. We didn't fix all that, but the barracks weren't complete. Tell me about the inhabitants.

Were they all American Air Force people in that particular prison camp? Every one of them was Air Force, except one British. I don't know how you amounted to that, but we had one British boy.

All right. Did you have a chain of command in prison camp where you had one, um, as far as the Americans were concerned? Sure, sure.

The highest ranking officers then? No, we didn't do it that way. We just took your own name.

We had a miller, he was a Cajun French from Louisiana, spoke better German than you did English, and, uh, he was our man in charge. Because he was fluent in the language. He was fluent in the language.

All right, now, were these non-commissioned officers and officers, or were you all non-commissioned officers? No, everybody was non-commissioned. The highest ranked there was Tech Sergeant, that's where I was.

I don't think you had any master sergeants at all. And you were a flight crew? I was a flight crew, yeah.

[Speaker 2]
All right.

[Speaker 1]
Were there any systematic attempts at escape? Yeah, we tried to dig out, but there wasn't much we could do. That sand wouldn't hold us.

We tried to line them up with coffee bins and dig out, but we couldn't. You tried the tunnel, but? We tried the tunnel, but it didn't work.

We did get one man out the whole time we was there. He went out with that bumper where he pumped the toilets out, and they put holes in it, siphoned it out, and take it out and spread it over the ground. We got to take all the holes and walk out.

And he got away and went back to Poland, and he spoke Polish, and he gave them information, you know. Later, they bombed it, staked it out, and bombed that town, and he made it all right. So he got out?

Yeah, he got out. He's the only man who ever got out. All right, now, let's talk about the average day in a POW camp.

What time was your roll call? Usually about nine o'clock. They'd let you out at eight to go to the restroom, and that's about what you needed.

You didn't have any other facilities. Most of the little rooms, port and water rooms, they didn't have any shower or anything like that. And they'd line us up five men deep, they called it flunkmont, and we had 8,000, and there was 2,000 of us in one compound, so they put 1,000 of us and five barracks on the other side, and a salvo on this side, line us up five men deep and count us off.

So in order to put a little bit of fun there during the morning, we'd hide one man out, and they would leave a couple of blank spaces, and by the time we'd get through, we'd shift on the garden stream up, and they'd go back and start all over again. Then they'd go find a man, he'd go on sick call, keep him getting in trouble. That took about a couple hours some mornings.

That occupied some of our time, getting as much trouble as we could. All right, then you came back and you had chow, such as it was. What was a typical first meal?

You get a two-gallon-half bucket of potatoes. Sometimes you get a little dry soup with weevils in it. We'd shake the weevils out, lay them on the table, go ahead and eat the soup, but we should eat the weevils.

They had a lot of protein in them. We didn't know that it was that bad. Any tea or coffee or anything like that?

No, we got some earth's acid. It was supposed to be coffee. Tastes terrible, but it was something to drink.

And when were you issued bread? We got a six of an open bread a piece every day, and you got to be a real problem over the bread, because the guy slicing the bread, if he sliced the piece too thick, was in deep trouble. So we just took the cards out from the ace down to the six of hearts, and the ace down to the six of diamonds, laid it on the bread, and that took care of that.

You were given rations twice a day, so three meals a day. I got two-and-a-half-gallon buckets of potatoes for twenty-one men, I believe here. And a six-loaf of bread a day, but we could get out a Red Cross soup when it gets Red Cross parcels.

Let's talk about the Red Cross parcels. They came in irregularly, and you didn't get a whole one, but you would divide. Sometimes, when you got a big shipment in, we'd get a whole parcel, and most times, we'd divide it when you couldn't get any.

What value did the Red Cross parcels have besides the contents of the package itself? Were you able to trade it for anything? Yeah, we'd trade our cigarettes for food.

Cigarettes didn't have any money, so we'd just trade the cigarettes. I've got a thing here that shows you what we did. We didn't have any value.

Who would you trade to? We'd trade between ourselves, just among ourselves. Did you ever have to guard with those cigarettes if it wasn't allowed?

They worked real good. Was there sort of a medium exchange, how much a package of cigarettes? Yes.

Give me one example. You don't have to read them all. You do.

We traded mostly among the Red Cross parcels. We didn't trade for the bread, the potatoes, stuff we got from the Germans. We didn't use that for medium exchange on that.

Were you able to organize it to any kind of athletic teams, any kind of recreation? Yeah, we had a bunch of baseball stuff over there, but we didn't do much of it. We didn't have enough to go around.

I think maybe one or two bats for 2,000 men. We had some teams where a guy would have an arm off. He couldn't run, so he couldn't bat, so one guy would have a leg off, and he'd bat for the guy, and the guy didn't have any arm to run for him.

It was kind of a crippled up team. It was kind of pathetic in a way, but it had a bit of humor to it also. All right.

As you got into colder weather, was it extremely uncomfortable up there in Northeastern Europe? Yes, it was uncomfortable. We got to where we could steal it.

It peaked pretty good, but by the time we'd get it stored away, they'd come back and start to take it away from us. We'd go back and steal it back again. Did anyone have a radio hidden that you could learn?

Yes, sir. We had BBC. I never knew where it was.

Still don't know the date. I have an idea where it was. We had one man go down.

It was down in a restaurant somewhere, down in an outside crapper we had. He'd go down and sit there and put a part for us. I've been here a time or two, and I knew what he was doing, but I didn't ever try to find out for sure.

I think that's what it was. I'm just guessing. He was sitting at a runner with a little note on a brown piece of paper, and they got the flies that we'd get news every day, and the guy would stick it in his mouth and chew it up to highlights, and we didn't have any problem.

All right, and that's how the word circulated. Were you aware that the Russians were starting to get fairly close late in the winter? Well, yes.

All right. We had already organized a complete outfit. We were going to have the Russian fight when we got there.

And then because of that, the Germans decided to evacuate. Yes. And did that come as a surprise?

No. Now, we really thought maybe they might overrun us. If they had, we were going to have the Russian fight, and then I'm going to realize they weren't going to do that.

So, on February 4th, 1945, you started your evacuation. Do you remember how you lined up, how long the column was or anything like that? What kind of guard?

We started off, of course, some of the guards, both the guards were older than we were because they had, some of them had already been in combat, some of them weren't combat people, some of them weren't as wise as they could have been. So, they were older guards. They were in their forties, and they just lined us up and started down the road, compound by compound, and that day, we put 8,000 men on the road.

You'd walk all day, snow or rain or whatever, wherever you get through. If you had a barn run, you'd sit out in the woods and cut for dogs and guards, and there you stayed all night, whether it was outdoors or indoors. Did you know then what your destination was?

No. We just knew you were going west. And so, you walked a total of 823 kilometers, about 502 miles, to Bitterfield.

That is in Germany? Yeah, that's on the Ebb River. That's 86 days on the road, that's how long we were on the road.

Is that approximately in the center of Germany? That's close. All right.

Now, what happened at that point? Who did you bump into there? Well, we ran into the front line scouts from the 104th Airborne Division.

The Americans? Yeah, the Americans, yeah. Terry Allen Lloyd.

Do you remember who saw the allied troops first? It was just breaking day that morning. We was in an old barn, and they came in an old barn and told us what to do, and I'd get excited, because we'd already got to do what we were going to do.

Yeah, you knew that you were about to bump into them? Sure. Everything happened all at once, I mean everything.

I know there's a possibility of being hit by your own men, but they were aware. They didn't fire, there wasn't any shots fired, but we needed to get into something else. And you were aware then?

Sure, they told us not to get into too much trouble. The Americans disarmed part of the guard, and we took care of the rest of them before we got there. Now, one of your stops on the way to Bitterfield was at an American POW camp, Stalag Levin D, up in Fowling Basel, which is north of Hanover.

So, you stayed there a while with other Air Force prisoners. While you were there, there were other American prisoners and everything else. So, you stayed there maybe a couple of weeks, and then you went on to Bitterfield, where you eventually bumped into American forces.

Now, tell me about your evacuation. What happened then, after the Americans took control? We just went wherever we wanted to.

There wasn't anybody to have any charge of. Nobody knew who we were, so we started looting, having a good time, getting all the food we could find, cook rabbits. We had a lot of fun looting, picking up some of the stuff.

We liberated some of the stuff, you know. And then they began to evacuate you. And then I got armed, and I took what I wanted.

Okay, they evacuate you to where? I went from there to a camp. I don't remember exactly where it was.

It was called D. Lawson Center, a big old tent. They took everything we had away from us.

What, you had lice on you? Oh, Lord. We had two kinds of lice.

The red-headed lice was a Polack lice, and the black-headed was a German lice. Oh, we don't know if that's correct or not. It's just something we said.

We had two kinds, though, and the other D. Lawson. By the time you got to speaking real good, they got to fighting real good.

And that D. Lawson gave us some more clothes, took everything we had, and put them in a pile and burned them up. Well, Vernon, as you know, I was in the style of 11th Avenue, and the Air Force people visited there briefly, and we always claimed that you all bought the lice to our camp.

Of course, that was a joke.

[Speaker 2]

No, it might have been so.

[Speaker 1]

We was all lousy. But that was the joke that we had. That's all right.

Yeah, we accept that. All right. Then you ended up, your port of evacuation was at Camp Lahar, Camp Lucky Strike.

Camp Lucky Strike, yeah. And what kind of boat did they put you on? Yeah, I think a boiler blew up.

We had a turbine, you know. It was 11 days out of the city. They had a river about 1,500 men.

They had 3,000 on board, and the weather was terrible. Part of the time, it was underwater. It threw up the strip wires.

It was a USS Explorer, mainly. It was a Coast Guard boat, really. A little one, probably.

Yeah, a little one. It threw up, but you could have made something. Half the boys were sick, even his arm got sick.

I didn't get sick. And where did you land in the States? Camp Patrick in Virginia.

And immediately were you allowed to go home on leave? Yeah, they took us up there real quick. All right, let's ride on out.

We didn't have any problem at all crossing. Okay, after you recuperated, what outfit did you report back? I went back to San Antonio, Texas, Kelly Field, and they couldn't handle us up there, so they shipped us out, just as many people coming back.

They were letting us out on the point system, and we had more points than some rest stopmen, and we were hollering to get out, which we should have been done again. They shipped us to Greensboro, North Carolina. And were you discharged from Greensboro?

Discharged from Greensboro. And what was the date of that, of your discharge? October 8th, 1945.

Okay, yeah, you were one of the early ones. Well, I had 105 points, and it made a lot of difference. Now, after you were discharged, then did you come back to where?

I came back to Richmond, but my wife and daughter still lived there. They had gone home to their mother, but she rented a house with the town I was liberated. And then I went back to the county I worked for, Wildflower Parks Company.

This store was open here in Somerset, or the store in Mount Sterling. I had no choice, so I came to both places, and I decided to take Somerset over to Mount Sterling. I came down to Somerset, and that would have been in 1946 or something.

That was on the 30th. I got out on the 30th, and I came over here to work on Monday. Boy.

I'd been home talking to the boss. I already knew what I was going to do. So, you actually kind of gained a new citizen.

I came in, I think. At that time. Now, have you been active in Veterans Affairs since that time?

Yes, I have. I've run for VFW, DAV, American Legion, XPOWs, National, I'm on a lot of VFWs. I've been in the Capitol, I've left, and I'm going to do it later.