

Library of Congress transcript of recorded interview
(Typos in original transcript)

**Recorded by P.F.C. Clarence O. "Mike" Swope in the winter
of 1977-1978**

Tom Swope:

My name is Tom Swope. My father is P.F.C. Clarence O. Swope, known to his friends for most of his life as Mike Swope. He served in the U.S. Army 103rd Division, 409th Regiment B Company. His serial number was 35054725. My dad's outfit landed at Marseille in September of 1944. He was captured two and a half months later in early December of 1944 during the Selestat engagement in France near the German border. That's spelled S-E-L-E-S-T-A-T. He spent the rest of the war in various German Prisoner of War camps. In 1990 my father was diagnosed with cerebral atrophy, a condition related to the malnutrition he suffered during his months of captivity. In 1991, he was admitted to the nursing home unit of the Brecksville (ph) V. A. Hospital near Cleveland, Ohio. He died there in June of 1995. Among the medals and citations awarded my father were the Purple Heart, a Bronze Star, Combat Infantryman Badge, Expert Infantryman Badge and P.O.W. Medal, along with various other campaign medals and awards. This tape is an informal audio diary of my father's experiences as a Prisoner of War. At first he was reluctant to talk, but I convinced him to include some of his stories in the cassette letters that he was sending me at the time. What you will hear are excerpts taken from those cassette letters. Dad made these recordings during the winter of 1977-'78 at the age of 54.

Clarence O. Swope:

If you expect a hero story, I'm no hero. I used to dig holes and I'd stick that stupid machine gun up on top of the hole and my head would be below the hole and I'd just kind of run off three boxes of ammunition, throw the gun over the hill because those automatic weapons, they do too much firing. We weren't too crazy about shooting those dumb things off. Although a couple times I was probably accidentally almost a hero, but nobody was there to find out about it. Yeah, okay. Here we go, we're back on the air now. And back with you again. On the stories we were talking about, why this particular story is probably going to be, if I ever get around to writing the whole biography of my two years and 10 months and three days over there in, in the big one there, this, this would be the punch line. And my rate of getting around to writing these things down is getting pretty slow so we're going to tell you about it now and see what you think

now. As far as almost being a hero, why that came about because while we were in this P.O.W. camp our assignment was to walk to these underground--the missile factories. It--that was a walk that--it was pretty torture. This was during the winter months and it was all we could do to get there, but once we got there our job was to blast tunnels inside of the mountainside. And once you got the main tunnel, then you would blast into the tunnels off the main tunnel and then create rooms underneath this, this mountainside. And from our observations, why, there was-- there was some main rooms in this particular mountain that had already been finished and every day, why, these--these scientists--we assumed they were scientists because they had their black leather boots, their black jackets, their briefcases and whatnot, were going into these main tunnels where they would be, be doing their experimenting and, and whatnot. Whatever they were doing we really didn't know at the time. Because we'd never really heard of the jets, missiles, rockets, or anything of that type. All we knew is that it seemed strange that once in awhile you'd hear this--the sound go by that would probably sound similar to what a jet would sound like today, but we could never see it. Now either they were shot off on the backside of the mountain or they were going so fast that, that the speed of sound, you were just always looking, you know, like miles behind where you should be looking.

But we did realize that something extremely important was going in these--going on in these, these finished tunnels, and being our job was to blast tunnels, we did have access to the dynamite. Now, as far as the American P.O.W. was concerned, why it was kind of a dog-eat-dog type existence. In other words, you couldn't trust what you might consider to be your best friend because if he was hungry, he would steal your food. But I just got the idea one day that there's something mighty important going on in these tunnels and I, I had been stealing some dynamite and planting the dynamite around the entrances in these main finished tunnels in such a way that--and wiring them in such a way that if we could set that blast off we would seal them and doom everybody that was inside those main tunnels.

Now this was a pretty good sized factory, in fact if you were reading in your--I just happened to see it last year in a, Robby got the world--book of Guinness World Records or whatever you call it. And I just happened to spot when I was looking through the index, world's largest underground factory. And it would be this tunnel in Germany. That was the place. And anyway, I got the idea well there's something mighty important going on inside these finished main tunnels and why in the heck don't I just plant this thing with dynamite and I kind of had to do most of this on my own. Like I say, you can't trust your own best friend to squeal on you so I had this thing

pretty much planted and wired and all ready to go. In other words, set this thing off would have sealed all these German scientists that were in there working on the German rocket program. As it turned out, the--I figured everything is ready to go. Maybe the next morning we'll set this thing off and just see what happens. Who cares; nobody will know who did it. But that following morning, the--we were getting ready to leave for work, from our P.O.W. camp which was, I don't know, maybe seven, eight miles away. We had to hike that thing. When the Russian fighter ships started coming in and strafing the town with--we were like on the suburb of the town where our P.O.W. camp was, they were strafing the town, coming in low. So all our guards--it was just kind of, kind of took off. They, they knew they were coming too close and their only way to survive was to get the hell out of there and leave us on our own, which was exactly what happened.

But later on, we--we through an article in Life magazine that I really didn't see till about 15 years later, that particular underground missile factory was where the Russians finally overtook that factory and they took the majority of the German scientists that were in there working on the German rocket program and they got them into Russia and they were the ones that developed the American--or the Russian outer space programs. von Braun, people like that were also in there, and somehow von Braun got to the Americans, which helped the American program. But I often wonder if, if I'd have had one more day to seal that mountain and all the scientists working on the rocket program that were inside of that mountain that were sealed off that it would have set back space travel, nuclear warfare, whatnot, at least 10 or 20 years. And this, this would really be probably the punch line if I ever get around to really telling the whole story, why that could well be the punch line because I've often felt that that could have been a big turning point in history. Just one more day for me to set that doggone thing off. So anyway, I never got around to it. And we were on our own from there on out after the German guards took off to make our own ways back to the American line. Now this--one of these days I'm going to finish that diary I started. In fact, I did a couple of more paragraphs on it there not--oh, maybe a year or so ago I think after you had read what I had written up to then, because I just started to get into the P.O.W. life I think when kind of come to an abrupt halt and probably the reason for that is there's certain things that you start talking about, it just makes you nervous. I can do it I'm sitting up here by myself so as far as I'm concerned nobody's listening to me. And a couple of highballs help.

But, yeah, what I should probably do is with your training in the programming to writing and so forth, why maybe you can make a story out of it someday. In fact, why I wonder how many other people have survived three firing squads. I--during my days as a P.O.W. I was stood in front of the firing squad on three separate occasions, and those aren't in the diary that I wrote here because I just didn't feel they were that significant to the story or whatever at that time.

But well, okay. To get to the three firing squads that we--I stood against, the very first one occurred when we were first captured. And we were captured by the Panzer division that was going down to engage in the Battle of the Bulge. Now, if you've ever seen the movie of the Battle of the Bulge, the commander of this particular Panzer division was, in the movie was set up to be a mass murderer. They'd take towns and wiped out people and line them up and shot them all down. Americans that, or whatever that happened to be occupying the town. But the day before we were captured, when we had captured the town, we had taken this town and a lot of the guys in our group--the Americans had a habit of being souvenir hunters. As far as, you know, when they'd take a town they'd get all the souvenirs they can. Well, we took a bunch of German prisoners and... Yeah, where was I. Yeah, we, we had taken the town. We had taken the German prisoners. And as the American reputation of being a bunch of souvenir hunters, they--any valuables they could get even off the P.O.W.'s we took, why they would take. And this one particular German soldier, somebody had stolen his watch. So the following morning when they--this was probably about one o'clock in the morning when we were captured and whatnot, but anyway the following morning, this guy was pretty teed off. And there were probably about maybe 20 of us, 25 of us left at that time. He lined us up and okay, who took his watch. And nobody would admit it. So he got a couple of his buddies and they lined us up along the side of the roads and they were just going to shoot us down. If nobody said who had his watch, they were going to just shoot us down. Nobody said anything and he was, they were ready to shoot us down, and just about, about that time, the tank commander, the colonel, pulled along and the side of where he had us lined up alongside of the road, and says "was ist los?," which means what's going on or what's up. And the German soldier said: "Well, these Americans stole my watch last night when they took us prisoners. And now we've got them. I'm going to shoot them down." And he says: "You come in here with how many men?" He says: "You know, 25,000 men." He says: "These 20 men fought you 25,000 men." And the Germans, "Jawohl." Yeah, he says: "Well," he says, "these men are professional soldiers, and they deserve a better fate." He says: "Send them to the rear." So in other words, this particular German army colonel did respect another fighting man. And this is one thing that we did find out about the Germans,

especially those in the German elite troops like the Panzer divisions and such, they respected the other fighting men. So he come along just about in time on that particular occasion. Okay. Yeah, okay. Then one other time this--we had in our P.O.W. camp we had what we call our lager Fuhrer. Fuhrer. We called him the Fuhrer, scar face, or whatever we called him. During, during the Second World War there was a daylight bombing on Dresden. Now this particular bombing raid was such that history will tell you that it killed more people than were killed in the atom bombs that the Americans later dropped on Hiroshima, whatnot, over there in Japan. Because it was a daylight raid and they come through en masse. In fact, the sky was, over our P.O.W. camp was absolutely black with American bombers, fighter ships, escorts, so forth. They were coming in from about four different points and rendezvousing just about over our P.O.W. camp to make their run on Dresden.

Now, this--our lager Fuhrer, the little scar face, he got the idea that somebody in our P.O.W. camp had signaled these bombers during the night when they were running reconnaissance flights by opening and closing blinds on the windows of the P.O.W. camp to let out light and thereby transmitting signals as to directions and whatnot. So he accused us of leading the American bombers and fighter planes directly to the target and so the following morning after this, this daylight massacre in Dresden, he took us outside of the, out of the main building, the compound, which was kind of a two-story barn or whatever you want to call it, fenced it, whatnot, lined us up in the yard, and demanded to find out which one of us actually signaled the, the American reconnaissance planes as to exactly locations and so forth. Zero them in on their targets. And he says: "Well, I will shoot one man at a time right down the line until somebody actually admits who signaled these, these planes exactly where to go." And actually we had absolutely nothing to do with it. And so nobody could say anything. So they lined up their firing squad and we were lined up alongside the fence and now in this particular occasion our particular guards which were made up of what we would call in the German army, there was an unit that was called like the home guard. Now these were the old guys, in their fifties, sixties, that were too old to, to actually go on the front line, were left back as P.O.W. guards and town guards and whatnot. They kind of pleaded with this guy not to shoot us down. He didn't think we had anything to do with it. But the argument went on there for about 15 or 20 minutes, and he started shooting at one end of the line, but after he got to about the third one, why they convinced him that nobody could speak up because nobody--there's no way, you know, we could signal them. So they kind of calmed them down a bit and he quit, he quit shooting. Or they quit shooting. But so the guards that we had, as far as the old German home guards were--as

far as I'm concerned they were genuine people. The guys, they often spoke that, you know, well, gee, it would be great if the war would end and I could invite you over to my home for supper, you know that we were on starvation diets there. And we were losing a lot of men every day from just plain starvation. And they knew it. They could see it. They had no control over it. They had no food themselves. And what little bit they could scrape up for us they were more than glad to do so. So our own guards kind of saved us on that particular situation. And, well, the third time then we faced this same firing squad, it happened to be the same old scar face again was--we were still in the P.O.W. camp when, when the war was just pretty much ready to come to a close. Hitler was in his bunker there in Berlin or wherever it was, and he knew the end was near, and he had sent out an order that all American prisoners were to be shot. And this order got through to all the P.O.W. camps, so forth. But then of course in most cases everything happened so fast, it never came about. But there again, old scar face, he was a strict Hitler man. Why he lined us up again outside. They have orders to shoot all American prisoners. And, you know, that happened to be the very same morning that the Russian planes come down low, strafing our camp, and which was right on the outskirts of town like I said before. And they--yeah, when all the shooting started, just everybody took off. Even old scar face he figured maybe he better save his own life. But we were then within minutes of facing that firing squad. He had them lined up ready to go in the morning, first thing in the morning. That was what was going to be--anyway that was about the third time and that was enough. We don't want to go through it again, and yeah, one of these days we'll get back to some more stories. We'll finish it. It's probably a lot easier to say it. One of these days, we'll, we'll put it down in kind of a sequence-type thing where first things first. I'm kind of jumping around here a little bit, but... Okay let's go back to the time that we were facing that firing squad when all of a sudden the Russians strafed us and we--everybody just took off. And we went to this little town that was near us, and we got into town. They were still strafing then and so we kind of--well, when the Americans used to strafe a town, they used to fly their fighter ships in a formation and kind of peel off. They'd come out of the sun so you wouldn't get a good shot at them, come down, strafe the town, let go a few bombs, whatever, and takeoff.

So we got in this little town and we got behind--we seen a Russian fighter plane coming in from one angle, so we got behind--all the buildings in Europe are cement blocks, they didn't have wood buildings. We get behind a foundation of one and all of a sudden we see that here comes the Russian fighter planes. Well, okay, you were protected but then all of a sudden from behind us here come some more Russian fighter planes. They happened to be flying American-made

probably P-40s or something like that. Lend-lease type program, something like that, they were flying P-40s. These crazy guys are coming from all four directions. They come right down on the town. All they do is tilt their wings a little bit to miss each other. That was quite an experience. Hide behind a building on one side and they're coming at you at you from the backside too. But we survived that one, and we got information that the Americans were in Pilsen (ph), Czechoslovakia. So by figuring out how to get there, that's definitely where we wanted to head. So we kind of made our way. It was what they call a marshal type law. So any roadside vehicles sitting along, you just--if the thing would run you'd jump in, start it up, and that was your transportation. We took an old truck of some kind part of the way and then we hitched up with a family that was fleeing from the Dresden area that was originally from France. And I think there were some kind of acrobatic family or something like that. And we were told at the time by the Germans, and of course we had no way to know what they were talking about, that there can be no such thing as two great powers. There can only be one great power. So now that the war was just about over between, you know, Germany and Russian and America, why it would be a battle between Russia and the Americans as to who would be the one great power. So that we figure, hey, well, we don't want to get caught up with the Russians and start going through this P.O.W. bit all again. So we tried to keep ahead of the Russians and get to the American lines before the Russians did. So we hooked a ride on this kind of wagon that this French acrobatic couple had, and we kind of buried ourselves under the hay a little bit in case they saw us there, and we got into the next town on the Elbe River there, and we figure, well, if everybody's going to spend the night there, we just got in an old building and slept on the floor. And the following morning the Russian tanks started coming through. They had caught up with us, the tank corps. So we were watching them go through and they seemed like a pretty happy group. And we got out there and asked them where they're heading. Well, they're going to meet the American lines at Pilsen Czechoslovakia. We said, well, how about hitching a ride. So great, and these Russian soldiers were some of the greatest people we've ever met. They give us cigarettes, they give us food. And we hopped on their tanks and we traveled with the Russian army for awhile until we got to Prague Czechoslovakia which happens to be the capital of Czechoslovakia, and when we come to the bridge across the river, why the Russians didn't cross the river at the time. But for some reason we were allowed to cross the bridge into the capital. So as it wound up, I was the--well, who I happened to wind up traveling with on this trip back towards the American line was, I was the only American. There was probably a couple of Czechs and a couple of Frenchmen. We kind of just joined forces together because we were all headed in the same direction.

And we were allowed to cross the bridge that took us into the capital of Czechoslovakia. It was kind of a town that was shaped something like Painesville with the square and of course the courthouse was kind of--or the capital building was kind of on one end there... Yeah, let's see. Where was I. Okay, yeah. As it turned out, let's see, we were--we crossed the bridge and we got into the capital of Czechoslovakia. Okay. Now, as we crossed this bridge, we--it was the same night that the Czechs had revolted against the German rule in the capital of Czechoslovakia. The Czech people were revolting against the Germans that occupied the town and they captured quite a few of them, and in fact they took them down by the river and put them on barges and strapped them to the barges and poured oil on them and were burning them. And as soon as we crossed the bridge into the capital of Czechoslovakia, why we picked up this old--well, it was like a maintenance-type truck and we found bins of locks and things like that. So the German--or the Czech people were kind of in a celebration-type mood also because they had kind of figured, well, you know, freedom after all these many years. And so we were throwing locks off the tailgate of the truck just, you know, along the sides of the streets. And the people were grabbing--no key, you know, locks. But that was great. And then also while we were in that truck, we found a cache--this had been a German truck--of American money. This was, you know, fives, tens twenties, whatever. There must have been, I don't know, half a million dollars in that truck. And this was probably American money that had been captured, taken from prisoners, whatever. And it was en route somewhere. Who knows? But in the frame of mind we were in, money as such had no value to us. Perhaps our minds were not quite operating correctly at the time. So we were riding, also riding through the capital of Prague, Czechoslovakia, or Pra-ha (ph), however you pronounce it, throwing out American money as souvenirs to the people of Czechoslovakia. Of course they were gathering that up, too. And we reached the end of the town where the, where the capital building was, and we figure, well, you know, here's where we can really get some real information as to what's going on. So I went into the capital building and the--this was still--well, I think it was in the morning by then, yeah. The President of Czechoslovakia, which was a guy by the name of Benkos (ph) at the time, wanted to know who we were. We were still wearing--was still wearing K. G. outfit with K. G., war prisoner, that's the German words for it. But I told him that I was an American. And it kind of spread around as a rumor-type thing that the Americans had reached the capital of Czechoslovakia, Pra-ha (ph), Prague. So as the rumor spread then the women of the capital, there's this big rotunda-type thing and in the capital building. And they had come in and set up tables, you know, like this was some time--I think it was probably in April. And they were baking their Christmas pastries and things of that type. Wait a minute, we got one mic out here.

Yeah, I think we got that fixed so we'll continue. Yeah, these women had heard the rumor that the Americans were in the capital of Czechoslovakia, and of course this is what they really wanted. Then they would, you know, they would really have their freedom and they were baking their Christmas pastries and setting them up on tables in the thing figuring well all the troops are going to be in shortly. But it was, it was very sad because as it turned out, the American really never did get to the capital of Czechoslovakia and I believe to this day it's still under Russian control, which is very sad because the Czechs were extremely beautiful people. And we feel real bad about that. Anyway, then the President of Czechoslovakia, why then of course he started to apologize for me--to me for what we have seen going on in the capital, you know, such as the burning of the Germans down on the barge and things like that he knew that we had seen, and he didn't want us to think that the Czechs were cruel people. So he wanted, he wanted me to go to the hospital which is practically right in the town square too, and he wanted to kind of show me what the Germans had done to some of the Czech women and so forth they had, you know, in this town. It's pretty gruesome. We won't really go into details on that. But I simply told him that I realize that they've had a tough time, but my job was really to get back to the American lines and he says: "Well, the American lines are in Pilsen (ph), Czechoslovakia, and there's a major tank battle raging between Prague and Pilsen (ph), Czechoslovakia, and that he would be more than happy to put me up in the hotel there in town until the battle's over and then we could carry on, make our--make our way, make my way, whatever, to the American lines. And well, I guess we were just obsessed with getting home or getting to the--back to the American lines, and so we didn't much care. So we took a--we told him no, we have to--that's our job to get back to the American lines as soon as possible. So we grabbed another truck that was in the capital there. And as marshal law, you know, anything goes, there's no such thing as what belongs to who, you know, or anything like that type thing. So we--me and I think there was a couple Frenchmen, maybe a Czech, they all--or they all wanted to get to the American lines. They figured they would be better off, you know, under the American than they would be under the Russians. So we took off that night and went--or that afternoon and went right to that tank battle. There's tanks on one side of the road, American tanks on one side of the road, and German tanks on the other side. The war had probably been called to an end maybe one or two days before this particular outburst and tank battle, but there were still skirmishes going on. So we drove right through this thing with shells flying on all sides of us, and we did finally get to the outskirts of Pilsen (ph), Czechoslovakia, when we first met an American Jeep coming down a road, sort of just on the outskirts of Pilsen (ph) and he was sort of like heading towards the capital. And there was a lieutenant in there. And we told him, you know, finally somebody spoke

English. We could make him understand us, that we had been P.O.W.s in Germany. We were trying to get back to the American lines and we weren't too far from at the time. So a few more miles we did hit Pilsen (ph) and there was the main force of the American lines. And I don't really recall what division this was. But I was the first American that got back to the American lines in that particular sector. And they took one look at me and they said, "Who did this to you?" I guess I weighed about probably 80-some pounds. I don't think I looked too great. And I told them the town where we were held, I said: Well, I was P.O.W. up around Kaemnetz (ph). And there was about three Jeeps took off heading that direction. They were pretty irritated at the time. So anyway that was our story. I'm getting back to the American lines. And from there on out, why I guess things started to look up, although the--after we had gotten back to the American lines, there was a few other stragglers from various camps in the area, American P.O.W.s that had reached the American lines, and they wanted to get home as soon as possible. And so they made their arrangements to take us to I believe it was Regensburg, Germany, where the nearest airfield where they could fly us back to France. But on the way there, why it was pretty sad because some of them, the idea of freedom I guess was just too much for them to comprehend because we had stopped at one place, and two of them went up alongside a river and they actually drown themselves in a river. I mean what for, I don't know. Your mind's in--I guess they called it, they flipped. And, so we did get back to--they got us back to Regensburg, Germany, where we had our first kind of like a meal you might call it. In fact, I--they had white bread which, which I thought was angel food cake because as a P.O.W. they had no such thing as white bread. They had what they call black bread or something like that which was not the greatest thing to digest the way they had made it. (COUGHING) Excuse me. And what else did they have. They give us a glass of milk which I thought was a milkshake because I had never tasted anything that rich because just your whole taste system was watered down more or less because as a--well, as a P.O.W., you're--and on a starvation diet, your instincts return to what would probably be best described as animal-type instincts. Your sense of smell increased so much and your nostrils would enlarge. In fact, I couldn't drink a glass of water without holding my head up because if I would hold it straight or down, it would just squirt right out of my nose. But as a P.O.W., we could probably smell a dried potato peeling a hundred foot away. We could smell fresh water a hundred foot away. It was extremely sensitive, your sense of smell. So naturally your sense of taste would follow in line. Everything was extremely exaggerated.

So, okay. Okay, here we were in Regensburg, Germany. So we got one of these--old airport was there. So we truck into the airport and pile onto these old--well, it wasn't old at that time. I guess that's the only thing they had. The old C-47. The one that was used for paratroops because it didn't have any windows in it as such. In fact, we would probably--we'd look out the bullet holes to kind of see where we were at. And they were three planes that took off from Regensburg, Germany, and heading towards I guess they called it Camp Lucky Strike near LeHarve, France. Right, okay, LeHarve, France. And of course with the three planes in formation when we hit the mountain ranges there, we took off in planes and you're looking out these bullet holes and all of a sudden you could see the wings flapping on the planes and the other planes going up and down when they hit the air current of the mountains. And you're starting to think, "Holy Mackerel, after all this, why these stupid things are going to fall apart." But they didn't and we got into the Camp Lucky Strike at LeHarve, France. And this was kind of like a redistribution station for P.O.W.s and well while we were there we got to meet--in fact I was standing in line to get an American regular army uniform again. I still had the old K. G. flannels on, the old white flannels with the K. G. on the back. And the very first thing we had to have was shower to get rid of the lice. I mean there were two things that were probably most important, and number one would be to get a decent meal, and number two would be to get rid of the lice that you'd picked up just about drove you crazy in the P.O.W. camps. So we got, we went through the line that, the shower type line and disinfectant, whatever you call it, to get rid of the lice and so forth. And got assigned a barracks type building, tent type things, and found the old chow lines there that--but the chow lines in that particular Camp Lucky Strike were, luckily were about four hours long because I mean at least you only got to eat three meals a day 'cause by the time you got out of one chow line, and ate it, you just got back in to get to the other line. And evidently for some reason they figured that cooked chicken was the best thing, the easiest thing to digest and the best thing for your--for your system. So for three meals a day you had cooked chicken. And other than the fact that the Red Cross, which was--I shouldn't condemn them. They were a life saver for us in the P.O.W. camps. We only got a couple of parcels, but it was something to look forward to and keep you going. They set up a donut and coffee type thing there right in the camp, and when you've been on a starvation diet like this, why no hot--no matter how much you eat, you would still feel hungry. And the P.O.W.s were going to the Red Cross to set up and eating donuts. And actually eating them until their stomachs burst which would kill them. So they realized, hey, this ain't the place to set up the Red Cross donut shop. So they had to discontinue that. And of course the first full day there then--wait till I light a cigarette...

(SINGING) Someday she'll come along, the girl I love. And she'll be big and strong, the girl I love.

(SPEAKING) There was this one guy out of our P.O.W. camp that had both legs amputated. And while we were waiting for a boat to get back to the States, why he used to lay in his bed there and that's the way he would sing that version of that song. He had lost his girlfriend. The guy had a lot of guts. Okay.

(END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE)

(TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO)

General Eisenhower happened to fly in and I happened to be standing in line to get my American uniform and which included what they called at that time an Eisenhower jacket which was a newer style than what we had had before. His plane flew in. You could tell with all the stars in it. And he come down the line. I don't know, maybe I looked a little more rundown or something than the rest of them because he just stopped the truck and he just walked over and he started talking to me. Asked me whose outfit I had been and when we were captured, where we were captured and how I was being treated. And I told him: "Well, I was getting tired of chicken for three meals a day." And he says: "Well," he said, "this is what they feel is what's best for you." And he says: "We're concerned about you getting back home as soon as possible." And of course at that Camp Lucky Strike, why they had medical facilities, but it wasn't the type of thing that you saw after the P.O.W.s come back from Vietnam where they were all checked out medically and so forth. We were in pretty bad shape. I was paralyzed to the extent that it took two hands, both hands, and all the strength I could gather just to raise a glass of water and drink it. And I probably should have spent some time in a hospital at that time, but the medic would come up to you and says: "Do you want to go in a hospital or do you want to go home?" Oh, well, okay. Get us home, you know. So that was the name of the game there. And okay. The only thing then was waiting for transportation to come home. And while we were waiting there, why, we--they did give us a back pay and some of the innovating members of our American armed services, the sergeants of the--of the mess and the--in charge of foods and so forth, they got a thing going there. They were sending--selling nickel candy bars for a hundred dollars apiece and such. It's just as well, because if we'd had had enough money to buy all the candy bars we needed, why we'd have been like the guys standing at the donut stand. So anyway, from there at LeHarve, France, why that was on the coast. It was just a matter of

waiting for a ship home, which is--was--wasn't too long coming. And we got on the ship. I couldn't carry the--I had kind of a duffel bag with a few things in it that we were issued there, and somebody else carried that on, and I had no strength to lift that. And to go back, let's go back a little bit there. Somewhere on the way between the P.O.W. camp and Prague, Czechoslovakia, before we got to the capital building, before we got access to any food, there were bombed-out convoys along the road. And naturally we were looking for food and groping around and I got into, into a truck that had a barrel of honey on it. And I got into this barrel of honey and I was just scooping it up with both hands and eating it. And the honey was probably a little too rich for my system at the time because I think I lay by the side of the road there for about a day with a diarrhea and a little bit of everything else, and we were pretty weak at the time, practically unable to hardly move. But this honey, there's something in honey which you find out later when you read books is the most natural food and you derive more energy from honey than just about anything you could eat today. And that was one of the things that actually saved my life was the fact that I accidentally got into that barrel of honey because it did give me the energy that it took to carry on and make our way back to the--to the American lines. I don't think I'd have made it if we hadn't run across that barrel of honey. But I did feel that--you could feel the strength coming back to your body after laying there for a little bit. And okay. So anyway, that, that got me back there. It's, like I say I'm out of sequence. It's foggy and details are extremely vague at this point. So we finally did get on the ship, headed back. Of course as soon as we hit the States, why we were supposed to go to, what the heck was that, some camp in, Camp Kilmer (ph), New Jersey, or someplace, a redistribution station where you find your transportation home. But I think about half of the guys jumped ship and were never heard from. I don't know how they ever got listed because they never knew they got back. So, so much for that particular story.

Getting back to where we were at, I was getting pretty sensitive, sentimental, whatever type thing there. So I should kind of give you a little bit more of the philosophy of the whole deal. Number one, lesson number one, important thing in survival is never, never feel sorry for yourself. I've seen so many people just die because they felt sorry for themselves. In other words, it's giving up. And if you ever do start feeling sorry for yourself, the only important thing to remember is that the only important things in life today are to have a full belly and a warm place to sleep. Far as I'm concerned, everything else is pure luxury. If you wanted to throw a third in, it would probably be your health. But if you got a full belly and a warm place to sleep, there's a good chance your health will take care of itself. Okay. Now let's see. Should we go back. You

know, you go through these things and you want to go back. It reminds you of something that happened previous. So it's getting out of sequence, the thing, you know, as far as, you know, feeling sorry for yourself, that's, that's probably the easiest thing to do. And to get inspiration to carry on is, is a hard thing to do in such circumstances. And one of the things that I recall is when you were just--when you're leading that life over there, it's--you get a feeling that, well, this is life the way it is. And you start to think of family and things back home, you figure, well, that was only a dream. That was only a dream. This is, this was real. That was only a dream. So you kind of lose a little reality there. And I recall one time there on our way to our walk to our working place, that, at the missile factory there that had kind of an outhouse there along the way, and this black bread kind of worked on you a little bit. And I asked the posten (ph), that's the guard. I want to go shizen (ph). If you know any German, you know what that means. He says okay. So I went in this outhouse there kind of along the way there, and I looked down and I seen a package of, an empty package of American cigarettes, Lucky Strike. I'll never forget it because it just brought me right back to reality, there was such a thing as the life previous to this. The package of Lucky Strike cigarettes was like getting a picture of home again or something, you know, of what life was before this. So this, this kind of give you a, the idea well that maybe there is a future. You know, maybe there was--that wasn't a dream, maybe that was real. It's extremely hard not being a literary expert to put down in words or writing exactly what your feelings were. But like I say, the most important thing is just you never feel sorry for yourself and if you got a full belly and a warm place to sleep, believe me, you're living in the lap of luxury. We're getting real sentimental here. I'm sorry about that. But the only reason I'm doing it is because if there was anybody here or even if you were sitting here, I couldn't, I couldn't do it. And one of the reasons is as you tell these stories, there are questions asked by most people as to detail and all. I'm skipping over a lot of the details, perhaps because they're even I'm comfortable here by myself, maybe there's come a time I may be able to do it. I'm getting better as the years progress because now all of a sudden that seems more like a dream than anything that really happened. Yeah. Okay. In fact, you know, you picture watching men die. I believe that I'm the only survivor out of 200 men in our P.O.W. camp there. I've written to those. Most of them were gone before we even...

(TAPE FADED)

We were talking about the P.O.W. life there and starvation. The fact that I think I'm the only man alive out of that 200 in that camp. And I did. I watched them all die. And this is something that you don't tell to people face-to-face. And if you want details you'll have to ask them sometimes

when you're by yourself with me. And we'll maybe try to elaborate. But all I recall is every morning they had a roll call more or less in this P.O.W. camp. And as your name was called, it was done right in the main aisle of the compound itself. As your name was called, you just kind of stepped forward. And then say here, you know, or whatever. And you could see them die. You watched them die. The first thing you would notice is they would step forward and their eyes were glazed. And they were actually dead. Their souls have left their bodies already. It's just... but their bodies were moving on reflexes alone. In other words, they would step forward. They would say nothing. Their eyes were glazed. And at this point, why the guards would say: "Well, send them to the hospital." And now this hospital they were talking about, nobody ever saw and nobody ever come back from it. So the last thing you wanted to do in that particular P.O.W. camp was to go to the hospital. Because nobody ever come back from the hospital. So and even I'm reminding me of the fact that on the diet we were on, your, your--the nutrition was such that if you were ever cut--now like we used to have to work with these little carts that we'd load with the rubble from the blast and roll them off to the side of the hill under a camouflage net and dump them over a cliff. And you would have to be extremely careful not to be cut or anything, because once you started bleeding anywhere from the smallest cut, your blood would not coagulate. You would just simply bleed to death. This was just simply a lack of something in your system that your blood wouldn't coagulate. So these are little things that I'm recalling as I'm telling these stories. But could probably be some day put in their proper sequence and come out as some kind of a story. There's a whole week there that was completely lost in my mind as to what had happened to me that particular week. And it was shortly after we were first captured. In fact, on these--they used to call them twenty and ten, the old box cars that they had in those days. On our way back into the rear lines, why they had stopped at what looked like just a big open space, like a prairie type thing. But then off to one side was this building they called the hospital. And most of us had frostbit feet. This was the latter part of December, just previous to Christmas, and there was no heat in the box cars and so forth. So they said well they're going to take us in there and we'll get checked out by the doctors in the hospital. If they had--first thing they were going to do, they were going to give you like showers. And actually these doctors were conducting some types of experiments. Part of the line would go into cold showers and part of them were to go into the hot showers, just to see what--what would be the treatment for, for frozen feet, frozen legs, whatnot. I was fortunate. Up to that time, I think everybody thought the cold showers were the best thing to cure the--to get the blood circulation again in the uncirculated portions of your body. I'm not positive, but I think it was the hot shower I got. But

the guys in the other line all wound up getting their legs amputated. So this is another series of miracles of why I'm here to tell this story today.

But after that particular hospital, all I remember is I lost the complete week between Christmas and New Year's I think it was. We wound up in another camp after that hospital which I recall. The only thing I probably recall about that camp is we received one portion of a Red Cross parcel. And of a prayer service that was kind of an impromptu type thing. I think that was on--in fact, maybe that was a Christmas Eve. Which week was it I lost? I don't remember. See I'm lost. We just gathered in a tent and asked to have services and somebody just, one of them that was probably a little more courageous than the others just got up and just started to--there was no Bibles or anything else. He just started to talk, and actually the prayers were basically--nobody mentioned one thing about our own safety and well-being. It was simply for the loved ones, the family left behind. And it was such a moving experience that I'll never--I doubt whether I'll ever experience it again and perhaps that's one thing as far as religion's concerned that you'd like to be able to experience such an exhilarating feeling as you did of coming out of that thing with complete faith that all is well with you; that you were just concerned about those left behind. And I hate to admit it, but I've never been able to go to a church and feel that feeling before. It's something that's I guess got to come within. So I don't go to church, but I think I got a reason to believe that there's somebody somewhere that when you need him, he's there. Okay? Okay. Now I was on that religious kick so I'm going to continue one more story with that and then we'll go back somewhere. I was never outwardly showed the religious stuff type thing, but no, I believe somewhere somebody's--if when you really need him, he's there. And so if you feel that you're lacking something by not going to organized religious groups and doing it that way, why don't worry. If the time ever comes, why you'll find it. And this was kind of proven to me one day when, like I say, we had to walk about six, seven miles to that camp. And even after the first day there, it was almost like funny it was, that the fact that they thought that we could make it there and work all day and then come back because it was all you could do to get there and yet for how many months was it, we did that. And, but they were dropping by the way side and left and growing weaker as the food supply got less and the energy was being burned off. But I do recall one time--this was probably January, February--coming back from the--we used to call it the mines, the underground missile factory, to the camp, there was a hill. After you passed through the town you come down a hill through the town and up another hill to the P.O.W. camp. And I had absolutely run out of strength completely at the bottom of that hill. And I thought, well, I'm next. Now we're going to fall by the way side and that's the end. And I wasn't quite ready yet

and I just says: "God," I says, "if you're going up that hill," I says, "by gosh," I says, "I wish to hell you'd take me with you." And I--you got a feeling--now this is the way prayers are answered. You know, they're not over a long-term. In a P.O.W. camp or in a situation like that, they're answered immediately. If you need them immediately, they will be answered immediately. But I knew I couldn't make it up that hill and I just says, you know, I just said: "God, if you're going up that hill, take me with you." And I felt a strength kind of surge through your body. And I walked up that hill practically effortlessly, as though you were like a robot or controlled by an outer force. Now maybe this is all psychological. Maybe it isn't. I don't know. All I know is that we made it up that hill and I made it many days after that. So this is kind of a religious experience that it's hard to describe. It's sort of like the type of thing that I don't know whether I had written this in the diary or whether I had written it in the book or what. But one time that we had that--we were walking along at this same little old outhouse along the road. I was walking along. All of a sudden I had an urge to really pray for my younger brother Lou who was about four or five years old at the time. I just had this urge to pray for him. Now, we're how many miles away, you know, Germany to Cleveland. And I asked the guard permission to go to the outhouse again. And I really didn't have to go. I just wanted to be by myself and pray. And so okay. He gave me permission. I went over there and I just went in there and I just, for some reason I just had to pray for my younger brother to be, to be all right. There was something going to happen and I wanted things to come out right. And all of a sudden I just, I felt better about it. I left and just, it just left my mind. But now after, when I got home, I don't know how long after it was, but it just come up in the course of a conversation one time. I remember it because it was in late March or early April. It was a particular Sunday that at that time I recall that was the day because I don't know whether it was somebody's birthday or Mother's Day or something like that, that my parents were riding out to that farm in East Lake and going about 50 miles an hour down Lake Shore Boulevard in extremely heavy traffic, and Lou had fiddled with the back door, fell out of the car, rolled into heavy traffic, got up, without a scratch, and walked back in that car, and continued on to the farm.

(TRANSCRIBING INTERRUPTED)

So now, I don't know what category you want to put that in, whether it's E.S.P. or what it is, or coincidence, or whatever. But it's something that you never forget when you know the dates coincide and the things coincide and the fact that why in the world would I want to just go pray for him all of a sudden. So, yeah. Okay. So like I say, if you, if you need it, you know how to do it.

(TAPE FADED)

Yeah, a little more story about a P.O.W. camp. We're reverting back again to this Stalag Four-C. There was a standing rule in this camp that stealing was, was like killing. In other words, punishable by death if that's the way it be. There was this one guy, Frank. I don't know what his name is. His name is probably in the book back home. Now he's the guy that came with me from Camp Limburg (ph) in Germany which was the first P.O.W. camp I was in. And he was out of Chicago. I think his father was a gangster and this guy was a con artist himself because he would wheel and deal, trading and everything else and whatever. He'd trade his dog tags for a couple of cigarettes. He'd trade his cigarettes for a half a loaf of bread, whatnot. He shared with me. For some reason, he was always sharing with me. He seemed to be obsessed with taking care of me. And this was in the early stages of the P.O.W. life and our minds were probably a little more normal than what they were in later days. But he would always share with me. But like I say, the American P.O.W.s, when things got tough, was dog eat dog. And I had a piece of bread or something under my--it was a piece of bread under my pillow that you'd sleep on your food. If you had anything left at all to eat, you'd sleep on it, you know. And he, he stole it one night and he was caught stealing it. So now the way this punishment worked is they had like a latrine type thing with kind of a little add-on type thing to the P.O.W. building that they had what they call a, sent them through the line where everybody got clubs and they'd stand on both sides and whoever committed the crime of stealing food had to run the line. There was no out there. They had to run the line and everybody would club them as hard as they could as they run through the line. And in fact they were lucky if they lived to get through that line. Then, then at the end of the line, why it was up to the offended party which was me in this particular case--it was the type, like a thumbs up or a thumbs down type thing. If it was thumbs up, why his life was spared. If it was thumbs down, why he was just wiped out. That's the death penalty for stealing a slice of bread. Well, and then it was up to me to determine, because I was the offended party. Well, it was thumbs up for Frank because he had saved my life for so many times. But this is just some stories to make you appreciate how great you got it now. Okay? Okay.

(TAPE FADED)

Yeah, Tony Stinziano (ph) from Wickliffe (ph), the only one in the P.O.W. camp that was anywhere near from where I lived. He was dying from starvation. I could see it in his eyes, and like I said, you could tell. You could see their eyes would go glazed. Their spirits would leave

their bodies before their bodies would collapse. But Tony was going, I could see--well, even before his spirit left, I'm trying to talk it out. We used to talk about, well, when it's all over he'll invite me over to his house for spaghetti dinner and everybody had menus planned on what they were going to eat when they got out. Then the night before Tony died, he wrote out a Will that he had one piece of chocolate and a little bit of tobacco left that he wanted me to have. And I talked to him that morning. I says: "Tony, you know, forget it. You're going to be all right." But he knew it and I knew it and there was no way out. But this is the type of thing that kind of maybe sets the--sets your disposition for facing life later maybe. Who knows.

(TAPE FADED)

Speaking of a sense of humor and whatnot or supposedly, I don't know, to give you an idea how important it is, why I'm going to have to tell you a little story now. There are times when you really need your sense of humor I guess in order to maintain your sanity. But this goes back to the big one over there, and our outfit had just taken a little town in the Vogue Mountains. We had been cut out off from the main forces so we were kind of isolated. There was kind of a two-lane road going through the town. First thing you do when you take a town like that, why you set up a road block at each end of the town to make sure that the enemy isn't going to infiltrate your secure spot there. So Rippey (ph) and I and about eight or nine other guys we were set up at one end of town, and we had picked up an old German truck that we set sideways across the road as a road block. And the way that, the way this thing originally, you know, we had a colonel that was our battalion commander, that he had a thing going, a real fetish. He was stuck on everybody should wear neckties. And that seemed to ridiculous to everybody. We just kind of laughed at him. What the heck, you're over here in a place like this. You need neckties like you need a hole in the head. But he stood by his ground. Everybody should wear a necktie. So anyhow we had our neckties on. And while we're at this road block. Must have been about 12, one o'clock in the morning, why the opposite side of the road that I was laying in a ditch along one side and Rippey (ph) was underneath the truck manning a machine gun. And the Germans did come down the hill right opposite our road block. And so which put us pretty much point-blank range. We were just the width of a two-lane highway apart. And they spotted us there and they opened fire. We opened fire at them. That battle went on for about, couldn't have been more than 10, 15 minutes. But it wound up with the--the only one left out of that one was Rip and I, and Rip was underneath that truck and I was down in the ditch and he started to holler, and for me. He says: "Mike, Mike, you okay? You okay"? And I says: "Rip," I says, "I'm okay, but I'm sure glad I wore this necktie."

(TAPE FADED)

But really, oh, you could twist a few things around. I might be able to come out a hero like the time I captured oh, about, there must have been about a hundred fifty German soldiers singlehandedly. Now we could make a major battle out of this, but why not tell it like it was. This particular incident happened the day after I was telling you about that necktie story, wearing the neckties in combat when we were on the road block and we got attacked by the Germans at point-blank range right across the road, and finally wound up pretty much wiping us out and heading back to the battalion aid station there. And opened a hole up for reinforcements or whatever, because there wasn't too many of us left in condition to do much. We were hit real bad and we had a lot of extremely seriously wounded people in that battalion aid station. Gut wounds, things like this, are extremely hard for a regular what we call a medic which is more like just a first-aid man to try to handle. But the following morning I was sent out on, like I say, I was probably the only one that, or one of the very few that was still able to do much and, you know, I had to hesitate. I heard that dog barking next door. I thought maybe somebody coming up the walk here. Anyway, I was sent out at the opposite end of the little town. Now this is only, the town was probably about a--oh, no more than about a half hour--half mile from one end to the other. One of these little towns, little village, and beautiful country over there, and very close to Switzerland up in the Vogue Mountains again. And I was sent out as a scout on the other end of town. This was this two-lane road that led through this town and to kind of make sure nobody come down the road from that particular end of town and surprise the--what was left of us in that town. And so I, I went to the outskirts of town there a little bit on that two-way road, and kind of sit down by the side of the road there a little bit and I kind of, I kind of heard somebody. After a little bit I heard, you know, people coming down the road. And they saw the town and I didn't see them at first. It was kind of a curve in the road there, and then when I seen them coming around the road to head into the town, why here it was a whole of what was probably left of a company of German soldiers that evidently knew we were in the town and what they really wanted to do was to surrender to us because we were, we were reaching the point in the war where I think the majority of the German soldiers knew that it was coming to a close. We had kind of had the advantage and I think they realized that their only way to survive was to perhaps go ahead and surrender to the Americans and to save their own lives. But so they come around this road and I didn't know what to do at first. I just kind of seen them coming around the bend there. I didn't know whether to run and hide or what. But they were--in fact, the lead ones had their hands up in the air, you know, and to surrender and whatnot. And so they got a little closer

and it was obvious they didn't come to fight; they come to surrender. And I just stepped out in the middle of the road with my old faithful M-1 at the ready position. And quite a few of the Germans really rarely spoke English. You couldn't understand them. But they said that they, they came to surrender. And I said: "All right, fine," you know, "follow me." And they--their weapons, they, they, some of them had a couple left, but most of them had--I think they knew what they were going to do. They just threw them by the side of the road, I just led this probably a hundred fifty of them or something like that into the town. And they wanted to surrender to us and they had us way outnumbered, but it didn't make any difference to them at the time. They were just actually looking for somebody to surrender to. (COUGH) Now, excuse me. Where we lucked out in this particular situation, like I said we had some extremely seriously wounded in our battalion aid station. Amongst these troops that were surrendering to me were a couple of doctors. And when I discovered that there were a couple of doctors among that group, why that was great. I told them that not to worry, that the Americans would treat them real good, and that they would be out of the major battles and their only--they just have to sit out the balance of the war and they'd be in good shape. But would they please help us with our seriously wounded. And they said they were--they were doctors and that was their job and they were more than willing to do anything they could for some of our friends from Company C, the old 103rd and I don't remember even the battalion. But they did. We got them into the battalion aid station. And that was a real blessing because some of these boys got some little more professional care than what they could have got from a first aid man or a medic. One little incident, like I say, how you want to twist it around. I had nothing to do with it. I just happened to be there. They were looking for me.

(TAPE FADED)

The way we got the news of F.D.R.'s death, Rick had asked me if I recall where I was at and what I was doing. And we definitely do. It was one of the things that you recall something like that. About how these Czechs, the P.O.W.s that used to--political prisoners used to, they'd devise the radio and they used to pass our work area every day. And well we were kind of in a ditch-type thing and they kind of go along the ridge above. They'd get right down near us, what they would do is they would take and write the news. They would pick up the B.B.C. in London news broadcast, and they would write the news and then roll it up like in a cigarette, you know, about like a cigarette butt type thing. And when we seen them coming, why when they got right by us, when our guys would happen to go over, ask the guard a question to kind of sidetrack them, and they would just kind of drop this butt type thing along the edge there, and one of us

would kind of wander over and pick it up to, you know, get any highlights that were on the B.B.C. news from the previous day. And all it said on that is F.D.R. died. You know. And so that's how we learned about that one. And that was a fairly reliable source

(TAPE FADED)

But all of a sudden, you know, you'd be working away kind of, and all of a sudden you'd become so weak that you could not pick up the shovel and you could not pick up the pick. You could do absolutely nothing but just lean against it. And the weird part about this is it happened to everybody on that work detail at just about exactly the same time. Their strength was just absolutely gone and they could do absolutely nothing for a period of about, maybe half hour, 45 minutes, an hour. I don't really recall. I am not absolutely sure of the explanation of why that particular thing happened, but later we did find that made a little sense an explanation to that whereas your body, the food that--in other words, whenever you got a, your day's rations which was a slice of bread, one slice of bread, and then that evening you'd get a bowl of this weak soup, which there wasn't much to that either. But your--that would give you enough energy to go just so long. And after the energy that you'd derive from that slice of bread was out of your system, you were completely unable to exert yourself until your body start--there's a built-in reserve energy in the human body that comes from the body itself. In other words, your energy then started to turn around and take away from your--any fat cells that you might have left was sapped and put back into energy. And you would actually feel your strength coming back after this period of time, whatever it happened to be, half hour, hour, 45 minutes. I don't recall.

(TAPE FADED)

You would dream at nights. The dreams were usually if at home of a food, you know, meals and things that you would like to have. And on the way to the work camp and in the mornings, why you'd maybe be walking next to a buddy of yours or something and you'd start telling him that the dream that you had the night before. Now you could stop anywhere in that story and this guy next to you could pick up your dream and tell you the rest of it. In other words, the dreams were almost identical to what the other guy had dreamt that night. Now, I never did really find an explanation for that. In other words, you know, you'd--I recall telling one P.O.W. that when we were walking to work one morning: "Hey, I dreamt last night that we got out of this thing and we were back in New York and we were walking down a street in New York and we come to this shop with pastries and so forth." And he says: "Yeah, I had the same dream." We went into the shop and we got these, what do you call it, cream filled wha-cha-ma-call-it. And he just finished

the dream for me. Extremely weird type thing that happened over there. And never was explained. My only explanation was that the rations that we had were so perfectly divided that everybody being on the exact same diet and everybody being under exact same conditions, their minds were exact same. Whatever. I can't explain that one.

(TAPE FADED)

And it goes like this: (SINGING) After it's over over here, I'll come home to you, dear. You've been blue but oh, so true, now this is what we'll do-ooo-ooo. We'll build a little place with a garden. Just a little home for two. And we'll be so happy there, we'll live without a care, making our dreams come true together.

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