

# Russell Gunvalson

590th Field Artillery  
106th Infantry Division

**Russell Gunvalson was born on 11 July 1923 in Spring Valley, WI, the sixth of eighth children. Following high school Russ worked locally before entering the US Army in July 1943.**

**Following basic training Russ was assigned to the 590<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; he spent from March – November 1944 with this unit, training at [Camp Atterbury](#), IN. The 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division shipped to Europe in November 1944, and took up positions on the Belgian-German border in early December. The German Ardennes Offensive, launched in mid-December, quickly encircled thousands of American forces, including Russ's unit, and on 19 December 1944 Russ was taken as a POW.**

**Along with many other captured Americans, Russ was marched away from the front line area to the German town of Gerolstein, and from there transported by rail to Stalag IX-B at Bad Orb, southeast of Frankfurt/Main; the three-day rail journey ended on Christmas Eve 1944. In late January 1945 Russ was in a group of non-commissioned officers transferred to Stalag IX-A, Ziegenhain, and he remained here until this camp was liberated by advancing US troops on 30 March 1945. Russ was moved to a medical facility in Rouen, France, then in early May 1945 shipped to the US; he spent the time until his discharge in December 1945 back home in Wisconsin, and recovering at several stateside medical facilities.**

**Again a civilian, Russ returned to Spring Valley and worked different jobs before starting with the Postal Service in 1947; he retired in 1979. Russ was married in 1947 (wife Idelle), and helped to raise two children. In 1985 Russ and Idelle relocated to Rochester, MN, where this interview took place in February 2004.**

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**Photographs (click for larger image):**



**= photo A**



**= photo B**

**photo A = Russ (kneeling left) and other members of 106th Infantry Division, Fort Jackson, SC 1944**

**photo B = POW identification tags, issued by Germans. These are from Stalag IX-B (Bad Orb, Germany), and have Russ's POW identification number, 23426**

**Interviewee: Russell Gunvalson**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor**

**Date of interview: 29 February 2004**

**Location: Rochester, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, March 2004**

**Edited by: Thomas Saylor, June 2004**

**Interview Key:**

**T = Thomas Saylor**

**R = Russell Gunvalson**

**T: This is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today's the 29<sup>th</sup> of February 2004, and what follows is an interview with Mr. Russell Gunvalson of Rochester, Minnesota. On the record, Russell Gunvalson, thank you very much for taking time today to speak with me.**

**R: You're welcome.**

**R: I'd like to start by just making sure I have a number of pieces of information correct on the record here. You were inducted into service March of 1943.**

**R: Right.**

**T: And were a member of the 590<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.**

**R: Right.**

**T: You mentioned stops at Camp Atterbury, Indiana in 1944, Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts in November, and that's where you shipped out to Europe.**

**R: Right.**

**T: Arrived in England, I think you mentioned the last day of November 1944. You took the ship over across the English Channel.**

**R: Right.**

**T: With the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division you assumed positions in the Ardennes Forest in Belgium on the Belgian-German border and it was here on the 16<sup>th</sup> of December 1944 that the Germans launched their well-planned attack.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Let me ask you, between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> when you became a prisoner of war, how did....it was a tumultuous time and how did you experience those three days when things became suddenly very different from before?**

**R: Well, up until the 16<sup>th</sup> we were just going from our bivouac at Schaumberg and there was three of us, the forward observer who was an officer, a lieutenant, and a sergeant and myself, or the corporal, the radio operator and Jeep driver. We would get in our Jeep every day and drive up to the Siegfried Line, right up on the front lines with the infantry and observe the Germans at the pillboxes. We could see them and they...from our BC scopes and we did that for five days until the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> of course. We were under that barrage for about maybe six hours and after they lifted the barrage that's when we, the three of us, got in our Jeep and went down and picked up our rations for three days and that was the last we were at our headquarters at 590<sup>th</sup> A Battery. We went up to the front lines then. We just stayed with the infantry until they withdrew. We withdrew right with them until we got back into the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> and captured the 19<sup>th</sup>. That's when we were ordered to surrender.**

**T: You mentioned an artillery barrage. Was that the first time you'd experienced something like that?**

**R: I was always on the outgoing end. Land on their soil. But I was never on the end where we got it and it was...at first we didn't know what was going on, you know. Confusion at it's finest. Just disorder. Until you gathered your thoughts and we didn't know if it was a push or not or just them telling us that they're still there too. So we'd do the same with our....for five days we'd throw lobs up there and mostly to keep our guns active. We didn't hit anything but at least....we didn't know if this was just a kind of a reaction on their part that gave us back some of what we sent over to them.**

**T: Was the attack, was the artillery barrage from the Germans on the 16<sup>th</sup> more intense than what you'd...**

**R: Yes. Yes. They ...about five, six hours of it. Just steady. The whole front.**

**T: What's that like in your words to experience that kind of incoming artillery fire?**

**R: You just seek cover. We were in that farmhouse and we were upstairs in that farmhouse where we had our bivouac, where we stayed. Our detail section. Then we went down below and the only thing we could do is just lay low and hope to God it doesn't hit you and it hit the gun section and our captain, Pitts, got killed the first morning as he was running from his bivouac where he was and out to one his guns. They hit one of our guns and he was killed right away on December 16. It was getting too close so we....all we could do was sit there and wait until they lifted that.**

**T: Was that difficult to simply sit and wait?**

**R: It seems like at the time it seems like maybe it was forever. But then as it slackened up then we could get up and get outside. But just...the same as the night we spent in the boxcar and got bombed. You just have to wait it out and hope to God that one doesn't hit direct.**

**T: Yes. On the 19<sup>th</sup> when you were captured, can you recall the exact circumstances when you actually became a prisoner? When the Germans were actually there.**

**R: Yes. The three of us in our Jeep we got into the forest, the Ardennes, and it was....we had been given orders to surrender and to destroy our equipment and destroy anything we had so the Germans couldn't use it. So...but in the meantime we were also given kind of a commission to if we could make it out we were to do so. To friendly lines. We were all by ourselves at that time. We went through the forest but we came to the point where you couldn't go anymore in a Jeep in the woods. So that's when we left our Jeep and went on foot. And we could....we knew there was fighting all the way around us but there was a spot in the lines where it was quiet. We said if we can get to that spot we can get out. Otherwise we'd walk right into it. Well, that was fine. So we left everything in the Jeep. Had no idea we were going to get captured. We had all the faith in the world we were going to make it out. In doing so I left my overshoes and my overcoat, my field helmet in the Jeep. We were going to make it. We didn't. We went over the rise and the only reason why there wasn't any activity down there because the Germans had already closed that line and we walked right into them.**

**T: I see. So it sounds like in the larger perspective actually being captured was something....was a possibility but the actual moment was a surprise.**

**R: Oh, yes. There wasn't any doubt that we were going to make it but then all of a sudden here we were, our hands in the air and....**

**T: What kind of impression did those, the first Germans that you saw up close, those with I guess weapons pointed at you, what impression did they make on you as a young man?**

**R: Well, you were just kind of in a kind of a daze. You didn't know what to think. You didn't know what was going to happen and just prior to that up at Malmedy the machine guns, about eighty-five members of an artillery battery... murdered them in cold blood at Malmedy on the 17<sup>th</sup> and here, two days later, I am one of those people.**

**T: Now was that fact known to you at that time, about the massacre at Malmedy?**

**R: Yes. Because we got word that they were shooting prisoners. And that, you know, ran through our mind more than anything. Because you didn't know what to expect because after all, after we left the battery headquarters at December 16, the 19<sup>th</sup> we didn't report in. We were reported, at that time, missing in action. After three days if you don't report you're missing in action. Like I say, we could have been found dead any place up there.**

**T: Sure. So that very moment when these Germans are suddenly standing in front of you, what was going through your mind was the fact that you knew that they had shot prisoners on another occasion.**

**R: Right. And they were just...but then as the day, the afternoon went on, more prisoners started coming in. So eventually we always said they're not going to shoot all of us.**

**T: But initially there were just three of you.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: That first moment of capture, how many Germans were standing opposite you? Do you recall?**

**R: Oh, geez. I don't...it seemed like their whole army was there. (laughing) Because, you know, it's really hard to think back on your feelings at that moment.**

**T: So it's...what I hear you describing is a sense of uncertainty mixed with fear.**

**R: Oh, yes. We lived in fear from that moment on as a prisoner of war.**

**T: At that first moment were you, shall we say frisked or searched at all?**

**R: Well, yes. The first...they couldn't take my overshoes but...and they couldn't take my overcoat because I didn't...they didn't bother me that way, but the first thing I noticed they were doing, they loved wristwatches. And of course being the first, they got my wristwatch right away but as the ranks grew bigger that word got around and anybody that had a wristwatch they pushed it up their sleeve. The first thing they do is they go over your wrist.**

**T: And that happened to you as well.**

**R: Yes. They got my watch.**

**T: Were you asked any questions at all?**

**R: No. Not along the route. I wasn't asked any questions until we got into prison camp when we were registered as Americans with the International Red Cross.**

**T: Yes. You mentioned that in your own account too and yet it was not right away that you ended up at Bad Orb. It was a number of days before you even got there.**

**R: It was a week later.**

**T: Yes.**

**R: We were all American prisoners. That's all. They didn't care who we were. Or what our rank was.**

**T: Were you separated from the two people you had been with, your officer and other person or were you kept together?**

**R: Yes. I got separated in the ranks there because during that...after ...that afternoon and into the evening I would say there were about thirty- five hundred of us all together. You went through the ranks looking for somebody you knew.**

**T: Right.**

**R: And that's when I found some other members of the A Battery and you kind of stuck together then.**

**T: Were those people who had been, shall we say, your friends before or were they suddenly just people you gravitated to because they were from your unit?**

**R: Well, from my unit. Battery A. A lot of us were together on the march and then on the boxcars and at Bad Orb.**

**T: O.K. Let me ask you. This is one of the overarching questions and that's about friends or companions during the months you were a POW. What importance was it to you to have close friends or companions that you were with every day?**

**R: When you're alone you're alone and as far as my friends of A Battery that were....I can't think of any closer friend than I have in Hugh Kingery that lives in Birmingham, Alabama, my bunkmate. He was with me from in that line , in the marches, in the boxcars, in the prison camp and with me all the way to Ziegenhain and some of those same people that I was with that I knew stayed at Bad Orb. Hugh Kingery and I and there' s a...I think it's Sergeant Young I got to know from A Battery. We were together at Ziegenhain. You have to have somebody, a buddy that you can really trust and confide in and knew he'd help you.**

**T: In what, in specific ways, how are you able to, how were you able to help each other in what seems like a pretty confining situation?**

**R: Like I go back to up in Ziegenhain when we were getting so weak. I'd black out. I'd just kind of faint and they'd take about six guys to roll you up to your bunk. And Hugh Kingery and I...he used to be from Illinois and when we got together at Ziegenhain we said that ...there's three bunks, six to three bunks, two to a bunk, and we said we'd take the top bunk because heat rises and let's get up off that cold floor. So they'd roll you up there and Hugh would come up and we'd just lay together to keep warm. It's somebody that you looked out for and he looked out for you. It was a buddy system. We were...**

**T: So having a friend was, what I hear you saying, extremely important to have one other person.**

**R: Definitely.**

**T: O.K. Well let me back up again to a chronological question and that's to the transportation from the point of capture to Bad Orb. You talk in your own memoirs here about that first night you spent as a prisoner of war and you have a lot to say about that really. Remembering the conditions and your surroundings and I'm wondering what stands out for you as the strongest memory in a way of that kind of first night that you spent in uncertainty as a POW.**

**R: The first night got to be....after we went through a count, I wound up in an old bombed-out church. It was...winter had set in and there's snow and it was cold and we had to get up off the ground and so we wound up, some of us wound up in this old bombed-out church. I remember taking my shoes off and I'd also in the meantime I had tucked another pair of socks in my belt in the back so I had dry socks. So in other words, I put those on and it was so cold I said I don't want my feet to swell. So I put my shoes back on so I could walk tomorrow. So I put that extra pair of socks on and the shoes and we just rested. I don't think we slept much. But we got up off our feet and rested. That was the first night that we spent in I think it was Runthrup, Germany. And then the next morning they got us out to walk further to Gerolstein.**

**T: How much uncertainty was there about what was going to happen next and were you bothered by that?**

**R: We didn't know from one hour to the next where we were going. We knew where we'd been but we didn't know where we were going to go or when we were going to get there. It was just a matter of...we asked the guards about how much further and to then it was always ten kilometers. We found out that yes, it's ten kilometers for them because they get relieved then, but we'd still go on. Then that second night the four of us got together and laid right out in the middle of the road.**

**T: Now from the point of capture you were marched all the way to Gerolstein?**

**R: Yes. That's about eighty miles.**

**T: What do you remember about those days of walking because it was a number of days you were underway.**

**R: Yes. Well, I can't...I don't recall too much on that walk but I remember the walks from the prison camp to the railroad station when we left Bad Orb. I remember the walk from the railroad station to Ziegenhain. On that walk. I think that took more out of us than anything because of the snow and the wind and the cold and at ....early in captivity we were in pretty good physical shape. We were hungry but we weren't starving yet.**

**T: Right. It's interesting that those couple of walks, marches, which were much shorter in duration than the initial one are ones you have stronger memories of.**

**R: Yes. It just...how we survived those I don't know. It's the grace of God we did.**

**T: Because you were...you mentioned it was eighty miles at first and I'm looking at the map which you include there and knowing something about the geography of that area, you passed through a number of cities and towns on the way.**

**R: Yes. I don't remember any of those towns. I remember Prum and Gerolstein.**

**T: Do you remember any encounters with German civilians?**

**R: Only in Bad Orb on Christmas morning. We had...we didn't encounter any civilians but they were out on Christmas morning out in the streets watching the great American heroes walk to the prison camp. But no, they didn't get to us. Only the young...I remember my shoe came untied and I was on the outside rank so I stepped over to tie...trying to put my foot up to tie my shoestring and these two feet stood right in front of me and I raised up and here was a kid I would say about fourteen, fifteen year old youth and he just looked at me and in good English said "You damn Yankee swine."**

**T: You remember that. How did that make you feel at the time?**

**R: I said here he is. Fifteen, sixteen years old. Boy! He sure has been taught well to hate us. And I said you know, there's nothing I could do but just bite my lower lip and get back in line and let him go.**

**T: Was there...do you recall any feelings of being scared at all walking through a town where there were German civilians sort of watching you go by?**

**R: Oh, no. I don't think there was any fear through there for the civilian population. I didn't...I don't think so.**

**T: And you weren't scared of them either.**

**R: No. No. At one time on one of marches we had a guard that was sixty-five years old, and he was a prisoner of war in England in World War I. And he wanted to go home just as bad as we did. There was some feeling against Hitler too, you know. A lot of them made him I guess, but the Youth is the ones we feared the most of. That and the Gestapo, if there was any around. The Youth in our marches. We didn't have too many young ones. It was mostly older people. Older guards. We had one guard that, a young fellow, that was called back to Germany and he was going to...he came through the ranks and he was wondering if there was anybody from St. Louis there. And of course you take thirty-five hundred people there's always somebody from Missouri or St. Louis.**



**T: Sure.**

**R: And he got talking to him and he could talk real good English and he was a student at the University in St. Louis in Missouri and he was called back to Germany to go in the army and he was in what they called the Home Guard and we had guards like that. Home Guard. He said that he had been following the war and he said “ This is our last big push.” He said “If this last battle fails,” he says, “Germany is done.”**

**T: And he said that to you in English.**

**R: Yes. And I just wonder whatever happened to him. If he ever got a chance to go back to St. Louis and further his education. He was educated.**

**T: When you got to Gerolstein and you marched and that was where the group was put onto a train.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: And the train ultimately carried you all the way to Bad Orb. Is that right?**

**R: Right.**

**T: It's the train trip itself I want to explore a little more as a theme. Can you describe the boxcars themselves and kind of getting on and getting situated?**

**R: Once they loaded us into the boxcar, sixty of us, we found that there was about maybe ten to twelve inches of horse manure and straw in it that they'd hauled up horses up to the front and took us back in them. We wanted to clean them out but they said no. So they just shut the door and wired the door shut. We had to sit in that. We found out that with that straw on the floor it made it a little warmer and the horse manure a little warmer. Even though it was rancid in there. We had no other choice but to sit in it and sixty of us. You couldn't stand because there wasn't room. You just sit with somebody between your legs and so on. Then ventilation was terrible so they found these windows. On each end there was a window that dropped open. So they finally opened that up. It was cold breeze that came in but at least there was a little fresh air. That's the only ventilation we had other than the slats of the boxcar. They were....it wasn't solid like our boxcars are. It was a wooden kind of siding on it so there was always a space between the boards that made it too cold in there. It was all right for horses but not for humans.**

**T: Right. This was emergency transportation it sounds like.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: By your account you arrived at Bad Orb on Christmas which would be the 25<sup>th</sup>.**

**R: Eve.**

**T: The 24<sup>th</sup>. That means this train journey was the better part of three days?**

**R: Right. Yes.**

**T: Wow. That's a long time for what is on the map not a long journey.**

**R: I think we did more stopping than anything because they'd sidetrack us in order to let other things go through. So we were just excess baggage.**

**T: Being in a car for three days with the same people makes me think of things like conversation and food and sanitary conditions and I'm wondering if you could speak about any of those three things.**

**R: Food was our greatest conversation. It was all the time talking about food and we were all the time talking about we gotta get out of this car. We've gotta get out of this car. We cannot be...we can't live like this because sanitary conditions are terrible.**

**T: How did they handle that? There was not bathroom. How did they handle that?**

**R: We just made a corner and that's where we went. In that corner.**

**T: Was there...were there buckets or...**

**R: No. No. Just right with the horse manure. We were filthy. You get...I never lost faith that eventually we would get out of there. A lot of people didn't. Some think that we're going to stay in here forever. I said I didn't think that because we were headed for someplace and the Germans....they're a little humane, you know. Food, clothing and shelter was our greatest concern.**

**T: What kind of food, if any, was provided that you remember?**

**R: When we got on the train in Gerolstein they gave us a little loaf of bread for six men and that's what we....six of us got together and shared that. That's all we had until Christmas Eve when they came in and gave us another loaf of bread for six men.**

**T: That's not much food. And what about water?**

**R: No. No water.**

**T: Which bothered you more from your perspective, not having food or not having water?**

**R: I guess food comes first because without food....well, you need both. But...you know there was snow on the ground so we'd eat snow. And even inside the boxcar**

**there's frost that came through in the cracks. You'd eat the frost and you'd get a little moisture that way. We knew that eventually we're going to get water because wherever there's food there's a little water.**

**T: Right.**

**R: Then they came in on Christmas Eve and gave us the bread and that was it.**

**T: In the middle of this already stressful journey comes your description of the air attack when the train was actually attacked...**

**T: Again, you've alluded to this earlier , the attack on the train. But can you sort of draw a picture of what that was like?**

**R: That was on, I think, let's see, the 24<sup>th</sup>, the 23<sup>rd</sup>. I think that was the night of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. We were sitting in that marshalling yard and I don't know just where it was. Some claim it was [the city of] Koblenz and some claim it was Frankfurt, but anyway, we were at a marshalling yard and that's when the RAF...they bombed at night. This bomber came over and dropped that incendiary bomb and lit up the whole area. Like daylight. We knew just exactly what was going to happen. We were getting bombed. And they loved railroads. They certainly did. They bombed all the way around us and I just remember I said I wish I was a mouse, real small. I could crawl up into the corner and weather this storm. Some of the cars that were in our lineup, they got out and started opening doors so people...so the soldiers, the prisoners, could get out but where do you run to? Of course the guards saw this and they herded....I didn't leave the boxcar but several of them did. Then the guards rounded them all up and put them back in the car again. I tell you, they were awfully close those bombs. They just shook our car. After that there wasn't too much lack of ventilation then because they just tore through all the cars.**

**T: Shrapnel or strafing?**

**R: Shrapnel from the bombs. It was a bombing.**

**T: There was no strafing of the train.**

**R: No. No. We got strafed in Ziegenhain.**

**T: So the door to your particular car was opened?**

**R: No. It wasn't opened.**

**T: O.K. Yours was not opened.**

**R: No.**

**T: Others were.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: O.K. This sounds like a...you mentioned wanting to be a mouse...a mentally stressful situation. How did you deal with that in that particular moment? It must have seemed like hours.**

**R: Oh, golly. I don't know. I just...it's something that, you know, you just....we just sit there and hope and pray that a bomb doesn't have a direct hit. That's the only thing we could do is just wait it out. You were...really useless. There isn't a thing you could do but wait out the bombing and go on to something else. We didn't think about yesterday or tomorrow. All we thought about is what's happening now. There wasn't any too much future for us. The past is really behind us. You just wanted to survive.**

**T: Another one of these overarching questions, is about religion and faith. I'm wondering how religious a person you considered yourself when you went into the service?**

**R: I was always taught to believe in God which I do and I was always taught the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, the Creeds. Also knew some Bible passages. I remember June 6, 1944, I was home on leave getting ready to go somewhere. We were given orders to go home on leave and if you wanted to save anything, leave it home. And the morning I left for back to camp I walked past ...Maggie Hanson was our neighbor. She's a devout Catholic, Christian lady. She came out and she handed me a St. Christopher medal. She said "I know this is not going to save you." But she said "Carry it with you and whenever you see it, she says, "don't give up. Keep your faith." And I put it on my dog tags that June of 44 and looking at my dog tags it's still there today.**

**T: So you still have that medal.**

**R: Right. It's with my dog tags. I didn't lose faith.**

**T: Did your...in what ways was your faith of real value or of importance to you during your POW time?**

**R: It was something that you could rely on because....like I say further on, that the Germans, they did everything that they could do to break me down physically. They did everything they could do to break me down mentally. And financially I had nothing. But the only thing I had left was my faith in God. That's one thing they couldn't take away. As a matter of fact I think it probably made me stronger.**

**T: That was my next question. Whether you feel your POW experience made your faith deeper or more meaningful.**

**R: Oh, definitely. Yes. It taught me that life is precious and you need something.**

**You can't go through life alone. You've got to have somebody there that you can confide in. I don't know how you...how do you explain faith?**

**T: Now the old adage and it's repeated in your memoirs as well is that there are no atheists in foxholes. Let me ask. I may change that a bit. Were there atheists in those boxcars?**

**R: Oh! No way! No. No. No. I remember Christmas Eve right after we got that loaf of bread. We sat there and we knew it was Christmas, Christmas Eve because... the snow had fallen all day and it was so nice and bright and the moon was out and church bells were ringing. Germany was a Christian nation and we knew it was Christmas Eve. Way back in the end of the boxcar was this young man, Ray Brown from Idaho. He kind of...he was kind of like a chaplain. He was more religious than I was I guess. He led us in prayer and we started singing Christmas carols and we just sang what we could that we knew and go from one to the other until later on in the evening, about the last one you sang was "Silent Night." After we sang "Silent Night" I don't think any of us ever got through it. It was so still in that boxcar and it was still in all the boxcars. There was not one word. It was just complete silence until the next morning at six o'clock when the guard opened the door and hollered in "Heraus!" So there wasn't any atheists in that boxcar.**

**T: How has your faith been changed since you got back in 1945? I mean has that more intense faith something that has stayed with you for fifty years?**

**R: Pretty much so. I tried to do what I thought was right and taught my children to do what's right and to obey God's law and to be baptized, confirmed. Both of them are married in a Christian church and today they still are that. It's what I had to pass on to them and I try to pass it on to my grandson. They've grasped this too. So I just feel that I do have some following.**

**T: Yes. Your faith of that moment in the boxcar that you recall rather poignantly...thank you. Was faith also something of daily importance to you at Bad Orb and Ziegenhain?**

**R: Oh, at Bad Orb I was there such a short time....**

**T: It was about a month by your account, right?**

**R: Yes. There wasn't enough to really get situated in because we knew we were going to get moved.**

**T: Was that clear when you got there?**

**R: Pretty much so. That they...took out all the officers first, commissioned officers. Got those out right away. Then after I got registered as a POW, that was I think January 17 of 1945 that I got registered as a POW. It was after that that the noncoms were shipped to Ziegenhain.**

**T: What was your rank at this time?**

**R: Corporal.**

**T: O.K. So it was a number of weeks there at Bad Orb between arrival and actually being registered as a POW.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Let me ask you about the conditions at Bad Orb. A lot of people arriving at that camp about the same time that you did. What kind of conditions did you encounter there? Maybe talk about the barracks or the actual...**

**R: Bad Orb was I think a dumping ground for everybody and that's just about what it was. It was ...we thought Ziegenhain was bad but it wasn't as bad as what we left at Bad Orb. Bad Orb was really a bad prison camp in more ways than one. It was really dirty and the food there was dirty. The food was about the same at all prison camps but it wasn't the best of conditions at Bad Orb.**

**T: Was that the individual barracks you mean?**

**R: In everything because the only ones that were there were the privates, and the privates were the lowest class of a person that life could ever deal with. And they respected rank. If you had two stripes on your arm, boy, they saluted you. But for a private though, he was the scum of the earth.**

**T: O.K. So that's who was permanently at Bad Orb. Being a corporal you were going to be moved.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: O.K. That's how you could figure that out.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: How did you spend those number of weeks there while you were at Bad Orb? There were....how did you spend your days, let's say.**

**R: I guess just sitting there waiting for time. There wasn't anything you...we didn't get organized at all there because...well, I don't know why. But we just sat there and waited our turn to leave camp. Once we got to Ziegenhain that's when we figured that we wouldn't be transferred again so that's when you would probably get organized. We did organize committees there and had....the Protestant boys, we had services every noon at one o'clock and at six o'clock at night the Catholic boys had the rosary.**

**T: So a much more stable existence.**

**R: We were pretty much organized because at Bad Orb I don't...in Ziegenhain the ranking noncom was our barracks chief. At Bad Orb I don't know if they had a chief.**

**T: I see. It sounds chaotic in a way.**

**R: It was. Our situation, our barracks we were in with three hundred men, we had a barracks chief and another building there was another barracks chief. The barracks chief would....he was in charge of the barracks and we respected that. Because somebody has to be in charge.**

**T: At the...at Bad Orb in all this chaos you were still registered as a POW by the International Red Cross. Is that right?**

**R: Right.**

**T: Can you talk about that?**

**R: Up until January 17, 1945 when I registered with the International Red Cross that I was a prisoner of war, up to that point, I was missing in action.**

**T: And that's the message that your folks had gotten already, right?**

**R: My folks got a message that I was missing in action but they hadn't had any knowledge of what happened after that. Then the International Red Cross notified the War Department that I was a prisoner of war and they gave them my POW number and then we could send out that one postcard. That's when I wrote that card that day too.**

**T: Yes. And you have a copy of that in your memoirs.**

**R: Right. Yes.**

**T: The actual registration with the Red Cross. What was that formality actually like? Was there a book you signed or did you see Red Cross officials?**

**R: Yes. All we had to give them was our name, rank and serial number.**

**T: Was that to the Germans or to Red Cross officials?**

**R: Red Cross.**

**T: O.K. So they came into the camp at Bad Orb and actually took this data down?**

**R: Right. Yes. Registered. They registered us.**

**T: Did that take very long or was it pretty much a simple process?**

**R: It's just a simple process. How long it takes to go through I suppose six hundred men.**

**T: Right. And Bad Orb was a large facility there.**

**R: Yes. Yes. There were thousands there.**

**T: Now there were Germans there too and did you have much encounter with the Germans on a daily basis?**

**R: There? No. I never had too much encounter with any German guard myself. I...when the guard would come in the barracks, that was left up to our barracks chief. If we had anything to...any gripes or anything, you could always go through the barracks chief.**

**T: I see. So the actual contact for the broad mass of the POWs was minimal.**

**R: Yes. But every once in a while, you know, there's always some...I don't know...in Ziegenhain there's two guys there that give the guards a bad time. Well, you know, they had it coming. The guards would probably rifle butt them or set them down. I said I'm hurting too much without....I didn't need that rifle butt across the face or into the stomach or across the back. I was hurting enough.**

**T: Right.**

**R: And be a good soldier and obey orders and ...I wanted to survive.**

**T: Did you see abuse of prisoners? Witness abuse of prisoners at Bad Orb for example?**

**R: No. I didn't. No. I imagine there was some there but not that...not where I was in the barracks. There's always somebody that defies orders and sometimes if you defy orders you have to suffer the consequences.**

**T: Sure. The time at Bad Orb, the daily routine you're describing is one of kind of a dismal existence in overcrowded facilities without much food and wondering what's going to happen next.**

**R: That's right. When we got to Ziegenhain we were glad we were out of Bad Orb. We had nothing...we heard nothing good come out of there.**

**T: Now let me ask another one of these kind of overarching questions. That's about a sense of optimism or pessimism. In the conditions you describe how difficult was it**



**to maintain a sense of optimism or hope from day to day?**

**R: Oh, my hope...to survive, all you wanted to do...somebody asked me once if there were any beautiful sights in Germany and I said yes, there are. There were two beautiful sights that I know of. Number one was to see that sun come up in that morning and see that sun, the same sun that you see here in Rochester, and see that sun go down at night. That I have survived the day and the night. I've survived another day. And another beautiful spot was when we got liberated and they took that swastika down and put the American flag in its place. At Ziegenhain.**

**T: Would you describe yourself by nature as a fairly optimistic person?**

**R: Pretty much so. Yes. I just...I've never tried to be negative about anything.**

**T: Would you describe yourself as having that personality trait even before you went to the service as a young man?**

**R: Oh, I don't know. I guess so because I've always....when I went into the Army I said I know there's going to be things in there that I'm not going to like but I said I'm going to be positive about it and do what I'm told to do, when to do it, and not make any ripples or cause any trouble because if trouble...trouble will follow you. So I always said that too. You make your own bed.**

**T: And that was the way you kind of approached your daily existence there as well?**

**R: Yes. Yes.**

**T: At Bad Orb was your friend Hugh Kingery with you as well?**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Were you in the same barracks?**

**R: I believe we were. Yes. We pretty much stuck together from the time we got together in our march.**

**T: O.K. So he's around so you have the benefit of a friendly face with you every day.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: How much was hunger an ongoing concern for you?**

**R: Oh! That was twenty-four hours a day. It was just....our stomachs just....just rolled. Just crawled all the time. And you get to the point where it doesn't hurt anymore.**

**T: And what do you mean by that? That's interesting.**

**R: Well, if you're hungry you get a little hunger pain. But if you go long enough that pain goes away.**

**T: Does it get replaced by something else or....**

**R: I don't know what replaces it. Hunger....I suppose your body is using up all the fat that's been stored for years. It's hard to describe hunger. It just gives you a gnawing feeling in your stomach until that gnawing feeling goes away. Your stomach is shrinking so much that it doesn't ask for food. That's why when we got into the hospital in France they fed us six times a day eggnog. Because our stomachs...they say it shrunk. Your stomach shrinks. You eat...if you have eggnog now, two hours from now you're hungry again. Because your stomach is expanding. Needs more food. They fed us, I think, for about six days there on vitamins and eggnog. Then pretty soon they allowed us solids.**

**T: I see. Does being hungry constantly change or influence like your topics of conversation or your mood?**

**R: There's only one....when you're hungry there's only one concentration on your mind. That's food. Food, food, food.**

**T: And now I'm thinking as a young man of twenty-one or twenty-two years old, typically for young men a topic of conversation is girls. Did that disappear?**

**R: Like I told the senior high class down here at [Rochester] Lourdes High School...we got talking about food, how hunger affects you. I said young ladies, I said, I gotta admit right now. I said, you did not appear on our daily target at all. I said it was food, food, food, food. Girls weren't even mentioned. It was just terrible how some of those guys would think up recipes when they got home. They just went wild. Just crazy for food. And we craved sweets terribly.**

**T: This talking about food or things you're going to cook when you get home, is this you as well doing this?**

**R: I suppose I did. I can't remember but I know there's some that had....I think that's in my diary too about...he was going to have his mother make an ice cream pie and put the ice cream in the oven and bake for an hour or something. Things like that. It's surprising what your mind does when you're hungry.**

**T: From your description you had lots of time on your hands at Bad Orb and Ziegenhain because there were no work details here.**

**R: No. No. No. At Bad Orb the prisoners did all the work. I mean the privates did all the work. And at Ziegenhain they did come in once on a work detail to go out and get some wood in I guess. They lined you up in there and of course I wasn't the biggest one in the barracks so I wasn't picked. They took men out to the woods to bring in**

**wood for our stoves.**

**T: And you recall that as being way out of the ordinary as far as the daily routine.**

**R: Right. Yes.**

**T: Wrapping up on Bad Orb, was there a daily routine at that place or did things just kind of shuttle along?**

**R: Daily routine? There was a daily routine for the privates that were in another barracks, but where we were as noncommissioned officers...**

**T: In a separate barracks at Bad Orb.**

**R: In separate barracks. We didn't have....we were just waiting time to move. I suppose what happens after....we couldn't move until after we were registered.**

**T: So you literally had...you literally sat it sounds like until it was time to go.**

**R: Yes. I can't remember doing anything down there, in Bad Orb. Oh, the days get awful long. All I could think of is you sit there and try to make conversation. Just to pass the time away. You lay in your bunk.**

**T: It sounds incredibly boring.**

**R: Oh! Yes. That's why today I don't get bored very fast.**

**T: That's a very interesting perspective. So in a way, in a kind of humorous way, I often ask people what impact they have from their POW time and for you it sounds like a new definition of boredom.**

**R: Oh, yes. Boy, it's boredom at its finest! (*both laugh*) Even in Ziegenhain. We'd sit there, around a little potbelly stove that we didn't have any wood anyway, but you couldn't lay in your bunk all day. You'd sit there scratching the fleas and the bites and the bedbugs and the ticks and laugh at the guy across. He was itching like everything and you were doing the same thing. We were just lousy, scratching, itching.**

**T: You mentioned laughing. Was humor a part of the POW experience too?**

**R: Just watching other guys scratch themselves and then there was a little humor out in the count outside. The Germans loved to count and on a day like today when it's snowing out and the sun is shining they'd line us up. Say there was three hundred of us out there and the German would go *ein, zwei, drei, vier, funf*, [one to five, in German], you know. All the way up. And he'd have three hundred men to account for. What would happen, some of these guys in the back row in the far end would**

**leave and go down to the front end and the German would get down there and he'd probably end up with two hundred and ninety-six. Count again.**

**T: There's supposed to be three hundred.**

**R: Yes. So what would happen, he'd start counting over again. Get up there and some of the guys on the end would run up to the other end. He'd get three hundred and five this time. See?**

**T: But why do that?**

**R: It broke the monotony! It didn't hurt anybody and it just....but they sure loved to count. And those guys that fooled the guards, they cared less. But until they found out that...well, the commandant came around. This is what's happening. So...they wouldn't do anything about it. It was kind of humorous there too.**

**T You know you've described the Germans on more than one occasion now and I really, I haven't heard you describe them as being abusive or as people that you were scared about.**

**R: Oh, no. No. No, I can't say the Germans treated me poorly at all. I mean, if they would have had the provisions to feed us I think they would have. If they would have had the provisions to house us I think they would have. And if they had the provision to transport us I think they would have. But the German Army itself didn't eat much better than we did because there was no food....**

**T: You know, you're being actually fairly positive in your discussion of the Germans. Does that mean that you bore them no ill will after the war?**

**R: No. I have no ill will for them. I know they were my enemy. The German people were not my enemy or the German soldier. It was Hitler and his regime that was our enemy. We went over there to stop that so he wouldn't hurt anybody else. Like I say, I joined to stem the tide of aggression around the world, and lo and behold I was part of it. And I had to be rescued. But, all in all, the Germans....I can't say anything bad about them because the one we had, that one guard, was...he wanted to go home like the rest of us. One guard, he was supposed to go up, be transferred. He was going to the Russian Front and we said...and he had to walk. There was no transportation. We told him just to go out there and lay in the ditch and get run over by the American forces and surrender. Save your life. I don't know whatever happened to him.**

**T: That's an interesting kind of encounters you've had with them and really not a negative one that comes to your mind.**

**R: No. I don't...the only thing is that I think you could have got into really trouble with the Youth. But the only time we had encounter with the Youth is at Bad Orb on that one Christmas morning. Other than that, no, we didn't run across any Youth group at all.**

**T: Let's leave Bad Orb because you spent most of your time at Stalag IX-A, Ziegenhain. The beginning of our conversation you mentioned that you remembered the train trip or the travel from Bad Orb to Ziegenhain better than the original one. Better than the train trip that got you to Bad Orb.**

**R: Yes. I think the trip from Bad Orb to Ziegenhain was the hardest trip. From Bad Orb to the depot there, I would say about six, eight miles out of town. That was not too bad a trip but I think the trip that is mostly in my mind is when we got into Ziegenhain and went up to IX-A in that blinding snowstorm. It was, I think about...most of the prison camps were about six, eight miles from town and you had to....of course you had to walk. There were six hundred of us in that group, all noncommissioned officers. And we were going up onto that old town road up to the prison camp through a blinding snowstorm. Cold and one thing about....I was a little better prepared for this trip because in my cigarette rations...I didn't smoke at the time. I never smoked. Anyway, I traded my cigarettes for a steel helmet which I could use to put soup in to eat and also strips of blanket I used for scarves.**

**T: These also things you traded your cigarette ration for?**

**R: Yes. Because there was always somebody that would trade anything for a cigarette and I'm so thankful that I didn't smoke. So I traded for that and when I left Bad Orb, my helmet, the steel helmet, I put straw in it and put it over my head for warmth. The strips of blanket I put around my neck and I only had a left-handed glove so I wrapped the other one around my right hand and around my neck. I had problems in the march that the strap of my legging broke and the heel came off my shoe and it came to the point where we could hardly, hardly walk because our feet were so cold that they were just like stubs and the medic who was with us he said, "Don't walk, shuffle." So instead of walking we just shuffled along. Our feet...the feet were almost like lead so... if your feet are so cold you hit it on the ground it just almost hurts all over and your feet are numb. So I shuffled off about six miles there. But the worst part of it is when we got up to the gate they wouldn't let us in because they weren't ready for us. Our leader got hold of somebody, commandant, and then they took us inside the prison camp through the gate but they put us in a great big tent. There was ice all over the floor and they put us in there. We were in there for hours. That was the worst night I believe I've ever put in because standing on that ice....Snow, there's a little warmth in snow. But ice is ice. Our feet were just...there's no way you could get off the ice until...I remember Hugh Kingery and I we got together and we'd stand with our arms around each other. He'd be on one foot and I'd be on the other foot and then we'd stand so long and then we'd change feet. Change to the other foot. To get one up off the ice.**

**T: A real example of how having someone to depend on in this case quite literally.**

**R: Right. Yes. And he was as cold as I was.**

**T: Did you spend a whole night in this tent?**

**R: Pretty much . Way into the early morning. Then they moved us into a barracks.**

**Thank God for that because we were up off that ice. In my memoirs I remember even the one wrote back in 1945, this is the worst night of our life. When I rewrote my memoirs I put on, I said, when they gave me the prisoner of war medal back in 1989 here in Rochester, Minnesota I felt I could accept that with honor that I'd passed the requirement that night in Ziegenhain.**

**T: You have a good sense of memory for that one particular night there.**

**R: You can't forget some of those things.**

**T: Now does that suggest that you were not in, that you and the group were not in the best of shape when you got off that train from Bad Orb?**

**R: Oh, no. No. We weren't in very good shape. We were...up to that point I bet I'd lost twenty pounds anyway. We were weak and tired and with no food you know, you can only go so long. Why some of us didn't die on that march is beyond me. I think it's just the grace of God we made it because we were together. We were all together. Even the medic in the tent. He said, "Don't sit down. Don't sit down. Don't sit down. If you do you won't get up. You won't get up." So keep moving. Keep moving. Even though it hurts.**

**T: What about the train trip from Bad Orb to Ziegenhain? Was that...**

**R: That was very uneventful. That was just maybe half a day and a night and the next day. There wasn't anything...nothing happened during that trip.**

**T: So no bomb attacks.**

**R: No. No. We were used to the horse manure. That didn't bother us because we knew...we were just still hoping that maybe our next place would be better.**

**T: When you got to Ziegenhain, was that the case? Were the conditions there better?**

**R: The conditions pretty much the same. It was a camp that the French POWs had built back years ago when they were first prisoners. Wood barracks. Actually I tell the students that if you're farm people, your dad puts machinery in better buildings than we housed in. I mean it was just a building. Up off the ground and we were out of the wind and snow. But they were cold. We were always cold.**

**T: What kind of sleeping quarters were in these barracks?**

**R: There was three hundred of us. All the barracks had three hundred. There was... bunks of three so there would be six to a bunk. There would be three bunks and there would be, let's see, there would be two hundred of those. Two times six...hundred times six would be six hundred. Yes, there were a hundred of those bunks. There would be three. There would be six to a bunk. We always got the top bunk. And the bunk was a wood lathe laid across the bunk plus the straw ticks.**

**T: So these were...were these sleeping quarters, bunks, any better or worse than those at Bad Orb?**

**R: About the same. Yes. Pretty much. Built the same. Out of wood. Just kept you up off the floor.**

**T: Did the food increase in amount or quality?**

**R: No. The food at Ziegenhain was about the same but we thought it was a little bit...it was cleaner. At Bad Orb we thought...I think it's right too...we felt as though there was maggots in it and some said there was glass in it. In the bread. It was terrible. At Ziegenhain now it was cleaner. We didn't get the best of the fruit and vegetables. We got the end of the carrots. We got the...potatoes, we got the peelings. We got everything that was leftover. They put...made soup out of it.**

**T: How many meals did you get per day?**

**R: We got three. For morning breakfast...and that was both camps. We got in the morning we got about a two-thirds canteen cup of herb tea.**

**T: And that was the morning?**

**R: Yes. Then at noon we got about two-thirds cup of this soup that was made out of potatoes and veggies and carrots, beans. But we got the end of the beans cut off and carrots. We got everything of leftovers and mixed with, thickened with barley, something like that. That was our noon meal. Then at night we got a loaf of that German *Brot* [bread]. Six men to a loaf. That loaf of bread I would say was smaller than our pound loaf here and on the bottom of that was about an inch of ...it was supposed to be molasses but we knew there was sawdust in it. It reminded me of our brownies we get today. But that bread was just terrible. But we got six to a loaf of that and we had to break that with our hands. Six of us always stuck together for the bread.**

**T: The same six? Did you split your bread with the same people?**

**R: Right. So we'd take turns in breaking the bread so that we'd all get some. If you broke bread and somebody got more than somebody else well the next time you may (*chuckles*). We took turns.**

**T: How did that system work in your opinion?**

**R: Oh, just fine. We took care of each other there. We tried to share equally.**

**T: How was the soup divvied out?**

**R: They came in with, there was a soup line. At Ziegenhain. Then they'd ladle that**

**out into...if you had a steel helmet. That's why I wanted a steel helmet. So when I got to Ziegenhain I had something to eat soup out of.**

**T: So you foresaw a value for that steel helmet.**

**R: Right. And it also kept me warm. My head warm. Because all I had on all through was that little wool knit cap like Radar wears [on the TV program M\*A\*S\*H]. That's what I had. With the straw on top of that and the helmet, the steel helmet on, it kept my head warm.**

**T: I see.**

**R: I was more prepared for that second trip than....like I talked to the Boy Scout class once. I said about Boy Scouts being prepared. I said I wasn't prepared for the first trip but the second one I did. I said my Boy Scout training paid off.**

**T: I'll be darned. Now do you feel that all in all the food was pretty equitably distributed?**

**R: Oh! Oh, yes. We got fed every day. What it was.**

**T: Yes. Do you recall any disagreements or arguments about the way the food was distributed?**

**R: I don't think so. No. Because we just accepted it and ate it and wished...of course there wasn't any seconds.**

**T: Right. With things in short supply and food being foremost among them, how much of a problem from your perspective was theft among the men?**

**R: Stealing. Oh, that ran rampant. Of course I didn't have too much to swap for or swap with. The only thing I had was my cigarettes and I would swap that right away and if I had strips of cloth I wrapped that around my neck. Nobody got that. And my steel helmet I ...get in my bunk I had my head in that with the strap around my chin. But stealing was...there was a lot of it.**

**T: What kind of things would people steal from each other?**

**R: Mostly food and things that I traded for because they probably smoked and they didn't get those rag scarves and they were the ones that they would want. You have to protect yourself. Hugh Kingery and I we got together. We have to leave anything...we always took it with us or one stayed at the bunk.**

**T: Did you ever have anything stolen from you?**

**R: No. Because we protected our property.**



**T: But other people did.**

**R: Yes. There was stealing and fights going on.**

**T: One wants to think that American servicemen put into difficult situations would kind of look out for each other but what you're suggesting is that there were people looking out for themselves and perhaps for their one or two close friends.**

**R: That's right. When it was a fight for survival.**

**T: When fights erupted, typically what would those be about?**

**R: I don't know what started it but they'd start swinging at each other and they were so weak that they couldn't hurt anybody but the guards would come in and the barracks chief said "That's all right. It's just between those two guys. We're not making for a breakout or anything." And those guys would try to swing and hit each other but when it was all over with they'd lay in their bunk and get up the next day and shake hands. They just...the tempers were, you know...pretty short.**

**T: Yes. So it was immediate events that seemed to cause them and not a long term...**

**R: No. No. Just something spur of the moment. There wasn't anything...the barracks chief didn't do anything about it. Just kind of controlled it.**

**T: You also mentioned cigarettes as being a valuable commodity.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Now where did the cigarettes come from?**

**R: We got that from the French Red Cross. The French prisoners shared their packages with us because we did not get an American Red Cross package at all.**

**T: O.K. so there was some constant supply of new cigarettes coming into this equation?**

**R: Yes. By the French.**

**T: Now did everybody get an equal number of those?**

**R: Pretty much so.**

**T: And for someone like yourself who was a nonsmoker that became something to trade.**

**R: Oh, yes. That was a great commodity to have. A cigarette that you could get something for it. Money didn't mean a thing. We didn't have any money anyway.**

**T: That's right. What did you frequently trade for yours for? Let's say at Ziegenhain.**

**R: Ziegenhain I traded mine for bread.**

**T: So guys were willing to part with some of their meager bread ration for cigarettes.**

**R: Oh, yes. There's always somebody rather have cigarette than bread. They'd come through "Bread for cigarettes. Bread for cigarettes. Bread for cigarettes. Here. Here." You'd have a cigarette and they'd have the bread. So.**

**T: Do you remember, how did the equation work? How much bread for how much cigarettes?**

**R: Oh, gosh. I suppose that their serving for that night before that they had left over. I don't why they would have left over but I suppose they knew we were going to get a cigarette maybe tomorrow and they wanted to have a little trading stock. And a lot of them saved the bread. I know I...the chaplain's aide on Good Friday....Maundy Thursday we were supposed to save a little bread. Chaplain's aide was going to give us communion. It's pretty hard to save a little bread.**

**T: That's right. So the ration was meager.**

**R: Yes. I did save it but then the next day we got liberated so...**

**T: That's right. It was March 30 you were liberated....**

**R: Yes.**

**T: And April 1 was Easter Sunday.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Speaking of liberation makes me think about the war itself. How much information did you have or could you get about how the war was going?**

**R: Oh, the British had been at that camp for years and throughout that process they had smuggled in a crystal set for radio and so the barracks chiefs would get together and they in turn would....we had a chief of all of them that would get to talk to the British commander. He kept us informed of what's going on up front. And as far as going into liberation day, we knew the war was going...was pretty close because of the shelling and the bombing and the small arms off in the distance. The war was getting closer.**

**T: O.K. So as March 30 drew closer you could sense...you could hear the war coming.**

**R: Yes. Yes.**

**T: Now you mentioned British. There were other nationalities at Ziegenhain and not just Americans.**

**R: We had British, French, Belgians, Australians. They were from all over the world. There was about ten thousand of us there.**

**T: How much contact as an American could you or did you have with these other nationalities?**

**R: None that I know of. Our chiefs probably had some like with the British and French. But as far as the soldiers, I mean the prisoners themselves, they were all in a different compound.**

**T: So there was an American compound, a British compound....**

**R: A Russian compound.**

**T: You mentioned being able to hear the war and having some news. The other end of the spectrum from news is rumor. And I'm wondering how much rumors were part of your POW experience at Bad Orb or here at Ziegenhain.**

**R: I don't really think there was...I don't know if it's a rumor or not but when the barracks chief came back and said about the British that they were this far...the front lines were here. We took it for granted that it was not a rumor. I don't know if there's any rumors really got started because they didn't know any more than we did. Whoever wanted to start the rumor.**

**T: But sometimes people seem to talk even when they don't....**

**R: Well, that's true. But in the prison camp where would you get your information?**

**T: O.K. So you had some news but little information traveling by rumor that you recall.**

**R: That's right. No. We relied on the British to keep us kind of up to date because they said the Germans were only going to tell us what they want us to know. That it's not that way. We'll go by the British because they've been here longer. They know what's going on. They follow it better than we do. So we took the British at their word and they were usually right.**

**T: How about contact with your family back home. You mentioned, and you have a copy of the postcard that you sent. Did you receive any news or letters from home?**

**R: I didn't receive one thing when I was in Europe. Everything I got is all returned missing in action.**

**T: So the things that your family or friends at home had tried to send was returned to them.**

**R: Right. And I have a whole envelope...a pile of envelopes with a rubber band around it....of all the letters that my friends and relatives from that small town when I was a prisoner of war sent me and all returned missing in action. And they saved them and when I got home they gave them to me. And I still have them today. Especially those letters. And the folks at home to write to me as a prisoner of war they had to have a special form for that.**

**T: They had a special address to write to and everything.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Let me ask you about getting out of this. I mean you were at...your date of liberation which you indicate is the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 1945. Can you recall the circumstances about the actual liberation when the POW experience was ended?**

**R: That...the night before we had been given orders to march out the next morning on Good Friday morning and to evade our liberators. They didn't want us to be liberated. They wanted to send us deeper into Germany.**

**T: And that Friday would be March 30.**

**R: Yes. So the barracks chiefs got together and they said if they get us out in the morning and send us down the road that there's going to be so many that's not going to make it too far and we have men in the dispensary that...they said if we can stay here...we're safer here in those barracks than we were out there on the road. That we'll just take the chance of staying there and to do that we're going to make sure that everybody is back in the barracks. One would fall out in the ranks and there would be six guys take him back into the barracks. We were supposed to be sick. You know, can't travel. That's why we want to get back in the barracks. It proved that some of the guys, they fell down before they even got out on the count ground. Carried back into the barracks. Then you had seven men in there. Then somebody else fell. There'd be seven more. So everyone that went down there would be seven back in the barracks. This went on for maybe a couple hours. We just told the guards that no, we're not going to leave. We can't leave these men here. Either...if one goes we all go. If one stays we all stay.**

**T: How did the Germans respond to this?**

**R: The German guards, I think they knew probably a little bit more than we did because they knew that we're going to be overrun right now. In just a matter of hours. That camp was going to be overrun and they didn't want any part of that. So**

**they took off then early in the afternoon.**

**T: Of March 30<sup>th</sup>.**

**R: Yes. That's when the Sixth Armored Division came through and liberated us. Our plan to stay there I think worked because I don't think....the casualty rate would have been great if we'd have been out there on that road.**

**T: What kind of physical condition were you yourself in by March 30?**

**R: Oh, geez, I was nothing but skin and bones. My clothes just hung on me and I hadn't had a bath, a shower since the first part of November. Well, I had one shower and that was in Ziegenhain in February when the International Red Cross came in to check prisoners. Orders were that we be deloused and for delousing they put us in a room with cold showers and be undressed and we all sat around benches in there on a concrete floor and old wood building with showers in it. No heat. And took off our clothes and they gave us about ten seconds of water and some lye soap and turned the water off again. Then lye soap and then turned the water on to rinse us. They gave us no towels to dry with and went over to the bench and put your clothes back on again. We were weaker than if they hadn't given us a shower at all. Our bodies were just drained. And we looked at our bodies and you could have played any kind of music there was on our ribs. They just stuck out that much. And the stomachs were just sunken in. We were just so weak after that. That was the only time I had a shower. And we put the same old clothes on, lice and all and I put long johns on the day after Thanksgiving in England because you were going over into the continent of Europe and winter had set in over there. To put long johns on. And I did that. I took the long johns off on the front steps of Rouen, France hospital on April 10, 1945.**

**T: They had been on you every day with the exception of that shower.**

**R: Right.**

**T: I'm wondering how much of a shock it might have been to stand there at those showers and really see each other's bodies in that condition.**

**R: Hugh Kingery...we looked at each other and we just said "Are we going to make it?" You're almost ready to give up because of your weakened condition. That's what... (sighs)...Germany wanted. They were just, like I say, the night of that walk from Ziegenhain to...from the railroad station to the camp, that night we spent...Germany, the army probably wishing half of us would have died. Then they wouldn't have to feed us, you know. You don't have to feed a dead man. And that's the way we felt too. A lot of times that way. And we spoiled their command by surviving.**

**T: So you, in a sense, that was the goal. Really. To make it. And you did.**

**R: Yes. Like when they presented us with the POW medal, General Andreotti said that...he said there's a lot of people said that you're cowards for surrendering. He**

**said “I don’t believe a word of that.” He said “I think you’re all heroes because you don’t...you had the prisoner where...you don’t believe that.”**

**T: That’s interesting.**

**R: He said because you guys consider yourselves survivors first and foremost. We’re not heroes. And Jessica Lynch was not a hero because she was a prisoner of war.**

**T: That’s interesting you should mention that because that’s the terminology that’s used with reference to her.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: How does that make you feel as an ex-POW when you see the news about Jessica Lynch [captured in Iraq in 2003]?**

**R: Well, when I saw that they made her a hero I felt really...you know, put down about my government and our administration and our army today that they... They made her a hero for political reasons only. It’s something that they....something good had to come out of that horror. And she was a victim of it.**

**T: When you look at the experiences, are you able to compare her experience to yours?**

**R: No. Hers was a Sunday School picnic. Well, twenty-one days. Hell, I spent that much time walking.**

**T: So what I hear you saying is that it makes you a little angry when you see the hoopla that’s attached to this and the hero status that’s given to her.**

**R: Not at the individual.**

**T: No. No. But at those who are creating that hoopla.**

**R: Right. Yes. Yes. I think [Arizona Senator and Vietnam POW] John McCain is a survivor. He’s a hero to me. All those guys in Vietnam are heroes. All those guys that come out of Japan Death March. They’re heroes.**

**T: Let me ask about that because in the course of my interviews I’ve talked to probably two dozen POWs of the Germans and an equal number of POWs of the Japanese. How do you view their experiences in relation to yours? Those POWs of the Japanese.**

**R: Well, when I think of the....I know a lot of prisoners of war from Japan. I said I don’t...I said I just admire those guys because they were prisoners of war longer than I was in the army.**

**T: That's right. You didn't go in the army until 1943.**

**R: That's right. And they were prisoners of war longer than I was in the whole army of three years...of three months. And as far as the Viet Nam prisoners of war, my God, I don't know how they came out of that with their mind. Being in solitary....we had an American prisoners of war convention in Wisconsin and anyway the master of ceremonies that night was a Viet Nam prisoner of war. Anyway, he introduced the speaker that night was a prisoner of war of Japan. After the speaker got through the emcee who was a Viet Nam prisoner said well, while we're on the subject, he says, maybe I can share a few of my experiences with you. He says after being in solitary confinement for five and a half years, he says, life got better. You know, God, how....it got better. Goodness sake! Five and a half years in confinement! And he's not a hero?**

**T: When you get together with other POWs from various conflicts, Korea, of the Japanese, Viet Nam, what's the relationship, how do you observe the relationship between those different experiences? Do men....do you see each other in different ways or is there a way of saying mine is somehow different than yours?**

**R: We're all prisoners of war... equal. They never questioned the date or time that you spent as a prisoner of war. As a prisoner of war you are a prisoner of war. You were treated...not the best treatment in the world. Anywhere in the world as a prisoner of war. But there's a bond between all prisoners that are different than any of the other veteran's organization there is. As a prisoner of war like Hugh Kingery and all the ones I know in Germany that are prisoner of war, we have a special bond. If you take a guy in the VFW, even a wounded Purple Heart man, he's got a Purple Heart but he doesn't do it with...he gets hit and gets off the line and goes back. He doesn't have that bond that we have that lived together and survived together.**

**T: Would you say you feel that bond with someone you meet who was a POW of the Japanese the same as you feel it with someone who shared your experience in Germany?**

**R: Yes. We never...we usually don't discuss too much of how they were dealt and how we were dealt. It's hard to say. We gather because we were POWs.**

**T: And yet the conversations would have to be by necessity different.**

**R: Oh, sometimes in a conversation it leads back into something that they've gone through. Yes.**

**T: Let me get back on track with March 30. I'm wondering if you recall the moment when you first saw American troops at the camp there.**

**R: Oh, golly. It's just....it's just a great thing seeing that Jeep and tank come through that fence.**

**T: Through the fence or through the gate?**

**R: Right through the fence. They didn't have to open the gates for them. That tank. That's when the Sixth Armored came in and we were all out there greeting them of course. Just slapping each other on the back and...they're here! The Yanks are here. We're free. It was just....we just cried and laughed. It was a joyous time of life. To be free.**

**T: How long did you remain at that camp then?**

**R: About ten days. Liberated on the 30<sup>th</sup> and I wound up at the hospital in Rouen, France the 10<sup>th</sup> of April.**

**T: And you flew from [the German city of] Giessen, is that right?**

**R: Correct. Yes.**

**T: That intervening period where you were still at the camp and yet no longer a prisoner, what transpired in those days?**

**R: Pretty much we just...well, there wasn't much we could do but wait for transportation back. Of course we took the dispensary out, the hospital guys out first. Without any question. Then they asked for volunteers to stay. There were other ones that were in pretty bad shape that they got out right away too. Then they asked for volunteers to stay in case the Germans had a counterattack that they would march us out. I said well, I'll make it. I made it this far. I'll make it. So I volunteered to stay until the truck came by and picked us up and took us to the airport. But we didn't...there wasn't any counterattack. We just waited for the next six by six to come through and pick us up.**

**T: Now you mentioned of course waiting being and sitting around being part of your POW experience....**

**R: Oh, yes.**

**T: ...from the beginning. How was the waiting different now that there were no Germans out there?**

**R: We were free to walk around any place we wanted to inside the compound. We still had a little order there that they had to maintain.**

**T: And from your perspective was order fairly well maintained?**

**R: I think so. Yes. The German guards left but the German commandant stayed. And he and the commander of the Sixth Armored that came in they got together and between those two they maintained order there. It was pretty much out of order you know the first day or two until they got order established again which had to be.**



**T: Were there any German guards left or had they left pretty quickly?**

**R: They'd left but a lot of them were recaptured. They were captured and brought back. That's when I picked up a little knick-knack here off one of the German guards and I got some German marks and some French franks off of a German. I wanted to get my money's worth. They got my watch. I was going to get their money.**

**T: Did you witness any retribution against these German guards that were captured?**

**R: There was one German guard that....not in our barracks but one barracks there was two Americans that they told that German guard that if he ever got back there they would do away with him and they did. Right there in camp. That first day. They did him in.**

**T: What happened to him?**

**R: They killed him. I suppose they beat him to death.**

**T: O.K. You didn't personally witness it though.**

**R: No. No. Today I...I didn't have anything to do with it. To this day I don't approve of that. I didn't approve of it then but there was nothing I could do. Just one man. Those guys knew...they were going to do it regardless.**

**T: Was it in your mind or is it even today, justifiable, understandable or how would you classify that?**

**R: Well, we were mad. When we got liberated. We were mad. After we got liberated we found the warehouse full of Red Cross packages meant for us and we didn't get them. That made us really, really mad. And some of those guys...they got mad because the Germans withheld that and they wanted to get even with somebody so they got even with him.**

**T: Were you allowed to or able to leave the camp facility while you were there?**

**R: No.**

**T: O.K. So prisoners were, in a sense, still restricted to camp.**

**R: Yes. Yes. They didn't want us running off in the country. They had a war to win. (chuckles)**

**T: Yes. So you were....would you say you were content to wait inside the camp?**

**R: Oh, yes. Yes. That was no problem. That was because I knew if not tomorrow the**

**next day I'd be out of here too.**

**T: O.K. So really waiting there was not a great problem.**

**R: No. No.**

**T: You were in France at Rouen and then at Camp Lucky Strike as well, right?**

**R: Yes.**

**T: The recovery process that went on there, what stands out in your mind as being most helpful from the time in France?**

**R: From my time in France?**

**T: Yes. You were there for a number of weeks.**

**R: I was there a couple weeks in the hospital. Yes. I tell you what, it was quite an experience. Coming off that plane and getting in that ambulance heading for Rouen, France to the hospital. Because I didn't know where in the world I was going. Coming off that plane they culled you like they do chickens you know. They put a band on you and this one's going to the hospital. This one's going to the States. This one's going to Paris. So I wound up in Rouen, France and they knew prisoners of war were coming but they didn't know what they were like. When we got to the front door we were so dirty they wouldn't let us in. They made us strip right out on the steps. And they burned our clothes right there. They couldn't let all that lice and fleas and bugs and ticks come in. Then they threw...what I saved...they gave us little ditty bags that they fumigated and after they took us in and I put my name on it and I got that back after it was fumigated. Then they gave us a shower and shave, shampoo and pajamas and put us in bed.**

**T: So they were quickly attending to your physical recovery.**

**R: Yes. Then the next day of course physical, physical, physical. They just...that's when they decided to feed us eggnog and paregoric.**

**T: Eggnog is of course loaded with calories so...**

**R: Yes. And that's the only thing we could hold down.**

**T: How did you do holding food down? Even if we think back to that week or so you remained in camp after the liberation.**

**R: The kitchen on the PX rations they kind of dished that out little by little for us because we were getting sick...the first thing I grabbed was a Hershey candy bar because we craved sweets. When that hit my stomach it made me so sick I thought sure I was going to die.**

**T: Oh, really. So you vomited that back up again?**

**R: Oh, yes. It was just terrible. So then they said....everybody else was doing that too so they stopped that. Then that's when they tried to ration out the C rations, K rations little by little. Weaning us back to health.**

**T: The physical recovery. Was this being accompanied by any kind of attention to what we might say psychological recovery of dealing with the POW experience?**

**R: Psychological recovery? No. We were just another soldier. As far as being a POW once I got out of Rouen, France and Lucky Strike we were just considered soldiers. There was no counseling, no nothing. Thirty-seven years later they debriefed me at the Veteran's Administration in Minneapolis.**

**T: And so until that time there really hadn't been any kind of debriefing as it were about your POW experience.**

**R: No. That's when the Congress passed that law for former prisoners of war.**

**T: About benefits. About the benefits that were available to you.**

**R: Right. And then encouraged all to take that protocol exam. That took three days.**

**T: Let me ask you about that in a little bit here. How soon was it after your arrival in France there that you were able to send word to your family back home?**

**R: As soon as I got in the hospital in France I sent them word and about my address in France. By the time that got home, by the time they wrote to me, I was gone already. So all that mail was returned.**

**T: You really accumulated a pile of mail for when you got it.**

**R: That's right. Yes.**

**T: So they were able to receive a telegram or a letter from you?**

**R: They got letters...no there wasn't any telegram. I sent a letter right away to home to let them know where I was and my address. I was a detachment of patients.**

**T: Now you, I know from your...the details here, you arrived back in the States in May and then were back in Wisconsin also by middle of May I think it was.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: Do you remember when were first reunited with your family?**

**R: Oh, yes. I don't know. I can't remember just what the date is now but I went into Wisconsin as far as Eau Claire by train and then from Eau Claire I went by Greyhound Bus to Baldwin, Wisconsin. Then I had a friend there that took me to Spring Valley. That was about eighteen miles down there. And I remember going up to the high school, my youngest sister, Karletta, Ky I called her...I went up to see her first.**

**T: Was it a school day?**

**R: School day. So the principal, I knew him, Mr. Syverson, and the first thing he asked me is how'd they treat you, Gunvalson? I said I haven't got time to talk to you right now about it. I said I want to see Ky. So he goes up and gets her out of class and sent her home with me for the rest of the day.**

**T: Did your folks know that you were coming?**

**R: They knew I was pretty close to home by that time because the communications those days you know, wasn't the best.**

**T: Yes. I'm just thinking back to when you mentioned that the twenty-mile drive to River Falls was something you couldn't master and it's the same with other communications here too.**

**R: That's right. It was a great homecoming.**

**T: Did you surprise your folks then literally when you showed up at that particular moment?**

**R: Yes. Nothing surprises mothers and anyway, when she saw this car drive up into the driveway she just couldn't understand who that was right at first. But then when I stepped out she knew right away that I was home and the first time in four years that three of her four sons was on American soil.**

**T: That's right because there was a photo. You had several brothers in service too.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: How long were you home with your folks at that first meeting with your family?**

**R: Then I wound up in the hospital in Fort Snelling. I was in there for about two months with a hernia operation and then after that I went home and finished my convalescent leave and by that time, August 8, the war was over. So I had to stick around long enough and then I had to go to Miami Beach, Florida for rehabilitation for POWs.**

**T: Yes. You were there until October I think it said.**

**R: Right. Yes.**

**T: When you were home with your folks there, you've got brothers who were in service...you had brothers and sisters and your folks. How much did they ask about your POW experience when you saw them?**

**R: Not too much. After I wrote my little article for the Spring Valley Sun it kind of took the heat off my explaining that to everybody.**

**T: Were people curious to know?**

**R: Oh, yes. They all wanted to know. They all wanted to hear my story because they, at that time, all those atrocities were coming out of Germany and they were just wondering if they should really believe that. So I had to assure them that this is what happened to me.**

**T: Were you Spring Valley's only POW?**

**R: No. There was another one. Mike Thome. But he never lived in Spring Valley. His folks lived there. He lived in...I think he lived in Minneapolis at that time, but he was in the 106<sup>th</sup> Division with me.**

**T: I see. So you were the only one that actually came back to town.**

**R: Right. Yes. I was the only POW from town.**

**T: O.K. So there was a level of curiosity. People wanted to know.**

**R: Oh, yes. Yes. And boy, when people saw me...I was invited out every night for supper.**

**T: How much did people ask and how did you decide how much to tell people?**

**R: They all asked how I was treated and today if I talk to a class, people want to know when I got captured, how I got captured, when I got liberated and how they treat you. So they all ask about the same question. The first couple days that went on I couldn't go a half a block until I had to tell my story over, tell....you know tell parts of it over. That's when the editor says...I got talking to him. He said "You go home and write it down and I'll publish it in the weekly paper." I still have that original handwritten paper.**

**T: The stuff that you wrote.**

**R: Right. What do you do with stuff like that?**

**T: Let me go back to the...in a sense being almost the...kind of the best known face in**

**Spring Valley there for a while. How did you handle the kind of constant attention that you had?**

**R: I really don't know. I just....it's hard to say. Of course it's been so long ago too. They were interested in my...really in my story. Even how I got in and out. That's why I guess I wrote it down on paper and had it printed. They answered the questions that they asked. Because they always asked me the same questions over and over and over.**

**T: They probably have, haven't they?**

**R: Yes. And to this day some of the same questions are asked.**

**T: When you got out of that ...now you spent some time in Florida and then were discharged in December of 1945. How soon was it after that that you went to work for the Postal Service?**

**R: I went to work August 1, 1947.**

**T: In the intervening period there, that's about a year and a half, what did you do with yourself?**

**R: I stayed home of course. I lived right there in town and I worked for the city for a while. In the meantime I'd written that civil service test and I knew I was going into the Post Office some time and until the Postmaster saw me in...let me see...that was August of 47. August of 47. Up to that time ...I got out in December of 45. O.K. I spent a time working for the city for x number of months. Then also there's a lumber company there that I drove a lumber truck for while I was just biding time.**

**T: So you knew what was coming.**

**R: Yes. April 23 of 47 I got married.**

**T: Was your wife local to Spring Valley as well?**

**R: Yes. She was living in Spring Valley at that time but she was born and raised in Eau Claire. But her folks lived out in...farmed out in the country.**

**T: What did you do there from 1945-47?**

**R: Keeping active. Busy.**

**T: When you started at the Postal Service having coworkers, did they know that you were an ex-POW?**

**R: Yes. But nothing was said about it.**

**T: Would you say that's more that they didn't ask about your POW time or you didn't tell?**

**R: I think they probably didn't ask and I didn't tell. Even my wife says that I didn't say anything. She said because usually on the 19<sup>th</sup> of December and I would mention it was sure a cold day, a day like today, say seven years ago...and that was all I said. Nothing...I never...I didn't say anything to anybody until ...my diary lay dormant for thirty-seven years.**

**T: When you got married in 1947, when you were dating your wife to be, did she know about your POW experience?**

**R: Yes. She knew I was a veteran and ...I don't know if she really knew I was a POW or not but she knew I was a veteran. Nothing was said about my POW status. Nothing...it never come at all to anybody.**

**T: It sounds like it...after that initial flurry of attention in Spring Valley and the newspaper article that it kind of passed into your past.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: This allowing your POW experience to become further and further in the past, is that something you consciously did or just felt it slipped away?**

**R: Somewhere along the line it was told to us through some Legion meeting that being captured was not a very honorable thing to do. So we didn't let anybody know that we were a POW.**

**T: Did you believe that when you heard that statement or was that something that bothered you?**

**R: It wasn't until Charles McDonald wrote the book Time for Trumpets and that's when he said that it wasn't a dishonor to be captured.**

**T: And that helped you in a way see your own experience in a different light?**

**R: Right. Yes. Because as I say in the book the fellows that were captured at Bataan didn't have any choice. They were surrendered by their command and the fellow that jumped out of an airplane in Germany and got captured, they didn't have any choice. I got captured in Germany. I didn't have any choice because the regimental commander surrendered his regiment rather than having us annihilated. I didn't have any choice and you don't choose to be captured. You go up into the line and get captured. You don't go in there to GET captured.**

**T: That's a good point and that kind of model of explanation really helped you to feel better about what had happened to you.**

**R: That's right. Yes. Until somebody explained to me that it wasn't a dishonor. That it just ...I happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.**

**T: You mentioned that your wife knew but didn't know a lot. How about your kids as they were growing up? Were they curious about your military service?**

**R: No. I didn't...They knew I was a veteran because I belong to the Legion. It never got out until about 82 I guess it was. 1982 when I got introduced to the POW organization.**

**T: That's a date that keeps coming back in conversation here. Let me ask you, how much of a kind of impact did that...being introduced to that organization make for you?**

**R: Greatest thing that ever happened to my being. It helped me to where I am today and just talking about.....the psychiatrist at the VA told me that we have to talk about this. You have to talk about it. So they got the whole story and he said now we want this for our record but you have to go out and tell your story, he said, because it's not only good for historians to hear but also it's good therapy for you to get it off your chest. I organized the Hiawatha Chapter here in Rochester back in 1985 and there was POWs that I called up to probably join us. They would have no part of it—they'd just hang up on you. They don't want to talk about it. And some of those still are that way today.**

**T: They still won't talk about it?**

**R: They still won't talk about it. They're miserable people.**

**T: How would you explain or describe rather how talking about the experience has been good for you?**

**R: I guess it's...if it's up in your mind someplace and you don't get it off, it's still there. I don't...I talk about it only when people ask me about it. Once in a while I will bring it up... Oh, gosh, that's not the way I look at it. Especially when I think of these women in service. They always say about women equal rights and equal opportunities in the service and I said I disagree because there's, to me, there was no place for any woman in that boxcar locked up with sixty men.**

**T: That's a good observation.**

**R: And I said, you know, I said we all have little dignity. They don't belong there. That's my personal feeling. And I wouldn't want them to be put in that position. I still think that.**

**T: Now you've talked about your experience on a number of different occasions since 1982 haven't you?**



**R: Oh, yes. Yes.**

**T: Do you still go to schools and things?**

**R: Yes. Yes. It's getting less today because I'm not out as much as I used to be. But yes, whenever any teacher calls me I usually honor that and the students today are really receptive to hearing. They want to know. And the VA told me if you don't tell them, who's going to do it?**

**T: In what ways is talking to groups, let's say schools, rewarding for you?**

**R: Oh, it's...I don't know. It gives me some satisfaction that maybe I'm doing something for history and maybe something that somewhere along the line that students will remember this and it helps them. I had a lady in St. Charles, Minnesota that wrote an essay on American prisoners of war and she wrote an essay. Came over and interviewed me. It's a great tribute to me what she said that it was an honor to meet Mr. Gunvalson because he helped me understand more things in life than anybody else has. That people forget to stop and just smell the roses. That they are so busy in life that they forget that there's some beauty around them. She was just amazed. And also, another thing there that affected her was my book. It said twenty-four hours. I said that goes back to the time when I went into the army that my buddy and I get together and were going to go together to Fort Sheridan. But he wound up at Fort Sheridan twenty-four hours before I did. When he got there he was put in the Air Force and went to Yuma, Arizona and never left the ground. I got... twenty-four hours later...I got there and I wound up at Fort Jackson, South Carolina and look what I went through. I said that was twenty-four hours. I often wondered who my friends would be, how my life would be today or where I'd be. I said it's just ironic that he died at the age of fifty-one and here I am seventy-four years old writing my memoirs. So twenty-four hours in your life, in everybody's life, can change. Within twenty-four hours your life can be completely changed. Sometimes for happiness, sometimes for sadness. The way it is now I'm talking to you, a historian. I may not be doing that.**

**T: That's exactly right. I mean our paths only crossed because of a chance meeting in a sense. I got a list of people and you were on it.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: I have just a couple more things to ask you if it's O.K. One is about the Veterans Administration and you mentioned that in the early 80s with the making public of each POW's benefits that you came into contact with the VA. In the intervening period from 45 to 82, what kind of contact had you had with the Veterans Administration?**

**R: Well, in the 50s we weren't very well received. I was having stomach problems and I went up to the VA. That was in the early 50s and I was up probably once a month, every six weeks. Anyway, every time I go up there I had to almost prove to them I was alive, I was a soldier and I was a veteran and I was a prisoner of war.**

**And they just kind of ignored me and I was getting thirty percent disability at that time. Well, it comes...just a short time later I was cut from thirty percent to ten percent and went back up there and I didn't get anywhere. I said to hell with you. Then it wasn't until 1982 I think...somebody must have got word of it. Anyway, that's when they passed that public law and today, right now, I go up there as a POW, my file has a big...across my name there's a great big green flag. We don't have to go through the means test. We don't have to go through anything. We get cared for right away.**

**T: So it sounds like from neglecting the POWs in the 50s they've bent over backwards to make amends.**

**R: They've turned around backwards. Yes.**

**T: Have you participated since 82 in any kind of discussion groups with other POWs sponsored by your VA?**

**R: Not in the VA. I've gone to Roundtable discussions over in Owatonna, but I never got into a Roundtable discussion at Fort Snelling.**

**T: So the VA, have they provided any kind of psychological help since 1982?**

**R: Oh, yes. I've...Rochester. I've...of course, I've got good medical insurance so I have all my stuff done at Mayo Clinic. The VA just put in a home base unit down here that I've gone down there and went through their clinic because I want them to know that I'm around and get registered. Last time I saw my doctor he said "Russ, are you depressed?" I said "Well, I don't think so." The psychiatrist comes down here once a month so I've been over here to the psychiatrist twice now. So I use their services. She says well, you're far from depressed.**

**T: I suppose that's good when you hear that.**

**R: Yes. (chuckles)**

**T: Would you estimate that this kind of really more hands on treatment is something you could have used right after 1945 to deal with things like dreams or nightmares, things like that?**

**R: I think so. If they would have been...if they would have done their part, you know. But they got educated too. (chuckles)**

**T: Yes. Yes. It took...when they get back from Viet Nam.**

**R: Yes. Yes. They debriefed them right away. I think Korean too...because the POWs from World War II weren't treated very good.**

**T: You mentioned when you got to France they didn't debrief you at all.**

**R: No. No. No. We were just another soldier.**

**T: And in that period after the war, after your release there, did you have immediate problems or things with dreams or nightmares that recurred?**

**R: Oh, yes. But they don't seem to pay too much attention to that. They didn't anyway. Now they do. Because the psychiatrist is the one that asked that, you know. So they try to keep my head straight.**

**T: Did you have dreams immediately after you were released as a POW that were about that time?**

**R: It's not every night. When special things come up like maybe tonight now I'll have a flashback or a dream.**

**T: Because we've talked about it today.**

**R: Yes. Yes.**

**T: Did you have those more frequently right after you were released in 1945?**

**R: I know I had some. I remember one dream I had in that small town....it was the Coast to Store. I remember that because I would park in the alley because....and I was doing some work and the owner of the Coast to Coast to store I knew, Newell Fagerland, he was a...I bowled on his bowling team. Anyway he said well, if you can't find a place to park in front, park in back and come through the back door. So I would go through the back doors and then you go into the storeroom and then through another door into the Coast to Coast. Well, that night I went through the back door, in my dream now, went through the back door and as I went out the door going into the warehouse from the store I heard a click and turned around and the door to the back ...with a click...I was trapped in that room. I think that's the night I was sealed in that boxcar.**

**T: Oh, the clicking.**

**R: I was locked in.**

**T: And that's the same clicking noise with the closing of the door.**

**R: Yes. Yes.**

**T: Did you have that one more than once?**

**R: That certain dream once and if I dream anything I always seem to be lost.**

**T: Even today.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: So the dreams have lessened....you don't have them as often.**

**R: Oh, no. No.**

**T: Another one of the larger questions is, the way that you would describe how your own POW experience changed, the most important way that that experience changed you or changed your life really.**

**R: I don't know how my life would have been without it. But I just...I try not to panic today. I try to maintain a certain level of...when things happen. I think I'm ....I have control of my patience. Patience is the biggest thing I think that I have. That's why I go to the VA because of the....the psychiatrist...because of the patience. I get impatient on how some people act today. I have to control that. In driving. People are NUTS today. And the psychiatrist says there's nothing you can do about it. He says that you just have to be patient and just don't let it bother you.**

**T: Are you more impatient in your own estimation than you were before the POW experience?**

**R: Impatient? No. I've always been a patient man. I trust my neighbor. I trust people. I have faith yet. Try to be a good provider. I don't know. I just...a normal human being.**

**T: You mentioned earlier about kind of a greater sense of appreciation for each day that goes by.**

**R: Oh, appreciation for life is great.**

**T: That sounds like something that may have come out of this whole ....the ordeal that you went through.**

**R: Yes.**

**T: You mentioned waking up and seeing the sun go up and down each day was a...**

**R: Yes. So many people don't appreciate that.**

**T: They don't and that's very perceptive and good to hear you say that.**

**R: They don't stop...when I see them walk by the house, they walk and they have the radio going in their ears. If they'd just throw that out and listen to the birds and listen to the train in the background and the busses going down on 52 and hear the**

**sounds. They don't hear that anymore.**

**T: That's a good point. Let me ask, to conclude, if there's anything else you'd like to add.**

**R: I guess I don't have too much to ask you.**

**T: Well, then thank you very much for the interview today.**

**END OF INTERVIEW**

**<http://people.csp.edu/saylor/POWproject/POWinterviews/GunvalsonRussell.htm>**

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