

Editor's note: I first met Pete Davidson at his home in Teague, Texas on July 30, 1994. By researching my family's history I learned that my great grandmother, Stella Lee, was Pete's aunt and I wanted to know if he had any photographs or information on the family that he might be willing to share. During the course of our conversation he told me about the times when, as a young child, his father's uncle, a Confederate veteran, would come to visit. He said that he had sat upon this man's lap and listened to his stories of the war. He also told me that while he couldn't remember any of those stories, he would always remember the smell of tobacco on that man's clothes. Later in life he told this story to Mrs. Vickers of the Freestone County Museum, who had also learned of Pete's experiences in World War II. When asked what he would give to have those stories of the Civil War, he told his visitor that he would give his right arm, which led to the next question concerning what did he think his children would give to have his story after he was gone. Once placed into this context, Pete agreed to make an audio recording of his experiences as a captured B-17 bomber pilot in World War II. I have not heard the recording and have only a copy of an original transcript, which I have now placed in electronic form. Since this original transcript captured Pete's grammar and language, I too, kept this as true as possible; however, I did edit this copy, primarily to correct the spelling of names and places. I also felt that explanations regarding some of the events, places, translations, etc. were needed so those have been added in the form of footnotes. William Albert "Pete" Davidson died on July 25, 1997 and was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery in Teague, Texas. I visited with his widow on several occasions prior to her death on July 9, 2005. It was a pleasure to have known them—John P. Blair.

W. A. Davidson Memoirs

(Transcript of recording made November 2, 1976)

This probably is not the easiest thing I've ever had to do. I'm not very well adapted to talking on the recorder. I doubt seriously that anything I have to say will be of interest to anyone. Also, the probably modulation of my voice and the newness of doing something like this will end up not being worth listening to, even if I had something to say.

This is November 2, 1976. My name is W. A. "Pete" Davidson.¹ At the present time I am sixty years old. I have been asked to record something that happened to me back in the 1940s.

And . . . this is '76? . . . and forty years from that means that this happened thirty-six to thirty-

¹ During my visit in 1995, I asked "Pete" how he received his nickname. He told me that his birth was quite difficult and that his father, who was also the attending physician, made the comment that "this child is so stubborn he reminds me of Pete"—the family mule.

two years ago. And, recalling the things that happened, one is certainly sure to leave out some of the things that maybe should be said, or he might be saying some of the things that should be left out.

I was a pilot during World War II, and for some reason or [an]other I had no better sense than to think that I could be a pilot when I joined the Air Force.² And, the day I decided to join, I felt like and believed that I could fly a B-17 airplane. Little did I know all of the things that I had to go through to accomplish this. But finally I did receive my wings as a pilot and then went on to be instructed in the arts and crafts of flying a B-17, which was popularly known at that time as the “Flying Fortress.” This plane was being used in the middle forties in the European theater of war and I was assigned to the 447th Bomb Group, the 711th Squadron in the Eighth Air Force and stationed in Europe in the early part of 1944.

I had as my crew nine other men on the B-17. There were four officers, including myself, a bombardier, navigator, a co-pilot, and six enlisted men who served as engineer, radio operator, two waist gunners, belly gunner, and a tail gunner. These were very fine men that I was serving with, and we had been in training together for four or five months before going overseas.

It so happened that the first assignment that I got to go and fly a mission, I did not go with my crew. I was put on another ship as a co-pilot to fly with a man, a pilot that had about eighteen or twenty missions. And of course, that left the rest of my crew on the ground and after this mission was over, well, we got together and of course, they wanted to know exactly

² Davidson joined the United States Army Air Forces, which was created in June 1941 from the Army Air Corps. This designation involved command structure changes that enabled the air forces within the army to expand more efficiently.

how well I had withstood the mission . . . and if it was scary and if it was rough and just exactly how I could take the mission. I don't mind saying that a person never knows how he's going to react under combat conditions until he actually gets there and goes through it. You can hear the stories from the other men and still you've got to wear those shoes yourself before you actually know what you can do, how you will react, and of course, like I said, my crew was waiting for me to see if I had any qualms or any doubts about whether we could do it for not. I knew that the men that I had flying with me were as good as anybody's crew. And, I felt like if other people could do it, that we could do our job that we had taught to do, as well as anyone else.

The men that you learn to fly with and the men that you learn to associate with, once you are put in a crew, become very dear friends, very close friends. You have while you're in training some bad times together and you have some good times. To keep from getting too serious, I never will forget one time. We were flying down in Florida while we were in training. We were stationed in Tampa, but we had flown down to Miami Beach and had to land our plane because we had some problems with one of the engines. And, it turned out that after we landed we had a pretty bad gasoline leak and we got the maintenance crew in Miami to start checking our plane over. We tried to take off a couple of times, and each time we would have a little bit of fire and had to come back in and do something about it. This all happened during the daytime. Finally, about ten o'clock that night they that they had our plane fixed and we got out on the runway and got clearance to take off and just as we left the ground, the gas started leaking around number three engine again. We had a pretty big fire that went back about the length of the plane. But I turned to the co-pilot and told him to call the tower and tell them that

we had one engine dead, coming in on three. And, we kept that engine high—in other words, right side high—and made a slow, spiraling turn to come back and make our landing. By the time we could get lined up with the runway to make a landing, you could see fire trucks, ambulances scattered all over the field. It looked like they had brought every unit available out. We couldn't understand why, because we didn't think that we were in that much danger. But anyway, we got the plane down, and just as soon as we landed, I was told to come to the control tower, the control office. When I got there, the commanding officer of the field for that day, the operations officer, wanted to know how we made it back in. I said well, it was very simple. I'm sure he had gone through it, if he had flown very much, with the same type of malfunction. And, he [said] that no, no one has ever made it back to [the] field before with that type of malfunction—because my co-pilot, instead of saying that we had one dead, coming in on three (he was a little bit excited) had said that we had three dead, coming in on one. Well, sure enough, you can't make it back that way. And, that's why we had so much attention from the fire trucks and ambulances.

But, when you're flying, like I said training, you feel like eventually you'll get into combat, but in the services you have a lot of fun, a lot of good times, and like I said, some bad times. But there are many, many things that happen to you just in your daily living, and especially with your . . . probably three hundred other men that are in your same group . . . but especially with the men that are in your crew. And you become very good, close friends and would do anything to help one another in any given situation.

You get acquainted with many men in the service and some of them you become very close friends with. I mention a couple of names here because these men, I think, played an

important part in my life, not only in my early training period in the Army, or in the Air force, but also they had the same, or a similar misfortune to mine. And, we became much closer friends. There was boy from Houston, his home originally in San Antonio and Fredericksburg, by the name of Chism. And, another one that came from the little town of Sabinal, down close to San Antonio, by the name of Donoho. They were very good friends of mine. They were both married and their wives followed them to a great extent during their early training period, as did my wife, Sybil. They became good friends, the girls did, with each other as did these two fine young men that were going through pilot training and going through the hardships and rigors of training, because, believe me, it was rigorous training. But, they did play an important part in my life, and I thank God for them, because we were the very best of friends and I think, helpful to each other later on in our service where we were serving in confinement. Donoho and Chism are still good friends of mine. We call each other periodically and every now and then have a little get-together. They are Texas boys just like myself, and even though we made many other friends, it seems like your early Texas buddies stick together and become closer friends through your good times and your bad. But, you will hear me mention their names later on because it meant a lot to me—and they still do as good friends and good buddies, as good as a man could possibly have.³

I guess the part that I 'm suppose to report or talk about has to do with an experience that some of the men went through based in the Japanese theater of war and the European theater of war. I know that anything I say or record about what happened to me as a prisoner

³ These two men are Kenneth Leroy Chism and Marcus Brown Donoho—see Reports 4467, 4592, “Missing Air Crew Reports, 1942–47,” Record Group 92, National Archives, Washington, DC.

of war, I want people to know that I have always felt like that if I had to be a prisoner of war that I was fortunate to be in the European theater and not a prisoner of the Japanese. As I'm sitting here recording this, I'm looking at a scrapbook that my wife has kept through the years of things that have been important to us one way or another in our lives. And, I'm looking at a telegram that she received, and this is what it says:

“The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your husband, Second Lieutenant William A. Davidson, has been reported missing in action since 29 April over Germany. If other details or other information are received, you will be promptly notified.”

Of course, as I look at this telegram some thirty-odd years later, it does bring back the memory of April 29, 1944, as we were flying a mission into Germany, a bombing mission, and the raid this particular day was one of the longest missions that we had to fly. We had gotten up early and received our briefing. When they had raised the map at the briefing to where you could see how far you had to go, everyone moaned and groaned because it was one of the longest missions and one of the hardest mission[s]. We knew that we would be going far enough that we could not have fighter aircraft protection. This was before the invasion into France and so we knew that it would be a long, hard, rough one.

This particular day the Air Force had put up what they call a maximum mission, that is, every plane that was able to fly and had a full crew that could possibly make it had to go. So after we crossed over the Channel, we started getting heavy flak. You must realize that when you're flying in bomber formation, it's not like a fighter plane or the small planes. You're a sitting duck. You just sit there and fly—close up your formation close together, but there's no

evasive action that you can take. You just sit there, and if the flak is coming, you fly right on through it. You hope it's either above you or below you, but not right where you are. But, if it is, you fly right on through just the same.

As we got over France and into Germany, we started getting fighter attacks. They came at us continuously. It wasn't just one or two attacks or one or two planes. Our men were calling out, "Fighter planes at four o'clock! Fighter planes at twelve o'clock!" And, "Fighter planes below!" And, "Fighter planes above!" They really started hitting our group. This is what they did quite often—concentrate on one group, which was twenty-seven planes. If they could knock out three or four in that group, then that made the others either close up real quick or get hit easier without having so much concentrated fire on the fighter planes that were attacking.

This takes a pretty short time to tell, but it seems like a lifetime while you're up there. Like I said, all you can do is, if you lose a plane, is close up your formation as well as you can and keep on going.

By this time we had gotten pretty close to our target and were on what they call the "bombing run." This is when you open your bomb bay doors and the lead plane, the one that is in the lead, all planes drop their bombs as he releases his. Even if you have a bombardier in your plane, you follow the lead plane. You can see groups of American planes ahead of you and you can see groups behind you. On this particular day it didn't seem like we could see them under the fighter attack. I know that they were, but it seemed like all the fighter planes this particular day were hitting our group. Fact is I was told later that only two planes from our group survived this bombing run.

Well, we had had one engine knocked out and we had another engine set on fire from the fighter attack. Through the intercom on the airplane I called the radio operator and told him to watch very closely in the wings because if the fire got into the wings, we would have to bail out. We were still trying to stay within our group because this is w[h]ere you have the best protection under concentrated fire, even though quite a few planes had been knocked out. We felt like in our plane—the men had called out several planes of the Germans that they had shot down—so we felt like we were really giving a good account of ourselves. But, we were getting the very daylight's mauled out of us. I was very proud, very, very proud of the way that our crew did. They were not asking for—I'm sure they were saying a lot of prayers and asking a lot of help from the Lord—but they were doing the job that they had been taught to do and they were doing it well.

As I said, we developed a fire in another engine and I told the radio operator to watch for it very closely, that if the fire got into the wings, we would have to leave the plane because this is where your gasoline is. During this time, too, we had an explosion down in the forward catwalk, just before you get to the bombardier-navigator's compartment. I asked your engineer, whose name was Murphy, to go down and check our oxygen tanks because it sounded like we had had an explosion there. On your oxygen tanks, you have several of them, they are interconnected and they have automatic valves that shut off on[e] tank from the other if one happens to get punctured. But, sometimes flying at high altitudes (and this day we were flying at 24,000 feet) your valves that work automatically, if they have moisture in them, might

freeze up because it's very cold at that altitude. If they freeze up, you stand a chance of losing all of your oxygen.⁴

So Murphy, who is also the engineer and the top gunner, has a long cord on his earphones attached to, of course, the intercom set. He crawls down into this catwalk toward the bomba[r]dier's compartment, checking it out. About this time the radio operator calls me and tells me that the fire is in the wings and he can see the fire and it looks like it's spreading real fast. We have already dropped our bombs and have made our turn and are on our way back. I give the order to bail out because of the fire—one engine already out and because of the fire in the other engine and getting into the wings. I know that it will only be a few minutes until it explodes.

I lean back in the pilot's seat where I can see Murphy down in this catwalk and I ask him, I said, "Murphy, did you get my message about bailing out?" He gave me a little okay sign with his forefinger and thumb. As I'm watching him, I see him kick off the door to the escape hatch. All of the men have been taught, when a command has been given over the intercom, such as a bail-out command or anything of that serious nature, each man has been instructed to chick in saying okay—he has received the message and will comply. I had been told many, many times by my tail gunner, "Skipper, if you ever say the word, be sure I get it and I will be the first on to leave." This was all in fun in the past, but now here it was true and was serious. He checked in, as did the other men, and they started leaving the plane.

There were three men in the plane who wore chest-type chutes. The rest of them wore what were normally known as seat-type chutes. They put their chutes on, their harness and

⁴ Staff Sergeant James V. Murphy was the only crew member killed when Davidson's plane was shot down—see Report 4467, 4592, "Missing Air Crew Reports, 1942–47," Record Group 92, National Archives, Washington, DC.

their chutes, and they had them with them and they sat on them, or turned them up under them where they could sit a little bit more comfortable. But, the pilot, the co-pilot, and the engineer wore chest-type chutes because the pilot and co-pilot, in moving the controls backward and forward had to have the maneuvering room. We always put on a harness, but we didn't attach our chutes until we needed them. The engineer, because he had to have freedom of movement, many times around the plane to make certain checks, wore a harness that also used a chest-type chute.

I record this not as it actually happened, not planning to point a finger at anyone, but this is exactly how it happened. We always carried extra chutes, put a couple of chest-type chutes behind the turret gun, and we had extra seat-type chutes, in case something happened or a man tore a chute or accidentally spilled it or something like that. Each crew member had particular places assigned to them, or picked them out themselves, where they would put things important to them. I had picked a place that one time had had a gyro compass mechanism in it, down in this catwalk, right next to the forward escape door, a bracket where this piece of machinery had been removed out. And, this was the place where I always stored my chest chute.

As I had given the command to leave the ship and each man had checked in and left the ship, the co-pilot had helped me to a certain extent to set the plane up on automatic pilot. We were losing altitude pretty fast and we were beginning to get into a spiral (and a tight spiral), but we had lost enough power that we could not maintain our altitude. I wanted to get the ship on automatic pilot because I thought that then it would give me enough time to leave the plane after everyone else had gotten out. As I went to the catwalk to get my chute, it wasn't

there. The plane, as I said, seemed to be winding up kind of fast, and I knew that I didn't have a whole lot of time to get another chute. But I crawled back into the top turret, which is behind the pilot and co-pilot seat. And, in my haste and hurry (and I was in a hurry!) I grabbed a chest chute. They have two handles on them, a rip cord handle and a handle to carry them by. As I grabbed my chute, I grabbed the wrong handle. Of course, the bomb bay doors were still open (the waist gunners as they went out the waist, the doors were left open and the door had been kicked off the front escape hatch) so there was a lot of air in the plane. When I pulled the wrong handle, the chute spilled out all over the plane. The air caught it and pulled it, and by luck, and a lot of help from the Lord, I went ahead and snapped the chute into my harness, which was a very quick and easy thing to do. I started gathering up the chute in my arms to try to roll it up enough, thinking I could get out of the airplane if I could roll it up enough. Of course, it was catching on everything. The wind was tugging and pulling and I just kept on pulling at the chute. I tore it in several places and as I got what I felt like was enough of it in my arms, well, I walked into the hatch. And then as I rolled toward the door, I didn't jump out, but the chute went on out of the plane and naturally jerked me out of the plane.

We had been through a lot of excitement, I guess you'd call it, and then all of a sudden, there I was floating behind a chute—complete quiet. Everything was just as still—there was no sound to be heard except engines of planes.

It was very, very quiet, but I was coming down pretty fast. I could tell that. I didn't know how fast because my chute was torn in several places. I knew it was going to be dangerous to land, but I still felt like I was very fortunate to be out of the plane. I saw a plane, A B-17, crash when I was about 2000 feet off the ground. I thought that it was our plane. Then

I saw some of the debris on the ground and I realized then it had exploded a few moments before it even got to the ground. I am not positive, but I do believe that was the plane that we were flying in.

As I came on toward the ground, a fighter plane flew past me a couple or three times. I was hoping that he wouldn't strafe me. It looked like he could have. I waved at him that I was a friend. I didn't want him to strafe me. He made two or three passes at me and one time came very close, but he did not strafe me on the way down.

I could see people gathering, watching me descend. As I said, this did not take a whole lot of time, but this was another "lot of time" in a few short minutes. This was just out of a little community. When my parachute landed me to the ground—I guess you would call it that—I was surrounded. There was a circle of about thirty-five or forty people watching me coming down. Like I said, I was coming down fast because I had turned myself to be facing in the right direction. I had flexed my knees so I would land without breaking any bones, and yet, because of coming down so fast, by the time my feet hit the ground, my face hit the ground too. The ground that I hit in was a kind of garden spot and had been plowed up, was not real hard ground. I had a pretty severe knee injury landing because I had come down so fast.

The people that were around me, surrounding me, you might say, were of all ages, mostly real old or real, real young—and women. It did seem that every one of the men had rifles—squirrel rifles, old Long Tom rifles, but they also looked like they were ready for business. One woman asked me if I was English, but I couldn't understand her except she kept saying the word, "English! English!" and I said "American." When I did, one of the older men in the group came forward. Of course, they all had their guns pointing at me. I would guess this

man was probably in his seventy-fives or eighties, along in there—pretty elderly man. He had a walking stick and he walked up to me. While he was fixing to say something—and he did say it, but not with his voice—he started beating me with this walking stick. I was tempted to grab the stick. Then I thought, “Well, if I do, they will shoot me with their rifles. And, what he is doing is beating me because I’ve been bombing some of their cities.” So I just stood there and took it. There were some pretty hard licks, but they didn’t seem to hurt too much. I’m sure I was in a state of shock. Finally, some of the other people made him quit hitting me with his walking stick.

Then, after a whole lot of discussion which I didn’t understand (I later learned to speak a little German. I had taken German in college, but like most students taking a foreign language, I didn’t learn a great deal), after much discussion, five or six of these men started taking me from this little community to a town that was about five miles away. I suppose we had walked about a mile when we came to a little corral. On the gatepost of this corral was trace chain. Looked like a chain I’d seen around our farm many times. They stopped me and got this chain. They got this chain around my neck, both of my arms behind me, looped it around me. They didn’t tie me with it, but just looped the chain around me.

They walked me on into this town. I think we got there close—it must have been close to noon, because I remembered checking my watch on the way down. Incidentally, on the way down, I had tried to smoke a cigarette in that peace and quiet. I didn’t know when I’d ever get another one. It was pretty hard to light, but believe it or not, too, this is the irony, these are the peculiar things that a man will do when—in the pocket of the flight suit I was wearing I had placed a Hershey bar and I ate that on the way down. This is funny, but I’m really glad I ate it

because that was the last piece of candy that I had for many a day. Anyway, like I said, I had looked at my watch and I said, “Well, it looks like I’m going to land about 11:30 o’clock.” So, by the time all these things had happened and they had gotten me into this little town, the school was out because a lot of kids were on the streets. It was a small town, not much bigger than the town where I live. They paraded me up and down the streets, and of course, people jeered at me, spit at me, looked like they were making fun of me. This went on for about thirty minutes, up and down the streets, where everybody could see me. And, of course, they could see they had captured some American flyers and they were very proud of this.

After this they took me to the city hall and my first experience with a *Bürgermeister*. They searched me and took what few things I had from me. Of course, they kept my package of cigarettes and they put me down in a little cell which was down in the basement of this city hall. There was another man they had captured there. He was not a member of my crew, but evidently had had an explosion in their plane and he had parachuted out all right. He had glass, bits of glass all in his face and eyes and couldn’t see. When I asked him, he told me that he had been there about forty-five minutes before I got there. I tried to pick some of the glass out of his cuts and got some out of his eyes with his shirt sleeve and stuff. He was in pretty bad shape. I was there with a crippled knee, but I could look at him and see how fortunate I had been.

We stayed there for about two hours. Evidently, they had notified the air force, the army, or something, because they came just to get us and took us to an airfield. There were several more men that had been shot down and they sent some of the pilots to look at us and kind of gloat over us a little bit. They were some of the pilots that were flying the fighter planes that had shot us down. We spent the night in this airfield—no doctors or anything to look at

the men who had been injured. They didn't give us anything to eat. They had collected and brought to that field about forty American prisoners, none of them that I knew or didn't know very well. Might have seen them but didn't recognize any of them as being men that I had known in the past.

Then, the next day they put us in a coal-burning truck and hauled us into town. And, we stood there at the railway station about four hours. Then, they put us on a train and carried us to what they called their interrogation center. When we got to this interrogation center, they separated us and put each man in a little cubicle. I guess the size of the room was about six by eight and had a wood bed in it—no mattress of any kind. They walked off and left us alone. They didn't bother us too much for two or three hours.

Finally, a man came and got me and took me to an office and they started asking me questions about who I was, the group I flew with and everything else. Of course, all service men had been taught that—you never thought you'd have to use it, but you'd been taught that if you were captured, the only thing you could tell them is your name, your rank and serial number. They start throwing a lot of questions at you and about what group you flew with, and all you give them is your name, rank and serial number. Of course, they threaten you a little bit. Then, they take you back to your private cell because you are by yourself and it's pretty lonesome. Then, they send somebody down there and they have forms for you to sign. You look at the top of the form and it says that it is a Red Cross form. Right after your name, rank and serial number, then it's what kind of plane you flew, also what group you were in, this, that, and the other. So you just don't fill it out. They take you back. They question you some

more. All you do is tell them that. And finally, they tell you, "Better talk because when we get through with you, you'll be glad to talk."

There's times that you feel like the world's a pretty big place and you're a mighty little spot in it. But, I think the majority of men, until they were actually coerced or tortured into talking, I doubt seriously if any of them, if any, few of them, ever did. I know the first time they asked me any questions, I looked at my interrogator (he could speak better English than I could) and I looked at him, I told him, "You are in the Army and you know what I can say and what I can't." And, that was just about the extent of the interrogation I had to go through. They took me back to this room and left me for a few hours. And, the next day they came and got me.

I didn't know where I was going but they had told me that this time it would be pretty rough, so I didn't know what to expect. But, we walked down this long hallway and when we got to the way to his office, we turned to the right and went outside. It was—I will never forget this—it was a beautiful day. Right in the street from this interrogation center was a big compound and a lot of people inside this compound. This guard took me over to this gate and there was a man standing there. I looked at him and I nearly broke down and cried because there was my buddy, my friend, a man that I didn't even know was shot down. It was Kenneth Chism. He's a man I mentioned earlier in the tape. And Chism had been there a couple of days and they had given him a portion of a Red Cross parcel—and, three days before that they had given him three cigarettes. He had saved one of them for me because one of my men that had been already sent across the road had seen him and knew his crew. And, he told him I was there or had been shot down. He had been standing at that gate waiting for me for two days. I hated to see him in prison camp, but it was a fine thing to see somebody that you knew that

had been a friend. I still hadn't seen any of my crew at this time—a little bit later—but he was a sight for sore eyes.

We stayed in this compound for about two or three days and while we were there, this was where I received the first food outside of a soup that I'd had on this transfer to this interrogation center. We received some food there and a Red Cross parcel that had three or four items in it you could use, a piece of clothing or two. And, like I said, we stayed in this compound for about two days. And, they put us on a train and sent us to a permanent Luftwaffe prison camp. This was Stalag 14, just out of the city of Sagan. It's about eighty or ninety miles south of Berlin. I didn't know it at this time, but this was to be my home until January of the next year.⁵

This was a permanent camp. This was cut out of a forest. Where they had built these compounds, they had cut trees that had been planted in rows like the Germans do. They had made barracks and they had several compounds of prisoners there in this area. This—I didn't think so at the time—but this turned out to be one of the best camps to be in at the time. But, as we got to this camp, men that knew each other, that had known each other, and ones that had not been so severely injured that they had been put in a hospital, kind of congregated together. And, of course, you got to know a lot more men, too, because it ended up, they had really crowded the prison camp.

It is pretty hard to say what's good or bad about a prison camp. You are behind barbed wire all the time and you've got guard houses high up in the air all the way around the camp

⁵ Davidson misidentifies this prisoner of war camp. He had been taken to Stalag Luft III. As Russian forces approached the camp in Sagan, Poland, the prisoners were evacuated beginning at 2300 hours on January 27, 1945 in a winter storm—see page 26. Arriving at Stalag XIII-D, the men remained until moving again, this time to Stalag VII-A near Moosburg, Germany where they were liberated by members of Patton's Third Army on April 29, 1945. See Neary, Bob, *Stalag Luft III* (North Wales, PA: Bob Neary, 1946).

day and night. You have what they call a “no-man’s land.” It is a single strand of barbed wire about thirty or forty feet from the fence line that you’re suppose to stay away from. I think, when I think back over it now, one of the hardest parts is not so much about what is happening as you just don’t know what is going to happen. You don’t know how long you are going to be there and you don’t know what’ll happen to you. And, of course, one of the hardest parts, too, is the hunger—the desire for knowledge of what’s happening to your folks back home. You get a chance to write them ever so often. They give you a little piece of paper and they censor it. Of course, there is not much you could say. And then, after you’ve been there two or three months you start looking for mail from home. You know you are not going to get it right away. Some that have already been in there tell you that they have heard once or twice in six months. So, like I said, it is the wonder about what is going to happen and what can happen as much as it is of your actual conditions.

I do want to say here that most of the food that we got was furnished by the Red Cross. The Germans gave us some food. They had some potatoes and they had some ersatz bread and they’d give us what we called a grain hill soup once a week.⁶ It looked like it was made of turnip greens and it was just a thin watery soup. I don’t know of any man that was ever in a prison camp that didn’t lose a lot of weight. And, of course, a lot of your waking hours after you have been there a while is the, the hunger and desire for food. When you first start being hungry, you think about pies and steaks, places to eat, places you have eaten and then, after you’ve lost thirty or forty pounds, you get to thinking about pinto beans and cornbread and you forget about pies and steaks. I never have, even in the thirty-some-odd years since I’ve been

⁶ Ersatz bread, in German *Ersatzbrot*, meaning replacement bread, was comprised of the lowest grade flour, potato starch, and other fillers, including sawdust.

home now, passed a day by that I didn't want some more pinto beans because I eat well—and I know this—that I can enjoy every bit of food that I take.

This place we were in, and stayed in until January, which was long, long, long time, we had few, if any, clothes to wear. Our shoes wore out. Our one pair of pants wore out. We had a couple of blankets apiece and the, as winger came on, we got pretty cold because we didn't have any heat in our room. And, what food we could get from the Red Cross parcels, we could go to the cook stove. We ended up with about 18 men in our room and we had only thirty minutes of cooking time on the cook stove for these 18 men. We didn't have any utensils of any kind. They gave us a crock bowl to start out with and a case knife and a spoon. Of course, those crock bowls broke about the second week we had them. And, the only way you had a pan then to eat out of or cook in was as you got a Red Cross parcel that had something that was in a tin can, you'd take those tin cans and slice them in thin slices of metal where you could take another strip of metal and bend them over and use one piece of metal to bend into the two pieces of metal to make a little wider strip. And then, the first thing you know, after four, five or six days of work, you could make a pan, say big enough to cook in for four or five men. And, you also made yourself a bowl to eat out of, out of the same material.

They gave us a little bit of coal when it got real cold, about six or eight pieces about the size of a brick, and most of our cooking material of fuel came from stumps that we dug out of the ground. You'd take a tin can and about ten or fifteen of you would get around one of these stumps and dig it out of the ground. Only way you could get it out, you didn't have a shovel or anything else. You'd dig it out—just go down each root and dig down and get it all out. You'd get every bit of it—tap root and all. Then, about once every two or three weeks you could get

an axe for about two hours and you had to chop those stumps up. That was your cooking fuel or heating fuel.

Most of the time you didn't have any heat in the room in the winter time. The only good thing about that was that, because you didn't have any hot rooms, you never did have anybody having colds. Like I said, all this time you're getting a little bit more hungry, losing more weight, beginning to get concerned then about the weight you've lost because you think, "Well, I've got to keep adding a little weight instead of losing it or I won't be able to make it through because I'll lose my strength." But, like I said, all this time, you're still glad too, that you're not in a Japanese prison camp. So some good things happen and some bad things happen, even though you are in prison camp.

You have some funny things that will happen. We had a German *hauptman* there that was in charge of this prison camp. He wasn't a bad sort. He wasn't too good, but he wasn't too bad, either. They'd come around to check you every night to be sure that nobody escaped. You had to stand what they call *appell*, which is, they'd could you every morning and every night. One night, we knew that they were going to come around checking because they left the lights on. They turned them out, but then they left them on instead of pulling the big switch and we knew they were coming around. Some of the men in this length of time had received a book parcel from home. So we had some books we could read every now and then. They were passed around all over the camp. But anyway, that night this *hauptman* came in and he switched on the light in our room. Every man was laying on his bunk and had a book holding it up. He said something about, "Oh, you're reading in the dark." We said, "Yep, we're supermen!" He laughed it off and went on. Like I said, you don't think things like that will

happen, but they do. It's not much, doesn't seem very funny now, but we got a helluva kick out of it at the time.⁷

Now we were talking about being concerned about losing your strength as you lost your weight, but the Germans gave us a little bit of barley every now and then. Barley is . . . oh, kind of like oatmeal. And, I know when it's cooked in boiling water and when you don't have to thin it, put too much water in it and make it thin, well; it tastes a little bit like oatmeal. Of course, this barley always had a bunch of weevils and we called 'em "worms." When we first started out in this compound, there were only about seven or eight men in this room. It ended up around eighteen or twenty. It was a room about big enough for six or eight men, but they tripled and quadrupled the bunks there to where it would hold that many. As new men were added to the room, they'd give you your supplies for the week. They'd give you so much barley and we'd cook the barley. When we put it in our pans, well, all of us that had been there some time, we'd just get these weevils and pull 'em out to the edge of our bowl or pan and just keep looking in it and pulling out a few more and leaving them up on the edge of the pan. The guys that hadn't been there very long . . . well, they'd ask us what we'd be doing. We'd tell 'em, "Well, it was the worms that was in the barley." Of course, they'd push their bowl back. They had not been there long enough to be hungry. Then, we'd split their bowl up between us. We'd push our weevils on back in there because we'd already decided—that was protein too. Like I said, that's not so bad. We all eat 'em all the time anyway and just don't know it.

I know I've said something several times about the Red Cross food that we received.

We never did get as much food as the Red Cross intended for us to get. They made up a

⁷ Hauptman, in German, simply means headman, leader, or captain. The word "appell" is actually Swedish in origin, meaning military call, or muster.

parcel—a pretty good parcel—that had a mixture of some kind of meat, some kind of canned butter, some canned milk, sometimes some canned eggs, sometimes some concentrated chocolate—might have been a couple of packages of cigarettes in it. It varied. You never knew exactly what it was. But, this parcel was built, supposedly, to give men subsistence food. One man a parcel per week. Well, we never did get that much food, but if you ended up with twenty men in your room, you had half enough parcels to go around. Instead of twenty parcels you'd get ten parcels, maybe, or five parcels. Sometimes, maybe you'd get two-thirds parcels per man per week. A lot of this food that was in these parcels was canned and the Germans would open all the parcels before they came into be distributed. Of course, the American prisoners were there doing all the work and they would take ice picks and punch holes in these cans. That was so you couldn't store the food up for any length of time or try to build up enough food for some men to try to escape or something like that. In other words, they tried to fix it where you'd have to go on and consume it or it would spoil on you. We found out that if in one of our parcels we had some butter, we could spread it on those holes and could still sort of store it up and spread it out to make it last a little bit longer.

I have mentioned the Red Cross several times. I think I need to say this. Back when my wife and I were both young and just before we were married, my wife used to go around with another young lady here in town collecting money for the Red Cross. I used to kid her about it. I told her she was just putting money in some rich man's pocket because half the money wouldn't even go where it was needed. Well, of course, I lived to regret those words because, like I said, the Germans gave us some food, but we existed mainly on those Red Cross parcels. I had the time there to sit and think of the things that I had said and done that were really

wrong, because where a person is really in need, really hungry, really needs the help, I found out that if doesn't but ten cents of that dollar go where it's needed, really needed, then it's worthwhile. And, I have been a big supporter of the Red Cross since my little stay in a prison camp.

I mentioned the fact that the fuel we used for cooking and eating during the winter time, most of it came from the stumps we dug out of the ground. And, I think this is an example of the ingenuity that the American people, American boys, American men . . . I think this is a fine example of the determination to overcome hardships or problems. We found out, even though we dug stumps all the time, we couldn't build a big fire and have enough fuel to go around. So somebody, I don't know who (I know in the latter days we were in this particular camp) took a powdered milk can which was about the size of a pound coffee can. Put the lid back on it, of course, after he had emptied it, and went around this can on the sides and cut it with this old case knife that we had. They wouldn't give us any type of pliers or shears or anything like that to work with. But, they cut the sides of this can into little strips but left them attached to each edge and then bend those up into a little deal toward the inside, like a squirrel cage. Then, we'd take a piece of cloth of some type, and make a little tunnel from that squirrel cage, get us a piece of twine string and put an axle on that little can and then, you could turn that can pretty fast and you could get quite a bit of air down this little tunnel. All of this would sit on a coffee table real easy, but at the end of that tunnel we had another pan that curved up. On top of that you could set your cooking vessel, utensil or whatever you were cooking with. But, you could put just a little bit of strips of shavings in that deal and light it and start that little blower to working. Of course, you would turn it by hand, but it was just like a little furnace.

You would boil your potatoes in about twenty minutes or thirty minutes on that. You didn't have to boil them very long because you were going to cut them up so fine to divide them out among all the men. They didn't have to be completely cooked. Of course, if you got your water good and hot, you threw the peelings back in there to make yourself potato soup. We called that a "kreigy" stove. "Kreigy" was a German word for prisoner and that was a prisoner stove. Since we are running into this fuel shortage now, I know of one way to overcome it in heat and cooking, if it ever comes to that.

In the rooms we divided the duties among the men. It would be three or four men that would take on the job of cooking, what little cooking we did or could do. They would do the cooking for a week and then, then next week three or four more would take on that job. All the duties were kind of passed around. Some men had to clean up the room every day for a week; others would get out and dig the stumps. We did our best to keep ourselves occupied.

As you stayed in prison camp a little longer, if you were very fortunate, you'd get some parcels from home. Your family could send you cigarette parcels or a food parcel or a clothing parcel. I think in my year in prison camp that I got a food parcel and two cigarette parcels and two book parcels. And my wife Sybil had sent me a parcel every time they would let them. They gave your family certain instructions on what they could send—and when. She sent me every one that I was able to receive but, of course, I didn't get them. I imagine some of them were confiscated and I also imagine a lot of them were in some of the trains or convoys that were bombed out. But it was a real treat to receive something from home, a letter. I think I received about six letters from Sybil. I know she only received about six from me and I wrote her at least thirty or forty. But when a man received a parcel from home, if it was a food parcel,

he could, by our own rules we set up in our own room, take one item of that parcel for himself and the rest of it was divided among the rest of the men. I never will forget this food parcel I got from Sybil. One item in it—and I could make my choice of whatever was in that parcel—was one of these peanut logs. It wasn't a great big one. It was about an inch in diameter and about four inches long. That was what I chose to keep for myself and divided the rest of it among the men in the room.

That candy was so precious that I couldn't eat it by myself. I asked my two friends who I had run into again. And incidentally, Donaho was shot down about four weeks after Chism and I had been shot down. Of course, we got him in our room there where we were staying. But you wouldn't eat your food in front of anybody else that didn't have any. When you ate this particular thing that was yours, you went outside and walked around the compound. But I took Chism and Donoho with me because I couldn't eat it without giving them some of it. I still like those peanut logs, I mean those pecan logs. That's what it was.

We started doing a lot of planning about four weeks before Christmas. We finally decided that we were still going to be in prison camp at Christmas. Of course, we had hoped we wouldn't be, but we started doing a lot of planning before Christmas, stashing some food back and doing without and making some big plans. We bribed the German guard with a couple of cigarettes to get us some yeast in the camp. Some of the parcels had had raisins in it and we started making us some wine so we could celebrate Christmas. Of course, the Germans got to smelling it after it started fermenting and poured it down the drain. But we did stash back and saved out of each parcel a little bit of food. Christmas day, I guess we had one of the biggest feasts that a man could have in a place like we were. I know after I got home, Sybil said

that their worst day here was Christmas day because all they could think of was where I was and what I was doing without and what we didn't have. And truly and sincerely that was . . . we had a feast that day because we had done without and saved back. But we celebrated Christmas just like . . . not just like home . . . but we celebrated Christmas.

After Christmas we moved on to the month of January. We didn't feel like the place we had been had been a palace, but we later began to think back on those times and it had been because . . .

One night about six o'clock the Germans blew the whistles and their horns and called us outside. The snow was all over the ground. It was very, very cold and they told us that they were going to move us to another camp. They gave us a couple of hours to get ready. They told us that we were going to march and we'd get in line, we'd stay in line, or we'd get shot. About eleven o'clock that night we left Sagan. And there were guards about every twenty feet with their rifles marching on each side of us. This was probably the coldest, most miserable night that I ever spent in my life. We marched all night long. Some men were falling out, giving out. Everybody was. If you had anything at all, you had made it into a pack and was kept. It contained everything you had. Of course, no one wanted to throw any food away or anything else. The ground was frozen. You would take two steps forward and slide back a step. You would fall down. Men behind you would stumble into you and you'd stumble into the one in front of you. About three or four o'clock the next morning, quite awhile before daylight, some men actually went out of their minds, some begging the guards to shoot them because they thought they were in hell. All the way they could get out of hell was something to happen to

them. They did have a few wagons coming along to pick up men that could not make it. Some men were shot.

One of my friends I've mentioned before, Donaho got lost from Chism and I. We both walked up and down the line kind of lagging back and pushing forward trying to find him and hollering for him. Finally we did find him. He was begging the German guard to shoot him because he just says, "I am in hell. I know it. I know I'm in hell and the only way you gonna get me out is just to shoot me. Change my life from what it is now." The telling of it right now, it doesn't seem real. But it was very real that night.

Our clothes were nowhere near adequate to keep the cold out. Our shoes were worn out. Our physical condition was in pitiful shape, all of us. It is a surprising thing to me that any man lasted through that night and the next day.

We only had two breaks in our march and one was about daylight. And then, we started up again after about a ten minute rest. And the next time we stopped was about five o'clock that afternoon. Then, it was to rest on the roadside in the snow. Most of the men that went to sleep were frost bitten or frozen. But by midnight that night, they got us into a town and started putting us into some buildings and some barns. I think back on that night and the night before and it wasn't a long march. It wasn't near as long as we marched later on, but to me, it seemed really a miracle that any of us lived through it, to not be physically harmed from the cold or lose an arm or legs from the frost bite.

The next two days we marched and it was still snow and ice. But it did not seem as bad as the first two days and nights that we had been out on the road. After our fourth day of marching, they loaded us in some box cars and we were locked in these box cars for two days

and nights. The French and Germans have smaller cars than we have and they used to call them during World War I “forty and eight.” They claimed they could take forty men or eight horses and they would crowd seventy-five of us in these cars. There was no way to sit or lay down. You just stood in tight groups and no way to relieve yourself because you were locked in. A miserable place to be, but it was still better than walking in ice and snow as we had done two or three days before. The train took us into the town or city of Nuremburg. And they had a prison camp out on the outskirts of Nuremburg. We were moved into this camp. It wasn’t a very good camp. There was absolutely no way of having the facilities that we had at Sagan, where you could in any clean or . . . the place was full of lice. Everybody had fleas all over them and flea bites. And most of the men would sit around and get the fleas off of them like you have seen monkeys do in a cage. Flea bites are painful if you get a lot of them. You think, it seems funny in a way, but it’s about like little ants keep stinging you and you scratch like a dog. You either get the flea or get somebody else to get the flea off of you. If they keep on they do hurt you. It’s a silly thing, I know, but its torment if you’ve got a lot of them and no real way to get rid of them.

We stayed in this camp at Nuremburg for approximately two months. We were within one-half mile of marshalling yards (railroad yards) where all the switching was done. The city of Nuremburg, the marshalling yards, that area was bombed four or five times a week while we were in this camp. A lot of times the target, and especially the night bombing by the English, was done at night and they came in, instead of by groups like our planes did, they came in from every different angle in singles. It lasted a long time. They dropped flares, and, of course, a lot

of their bombs would hit in our prison camp. You were free to go outside if you wanted to during a bombing raid. You couldn't let any kind of light out.

We had a little trench out there. They'd let you dig little trenches eighteen inches deep and if you felt safer during a bombing raid, you'd go out there and lay in that trench. Or, if you felt say, you'd stay right where you'd been sleeping. It was up to you. Sometimes you'd go out there and lay in the trench. Other times you would just sit where you were and of course, hope it didn't hit you.

Outside it was always a lot of shrapnel falling from a bomb burst and also from the flack they were shooting up at the planes—shrapnel coming back down. You could hear it singing and whistling on its way down and you knew about how close it was getting. One time it was getting . . . seemed like real close to three of us that were out there. One old boy told me, "Let's move, it's getting too close." I think we moved about two feet and I asked him, I said, "Do you feel better now?" "Yeah." He really hadn't but he felt like he had done something to protect himself.

Another night, I remember we had gone into the trenches and just ahead of me there was one boy just cursing up a storm, and one behind me was praying real loud. Finally, the one that was doing the praying hollered up there and just curse that boy our real good and told him to quite his cursing because he was praying and he didn't want him cursing while he was praying.

They finally decided to move us from Nuremburg. We were real glad to leave because it was such a pitiful place. It was . . . we got much hungrier there than we had in Sagan because we had quite a bit less food and we were real glad to move out from there. They had told us

that they were going to march us again, that we were not going to ride, that we were going south. And, the two days that we marched, as we would come to a town late in the afternoon, it seems like all of the Germans then, even though they might live in a town this size . . . not much bigger than this, everyone of them had barns . . . big barns. They would go out to do their farming and they would bring their supplies and produce and things that they had made back to these barns. But anyway, this is where they would put us up at night. They'd lock us up in these barns. It would take us forever after we came to this town for the Germans to get us put in the barns and station the guards at front doors and back doors. They'd crown one hundred fifty to two hundred men in a barn that would have been crowded if you had just put one hundred men in it.

After the second night of this our senior officer . . . one thing I haven't mentioned, but it was true, but any P.O.W. . . . where we were this is true . . . is under very strict officer control, more so than even when you were not a prisoner of war. The senior officer in our camp had been Colonel Alkire, and he was still the senior American officer on these marches we had been on.⁸ You didn't do anything that your senior American officer didn't approve of. If he gave you an order, it was a much stricter order to follow than when you were back in the states under just regular military rule. In other words, you have some slack American men that want to escape and by doing so, they make a hardship on everybody and they are qualified to. Had they gotten out of the prison camp, they couldn't have gotten out of the country because they couldn't speak German. They didn't know timetables or schedules of the railroad. In other

⁸ Colonel Darr H. Alkire, Commanding Officer, 449th Bombardment Group, was shot down on January 31, 1944 while on mission to Aviano, Italy—see Report 2403, “Missing Air Crew Reports, 1942–47,” Record Group 92, National Archives, Washington, DC.

words, to try to escape or anything like that, you had to be a qualified person, otherwise, you were refused. We had escape committees. We had information committees. And, all of these things were funneled into and through places that would help the prisoners, and also help those that were qualified to try to escape.

But, like I said, at the end of this second day march, Colonel Alkire talked to this German *hauptman* and told him, “We’re wasting so much time after we get to these towns that we’re going to spend the night in, let’s send a few men ahead, locate the barns, locate enough of them that will hold all men, and then it won’t take you two or three hours to get our men separated and locked up. Give them more time to rest, and if they get a little bit of rest, we can move further the next day.”

So the Colonel chose seven men. Chism, Donaho, Silk, and I were among the seven to go ahead with the guard.⁹ Alkire gave us strict orders that he had given his word for us not to try to escape because this would . . . what we were doing would help our men more than it would help the Germans. And this is what we were trying to do, to make it just a little bit easier on our men.

So on the third day of this march, the seven of us, with a German guard left out about an hour and a half ahead of time. We knew where we were going and knew where we would end up that night. Because there were just a few of us, we could move quite a bit faster than the column could. We hadn’t been gone very long until we ran across a German on a bicycle. Chism, now, could speak excellent German and, of course, our guard could not speak English. But, we had a few cigarettes and a little soluble coffee. We did some bartering with this

⁹ Davidson might be referring to Second Lieutenant Louis A. Silk, who as a member of his squadron, was shot down on the same day—April 29, 1944.

German that we ran across that had the bicycle, and we gave him about an ounce of soluble coffee for the bicycle. We gave it to Herman who was our German guard. Instead of walking, he could ride. But, we knew that if we could get Herman riding and feeling like a big shot, he could also help us. So as we'd march on down the road, we'd come across a farm house. We'd just keep right on walking, but Herman would go up to the farm house. He'd tell them he was a German soldier and he was hungry. He'd get a couple of potatoes, couple eggs and a chunk of bread. By the time this went on all day long, well, that night we ended up with a pretty good cache of food. And, we also got to this town early enough that we could locate the barns. We went in and talked to the *Bürgermeister* and got it settled with him that the *Hauptman* was coming in.

The *Bürgermeister* always followed any German officers' order. It didn't matter if he wanted to or not. He did. He had no choice. So we'd go look at these barns and we, the seven of us, would decide how many could go into this barn. And, of course, we fixed it to where our men would be fairly comfortable and not crowded in like they had been the first two nights. Of course, we always arranged to find one little barn that was about right for seven, eight, or ten men. This would be for us and our German guard.

Herman would go into the German people that had the house next to this barn that we were in, and he'd tell them, "Now, these prisoners are pretty nice men. I've been with them a day or two and they've got some food and they're going to do some cooking. If they cook out there in the barn, they could burn it down. But, if you will let them cook in your kitchen, I'll see that they clean it up. We'll take care of everything."

So we got to do some cooking in some good kitchens and eating some good food there for about eighteen days. The weather was turning off a lot milder because, like I said, this was the latter part of February or early March, I believe it is, and for about eighteen days there we came as close to living like what we thought were kings. We were not behind barbed wire. We . . . had . . . even though we had a guard with us, we could walk at our own pace. We could stop and admire the scenery—and it was beautiful scenery—as you would go down into the redoubt area. I think this is considered one of the most beautiful parts of Germany. All the way you are going over you've got a good chance to observe all of it. It is mountainous. It's beautiful. But, the freedom we had during the day . . . we enjoyed it. I'm not saying I enjoyed being there, but under the circumstances, well, we were eating well. We were gaining weight. We didn't know what would be around the next bend, but we felt like we were better off than we had been back at Nuremburg.

As we moved from town to town on this march you could tell that the German people knew that the war was not too far from being over. In most cases, at night, if we did get to go into their kitchens cooking, they would come in and talk to us. Some of them could speak good English and if they couldn't, Chism would interpret for us. Of course, they wanted us to write notes that they had been kind to American soldiers and they were looking forward to the very near future being a conquered country. Because even though Hitler hadn't admitted it yet, most of the German people realized at this time that it was pretty much a lost cause, as far as them winning the war.

We never did give any of them notes. We told them that as prisoners of war we were not allowed to write or sign our names or do anything. But, we told them that they could the

soldiers, American soldiers, or any soldiers that came in . . . that they could explain what they had done for us and it might help them.

As we finally came to our last camp that I was in, we sure did hate to go back behind that barbed wire. The last night out we knew the next day that we would be in Moosburg and we considered breaking all the orders that we had been given because we sure did hate to get behind that barbed wire. Two of us talked about it more than the others. But after you consider everything and the situation were in . . . and of course, we didn't know for sure where our forces were and we weren't too anxious to run into the Russian forces. And we just felt like . . . finally, the decision was made that maybe there was safety in numbers and we might be safer staying where we were, going on and getting behind the barbed wire again. Moosburg is . . . uh . . . was a little better than Nuremburg, but was a lot worse than Sagan. We went back to the very, very short rations again, crowded conditions . . . not . . . no barracks to stay in or anything else. There were no facilities to speak of and very crowded conditions. We were worried at the time that when they'd spoken of Moosburg, we knew of the Dachau Prison Camp. We knew that Moosburg was only a short piece from Dachau and had we known that they might take us to Dachau, we would have escaped. There wouldn't have been any doubt about that. We felt like . . . we did know of this other camp and we felt like if they put us there, that possibly American forces could arrive in time to liberate us.

So we went on into the camp at Moosburg. And, the first thing they did after we got there was march us about five or six miles down the road and marched us in a chamber deal for showers. As you looked around this deal, it was very much like American people have seen in pictures of gas chambers that they had. What window light they had was real high up and they

didn't open. They had the pipes running real high up all through it. Well, we didn't think it was a gas chamber and went on in it. Sure enough it was a shower bath.

Whether it was designed like that . . . like the ones they had in the . . . some of the other bad, bad camps, I don't know. But, it was a scary moment there for a while, where they hadn't even been interested in any of us having a bath for the past six months, and here they were forcing us to take one. It did leave a question in our mind for a little while. We were in Moosburg camp for about three and a half weeks.

In making this recording I had not made any preparation or dates or anything. All I've done is just as things come to my mind I've presented it as I remembered it. And really, this is the first time I've remembered with continuity my whole experience over there. I've, of course, stopped the recorder and played it back once or twice and started again, but I've not made any notes. I've done this by memory. My dates are fairly accurate. My timing is fairly accurate . . . the lengths of time on roads, the marches and things. There are the things that are just imprinted on your memory. And I guess, as long as you have a decent memory, that it will be that way.

After about three and half weeks in the camp at Moosburg, you could hear gunfire approaching from an easterly direction, and from a westerly direction, and all of a sudden then it seems all around you. It is not that close to you. It's pretty far away, but you know that somebody is coming. You don't know for sure who it is, but you can tell by the skittishness of the guards, they're getting worried. They're getting scared. We are climbing right up next to the fence hollering at them now. They have their little single strand wire there of "no man's land" that you're not supposed to walk in. We are crowding the fences and they are not

shooting at us. We are hollering at them that they better throw their guns down and come on in and be with us and safe or, if they stay out there, they'll be killed. And of course, that made them get a little more skittish. They're scared. There's no doubt about that.

As the gunfire draws a little bit closer, some of us climb up on some buildings there to look out back over a hill. We know that just past that hill is a river. The gunfire gets, we think, close to the river. We can't see them because the gunfire stopped. For quite a while, the gunfire still goes on, but it doesn't seem like there's any movement on it. Of course, we can hear a few bullets whizzing over our heads and a few shells and they're directed mostly toward the town of Moosburg, which is just a short distance away. This is on April 28th, and like I said, the gunfire seems to continue but not progress any further.

During the night, it's fairly quiet. There are a few bursts and everything. But the next morning it seems like they're really beginning to move because the gunfire picks up. The activity . . . you could hear what sounds like tanks and see a lot of Germans moving . . . and moving back in the opposite direction. By ten o'clock that morning the gunfire seems to be coming closer. You all of a sudden wake up to the fact that about half as many German guards are around the compound as there have been. Evidently, during the night some of them had pulled out. And I don't know whether they'd directed to or whether they'd decided to take off on their own or what.

This continues. You keep hollering at your guards. There's thousands of us there doing that and it does have an influence on them. None of them actually did except you see a few of them walked off into the woods and they didn't come back.

About . . . right at noon we saw an American jeep. As he came around this bend in the road there, this German guard that was standing closest to the road there where we were, he started to run back down to the other end of the compound. Of course, he was on the outside and about the time he got halfway around, well, here comes an American truck with quite a few soldiers in it. And as they rounded the corner, of course, he threw his gun down pretty quick. The men up in the pill boxes, up in the guard boxes, started scampering down about as fast as they could. By that time we were trying to tear open the gate, the barbed wire gate there, and this is what is known as "Liberation Day," as far as we were concerned.

I would try to tell them in the recording that I was captured about eleven thirty on April 29, 1944, and this is April 29, 1945, at 12:00. And I was liberated. I was . . . the gates were open and I walked out of them. I had been a prisoner for a year and thirty minutes.

Of course, the first thing we started doing was looking for food and every man in the prison camp . . . uh . . . the soldiers that came in, and there were a lot of them. It was pitiful really, to see American men grabbing, fighting for the food that the soldiers had. They had their rations with them and, of course, they started throwing them out. And the men were fighting and shoving and scrambling for what few things they passed out to us. Of course, we spilled out into the town. We started going through houses looking for food and scrounging for something to eat with, if we found some food and everything. Of course, the people were dumbfounded. They were going through a shock, I guess, just like I'd gone through the day I landed in that parachute. They looked like they were stunned. They had scared looks on their faces. The soldiers that were captured were searched and their belts were taken off their

pants, suspenders were cut. And, it was a great change from the position we had been in earlier that morning to the position we felt like we were in by 12:30 or 1:00 that afternoon.

We were ordered to stay in this camp because our liberator, General Patton, would be there the next day. And sure enough, old "Blood and Guts" showed up and stood up on top of a little incinerator deal there and made a speech. He said he was proud of us, that he knew [what] we had been through and had had some experiences that we didn't break under, and he was proud of that. He said, "I want to tell you one thing, the Third Army feeds well." They haven't given us any food to this day. We still had to get out and scrounge for food just like we had before until finally, within a couple or three days they took us in some trucks back there close to Regensburg. And, we stayed on an airfield there for two days. Finally, they came in planes and flew us out into France.

From there, just as quick as I could make my way, I came home. I had always followed the Army rules, the Army regulations. As I got these embarkation camps and they told me it would be three weeks and four weeks and they had so many men, the men that I had been with, by hook and by crook, we by-passed all the delousing jobs and we by-passed the record places. Where we were supposed to be in one place for three weeks, well, the only way they knew you had been there long enough was to delouse you and give you a shower and new clothes. Well, we by-passed it, then came on. We got a truck and finally got to a place called the "Tenth Lucky Strike" and finally they gave us some new clothes and a bath and some good food and within two days, we were on a boat coming home.¹⁰

¹⁰ Davidson may be referring to Camp Lucky Strike, the U.S. Army Transit Camp that was located at St. Valery-en-Caux, northeast of Le Havre.

We landed in Boston and only spent one night there. Then, through a long train ride, I was moved to San Antonio. My wife, Sybil, met me down there. I had sent her a telegram along the lines that about the time we'd get there and this was a very joyous reunion. Of course, they kept us there and told us the men that had been injured in any way could go over in one direction. If you hadn't been hurt, you could on in this building, sign some papers, and go on home. That was the building I went in because not home was the place I wanted to be.

I've listened to this recording back, played it back, once or twice, and I know that I've left out more than I've talked about. When Mrs. Vickers gave me this machine to do this recording, I didn't think I'd need one tape. Here, I've used about a tape and a half. I know I told less than half the things that happened. I tried to give you a true glimpse of the life of a prisoner of war. It was an experience that I look back on at this stage . . . it was another phase of life that a man goes through. At times, I was very bitter toward the Germans. I've outgrown that. I've only spoken once or twice of mistreatment. There were more times than that. Like I said, you get over it. People are the same everywhere. Had they been bombing our cities, I'm sure I'd have been bitter at them and the treatment I received at times, that was bad. I don't think I need to forgive them because I never thought that most of them were responsible.

The people of a country are directed to do for their leaders just like we were directed and there's not much, when you're caught up in a war, that an individual can do about it, except support his country to the best of his ability. When he's asked to do something like this, to record it, he's going to do just like I've done. He's going to leave out a whole lot more than he tells because I think, our memory helps us to forget the worst and remember only the best. This is true, in all our lives, as well as in our war experiences.