

Interviewee: Luther H. Smith, Jr.

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor

Date of interview: 7 February 2005

Location: by telephone to the Smith residence in Villanova, PA

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, March 2005

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, March 2005

Luther H. Smith, Jr., was born 27 September 1920 in Des Moines, Iowa, and raised there as well. He attended the University of Iowa from 1938-41, then enrolled in the Civilian Pilot Training Course, a program to train pilots.

Luther enlisted in the US Army Air Corps in September 1942, and completed Air Corps training as a fighter pilot. He served with the 302nd Fighter Squadron of the 332nd Fighter Group, and was one of the Tuskegee Airmen.

In January 1944, Luther joined his overseas unit and began flying missions from bases in Italy. By October 1944, he had completed more than one hundred. According to a 2009 article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and Luther's records, "he was credited with destroying two enemy aircraft in aerial combat and ten aircraft in ground strafing missions. He received the Distinguished Flying Cross, and an Air Medal with six Oak Leaf Clusters."

On 13 October 1944, Luther's plane, a P-47 Mustang fighter aircraft, was shot down while on a mission escorting American bombers to Germany. He bailed out, but was badly injured. His German captors sent him first to Luftwaffe (German Air Force) hospitals, then to a hospital prison camp facility, Stalag XVIII-A at Spittal, in southern Austria. Luther remained here for the duration of the war, and was liberated by US forces in early May 1945.

After his return to the United States, Luther had a long recovery from his injuries. He remained in the Air Corps (after 1947, Air Force), retiring in 1947. He then completed a degree in engineering at the University of Iowa in 1950, and had a career as an aerospace engineer for General Electric Co.

In 1995, Captain Smith accompanied President Bill Clinton to Europe with six other veterans for the fiftieth anniversary marking the end of World War II. He also served on the Architect-Engineer Evaluation Jury to select the design for the National World War II Memorial in Washington.

Luther H. Smith, Jr., died in December 2009, at age eighty-nine. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Some personal details also confirmed in "Tuskegee Airman Smith dies," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 12 Dec 2009.



Burial: Arlington National Cemetery, plot: Section 46, Site 1836



Interview key:

T = Thomas Saylor

L = Luther H. Smith, Jr.

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 7 February 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I'm speaking by telephone with Mr. Luther H. Smith, Jr. at his home in Villanova, Pennsylvania. First, on the record Mr. Smith, thanks very much for taking time to speak with me today.

L: You're welcome.

T: For the record, and please correct anything here that's incorrect. You were born 27 September 1920 in Des Moines, Iowa, and you were raised there as well. You attended the University of Iowa before enlisting in the US Army Air Corps in September. You attended from 1938 to—

L: Dropped out in 1941.

T: And then you enlisted in the Army Air Corps, September 1942.

L: That's correct.

T: On the other end of that, you were discharged from service—

L: I returned to the University of Iowa in September 1947.

T: The same month you were discharged from service.

L: Yes. I graduated in 1950.

T: And you were discharged with the rank of captain.

L: I was retired. I was not discharged.

T: Retired with the rank of captain. You served in service with the 302nd Fighter Squadron of the 332nd Fighter Group. You arrived overseas on 29 January 1944 and flew missions after that time. I want to start by going back to Friday, 13 October 1944, and ask you, Mr. Smith, what was the mission for that day?

L: The mission was a bomber escort mission, and our function was called target withdrawal. We had to escort 15th Air Force heavy strategic bombers from the

target, which was Blechhammer, Germany, back to what they call the bomb line, which at that point was the Danube River near Budapest, Hungary. Our job was to escort the bombers safely from the target back to the Danube River. Budapest, Hungary. At that point, because we were about 550 miles from our base in Italy, the bomb line represented the location where the bombers would be fairly safe to fly without the need for escort protection. We were authorized to attack targets of opportunity, which is the euphemism for strafing airfields and railroads.

T: Was that mission that particular day different in any way from other missions you had flown?

L: It was, at that point, the longest mission that I had flown personally, and for that reason we had just the function of target withdrawal. We didn't take the bombers in, cover them over the target, and bring them back out. We just flew to the target area, picked the bombers up as they left the target, and escorted them back part way to the Danube River, because it must have been about 750 miles to the target area.

T: So you didn't escort them the whole way.

L: No, we did not. The fighter escort did not have that kind of range to take bombers to all targets and bring them back. If it was a short mission it could be done, but many long missions we either had target penetration, take them to the target, target cover, cover them while they are over the target, and target withdrawal, cover them in the return from the target.

T: These kind of strafing missions. Had you done those before that day?

(1, A, 35)

L: Yes.

T: What kind of missions are they?

L: Strafing is simply a target of opportunity where you either know or see a ground opportunity to attack, and you go down and strafe it.

T: Are those particular strafing missions, being close to the ground, more difficult or more dangerous in perspective than other things you may have done?

L: Relatively more dangerous, because you are encountering whatever enemy ground fire that may be located at that particular location. They can see you coming and if they're lucky enough they can hit you, whereas in escorting, which is done, for us, strategic bomber escort was done at very high altitudes. Usually twenty-six thousand feet to perhaps thirty-six thousand feet, which only the most effective German ground fire could reach. But it was very effective, most of the time anyway,

because they had a lot of practice throughout the war. So we possibly lost more escort fighter planes in strafing missions than we did in escort missions.

T: Is that right?

L: We were apt to be encountered by German enemy aircraft, but we were superior at that point in time to the Germans, and we could usually defeat them. Generally, at that point I wasn't shot down because [I was] flying with the P-51 Mustang [which] was superior to most of the German fighter aircraft. All of the German piston fighter aircraft. Only the jet fighters were superior, because they were faster.

T: What happened to you on that particular day? On Friday, 13 October.

L: It will take about two hours. That was quite involved because at the end of our escort mission we were authorized, as I said, to take on targets of opportunity—which was strafing the several Budapest, Hungary, airports. The airport that our squadron was assigned to strafe was loaded with aircraft and glider vehicles. Most of the aircraft did not have fuel on board because Germany was very short of fuel. They didn't have fuel except for aircraft they were going to fly on the days or missions they were going to fly. So attacking or strafing an aircraft without fuel, you couldn't actually account for it being destroyed by your strafing attack unless it burned up. You saw it, and you both observed the burning aircraft as well as having it documented in your gun cameras. The film in your gun cameras. You could only claim a victory if you actually saw something happen or if it was documented from the gun cameras for something you were shooting at. So we were concerned about whether the airplanes or the vehicles that we actually shot at were destroyed or we just got shots, and you couldn't claim a victory at this particular field. Understand, there were several fields that we were strafing. The reason why I know this is because the account of that attack was actually recorded by Hungarian writers after the war, in the last several years, in which they specifically mention my name as being one of the pilots in that attack. I have no idea where that information came from, but I do have a cassette copy of the article that I received from United States historians in McClean, Virginia.

So nonetheless, I can account for the fact it was several airports we were attacking. The particular airfield just outside of Budapest that our squadron was assigned, most of the airplanes did not have onboard fuel. We couldn't tell whether they had fuel on board or not. When I finally lined up on airplanes, I couldn't tell whether it was an airplane or glider. The gliders were quite large. Looked like airplanes. You got up close and you'd see they didn't have engines. I did happen to see on one side of the airport two Heinkel 111 German medium bombers. They were sitting side by side and up against a road underneath high voltage power lines. Nobody wanted to attack these airplanes because they were under these power lines. I could see that they were two bombers, Heinkel 111 German bombers, so I decided to attack both of them. So I started to fire at the first one. They were sitting side by side. It exploded and burned. So I thought, oh, it's got fuel on board. So it burned up. And of course, I was able to record that with my gun camera.

I tried to get the second on the same pass because there were sixteen airplanes in the squadron. Somebody would see that first airplane burning and would come around and take out the second one. Being greedy, I was trying to get them both. Strafing, you try to do as low altitude as you possibly can. When I say low altitude, you are as close to the ground as you can fly. And you don't measure how many hundreds of feet you're above the ground. You measure by just several feet so that you're down to the ground to the point where a gun emplacement may actually hit something between the gun emplacement and the airplane they're shooting at or shoot into the ground.

T: How far off the ground are you, do you reckon?

L: Couple feet. Not more than two or three feet. In this instance, after I had hit and caused the first bomber to burn up, I went back and attacked the second one which was on the other side but was a clear target and I could see it and I just had to be watching to make sure I was lining up on the bomber rather than the one that was burning. But I was down low and what I was trying to do was to fly into the bomber at almost the same level as the bomber sitting on the ground. As I explain my mission, I'll tell you why. On the second pass I did strike the second bomber. It caught fire also and blew up. So there I had on my gun camera recorded, two destroyed German Heinkel 111 bombers. The guy said, "You got it! You got it! You got both of them!" But I said to myself, "This is kind of dangerous. You went back to a target the second time." You don't do that in combat. Somebody will be waiting for you. I then proceeded to get as low as I possibly could on the ground, because on the first pass, when the whole squadron made its first pass over the field, you don't know what kind of ground fire there is there. Gun emplacements on the ground. You don't know. Nobody told you.

T: They may or may not have some there.

L: And so you make the first pass as fast as you can and as low as you can because a lot of ground fire, someone's going to get hit. Unfortunately, on our first pass one of the planes in our squadron was hit by ground fire. Of course, all we saw was this vehicle cartwheeling across the field. On fire. We didn't know who it was. One of our guys was hit. So we knew there was a gun emplacement on the ground. So we all had to be worrying. That's the reason I was flying so low, as I had mentioned to you.

T: You didn't know where the gun emplacement was, did you?

L: Obviously we didn't know where it was, because when we saw the airplane it was on fire, hit the ground and was cartwheeling across several hundred miles an hour. But I was aware of that fact that there was a gun emplacement somewhere, and going back to the same target the second time to hit the second bomber I knew that the gunners knew that the second plane was there. Somebody was going to come back and try to hit it. So they could get a bead on that particular spot.

T: Sure. They almost could pre-aim the gun, couldn't they?

L: Precisely. Precisely. So for this reason, I'm going to all this detail because I went back after I'd hit the second bomber and got over the top of it I dove down to as close to the ground as I could get. I was so close I couldn't measure the altitude, how high I was. It was a matter of inches, perhaps twelve or eighteen inches above the ground. So close the only way I could tell that I was above the ground and not flying into the ground was that I was looking, I was watching the grass on the field and the turbulence caused in the grass, by the movement of the grass, I could get some relativity between my wingtip altitude and the actual ground by just looking at the movement of the grass. And I was turning as tight as I could, make a turn away from what possibly could have been a location for a gun emplacement.

As I was turning towards the middle of the field where there were other airplanes and vehicles burning and smoke, just to get out of the line of sight of a gunner, I could see tracer bullets going underneath my wing. I was turning away from the gun emplacement. I was so low to the ground I was below the gun emplacement so the gunner had to shoot down. I was flying away from him, turning away from him, very close to the ground. He was undershooting and I could see the tracer bullets going into the ground. But I didn't know how accurate the gunner was, and I was afraid that all he had to do was lift his gun and he could hit the underside of my airplane and I would have been the second casualty cartwheeling across that field. Obviously in a situation like that, a millisecond, a nanosecond, is an eternity. I was afraid that gunner was going to hit me. Obviously. But I was fortunate enough I was able to escape into the smoke. This time I reversed my flight and got out of there. So that was the incident on that strafing mission on that particular mission. That was the first encounter near death that I had of four on that particular mission.

Shortly thereafter I was in a flight of four. The flight leader, and his wingman. I was the deputy flight leader, and my wingman. We were flying a team of four. It was called a flight element. Four airplanes. In a squadron there are four such flights, A, B, C and D. And all four of us were flying nearly our last combat mission for our tour of duty. It was my actual last, my fiftieth mission with my second tour. I flew 133. That was 133rd mission, but it was the fiftieth mission of my second tour in the 15th Air Force flying escort for heavy bombers. So we called each other and lined up to head for home after having expended a huge amount of fuel just on the going to the target. Brechhammer, Germany, is in southeast Germany. Pick up the bombers and escort them back to the Danube River at Budapest. Then taking on the strafing expended more fuel.

(1, A, 169)

T: Sure.

L: So we were getting a little concerned. At least I was getting a little concerned about fuel consumption, because at that point we were about 550 miles from home

at Budapest. I had just had a narrow escape. I was more interested in heading for home as quickly as we could. Furthermore, I had two bombers destroyed in my gun cameras that I was glad to get home and brag about. Have something to brag about.

T: Do you tell me that fighter pilots used to brag about that kind of stuff, Mr. Smith?

L: What else is there to brag about? *(laughing)* The escorting was pretty mundane. You didn't do anything. Escort the bombers. Just shepherding. But the flight leader saw...well, I didn't know what he saw. He was motioning to me as the deputy flight leader to get on one side of his airplane because I could see he wanted to go down and do more strafing. I had no idea what he saw. I certainly was in no mood or attitude to go down and do anymore strafing after having narrowly missed being shot out of the sky in the last one. So I ignored the flight leader's direction for me to get on one side so he could dive down for another strafing run. So he decided he was going to fly, go down anyway. So when he went down with his wingman to do more strafing and what he saw was a freight yard. It was just a freight yard somewhere about thirty kilometers north and west of Budapest, Hungary. I had no idea where it was. I do now because I did some research on it after the war and the article I told you about by the Hungarian writers. In the area called Lake Balaton, which is about thirty some kilometers from Budapest [actually one hundred kilometers southwest of Budapest]. But there was a freight yard there.

So he went down, he and his wingman, and started strafing this freight yard. It had oil cars and other freight vehicles in the yard and a little station. All I did was, I stayed up and circled over the flight leader and his wingman with my wingman, and they made seven or eight passes over this freight yard and they caused all cars...burning and the little station, they shot at that and it was burning. I was even a little disgusted. I said, "Come on! Come on, guys! Let's get home! We're short of fuel." After the eighth pass I could see them pulling up. I said, "At long last! Let's get going!" I looked over my shoulder just to make sure my wingman was in place on my wing and I noticed that I was turning toward the flight leader and his wingman, my wingman was pulling away from me going down to actually strafe this freight yard. That really teed me off because I didn't give him authorization. I didn't want to go down in the second place and didn't feel it was necessary for any of us go back down there after all of that and we were running short on fuel. So I was a little bit teed off and said, "I'm going to report this as insubordination." But he was my responsibility, so I had to go down with him. He was my responsibility. He was my wingman.

T: Did you outrank him?

L: Yes. I actually outranked him because I was several classes ahead of him. But I was the deputy flight leader and he was my wingman, so he was subordinate to me as the deputy flight leader. So I had to actually follow him down when he went down to strafe. He had some legitimacy for going down because the freight yard was there and we were on, at that point in our mission, taking on targets of opportunity, and since the flight leader had actually gone down and made passes, it

was conceived that the rest of us could do the same thing. I was just certain it wasn't...I wasn't for it. I'd done my strafing.

Nevertheless, I followed him down, but I felt there wasn't any real opportunities left because these other two fellows had pretty much hit the freight yard and hit all the vehicles that had oil in them or whatever there was in the vehicles to get them to burn. Not all the cars were burning. So when I followed my wingman down, I was right behind him, he made his pass. I started to shoot at the cars too and my reaction was get some strikes on these vehicles just to add a little compliment to the two bombers you've actually got on your gun camera. So when I—I was only about ten feet over the tops of the cars. Pretty low. So I lined up on it and noticed the tracer bullets were going directly into the cars. Oh, I've got a pretty good strike on these. So I just held the trigger and said, "Let me hold this for just a second or more and then rise up and we'll join up and we'll head for home." Got halfway down the line of cars and there's a huge, monstrous explosion. So big I couldn't fly over it. As I said, I was only about ten feet over the tops of the cars. Flying about three hundred miles an hour. And I couldn't fly to either side. The explosion was much larger than I could escape. So I thought, "You've done it this time! You're not going to make this." Fearing that, as I flew through the explosion, steel and debris and everything else was going to be rising up and hit the airplane and cause fatal destruction of both me and the airplane.

But fortunately, because God was with me, I was in and out of the explosion just very quick. Then I was afraid it was going to take out my engine and destroy the airplane in some way. And the concussion from the explosion did blow out the glass of my cockpit, except for the windshield. It was pretty sturdy. It was bulletproof. It also buckled the wings and tore off part of the tail. Just from the concussion from the explosion. It was pretty violent. Because I was only—I don't know how far I was from the explosion, but it was just in front of me. Must have been about one hundred feet, I guess, and I flew right through it. But the aircraft engine was operating. The instruments were functioning when I got through the explosion and I could see, you made it. But the glass, remaining glass, in the cockpit and the windshield, the front glass, was blackened by the explosion and the smoke. So I couldn't really see out.

T: Were you injured yourself, Mr. Smith?

L: At that point I was not because I was away from it. The airplane was just rocked by the concussion. I was checking the instruments to make sure the airplane—because the airplane was flying very badly because of the damage to the aircraft. I don't know whether my wingman...he was in front of me, he may not have seen the actual explosion, but the other two fellows, the flight leader and his wingman were flying above us. They saw this big, huge ball of fire. Didn't know what happened. "What happened down there? Smith, what did you hit?" I said, "I don't know what I hit. I hit something. It kind of got my airplane." And he said, "Are you all right?" I said, "I seem to be all right. The airplane is functioning. The instruments are functioning." So I called to my wingman and I said, "Greene, get on my wing. I can't see out. I'm going on instruments. Fly my wing and protect me." So as he came in

and flew up beside me he said, "You're leaking fuel, Smith." And at that point my attention was more with the condition of the airplane. I hadn't paid that much attention the last two or three minutes of my fuel situation. We have three internal tanks. I think there was about forty-five gallon tanks inside the airplane. We had external tanks and we had done most of the flying of the escort on the external tanks and burned those first and just used enough fuel internally. Intelligence always made sure whatever we did, we had enough fuel internal so if we had to drop our fuel tanks, external tanks for combat, we had enough fuel to get back home safely. So whatever we did, we always managed to have fuel to get back home. That was part of the mission requirement.

So when I looked at my tanks, one tank was empty. I wasn't on that tank. One tank had fifteen gallons of fuel on it. I was burning from that tank and the third tank was full. I wasn't on that tank. Obviously my assumption was that the fuel that was leaking was on the tank that I was on. The P-51 Mustang burned about a gallon a minute. So I could estimate I had about fifteen more minutes of fuel in the tank that I was on. So if I kept on that tank, in fifteen minutes I should have enough fuel to get me within the forty-five gallon tank and safely home. But then I realized that we'd burned so much fuel in that strafing and circling that I was going to be short no matter what. I said, "I can't worry about that now. Just make sure I get as close to home as we possibly can." Because after Hungary you had to fly through Yugoslavia and then it was 180 miles of the Adriatic Sea to cross before reaching Italy. Then it was a range of mountains, the Tyrolean Alps, and the western part of Yugoslavia you had to cross. They were about fourteen thousand feet high. All these things went through my mind. "I've got a problem here."

So I was watching...I was on the tank that had I thought the leakage was occurring and was watching the fuel consumption and estimating. I was actually burning about a gallon a minute. I was watching the gauge also. I said, "When it gets down to zero I'll switch tanks. I don't want this thing to run out of gas and stopping in the sky." So when it did reach approximately zero I reached down to switch the tank over to the full tank—I just had one full tank of fuel left, forty-five gallons and that would take me fairly close to home and I would worry about how close I would get when I got to the Adriatic Sea. What happened was there was—as though I hit a wall. The airplane practically stopped in the sky. Obviously didn't know what happened. But the engine stopped and I couldn't figure out...I knew I was high enough, I was up around thirteen, fourteen thousand feet because I wanted to have enough altitude to cross the Tyrolean Alps, so I didn't know what happened. My wingman had told me that it was still leaking fuel even though I had switched. I was on this one tank that I was burning from. My assumption was I was consuming the fuel more than I was leaking it or the same rate. But what happened really was, it wasn't fuel that I was leaking, it was ethylene glycol, which was the engine coolant. It was the engine coolant that was leaking and when the coolant system ran out of coolant, the engine overheated and started to burn up. So it wasn't fuel I was leaking. I was leaking ethylene glycol and I didn't know it. But I knew immediately what had happened because all the instruments went from one extreme to the other and the engine froze. When the engine froze, the propeller was still windmilling and had no cooling and it caught on fire. My wingman says, "Smith! You're on fire!" I

said, "Yes, I know. I know. I know." He said, "You have to get out of that airplane." I said, "I'm aware of that." I had never been in a parachute ever in my life (*chuckles*).

(1, A, 348)

T: You're about ready to make your first jump, aren't you?

L: And the first thing that goes through your mind is, is that parachute going to open? You don't worry about those things. You go through a routine. What are you going to do to get out of this airplane? So the procedure is for—in fighter aircraft in World War II we didn't have ejection seats. So the procedure was to turn the airplane on its back, jettison your canopy of the cockpit and fall free. You're free of the airplane. Don't worry about hitting anything because you're going to fall free of the airplane.

T: So you bail out by gravity, in a sense.

L: You bail out by gravity. Pull the parachute and descend.

T: To check now, you're over land? You're not over water, right?

L: I'm over land, because I was flying from Hungary over Yugoslavia. Then I was going to be over the Adriatic Sea the last 180 miles to home. We were based in Italy. So when the airplane caught on fire, the guys could see the airplane was smoking. They could see the smoke. My wingman said, "Smith, you're burning!" And I said, "Yes, I know I'm burning." They said, "You're going to have to go." I said, "I'm going." They said, "Good luck! We'll see you later." That kind of sort of small talk. You'll be okay. So then I had to go through the routine. So I said the first thing I'll do—I didn't want to be upside down in an airplane with my safety belt on, because hanging by my safety belt wouldn't release me. I didn't want to be caught in the airplane, on fire and upside down.

T: Right.

L: So I unbuckled my safety belt. I hadn't done this before in my life. I didn't have any idea, experience... The next thing I did after I told the guys I was going—

End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 383.

T: You don't want to take your seatbelt off before you...I understand. Because if you're hanging upside down, it may not release.

L: That's right. I was just afraid the gravity might hold me in and I wouldn't be able to get the airplane back right if I was upside down and the seatbelt was holding me in the airplane. Couldn't get out of it. So I unbuckled my safety belt, pulled out the radio jack and told the guys I was leaving. The last thing I wanted to do was pull out

my oxygen jack, because I was on oxygen. So I reached around and pulled out the oxygen jack and then just proceeded to flip the airplane on its back. Jettison the canopy was the first thing I did. Fall free of the airplane, and I'd be on my own.

Unfortunately, that's when life started all over, or ended and started again. Because the airplane was partially turned on its back. I had failed to remember that part of the tail assembly had been blown off in the explosion and the airplane was flying so slow because the engine was frozen and the propeller was barely windmilling. The airplane was flying pretty slow. The airplane fell into a tailspin. Couldn't stay in flying speed and fell into a tailspin. Now the airplane is on fire in a tailspin. And I'm caught in the airplane with my seat belt fastened, because I hadn't released it. Wasn't going to do that until I got it on its back. I think I had just unbuckled my safety belt as I turned the airplane on its back because what happened to me was, I slid partially out of the airplane as it fell into the tailspin. I knew I couldn't get out of this airplane in a tailspin, so I tried to get back into the cockpit with my seatbelt partially holding me in and there wasn't anything I could hang onto with the canopy jettisoned. I was partially upside down in the tailspin. I was really in a dilemma and a mess, too. I was trying to scramble and the only thing I could do was to reach with my right foot and hook my foot between the rudder bar and the brake of the airplane. I was able to wedge my foot between the rudder bar and the brake. It's just a lever. And that caught my foot, my right foot. But it kept me in the airplane. It also jammed me so the airplane was spinning up—the spin speed was beginning to speed up and the torque was increasing. I couldn't get out of the airplane and couldn't free my foot and get out of the airplane or get back in it. It was pulling me out of the airplane. I was in a real dilemma.

(1, B, 411)

T: And of course, you're losing altitude the whole time.

L: I was coming down. Straight down. In a tailspin. So the final thought I can remember before I went unconscious was, "So this is how guys go." And I can remember that as though it was this morning.

T: You consciously had that thought, that really this is what it feels like.

L: This is it. This was the end. I couldn't get out of this one. After being able to get out of the explosion, after being able to escape from the ground fire in the strafing mission, this was the third event and I said, "This one you're not going to make." And so what happened was, because I was partially out of the cockpit of the airplane, my oxygen mask was blown off by the wind because I was halfway out of the cockpit. I went unconscious. The last thing I remembered was so this is how guys go. When I came to...I'm here now.

T: There's a bridge between what happened at that point and now, because you didn't die.

L: I didn't die. The story continues. I was in the parachute coming down. Head first. Normally in the parachute you're sitting upright. I'm coming down head first. So the thing that I see because I'm coming down head first is looking straight up at the canopy of my parachute, which is ripped. Right through the front of the canopy. So when I came to I was in a total state of shock. Had no understanding of where I was. I wasn't aware of the parachute. I was in an airplane. Then the silence. No engine noise was what struck me first. It was just the swishing of air. Me being in the parachute. With the parachute being damaged and me coming down head first which was unusual. I'd never been in a parachute before in my life. Something horrible had happened and I was in a state of shock so I couldn't feel anything. I was trying to make an assessment of what could have happened.

I happened to glance down to the ground and directly underneath me was my airplane. Maybe ten thousand feet below. But I could see my airplane burning on the ground. So I knew that I had escaped out of the airplane. Didn't know how. But I was out of the airplane in a parachute coming down head first rather than sitting upright in the parachute harness. Then I said, "How did you get here?" So I was trying to make a quick assessment. Something must have happened to me. If you look at the parachute, the canopy being ripped. What obviously happened was that the—after sixty years I've obviously thought this thing through—so while I was in the airplane, the airplane was in a tailspin. I was halfway out of the airplane and I was unconscious. I still pull the ripcord, which you obviously don't do in an airplane. Because it was a seat pack that I'm sitting on. There is what they call a pilot chute, which is not much larger than a handkerchief and a spring. So when you pull the pack and you pull the ripcord of the pack, it releases this—there's a spring on it. It opens it up like unfolding a handkerchief. That's what pulls out the main canopy. And because I was partially out of the airplane and I pulled the ripcord of the parachute, the pilot chute was able to come out and pull the main canopy out of the cockpit, and because the airplane was in a tailspin and not coming straight down the uneven gyration enabled the canopy of the parachute to get out without entangling totally on the airplane fuselage, but it did entangle somewhat because it ripped the center of the parachute canopy.

T: Did it also pull you out of the aircraft?

L: Pulled me out of the airplane, and it snapped my right foot which was jammed. The force of the canopy. Snapped my right hip. Broke it in two. Pulled me out of the airplane. And I was alive. That was the third incident of almost dying.

T: So the parachute comes down. You must have hit the ground pretty hard.

(1, B, 458)

L: I'm not on the ground. I was still coming down. Then I'm looking at the situation and I see my—I still have no feeling because I was in a state of shock—I saw that my left glove, the glove of my left hand had been blown off because that was the side I was on out of the airplane, and I was trying to figure out what else is damaged. I

noticed that my right foot was turned around backwards and all the riser straps of the parachute were on my right leg. It was my right foot that was jammed in the airplane. So as the parachute blossomed out after being pulled out of the cockpit, just because I was upside down and pulled the ripcord while I was still in the airplane, the parachute came and pulled me out. The last thing that came loose was my foot, and all the risers wrapped around, actually, on my right foot. I was being held to the parachute with my right foot, but my right foot was turned around backward. My hip was broken in two. So I was afraid that it was going to snap off. So I reached up above the shroud lines, above my foot, grabbed the shroud lines, make sure I was hanging onto the shroud lines, so my leg wouldn't fall off. Then I realized that because the canopy was ripped in two in the beginning I was coming down at twice the rate of speed normally. I could tell I was coming down at a tremendous descent rate. So I felt that when I hit the ground I would either break my back or break my neck. I couldn't help myself because I was coming down head first anyway.

T: Did you manage to right yourself so you didn't have your head hitting first?

L: No. No. I was coming down head first. Like a bag of coal. So then I said, "You're not going to make it after all." All this is happening [at] lightening speed. I went unconscious a second time. While I was unconscious I was in a dream, a very agitated nightmarish kind of a dream that I was in a room, confined in a room. Couldn't control myself and I was banging my head against the wall because of the agitated situation I was in. I was just banging my head against the wall. Uncontrollably. In reality what was happening was I was crashing down through the trees. The canopy of my parachute was coming to rest on the top of the trees, being stopped by the trees, and what I was dreaming was hitting my head against the walls and I was crashing down through the branches. I came to and I came to realize I was crashing down through the trees and the canopy was slowing my speed down. Reached out and grabbed a branch and sat on it. I was alive. That was the fourth incident that saved my life. Landing in a tree rather than on the ground, and break my back or my neck.

T: Did you injure yourself any more by hitting the trees there?

L: I'm not sure, but you raise a point that...four years ago I had that back surgery and the MRI photo showed that I had some kind of severe back injury. I couldn't tell whether the parachute pulling me out of the airplane or striking the branches as I was coming down through the trees did damage to my back that I was not aware of. The Germans put me in a huge body cast called a spica cast, and I was totally immobile for over a year, all the time I was a prisoner of war and several months after the war was over. So whatever happened to my back—my back was immobilized and it healed on its own. But the x-rays and the MRI photo show there was back damage sometime when I was young that I was never aware of. So when the surgeon was doing the back surgery on me, he thought I was in an automobile accident. I was never in an automobile accident. "Something happened to you. I can

see it on the screen here, on your photos.” I said, “Well, I had an incident that happened to me when I was in combat in World War II.” So the answer to your question was, there may have been some injury either in the airplane as the parachute pulled me out of the aircraft or crashing down through the trees.

T: From your lucky survival to that point, you’re in a tree, you’re near the ground maybe, too?

L: Not near the ground. The trees were about seventy feet, one hundred feet or more high. I was up there near the top where the parachute canopy came to rest, and I just reached out and grabbed a branch. It was an excruciating situation. My foot was hung up in the air from the shroud line of the parachute. I couldn’t free myself. That was a laborious task, just getting my leg free from the parachute straps. As I sat there unable to do anything for myself, the German soldiers saw the parachute canopy in the top of the tree. They were shooting at it, thinking that I was trying to hide from them. But I wasn’t hiding. I just couldn’t get out of the tree.

T: How soon did the German soldiers arrive at the ground?

(1, B, 516)

L: I can’t really remember now. Several things were happening. One was I could hear the bullets from my airplane that were burning. From the airplane that crashed. That was just a matter of minutes since the crash occurred. I was in the tree. [The plane was on] the ground. Not too far away. My wingman saw my parachute in the tree where my airplane was burning on the ground in a clearing. The clearing was sufficient, as his judgment was. He was going to try to make an emergency landing to get me to come out of the trees, out of the woods. It was a wooded area where the tree was. He was going to fly me back to the field in his single place airplane. But because I was totally incapacitated, couldn’t move out of the tree, I couldn’t even get out of the tree. I was watching him. His wheels and flaps were down on his airplane and he was trying to signal to me he was going to land the airplane. Obviously he was going to land, pick me up, take me back home.

T: With his wheels and flaps down you could read that message.

L: I could see him, because he was flying right over the top of the trees. The bullets were going off from my airplane. He was attracting attention from German soldiers on the ground. They were shooting at him and shooting at me. All of a sudden I didn’t see him anymore. The bullets were still going off and I could see bullets whipping through the trees, hitting leaves and that sort of thing. So they were still shooting at me and I was trying to figure out why are they shooting at me. I can’t even get out of this tree. They thought I was hiding. So eventually the Germans saw my body, my person in the tree. They figured there must be something wrong. So one of the German soldiers climbed the tree. Speaking German. He was speaking to

me. I didn't know what he was saying. He was calling to his buddies. This guy is injured. Couldn't get out of the tree, and he needed help.

The tree must have been seventy-five, one hundred feet. The tree was about one hundred feet tall and I was up about seventy feet, where I was sitting on a branch. Another German soldier came up the tree and he had a rope. So he put the rope underneath my armpits and lowered me down this tree. I couldn't control my leg, my right hip which was in two pieces; every time it struck a branch I couldn't control it. So what happened was it was a compound fracture, and the two hip bones, two pieces of hip bone had protruded through the skin and were outside of my leg when I was finally on the ground. Obviously the pain was beyond description. I thought I was going to be able to faint again and get out of that pain experience, but I couldn't. I was still conscious. So when the rope let me down to the ground, I obviously couldn't stand up and the Germans didn't know what to do with me. It was in the woods. They finally figured that they were going to have to get a horse. So they put me on the back of a horse to get me out of this woods to get to where there was a clearing, and they put me in the back of a German touring car. Wrapped me up in my parachute, because I was still in a state of shock. Shivering like a leaf. They drove slowly to a hospital, local hospital somewhere nearby, and I was hospitalized. That was four times in about twenty minutes [that] I was almost killed. On Friday the thirteenth of October. That's what happened on that mission.

T: From our perspective, investigating POW experiences now, when you realized you were in the hands of the Germans there, had you given any thought before that day, Mr. Smith, to what would happen if you were ever a POW?

L: Your question is very good, and you talk to other POWs. We didn't quite know what to expect if we were prisoners. Always figured that could happen. But it's possibly going to happen to somebody else other than you. You never figured you were going to be in that situation. You didn't think it was going to be something that you were going to be confronted with. But it did cross your mind.

T: What I hear you saying is, you thought what would it be like if someone else becomes a POW, because I'm not going to be one.

L: I'm not. And you didn't have an opportunity to talk with those who were prisoners of war. You just made sure—don't get yourself in a situation. But when you're confronted with it you...but you see, in my situation I couldn't do anything about it. I was their prisoner. They'd captured me. Unfortunately, misfortune had happened to me and I was going to have to live with whatever the situation was.

I was in tremendous pain. Hip in two pieces. I was in a state of shock. Whatever happened was going to happen. So what you're asking went through my mind, but there wasn't much that I was going to make an issue of. I could not understand their language. They couldn't understand me. I was, at that point the state of shock was causing dehydration. So I badly needed some water. They didn't have any water. All they had was black coffee. And when I said water, they didn't know what I was talking about. The thoughts that went through my mind were kind

of inconsistent with reality. So when they put me in this touring car and they were driving toward this hospital, obviously this was attracting a lot of attention of natives, residents, and I was looking in the eyes of these people. I had no idea where I was. I was trying to see if I could see a face that would have some empathy with my situation. You're in the hands of the enemy. You don't know what's going to happen to you. It was a strange thing. You're alone in a situation. You have no control over it. All you're going to have to do is see what happens. You had no idea what was going to befall you.

It was just a short ride to a hospital. They put me in emergency and they were trying to reset my leg, putting me in a splint. There was a German officer who was trying to interrogate me while they were trying to set my leg and I said, "That's a hell of a way to treat a person in a hospital. Trying to interrogate me." I couldn't speak German, but I could understand what he was saying. He said, what kind of airplane were you flying? Where you flying from? I said, "Lost, lost, lost. I was lost."

(1, B, 600)

T: This is the very same day that this interrogation is happening, right?

L: Yes. When I was at the hospital, yes. I was on the operating table. Of course, they were trying to get information as quick as they could.

T: Sure.

L: I said, "If I ever get back, I'm going to report this. This is not the way you're supposed to treat prisoners." I can remember that as though it were yesterday. This interrogation went on. I was of no help to them. He knew I was not lost. I think perhaps at that time the bombers were still flying back from the target. We weren't with the bombers at that time. We were doing the targets of opportunity. He knew that I was with these fighters. And he knew there was this black unit in Italy, because we had posters, German posters, showing our base and our airplanes. They knew there were black pilots that were escorting these bombers.

T: As an African-American man, did you worry do you think, or wonder how you'd be treated by the Germans?

L: Of course. Obviously. If you ever got captured you didn't know how you would be treated. We didn't know if they were going to cut our heads off or what. We had no idea, because we didn't talk to people that had been captured. Very few black American airmen had been captured anyway, because of our ability to fly without being caught up in that situation. So we didn't know. We just made sure we didn't get into that situation. So it was unknown to us what the treatment was going to be. We didn't have any feedback. I was having to take it second by second, moment by moment. Unfortunately, I was in that situation. The treatment, really, I was in their hands. I couldn't control...I couldn't dictate, and the experience then began to unfold. They were treating me civilly. They weren't trying to harm me. They

weren't trying to make life any more miserable for me. They were just treating me as a wounded soldier who was a prisoner.

T: And I hear surprise in your voice. Were you surprised by that?

L: I had to take it as it came, because I didn't really know what to expect. That was reality. I feared for the worst. I thought they might cut my head off. There were lynchings, lynchings were performed by civilians. There was no lynching of prisoners of war, military prisoners of war, by German soldiers. There was zero. There was no extraordinary bad treatment by German soldiers of black Americans. There was no racial attitudes or anything like that of racial hostility whatsoever. Because they didn't have that kind of experience, the experience of Americans, of slave and master and the racist attitudes. That wasn't true in Germany. There were attitudes, but it was between German Jews and the Germans, but nothing between African-Americans and Germans.

Obviously, I didn't know that before I was there. I'm telling you now, sixty years later, looking back, that was the experience. And furthermore, after I became a prisoner, I think I was in prison camp by then, I was interviewed by an International Red Cross worker, because Germany was a country that profoundly adhered to the Geneva Convention, particularly the prisoner of war protocol. I was told by the representative, he said, I'm going to assign you a number. That number is your number. It will not go away. You are as safe as you would be if you were home. I had no understanding of what he was talking about. He said, the Germans take of their prisoners. They don't disregard (*static on tape*). Now this was strictly military. It wasn't the way they were treating the German Jews at all. That was absolutely, totally different, because this was the Geneva Convention. So the treatment I was given as all Allied prisoners was, was as though we were one of them. They observed the Geneva Convention. They did not treat prisoners any differently than they treated their own people. If I were able bodied they wouldn't even have me doing any work. I was an officer. Officers didn't work anyway. In that respect, I was treated as a VIP. That was the kind of treatment I received. I'm telling you now, that was the treatment.

T: Now you were in several different hospitals, weren't you?

L: Yes.

T: Talk about those locations. Were they pretty much the same, or were they different?

L: The location of the hospital was that, as time...because as I say, I went down in October. Because of the situation with my leg—it was a compound fracture. Infection set in. I got dysentery, which is an infection in the leg, and I had osteomyelitis, which is an infection. So I was in pretty bad shape and was dying. The head prisoner of war was a doctor, an Australian doctor. He was kind of like the camp physician. He was particularly concerned about me and my physical

condition, and complained to the Germans that this one captive, this one POW, was in bad shape and should be placed in the hospital. The Germans said, "We don't have any way of transporting him to a hospital. Furthermore, we don't have any hospital beds." He said, "You've got a prisoner that is dying and it's going to be your responsibility." And they took that seriously. As I said, because they observed the Geneva Convention. That number couldn't just disappear and say well, he died.

T: So you were signed in by the Red Cross, and had your number.

L: Yes. As I said, it had no significance to me at all. Then I knew that my situation was deteriorating. So I said to the Australian doctor, I said, "Why don't you get me repatriated back the States? I'm in no physical condition that I could be of any harm to the Germans from now on. I'm really no help to the Americans. Why won't they send me home?" He said, "Well, Smith, you're a POW. We can't promise you anything, but I'll see what I can do." So he checked it out with the German prison camp authorities, came back to me and he said, "I have good news and bad news for you." I said, "I only want to hear the good news. I'm not interested in the bad news." He said, "I'll tell you the good news. The good news is the Germans will repatriate you back to the States." I said, "Forget the bad news. When can I go?" He said, "I have to tell you the bad news." I said, "Why? They're going to repatriate me. I'm not interested in anything else." He said, "Yes, you are. The Germans want an exchange ratio of nineteen to one." They wanted nineteen of their own for one of me, and obviously the Allies weren't going to give that kind of gift. Give away nineteen Germans for one American.

So repatriation was out of the question, because at that point in time of the war, October of 1944, the Germans were losing and the only real leverage, the only leverage of any significance they had in terms of peace conditions, settling any kind of arbitration for peace, were the leverage the Germans had with the American, Allied prisoners. So that was the only real commodity they had at the exchange table. So prisoners were the real value, and because they treated the prisoners very well, it was a situation that I was going to be in the camp.

What was interesting in the hospitals, the question you asked, I was then, because of my physical condition, they realized that I was dying and they were going to have to put me into a hospital to keep me from dying. So they transferred me to a hospital. Now the biggest problem was the logistics of getting me, because I couldn't walk, I was bedridden, totally. I had a big spica cast on my leg. The whole body in a cast.

T: That was on you right away.

L: Yes. They put that on me right away. So they assigned three prisoners of war. One was a British sergeant major, and [there were] two British medical aides to accompany me to a hospital. In addition to these three prisoners of war, British prisoners of war, there were two German soldiers as security guards. So there was a party of six. The five of them and me. I was on a gurney, which is a stretcher on wheels, and the medical aides had to push and pull this stretcher. They were going

to transport me by train from the prison camp to a hospital, somewhere in Austria. It must have been about 150 kilometers east of Spittal, in Austria, on the main line. I know of what I'm speaking, because these hospitals were converted resort hotels.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A, begins at counter 000.

T: —more than one hospital, mostly in the same geographic area?

L: A small town. I think I was in two hospitals. One big main one and then, as I began to get a little better, in 1945 they transferred me to another hospital. I remember being in two hospitals in particular. But when I was in the first hospital, a couple of things happened. One was, the latter part of November the beginning of December in 1944...

T: For clarification, civilian or military hospital?

L: Military. German Luftwaffe military hospital. These are military hospitals. And they were converted resorts. Buildings. They were off targets for Allied bombing because they were hospitals. So we didn't have to worry about being bombed by the Allied bombers. They were just these beautiful places. They were beautiful structures. Obviously totally different from prison camp. Bed sheets and what not.

But the situation that developed was I was hearing Christmas carols. Radio. I was hearing Christmas carols being played in the hospitals. There were no Christmas carols in prison camp. I hadn't heard a Christmas carol since I left home in the States. That recalls Christmas time. That was like being home. I said, "This is luxury in this nice hospital." It wasn't half bad. Of course, I was in bad shape too.

The other aspect was, in the prison camp the food was so scarce that most of the time the diet was grass soup. Grass soup is hot water and grass. That was the daily diet. I was down to something like seventy pounds. Had dysentery and osteomyelitis. I was in pretty bad shape. So in the hospital I began to get food. I felt this was not that bad. This was early December.

Then on 16 December 1944, all the Christmas carols stopped playing. There wasn't any more Christmas carols. All I could hear was this "Achtung! Achtung!" Attention! Attention! And this ranting and raving in German. Which obviously I couldn't understand a single word. One day I was told I was going to have visitors. They said, your comrade is coming to visit you. I didn't understand what they were talking about. A Canadian work force, prisoner of war work force, was working in the area and were aware that there was an American prisoner of war military airman in this particular hospital. They asked, could they visit this prisoner. The Germans said, yes, you can visit him. They told me some Allied prisoners wanted to talk to me and I said fine. Be glad to talk to them.

So when they came to visit me, there were several of them, my first question was, what was all this haranguing going on, on the radio. I said, I don't understand German. I don't know what they are talking about. Didn't you know? And I said know what? There's a big battle going on. I said, what are you talking about? They said, up in Belgium they've got the Allies surrounded, which meant nothing to me. I

wasn't a ground soldier in the first place. I said, where's the Air Force? They said the weather was so bad the Air Force was of no use. And that was obviously the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge.

T: So you can place it in December. It's December now.

L: It occurred on 16 December. As I said, all the Christmas music stopped and it was Hitler on the radio telling the Germans, listen, this is our opportunity to perfect our secret weapon, the V-1 and the V-2 rockets. He said this was our opportunity to make a return hit on England. With the time we had to develop this rocket, we could now strike at England and we'll have a chance. Well, that didn't mean anything to me. I didn't understand it. But once I heard what these Canadians were telling me, it scared the living daylights out of me.

T: Why is that?

L: Because this war isn't going to be over. You better learn the language and protect yourself. Have some kind of control. You have no control now. You don't know what's going to happen. So what happened, the reason I'm saying this is, I decided I was going to have to learn the language of German to make sure I knew what was going on for whatever little protection I could provide for myself. So in three weeks I could speak German. Not fluently, but very, very well. Three weeks hence. Now if you think you can do that, try learning a language in three weeks.

T: It doesn't happen that fast. In the hospitals there, how often did you see other Allied prisoners?

L: In that particular situation, in that particular hospital, I think maybe one or two Allied prisoners. In the hospital I went to, went from there, the second hospital, I had a roommate who was a South African prisoner, who was Afrikaans. South Africa prisoner being Afrikaans meant that he was of German Dutch descent. He could speak fluent German. And when he heard me trying to speak German, because I was insistent I was going to learn German, it would irritate him how badly I was speaking the German language and he could speak it fluently. So he would cuss me out something profanely every time I used the wrong syntax, or the wrong verb or noun or adverb or whatever. It was very, very intimidating to me in trying to speak German without any formal education or instruction, and having somebody speak the language constantly correcting me. It was just irritating to him. The way I would speak. So I was being intimidated, so I just learned it without being harassed by him and it only took me three weeks and I could speak German. But the reason for this happening was German language is not that different in derivation from English.

(2, A, 67)

T: That's correct.

L: Many of the words are the same derivation.

T: Yes. That's right.

L: *Wasser* is water. You could pick it up. Since German was being spoken all around me and constantly—the only thing I heard—German came rather quickly.

T: Mr. Smith, what kind of treatment did you receive from the Germans in those hospitals, because that's where spent most of your time.

L: It was very cordial. When the German doctors would come, and I was in a ward frequently and number of patients, not prisoners, and on occasion I would be the highest ranking person in the room. German as well...whatever else. And the doctors would "Sieg Heil" [salute] me because I was the highest ranking, and they would carry on small talk in English because almost all educated Germans were bilingual. They could speak English.

T: In the condition you were in, in the hospitals there, and you spent months and months in hospitals and in casts—

L: Seven months total.

T: —was it easy for you to maintain a sense of optimism about what was going to happen to you, or didn't you?

L: Yes and no. Obviously, you don't know how long the war was going to last. There were rumors all the time, as there are in situations like that. You think things are going to be better. Always, or you lose your mind, really. My feeling was the war, because we were winning and the Russians were approaching from the east and it was pretty ominous, the Russians were going to take over. The Germans were losing, because they were losing from the west. The invasion of the Allies from England from the west, the Russians were moving west from the east, so there was evidence that the war wasn't going to be that long. Nobody knew how long it was going to last. The Germans had the fatalistic attitude they were losing. So conversations that were going on was what was going to happen to the Germans if and when they lost.

T: From your conversations with them, they already gave that indication, they knew they were losing?

L: They knew it was a matter of fact. They were concerned more about the Russians approaching from the east, because there was some kind of an understanding between the Allies and the Germans of what Eisenhower was going to do in terms of a surrender by Germany. There was going to be accommodation. All they had to do was treat the prisoners fairly and they were going to be treated fairly in return.

They had no idea of the treatment they were going to receive from the Russians. I didn't know any more than they did about the Russians, how the Russians would treat the Germans.

So all the conversations of the Germans with me was how I felt the Americans, under Eisenhower's leadership in Europe, how they [Germans] were going to be treated if and when the war was going to be over. So there was a fair amount of discussion, particularly as I learned German more and more and could speak daily and in a conversational manner with Germans.

Now actually what happened was, in April of 1945 when President Roosevelt died, there was huge concern throughout Germany. What's going to happen to us now? President Roosevelt is dead. Who is this Truman? They would ask me, who is Truman? My response was, I don't know. I don't know who follows Roosevelt. I wasn't aware, because I was overseas at that time in '44 for the election. I didn't know who Truman was, even though he was from the state of Missouri. He was a senator, I knew that, from Missouri. I couldn't remember the fact he was vice president.

(2, A, 110)

T: Most Americans didn't know much about Harry Truman when he became vice president.

L: No. I didn't know much about him. But they were concerned, because there was some accommodation that Eisenhower, through President Roosevelt, had made with the Germans that there was going to be terms and conditions of their surrender, what was going to happen. What we were going to do for Germany and that sort of thing.

T: This sense that the war is going better for the Allies, the fact that you can kind of read the rumors that the Allies are going to win, did that cause any concern in your mind about what might happen to you as a POW if the Germans lost?

L: Yes. The war was going to be over if the Germans lost. The war was going to be over. I was going to be returned back to the United States. That's the only thing I was living for.

T: So you didn't worry at all what might happen to you with the Germans losing.

L: It was after the Battle of the Bulge was resolved, things got better. My concern was only one thing, get me out of this German hospital, back to the prison camp. Because the Russians are going to overtake this hospital and I had no idea the treatment or the conditions or how the Germans were going to be able to react to the Russians, what they were going to do with me. If I was in a prison camp, everything is going to be turned over to the Allies. I'd be turned over to the Allies and American forces and I'd be safe at home.

T: So as the Russians got closer, what I hear you saying is you felt it would be safer in the prison camp as opposed to the hospital.

L: That's absolutely clear. And it was my idea, get out of this hospital. So I told the Germans, get me back to the prison camp. They said, we don't have any transportation to get you back. I said, what do you mean you don't have any transportation? You can get me back to the prison camp. What they were telling me was all the railroads were bombed out. I said, come on—and it was true. The Allies had bombed out all the railroad bridges through the Tyrolean Alps so they stopped most of the mobility of Germany. The Germans were really forced to a standstill. Now this was in the latter part of the war. March, April, and May of 1945. The Russians were close on their heels.

They were able to transport me back by train, and actually had to ford a stream because the bridge over the stream had been bombed by the Allies. The way we bombed, we bombed from high altitude with heavy bombers. We'd blow out these bridges and the Germans would come in with pontoon bridges and put the bridges back in overnight and have them operating again and the Allies finally got wise to that and said don't send in these heavy high explosive bombs to bomb out these bridges. Send in just light bombs by medium bombers and just wreck them so they can't move them. The Allies got smart. So when they did that, the bridges were down. They couldn't get them out of the way. If they ever did put in a wrecking crew, the Air Force would come in and strafe them.

T: So you had to, on the way back with this train, get off the train at that location and ford it.

L: Had to walk me on a stretcher.

T: Were you still in your body cast?

L: Absolutely. I didn't walk from the time of the accident in October [1944] until the following October [1945].

T: That time in the hospital, you were in bed all the time.

(2, A, 147)

L: Yes. For thirteen months. In prison camp, in Europe, and finally back in the United States.

T: How long did that trip back to the prison camp take? Was that a one day deal or longer?

L: It was overnight. It was kind of harrowing, because it was by train and it was fording this stream where Allies had knocked out the bridge. So the trains were coming up to where the bridge was one way and came up to the same stream on the

other side. They were sitting ducks for Allied strafing. In fact, it wasn't a Red Cross car they could see. It was pretty harrowing. It might have been strafed. I'd rather be at least trying to get back to the prison camp, which turned out to be the case. I was returned to prison camp. Sometime in, I think, either the latter part of March or the very first part of April. It was about a month or six weeks before World War II ended.

T: So you spent the last four to six weeks, approximately, in XVIII-A.

L: Yes. Back to the same prison camp. What was interesting, while I was still in the hospital in Bad Hochstein I was visited one day by a German SS major. He was a dyed in the wool Nazi.

T: What was he coming to see you about?

L: I was in the hospital. I don't remember. He was in uniform. I had no idea whether he was a patient or... He wanted to talk to me, because most of the Germans wanted to talk about what I felt was going to happen to them when Germany was faced with surrender. What did I think the Allies were going...everybody in Germany was concerned about that. The best thing to do was to ask a prisoner when he's the only American they had close to them. And I was using my German to tell them.

But this SS officer came in one day and he was a pretty belligerent guy. And the conversation went something like this. He said, your propaganda is the world's best propaganda. And I couldn't figure out...everybody knows the German propaganda is better than anything else. He says, nein, nein, nein, nein. We're talking basically in German. He said, your president, President Roosevelt, has you all believing that Russia is your ally. I said yes, Russia is our ally. He said, no, Russia is your enemy. He said to me you will be at war with Russia—this was 1945—you will be at war with Russia in five years. And I just laughed at him. This guy is making propaganda. So it was a standoff between his attitude and my attitude.

And he said, and you, he called me *schwarzer Amerikaner*, black American, he says, they've got you buffaloed—or something to that effect. In German. And I said, what are you talking about. He said, you, *schwarzer Amerikaner*, you volunteered to fight for a country that lynches your people. I had never heard that before in my life. And I listened to his words... It went through my mind when he said you volunteered to become a military airman. To be in the Air Force to fight for your country, and yet they lynch your people. And that hit me like a bomb. He was absolutely right. Black people were being lynched, in America.

T: You mean you hadn't thought about that before, Mr. Smith?

L: I never thought about that. I'd heard about it. I was aware of lynchings and all that stuff, but it never crossed my mind that against that background, you still volunteered. Which I did. I couldn't tell him, you're absolutely right. I said to him, nein, nein, nein, nein, you're all wrong. It was kind of like a standoff. I wasn't going

to admit it. He was trying to say, you dummy, you haven't even got sense enough not to volunteer to fight for a country that lynches your people.

So he left the room that day and it just blew me out of my mind. I said, he's right. I never thought about it in that context. I wouldn't just volunteer to go out and do something with a group or nation that was against me. I'm trying to be an American. I'm trying to be the best I can. Of course, I volunteered because I thought it was the best thing I could possibly do. In World War II time, the 1940s, it was the best thing. It was the only real good, honorable thing that black people could actually do to be measured along with everybody else. And so he was right. But I felt this guy was going to come back. He's going to lay this out on me, and he's telling the truth. How can I deny this?

And he did come back the next day, and I pretended like that conversation was yesterday. He came right back to it and he said, you *schwarzer Amerikaner*, you volunteered to fight for a country that lynches your people. I almost said, so do you. Because you lynch German Jews. You kill them. You do the same thing that you're accusing America of. Furthermore, I'm doing it for a reason. I'm doing it to make my country better. The only country I have is my home. I was trying to make this case. I was doing the best I could for myself. I wouldn't expect to be somebody else do anything better for me. So why not do it for my homeland? It's my home and I'm fighting for it. But it was kind of like a standoff.

But that actually happened. And that was an experience I lived with the rest of my life. This guy telling me, you dummy. You volunteered to fight for a country that lynches your people. And he was absolutely right. I'm glad that I did, and I've lived a rewarding life as a result. But that was an experience that I had.

(2, A, 226)

T: That's very interesting, Mr. Smith, that really, he got you to thinking, and yet you couldn't admit he was right.

L: I had never given that any thought whatsoever. Now it actually happened to many, many black Americans in World War II.

T: As a black American in that hospital—I take it you were the only black American in that hospital.

L: I was the only one in that particular prison camp and hospital.

T: Did you have other people, other Germans come up to you and talk to you about, because you were black? Let's face it, for them you were something different to look at.

L: Yes. And many had never seen black people. Black Americans. It was the first experience. But in general, it was never a conversation topic.

T: Did you get the impression they were kind of looking at you but not talking about that?

L: They were curious, but in conversations I had with Germans, usually military. There were obviously German nurses and technicians of some kind in prison camp or in the Luftwaffe hospital. It was more about the situation, the war situation.

T: Is that civilians as well as military people there?

L: Yes.

T: And was it a lot of the rumors that you were talking about?

L: Always. They had their versions. We'd have ours. In prison camp, just like the movie—I've forgotten the name of it. The movie they had years ago about prisoners, prison camps in Germany. We had clandestine radios that in prison camp would monitor BBC which broadcast every day. We'd monitor without the Germans knowing about it. I think they were aware of it, but we'd hear where the fighting situation was, what was going on. That's how we kept in touch with what was going on in the war situation. The Germans would try to confiscate that sort of thing if they could. In general, we talked about the situation rather than...as I said, after Roosevelt died there was great concern by all Germans as to what was going to be their disposition, how the Allies were going to treat Germans with a new president, President Truman.

T: The Germans you came into contact with, in sum, sounds like they were concerned or worried really, about what was going to happen to them.

L: Their destiny was of great concern. Because they pretty much figured they were losing the war. They were going to have some accommodations as a result of some armistice agreement with President Roosevelt. He was trying to encourage them to surrender, with certain conditions. And they thought this was going to be pretty much worked out through Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander in Europe. But when he died, when Roosevelt died, they had no idea what to expect under the new president, Harry Truman.

T: The last six weeks of the war you were back in XVIII-A. What were the conditions like by that time, and what was the mood?

L: You're asking another very interesting question. As the war wound down, there was a great concern by the Allies outside the prison camp as to what was going to be the welfare of the prisoners in the prison camps with certain uncontrolled German renegade people that would try to capture prison camps and hold the prisoners hostage. You understand what I just said?

(2, A, 282)

T: I absolutely do.

L: This was a major concern. I don't know how it developed. The way that we learned about it, and it's interesting that you have that background as a historian and a writer about prisoners of war. Inside there was a plan developed that the prison complement, Germans, would place a sheet, a bed sheet, in the middle of the prison compound. In the center of the compound. Each day, all day, there would be both RAF as well as the US Air Force fighter planes circling and patrolling the prison camp. When they saw the bed sheet there, that meant everything was fine. They would circle and patrol this prison camp all day long during daylight hours and at night they wanted to see that bed sheet taken down inside before the last patrol left for the night. They'd want to see that bed sheet brought out in the morning the next day. If there was any disruption of this procedure, they were going to send paratroopers in to take over the prison camp.

T: And this information was known to you and the other prisoners.

L: Yes. We were aware of it. I don't remember how the communication went, but we got these things. So they would roll me out on this stretcher gurney every day and I would watch these patrols of Spitfire [single engine fighter plane], Royal Air Force Spitfires and Hurricanes [single engine fighter plane], and P-38 Lightnings and P-51 Mustangs [both US single engine fighter planes] circling and they would do this every day all day long, patrolling this camp, Stalag XVIII-A, and this was the way to make sure that the camp was safe.

T: And the Germans inside were okay with this?

L: The Germans inside were protecting the camp for the prisoners, to keep these renegades from taking over and holding the prisoners hostage.

T: So this putting of these bed sheets, that was okay with the Germans as well.

L: They are the ones that were doing it.

T: I see now.

L: Yes. And it was their way of cooperating to make sure the prison camp was being safeguarded. The instruction was, if that bed sheet was not in that disposition of being placed out at daylight and then taken down at dusk, they were going to bring paratroopers in to invade and rescue the prisoners in the prison camp.

T: That is an interesting story.

L: Now something else happened. A couple other things I will mention. About two days before World War II ended and there was very little flying going on because the

war pretty much ended. A B-24 [Liberator, US four engine heavy] bomber I saw coming in over the mountain range, and I thought it was just some guys up getting some flight time before going back home. I saw this bomber was heading toward the prison camp. I thought they all know the prison camp was there, because Spittal was also a junction, rail junction for the electric lines going into Switzerland going west, and the steam rail going east going into Austria, Vienna. It was the main line between Switzerland and Vienna, Austria. At this rail junction it was a secondary target. So if bombers could not go to their target areas, they would drop their bombs on this junction line. In Spittal. Spittal was a very small town. In Austria. The junction was maybe just a couple miles from the prison camp. So when bombers couldn't make their target they would drop their bombs on Spittal junction, and frequently those bombs were very close to the prison camp. That made a real Christian out of me. Because those bombs would come down. Some were close. I thought this was going to be it. Nevertheless, the proximity of the camp and the rail junction line made it a frequent target for bombers that couldn't take their bombs to the primary target. What happened was that this bomber that was approaching the camp came directly at the camp, and the reaction that went through my mind was this particular B-24 American bomber was in the control of Germans and they were going to bomb the prison camp.

(2, A, 368)

T: So this fear of renegade Germans was all around the camp.

L: Yes, it was. Of course, we were paranoid. We didn't know what was going on. If something was going to happen at the end of the war or something like that. So I saw it was almost like a hostile move of this bomber approaching the prison camp, and it kept coming lower and lower and lower. It was a single B-24 American bomber. Approaching this prison camp a day or two—about 7 or 8 May of 1945. It went through my mind, the Germans are going to bomb the prison camp with this American bomber, because that's the only thing that was flying, was American bombers. All the Germans were on the ground or blown up or something. It came closer and closer, and came lower and lower, and as it approached the field I could see, actually see, the bomb bays opening. The bomb bays are sliding open. I said, oh, my God, can't something be done about this? And the plane came down lower and lower...

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 388.

L: I saw the bomber. It was fifty, sixty feet. It was less than one hundred feet above the ground heading toward the camp, the compound. And nobody was doing anything. There wasn't anybody around or anything like that. And I thought, here the war's going to be over and I'm going to be killed after all. So I saw these objects coming out of the bomb bay. I thought it was bombs. Then what happened was the camp guards came out, pushed my gurney into a building—

T: Because you're still immobile.

L: Yes. I was on a stretcher. I was just out sunning. It was May 1945. A day or two before the war was over. And what these objects were...and they had parachutes on them. These were medical supplies to give to the prisoners to get them ready to be liberated. This was an American bomber dropping in by parachute, by bomber—there wasn't any place to land in around the camp. They were bringing these medical supplies so they could get these prisoners ready to move out. And I thought we were going to be bombed. Of course, when they dropped them with these parachutes, these medical canisters, they came crashing down on the ground. They didn't want anything to strike me. So they pulled me into the building. I could hear it hitting buildings and the ground. But that's what they were used for.

The other final incident I want to give you about the experience of being a prisoner of war is the day that we were liberated. I think it was by the American 8th Army. I'm not sure about that. It could have been the British 8th Army that liberated the prison camp.

T: Literally came right into your camp?

L: Came into the camp. They liberated the camp. It was a military force. Infantry force. They had a medical doctor. They had prisoners. There were eight thousand prisoners in the camp. Many of them were wounded and injured. The doctor was there to interrogate those that needed medical attention to make sure that they had attention both before they left and were given accommodations on the way out. The doctor's duty was to get an assessment of the medical condition of each of the prisoners that needed medical attention. So the doctor had a little field table he set up on the middle of the compound. The prisoners were being interrogated by the doctor and the doctor had an aide, a female, and I thought she was just a medical aide.

So both were sitting at this little card table, field table. The doctor was interrogating the prisoners that needed medical attention. So it came to my turn. They rolled me up on this gurney and said "Hi, Lieutenant." And I said, "Hi." And how are you? I said, "Great. The war is going to be over." "We're going to have you guys home as soon as we can." After the small talk was over he started asking me specific questions about my physical condition. Every time he would ask me a question I would answer the question to the best of my ability. The aide would repeat the answer that I gave him and he would write down whatever he wanted to jot down in his notebook about my situation. After a while it began to get to me. Why is he asking me the question? I would answer the question and then the aide would repeat the answer that I gave and he would respond to whatever the aide would say, the young woman, whatever she would say. And the doctor was aware of what was going through my mind. He looked over at me, patted me on the shoulder and said, "That's all right, Lieutenant." The aide was an interpreter. All my answers were in German. I could not speak English.

(2, B, 424)

T: Is that right? That's interesting.

L: Now wait a minute. You've been talking to prisoners of war.

T: Yes. More than sixty interviews.

L: Have you heard that one before?

T: No. I've heard of people who said they picked up languages. Some people can do that easier than others. And some men said by the time they left the Pacific they could speak Japanese, or understand it pretty well. But I haven't had someone tell me what you just did, that they spoke it like that.

L: In the prison camp, German was the pretty much language that we spoke. It was the language of the camp because the camp was big. It was about eight thousand prisoners from all over the world. From India, Australia, Canada, United States, France, England, South America, and Russia. The common language was German. So pretty much as a matter of protocol, everybody spoke German. And so by the time the war was over, it was easier and kind of like the function of the language was the German language. So in casual conversation and anything else was German. We weren't speaking our own language because our own languages were several. One South African native who spoke seven different languages. Most phenomenal person in the camp. He was a native South African. He could speak almost any language of any of the languages in the camp. He was the most unusual young man.

T: You met some interesting people there in camp, didn't you?

L: Yes.

T: Did you meet anyone else in either the hospital, but especially XVIII-A, anyone else from your own unit?

L: Nobody from my unit. There was no other black Americans in the prison camp where I was.

T: So no other members of your unit.

L: I was off the main line of the air flight because of where I was captured. I was really trying to get back from Hungary. Most of the targets were either Austria, or Ploesti oil fields, or Munich in Germany, and camps in and around there we lost a lot of people. Not so many of the escort pilots, but the bomber crews. Along those routes to the target. But the camp that I was in was just a big prisoner of war camp. It was in southeast Austria, where it was located. Spittal.

T: It's in southwest Austria, yes. Tell me, the war is over. How soon before you were able to leave the camp?

L: I left, I think, about the second day. Because of the deterioration of my physical situation. As I said, I weighed about seventy pounds. I was in real bad health. Real bad physical shape. I was in a fused body cast. So I was liberated by ambulance. I had to stop overnight at a hospital every night. They transported me from Austria down south through Italy to Rome. I think it was a couple nights in field hospitals and eventually to Rome, where I stayed two or three days. Then eventually on the second or third day to Naples, Italy, where I awaited a hospital ship to be transported back to the States. I didn't get back to the States [until], I think it was sometime in July.

T: Did you sail from Naples then?

L: I sailed from Naples.

T: How soon were you able to get word back to your family back in the States that you were alive and okay?

L: I think there were accommodations for me to write to my parents and say I was liberated from prison camp on 8 or 9 May of 1945. I had no idea how long it was going to take to get back home. That was before the days of computer emails and that sort of thing.

T: It sure was.

L: It was just the postal service.

(2, B, 466)

T: So you couldn't really tell them when to expect you back.

L: I think I received letters from home while a prisoner of war on a couple of occasions in the seven months.

T: So your folks knew before you were released that you were still alive.

L: They were aware, because my brother, my younger brother, was assigned to the 15th Air Force Bomber Command, and he was functioning as a chemist. His job was to test the soil at the bomber bases for the quality of the ground to be used for runway bases.

T: So on the very day you went down, in a sense, your brother had the news and your folks would have it pretty soon after that.

L: Yes. Soon thereafter. Even though the telegraph operator came to the house, my home in Des Moines, Iowa, with the telegraph message: "Missing in action." That was the formality.

T: Really, in a sense, your folks were fortunate to have the news before that telegram arrived.

L: I'm not sure about when it arrived or when they heard. But since I was seen in the trees and I was not aware of the circumstances with my wingman, who as I said was shot down by the Germans—while I was in the tree they shot him down out of his airplane. After I went down, German officers came to me and said, your comrade was not so lucky. What do you mean? He said, your comrade, your flying comrade. He said, we got his airplane but didn't get him. And I couldn't understand what they were talking about. But obviously he came to me. He was trying to land the airplane to pick me up to fly back, fly me back to our base. And they said, we got the airplane, which meant his airplane crashed. They got his airplane, but they didn't get him. So what went through my mind from October of '44 until the war was over, my wingman was killed trying to rescue me. So I had that on my mind.

T: Was he actually killed, Mr. Smith?

L: He was not. When I was in Rome in the hospital, one of my squadron mates came to the hospital. The first thing I asked him, what happened to Greene, my wingman? And he looked at me and smiled. I said, "What are you smiling at? What happened to Greene?" And he said, "Smith, I hate to tell you this." I said, "Tell me. What are you talking about? What happened? The Germans told me he was killed." And he said, "The Yugoslavian Partisans picked Greene up right after he crashed, and four days after he crashed he was back at our base. We shipped him back to the States."

T: So he was fortunate enough to get away.

L: Sometime while I was in the hospital in Rome, Colonel Davis, who was our group commander, visited me in the hospital and he said, "Smith, I have several things to tell you. The first thing I want to tell you was that we de-activated your 302nd Fighter Squadron."

T: Let me ask you a question here, about when you got back and saw your folks. You've talked about them getting the news. When you saw your folks, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

L: It was a long time before it really took place, because I was hospitalized. I still was not walking. I was still bedridden when I came back to the States in July of 1945. I was still bedridden until October 1945, a full year from when I went down. Then because my leg was still in two pieces, my hip was still in two pieces, I couldn't heal. I was still totally underweight. So the doctors decided that there was no point in operating to try to fix my right hip, so they might as well send me home to build

up some body strength even though the leg was still in two pieces. They said, "Smith, we're going to send you home for ninety days." I said, "For what?" "You have to get back to normal one way or the other. We can't operate until you're in much better shape than you are." I said, "I can't leave the hospital." "Oh yes you can. We're going to send you away from the hospital." The doctors were saying, you'll do better at home on your own than you will be here being coddled by us because you're not making any progress. This was a year after the injury. So I was able to go home for the first time in October of 1945.

(2, B, 518)

T: How long had been since you'd seen your folks by that time?

L: It had been a couple years, since I went overseas in January of 1944. I think they'd come to visit me. I was in a general hospital in Clinton, Iowa.

T: Big hospital there.

L: General hospital in Clinton, Iowa, down the Mississippi River.

T: When you and your folks first got together, how much did they ask you about your POW experience?

L: I don't think it was really that much in direct ways. There must have been, because there was real concern, and people often ask me another related question—not directly related. What did my folks think about me being an officer in the Air Force? And that caused me some thought, because I couldn't remember.

T: It sounds like from the conversations with your folks, that the topic of being a POW came up in context, but wasn't a real focus of conversation.

L: No. And I think because of the period of time—and I had written about four times to my parents. So they got letters from me when I was a prisoner of war. So I was trying to tell them the best that I could about my physical condition without alarming them. So by the time that I was [returned to the States] the war was over, it was several months after the war was over in May; I was not returned to the States until July. I came home on a hospital ship and was placed in hospitals. A couple hospitals in Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then finally settled in Clinton, Iowa, Schick General Hospital in Clinton. They were pretty much aware that my situation was pretty serious from the standpoint of recovery.

T: It sounds like your medical condition was more of a focus for them than you having been a POW for those months.

L: The fact of the matter is, that because of the problems and complications my right leg is seven inches shorter than my left leg and that has created a permanent disability. So I wear a high lift shoe today. Since the war in 1945.

T: So they were able to repair your leg, but not to get it, certainly, back to the way it was.

L: And that eventually...the doctors at Schick, excellent doctors from the University of Iowa hospital, orthopedic surgeon.

T: I'd like to ask if, after the day you bailed out of your plane, 13 October 1944, and after the war, if you had or have dreams or nightmares about that experience, or anything connected with you POW experience.

L: None. I never dream about that. What happened is that, while I was somewhere either in Stalag XVIII-A or in the hospitals, because of my physical condition I was deeply depressed. I was despondent because I'd gone down on my last mission. I'd written my parents and told them I was coming home soon, didn't know when, but I was ending my tour and returning to the States. Didn't give them anything specific. Then having this happen, and happening on my last mission after having flown two tours of duty and 133 missions. I obviously was feeling sorry for myself, and why did this have to happen to me, and how could this happen to me after all I'd gone through and the things I had accomplished as a combat pilot and have it end like this. Really feeling sorry for myself, until one day it dawned on me that on that Friday the thirteenth of October 1944 I was almost killed four times in the short span of twenty-five or thirty minutes. I was miraculously, my life was saved and spared by only God. It wasn't because of what I did, of what my airplane was able, my parachute was able to do. It was God's doing that I was alive, where hundreds of thousands of men had been killed in that war. Killed daily throughout that war. And my life was spared. And I realized that I had something to be thankful for and to live for. I knew not what, but what I could do in appreciation or gratitude for my life being spared, but I better start working at it and making sure that I showed some acknowledgment that my life was spared.

T: Is it safe to say that that was a life altering experience for you, Mr. Smith?

(2, B, 577)

L: It was. I said that at the beginning. You didn't remember that.

T: Yes. I did, but I'm kind of summarizing to make sure that we get the words right here. Is it going too far to say that there's a Luther Smith that existed before that day and another one that existed after that day?

L: I'm not quite sure of the differences, but there is that. I've had to make at least each day count for being here.

T: Do you think about that? I mean, consciously, now. Making every day count.

L: Yes. I do more so now than I did then. It really didn't cross my mind until I was a prisoner of war. I was just trying to get back and healthy and alive, and then it eventually came to me that my flying days were over and I was going to have to make a transition and a readjustment. Then I had to worry about well, what am I going to do now? My decision was to return to school, finish my education, and at that point in time there were very few black engineers in the United States functioning as engineers. But I had no other previous training. So I decided to finish my engineering education, which I did at the University of Iowa.

T: Was it hard to accept that you weren't going to be a flier anymore?

L: I was permanently grounded. The Air Force told me that. Because of your physical condition and your situation, you are going to be permanently grounded and we're going to retire you from the Air Force. We're going to put you on retirement. You're going to get compensation, financial compensation, for the rest of your life at your grade, as a captain. I've been receiving captain's pay since September of 1947. So I made that adjustment and decided that my life was changing. I was not going back to become a military pilot or an aviator of any kind.

T: Was that hard to accept that finally?

L: The realization you're alive, you're going to have to make an adjustment, you're going to have to change your life—all that took place. In the hospital there wasn't much I could think about other than an adjustment. The attitude that I had, you have a lot to live for, you have a lot to be thankful for. Make the most of what you are and what you can be and don't think trivially about the fact that you are alive. Those had quite an effect and quite an impact on both my attitude and my resolve to make something of myself. Because I had something to be appreciating. Somebody other than myself pulled the ripcord of that parachute.

T: It sounds like you took a real bad experience and turned it into something positive for yourself.

L: That's kind of life. I was going through the process of being a POW and I was pretty miserable, physically and mentally, before this came to my mind. But thinking about the alternative, I'm glad I'm here.

T: Over the years have you found it easy to talk about your POW experience?

L: It's easy. A book I read.

T: Have you always found it easy to do so?

L: Yes. In the beginning it meant nothing. It was just the day to day living of what you are. You hadn't been through this before. Each day was different and new. Very, very few—and you should know this as well as I—veterans really talk much about the war immediately after the war.

T: That's correct.

L: And it was years and years later. Almost like fifty years. World War II didn't come into real significance in the United States until fifty years. It was 1995.

T: That's about right, Mr. Smith.

L: Celebrating the fiftieth anniversary and everybody talked about it. But then we're in the twilight. We're anxious to get the veterans to talk about their experience and what they went through for historical [reasons] and for posterity. Prior to that, personally, I was only trying to make the adjustment in my life from a military background, which was not significant, to an aerospace engineer. I was trying to be something that was current. But now in my latter years, it's been a real privilege to have the opportunity to talk about my experiences. Now I've been able to package it. Now people are eager to hear about it.

T: That's why you're spending time on the phone with me, right?

L: That's right. That's the reason why people like Alex [Col. Alexander Jefferson, another 332nd Fighter Group POW] and others referred you to me.

T: Would you say that had I come to you in 1960 or 1970, you're forty or fifty years old, would you have been able to say yes to an interview like this then as well?

L: It's interesting, because in 1977 the Valley Forge Military Academy, which is only three miles [from] where I live here in Villanova, Pennsylvania, has a big military junior college and college, and every year they have people address the cadets. They have about eight hundred to one thousand cadets in Valley Forge Military Academy. They have very prominent military people like Eisenhower and Alexander Hague and other military people, people from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf Wars. I was approached by the commandant of the academy and asked would I come and speak about my experiences as a World War II combat pilot, and I was trying to compare myself with people like Dwight Eisenhower and Alexander Hague and other distinguished military people and I said, "What do you want me to talk about?" They said just talk about your personal experience. It would be an inspiration to the cadets what you went through, and what crossed my mind was, "I will give them, in the third person, the story about my final flight as a combat pilot on Friday, 13 October 1944."

I related this to the corps of cadets there at Valley Forge and I was told by the commandant, those cadets used to have a difficult time listening and impressed by various dignitaries from the military for twenty-five to thirty minutes. They said

this was the first time they were riveted to your story. They were holding onto their seats and they never took their eyes off of you during your whole dissertation about that final flight that you took on Friday the thirteenth. I thought, I must be interesting. So I told this story. Then they had to be back to tell that story again at Valley Forge ten years later in 1987. The commandant called me and said there's a story here at the academy about your experience as a fighter pilot in World War II. He said, I'm new as the commandant and all the previous students, cadets, are gone. Most of the staff are gone. There's just a very few people that even remember that you were here. Would you be kind enough to come back and tell your story again? And I said, yes, I'd be happy to do it. So I did that in 1977 and did it again in 1987. Then by the time 1995 rolled around, the fiftieth anniversary of World War II, everybody was into that story mode.

T: You're right.

L: Of course now, it's history about World War II and what it meant. Of course, I was a part of the development of the World War II memorial in Washington, D.C.

T: On the record here, I'll thank you very much again, Mr. Smith, for your time here today, for sharing your experiences as a POW.

END OF INTERVIEW