

**Robert C. Jackson**  
**Narrator**

**Michael Aikey**  
**Interviewer**

**Wayne Clarke**  
**Videographer**

**Interviewed on August 8, 2001**  
**Latham, New York**

**RCJ:** ...started, indicated in the introduction there, but my granddaughter noticed the scar on my leg and she said, “What’s that Gramp?” and I said that’s where I was hit when I was a soldier in the battle, and she said, “Oh, you were in a battle?” [Laughs] Nine-year-old honesty. Anyway, she got me started because I have a log which I kept. It’s a daily record of all the time I was in prison camp, so I brought that out to show her, and she said, “But, Gramps, I can’t read it.” Between my writing and fifty-some year-old pencil on very shiny paper, it’s understandable. So, I got the idea, too, it would be good maybe, if I typed this up, so she could read it. So, that’s how it all got started.

**MA:** Well, good for her, good for her.

**RCJ:** But the most interesting aspect has been finding the guys that I was captured with or their surviving relatives. In fact, as late as this past January, I found my closest friend, or found his family—he died in 1971. It’s been an interesting path. Actually, eighteen of us in this building were captured, and there were two killed and all but three of the group were wounded, so we were a mess. So, it’s been a very interesting path. In fact, I saw a couple of these guys, one for the first time in fifty-seven years, just, oh, a month ago. I went to what they call a Tristate 34<sup>th</sup> Division annual reunion. I guess this was their 27<sup>th</sup> or something. And I’d never done one of those before. I haven’t really been a joiner. In fact, I didn’t even know until about a year and a half ago that there was an association, and there’s associations for everything. So, I should have realized it. But it was interesting.

**MA:** But you really spent most of your life after the war—you got married, you had your wife, job, your family.

**RCJ:** That’s the important thing.

**MA:** Now it’s time to ...

**RCJ:** Well, it’s been interesting because there have been a lot of offshoots from writing this and now I’m rethinking it in many ways. The whole idea of all these

other people out there that would be interested in this. Some of them, the surviving family members, their husbands, or fathers, or uncles or whatever, great grandfather in one case, just didn't talk much about the situation, as I guess most of us didn't, and so they really enjoyed this aspect of looking into a bit of their relatives' lives that they didn't have a look-see at before. So that aspect's been really great.

**MA:** Let's see, we're going to... That's half the interview right there. Now we're going to get into the more formal. What I'm going to do, first of all, is just announce who we are and I'm going to start off with where you born, and we'll just take it from there.

**RCJ:** There's a bit of history in that, as to where I was born.

**MA:** Today we're interviewing Mr. Robert C. Jackson at Latham Headquarters. It is August 8, 2001. Michael Aikey, Interviewer. Wayne Clark, Videographer. Mr. Jackson, where were you born?

**RCJ:** Groton, New York; technically West Groton, New York.

**MA:** Where's Groton, New York?

**RCJ:** Well, it's in the central part of the state, if you know where Cortland is?

**MA:** Yes.

**RCJ:** Well, that's the closest large place, and Ithaca is about seventeen miles from there.

**MA:** And you went to school in Groton?

**RCJ:** No, I went to a one room country school on Cobb Street in West Groton. Eight grades in one building.

**MA:** What was that experience like?

**RCJ:** Oh, it was interesting. I actually was boarding on our property and so I walked to school although we didn't have busses, but the one room grade school is a unique experience. Having become an educator, I often reflected on those days when there'd be three in a class, that sort of thing, and you'd all be in the same room with one teacher and the pot-bellied stove in the corner that heated the place, no electricity, no running water. It was the good old days, I guess. But actually, being a kid, I probably didn't appreciate it as much as the experience offered. Because, actually some kids—that was like an ungraded classroom in many ways—and because kids could advance just by listening to other grades above them, and some kids were real smart. That wasn't me, but some kids that are real smart could actually pick up and move ahead without anyone even kind of being aware of it

**MA:** You went through all eight?

**RCJ:** No, I moved to Ithaca, New York after my father died, and started down there in an elementary school and went to junior high there. Then I moved to Morrisville, New York which is up near Syracuse, and I graduated from high school there.

**MA:** What year did you graduate from high school?

**RCJ:** 1943.

**MA:** Where were you... do you remember when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

**RCJ:** Not that day, I don't remember where I was or what I was doing actually.

**MA:** As the war began, you were still in school—did you think about...?

**RCJ:** Yeah, everybody did, of course. I volunteered, but I would have probably been drafted in short order anyway. I finished school in June and then I actually went in in October. And my first active day, I guess, was October 1<sup>st</sup>.

**MA:** And so, you enlisted in Syracuse?

**RCJ:** That's the first really assembly point. They got a group of us together prior to that but then we went by bus to Syracuse and from Syracuse by train to Long Island—Camp Upton.

**MA:** Was this your first time away from home?

**RCJ:** No, basically, but I had done traveling some on my own.

**MA:** What was Camp Upton like?

**RCJ:** Like a lot of other camps. My great career in the army started out with a big bust. I was threatened with court martial the third day I was in the service.

**MA:** How did that all come about?

**RCJ:** Mistaken identity. I had to have a whole chapter on it in the log. But I had my service record at least four times while I was in, I know it was lost and any time that happens and your group shipped out or moved, you wouldn't go, because you had to go through the shots again and you had to get all the paperwork caught up again, and then you'd catch up with your group. This happened to me several times and after a while it got to be a joke. They'd post the orders for people moving and I wouldn't be on it. So, then the guys would start saying, "Well, Jackson take care of the barracks; be nice to the NCO's; we'll see you maybe." So that's the way that went. I know of at least four occasions where my service record was lost and you'd get shots all over again. It wasn't bad because it was just the nuisance of it, because you'd already had them so you didn't react much, but it wasn't much fun.

**MA:** What was basic like for you?

**RCJ:** I don't know. I was a young kid. It was a challenge. I just kind of did what I was supposed to do. Probably the biggest thing about my military so-called career, was that I was just an ordinary guy like thousands of them and I was no different than a whole lot of people in the same boat so that's what was probably... If my career was unique it's because it was like everybody else's.

**MA:** And, after basic, you became an infantryman?

**RCJ:** Yes. Actually, I was classified as a veterinary technician. My stepfather's a veterinarian and I had worked for years with him, and I really liked that, so when you did your MOS classification test, you kind of leaned a certain way and so I came out classified as a veterinary technician which was what I hoped I'd be assigned to do because that's what I wanted to be at that point. Anyway, they didn't need veterinary technicians. They needed foot soldiers. In fact, in prison camp, we had a guy that spoke seven languages—he'd been an interrogator at Ellis Island—here he was carrying a rifle. And he was not a young guy; he was in his thirties. In fact, he shouldn't have been there, technically at that age, but those situations happened. They just needed the cannon fodder.

**MA:** What unit were you assigned to?

**RCJ:** I was in the 34<sup>th</sup> Division, 168<sup>th</sup> Regiment, F Company. It was the first division overseas and landed in Algiers initially and fought their way through Africa and then ended up in Salerno, then Italy.

**MA:** Did you come in as a replacement?

**RCJ:** Yes. I came well in as a replacement.

**MA:** What was it like at that point to come in as a replacement in the platoon and the company?

**RCJ:** Well first of all, all of a sudden, shells were bursting where previously there had just been trucks backfiring—that kind of noise—except when you were training you'd go through some of that. I can remember joining a company; we'd joined them in a vineyard, these guys were dug in and there were rows of grapevines all around us. At first, you're ducking on the outgoing as well as the incoming, because you don't even know the difference at that point and pretty soon you learn. I was well received; those guys were always glad to see more help. You were welcomed no matter what you looked like or what you were. It was a common thing just to be glad to have help

**MA:** What was your squad like?

**RCJ:** We had a good squad and we had an outstanding company commander who was Hawaiian by nationality and a great leader. He'd been with the company a long, long time. Our lieutenant that was captured when I was in the platoon—the lieutenant was really a nice guy, he was almost as young as the rest

of us. And in fact, his widow, I have been in correspondence with; he just died four years ago. I should have started my story sooner and search.

**MA:** What was your job in the squad? Just a regular...?

**RCJ:** Just a rifle guy. I carried a radio and I also occasionally was the first scout which nobody... Well, I had a friend that liked that, but most people don't care to be first scout.

**MA:** What does first scout do?

**RCJ:** He's out there ahead of everybody, he's leading the whole squad, platoon, whatever it is. He's first man out. Quite often you'd use a first and second scout and they'd work together. You know, night patrols, it's scary, to say the least.

**MA:** What kind of equipment were you carrying?

**RCJ:** This buddy of mine used to carry a Tommy gun because most of the time he would be first scout. And he's the one that I just found the family in January. But the rest of us would carry... I could have had a Tommy gun because I had the radio part-time— it's a small radio, not the big backpack, although I hauled that a couple of times, too. But usually it was like what you'd call a walkie talkie. That was on the squad level; each squad would have one of those. Otherwise, I liked the M1 and I didn't want to give it up.

**MA:** Equipment pretty good in general?

**RCJ:** Excellent. By the time I got in, they weren't using broomsticks for drills anymore and the Enfield rifle had been phased out, too. I handled one of those two times, but never really seriously trained with one because we were issued M1's.

**MA:** Did your training prepare you at all for...?

**RCJ:** Well you know, I'm amazed, of course I went in in fairly good shape right out of high school, not like the shape I'm in now. But, I really did get conditioned because I remember sleeping on a bivouac one night where water froze in our canteens, not hard, just crystallite. It was that cold and yet, you'd sleep through that even though you were miserable and I didn't end up with a cold or anything like I think I seemed to when I got to be a civilian.

**MA:** So, you plopped in a vineyard in Italy. Do you remember your first impressions?

**RCJ:** Well, I didn't know whether to duck or stand; that was kind of embarrassing after you realized, "Hey, that was outgoing, not incoming," stuff like that. But you got acquainted with your squad right away. It's not a social gathering because you stay spread out because of the conditions, but eventually as you spend more and more time and are challenged more and more, you get to know the other people in the squad pretty well. The group we were captured with

was kind of a mixed bag because it had been a miserable, cold, rainy day and night previously, and we had captured this house and barn which is a common unit, so a lot of guys came up. We had a water source there too. A lot of guys came up to check us out, as they say, when actually it was to get out of the weather mostly. So, we had a mixed bag, not just our squad from the platoon. As I summarized in the book, I hadn't really realized it until I started putting this together—hey, a whole hell of a lot of these guys that I didn't even really know before. So that's the way it went.

**MA:** What was your first experience in combat like?

**RCJ:** Scary. In fact, I think every experience in combat was scary. Anybody who says they weren't scared, or that sort of thing, I'd have to question their sanity or their honesty, one of the two. Because you know, your life's in danger. Hey, if you don't care about life, you could look at it that way. But, I don't remember the first instance; I know it was shortly after I joined the company that we were on an attack again, and that's when you were exposed more, when you were moving.

**MA:** So, you were mainly on the offensive?

**RCJ:** Yes. Our company was, we were at that point, on the east coast, no excuse me, west coast of Italy, not inland very far, and that attack took us north up until finally, with only one break, took us up to within sight of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, on that side, then we were pulled back to a kind of resort area on the coast. That was a week or so and in that some of us got special training and supposedly volunteered, but it was, "You and you and you," and I got tabbed for heavy demolition work and learned to set pole charges—fun stuff—[unclear] torpedoes and that kind of fun thing. Then, thank God, I never had a chance to use it after that. Well anyway, then they pulled us back and we went in to the central part of Italy and they took us on trucks up to near Florence and from there we attacked north and I was captured about eight miles or so, I'm not sure, south of Bologna in the mountains. In fact, we had fought so much in the mountains, I didn't know there was any level place in Italy at all. Although beyond where I was captured, beyond Bologna, there's a Po Valley, prior you know to the northern part of Italy. So, all in all, it was an interesting experience.

**MA:** Take us through the day you were captured. You said it was raining.

**RCJ:** Yes, it was a dawn attack. In fact, we assembled and started moving out before daylight and as we approached this small town—I don't even know the name of it—on the left and above the town on a ridge was a farmhouse and so our squad was designated to clear the farmhouse and then the company orders, as I recall from my log, had been to secure the town and the high ground in front of it, and that was supposed to be that day's assignment. Of course, those marching orders, as we call them, always sounded so simple and so easy. But anyway, we finally cleared the farmhouse and set up our post and started checking. Part of this farmhouse roof had been blown off prior to our even being there. It was still

raining and misting and the fog and stuff was still around, so it was hard to see. We noticed some activity on our right front, and we didn't know what it was, and so we contacted our company which was a couple of hundred yards or more behind us, and so they said they'd try to find out. This went on and finally, they partly started using mortars on us, so we had to pull our outpost people in because they had a couple of direct hits out there. So, our lieutenant sent me back to... We were having some communications problems—our radios weren't working too well under the geographic conditions like that. So, he sent me back and told me, and he called back for a heavy fifty-caliber tripod-mounted water-cooled machine gun, and so I brought that group back up with me and we also dragged up a wire unit, which is like a telephone line, so if we had any problems we had direct wire contact which is always more secure and more dependable. Well, this was, as I said, early in the morning and by the time I went back it was maybe mid-morning or somewhere around there and while I was gone they established that it was Germans out front, not some other company because it wasn't unusual for a company to flank you and you're not being aware that they're friends instead of enemies, and these were definitely not friends. So, we had called artillery way deep because you don't want short rounds to fall on yourself, so you start deep and bring them back. We started that and then they started shelling us. It was almost like a game. If we didn't call for artillery, we didn't get shelled, but it was like retaliation almost. It's crazy, war's a stupid thing anyway. Those situations where, "If you fire at me, I'll fire at you; if you don't fire at me I don't fire at you," you just wouldn't think could exist but it did. So anyway, this went on. We had a lot of casualties off and on. We ended up with two being killed right there in the house, and others outside, but this game, so-called, went on up until late afternoon. And then we couldn't figure out why our company wasn't sending up reserves and giving us a little more help, but we kept going, we kept covering our firing lines and all of a sudden, we couldn't hear the fifty-caliber machine gun. A water-cooled fifty-caliber machine gun sounds different than a regular machine gun, and we didn't hear it. So, somebody checked because we had put these guys on the second story and they had a good field of fire because that side of the house had been blown off. The gun was still there but no men; so, they had gone somewhere, anyway. We had lost the sound power we'd got off the wire phone—it had either been cut or hit by a shell or something, so we had lost that so we had no contact with our company. Our little handy-talkies were useless. We had two of them and couldn't get either one to work, so we didn't know what was going on with the company and so the lieutenant was just about to assemble us to go out through the back and go back to company, but we found out we were surrounded. There were troops between us and our company. So, we had a firefight for quite a while. They finally got us with what they call German rifle grenades. They're bigger than a fifty-caliber shell but they fit on the end of a rifle and they're very accurate and they were popping those through the windows and doors. They're not highly damaging in terms of explosive power but there's a lot of shrapnel and of course if you get hit with one, it would do you in well. Anyway, those things were hitting in there pretty regularly and we were

getting cut up pretty bad. So finally, we had a medic—later I discovered, he had seven major wounds. I don't know how he was still alive. All of a sudden, he started crawling out trying to raise one arm, calling, "Comrade, comrade," and they didn't shoot him. Somebody had stuck a pair of long johns out of a window on the end of a shovel handle and they shot it off. We didn't expect they were going to allow us to surrender, but they didn't shoot him. So pretty soon everybody was piling out of there. Later on, some of the guys claimed, "I didn't want to surrender, I wanted to continue to fight." Well, B.S., that was all I could say to them.

**MA:** So how many were left in the platoon at that point?

**RCJ:** Sixteen alive that were captured, two were killed [unclear] and all but three, maybe four, but I think it was three, were wounded of that group. Some seriously, some minor. Mine was minor, in fact I didn't even know I was wounded until I went through a stream later on because everybody looked like they were wounded because of other people's blood. You'd check each other, you'd help each other and stuff like that. We looked a mess although you might not even be wounded and still looked pretty bad.

**MA:** What was your initial impression, you finally decided...

**RCJ:** We finally decided... it was just spontaneous. I don't think anybody said, "Let's surrender." There was talk about it but no one, until a medic went out and didn't get shot—I think that was a clue—then we all dropped our cartridge belts, put down our rifles and went out [puts hands over head].

**MA:** What was the initial reception?

**RCJ:** Very good. We didn't know if we wouldn't be shot right there and you weren't sure of that even after you got outside. The first guy that searched me—I had left my backpack and everything in the house which had my camera in it. I'm a photographer. It wouldn't have done any good because they would have taken it anyway, but I wished I had the film or had sent it back before. But anyway, I didn't. They searched us, and the first guy, as I started to say, searched me and I had six packs or five packs of gum in my pocket. He took one and handed me back the rest. Well, that was the last time that happened. The next guy that searched me, he took everything. But those guys were soldiers and they knew we were and we found in prison camp the same thing was true. When we got a guard that had been on the front lines, and we did sometimes because they were home on recuperation leave or something, those guys really treated us well, with respect and no abuse and everything like that. Whereas the further back we got with the rear echelon, the less respect we got and more crap happened.

**MA:** So, you were captured by regular Wehrmacht infantry?

**RCJ:** Yes. I obviously don't know what particular unit, but as we were walking back, a really funny thing—no one laughed but it really was, as I reflect on it—a German stuck his head up out of a foxhole and said to me like he was another one



of us, “The shoe’s on the other foot now, isn’t, it?” and slang terms like that, in English. He’d probably been in the States somewhere and maybe lived there, who knows? But interesting... I realized as we were moving back why our company probably didn’t counterattack. German strength there was unreal and there were pillboxes and we knew there was at least one because a shell had knocked off the hay that had covered it. It was a heavily fortified area. I had a friend that I had trained with all through basic training. His name was Robert C. Jenger, mine was Robert C. Jackson, bunks next to each other. He was captured about five and half or six months after I was. They had moved about a mile from where I was captured. They had dug in and been in that area all winter. I’ve heard all kind of stories as to why, lack of supplies, lack of troops, wanted to hold the Germans, didn’t want to break through and then have the Germans pull their forces back and consolidate them. They wanted to keep as many Germans tied up there as possible. You know, I’m just a GI, I don’t know from anything. They were there all winter in those mountain ranges.

**MA:** Now they marched you back to where?

**RCJ:** We went back to just an aid station which...Actually we had grabbed both our medics’ kits which were small units, and we had better supplies in those kits than they had in those aid stations so we were patching up everybody. They took, at that point, the most severely wounded and put them on trucks. We had one guy that had a really bad wound on his leg and he didn’t tell anybody, didn’t tell the Germans because he didn’t want to get on those trucks. He didn’t know where they were going. But they did take those people, we all hoped, to a hospital. I have no way of knowing because there are three people I haven’t been able to find on my search.

**MA:** Treatment was pretty good?

**RCJ:** Yes, up to that point. We were being hustled, we were being shelled by our own fire, you know, and we were carrying, because so many were hurt, everybody that could was helping somebody else, and every time a shell would come, you’d hit the dirt and the poor wounded people would take the abuse again, but they went down too. They knew they had to. It was muddy and it was slippery. It was a bad situation. We walked about six miles, estimating, before we got to a point where we were able to sit down and get some water to drink and kind of get organized and so forth. And eventually we ended up, I can’t remember the town now. They had an assembly point. We were in a couple of buildings and kept overnight until we got to this assembly point. From there they had assembled other nationalities, we met some Aussies there, and then we were put on a train at that point and eventually taken to Germany.

**MA:** Had you been interrogated at all up to this point?

**RCJ:** Yes, the first night.

**MA:** What was that like?

**RCJ:** Well it was threatening. It was a table like this one and a Luger laying on the corner of it and a guard at the door and you're sitting there in a straight chair, and they ask you your name, and you tell them your name, rank and serial number and you try to play the role, but it's pretty easy to say, "Don't tell them anything." But I recited all that in there [points to his book], that's another chapter, "Interrogation". But it was intimidating, there's no two ways about it. Course, we hadn't had any sleep and we'd been physically under stress for a long time so that adds all to the mix.

**MA:** So, you were taken to Germany?

**RCJ:** Boxcars. So many in a boxcar you couldn't all sit down at once, let alone lie down. No one could lie down. So, you took turns. Under those conditions it's amazing. People really worked pretty well together. That was a three-day hell because we didn't get anything for twenty-nine hours, and whenever there'd be a raid on the rail lines we'd be shuttled to the side and just sweat it out in those boxcars. We had that happen to us later on as we were taken into Munich to work on the railroads and stuff. You always hoped you were in a town where at least you might get into a shelter. So that's kind of scary because they were bombing the railyards; obviously they were a main target. And they had no way of knowing whether it was POWs in those cars or what.

**MA:** Your first impression of the first prison camp you were in?

**RCJ:** Oh, it was a huge one. Stalag VII-A near Munich, actually about 32 kilometers north of Munich in a small town called Moosburg. It was one of the largest camps in Germany, if not the largest. They figured when we were liberated, there were 80,000 in camp and there had been more than that processed through there. They were on what they called commandos. They would be out in other areas, farms, small towns where they had some industry and they would be working in those places. Some were on individual commandos. They were assigned to a farmer and they worked there. A fellow I met after we were liberated and had been out and he had had high school German. He spoke German like a German because he had been with this family and he had this high school background in some basic things, but he picked it up real fast. They didn't speak English, so the language was German and he became quite fluent in it.

**MA:** What type of housing did you have in the camp?

**RCJ:** Well, it varied within the camp, but basically long buildings with a center area that had, usually, two water faucets and there were about two hundred men on each side and there were three tier bunks. They were just made out of 2x4's and 2x6's and some had slats like bed slats and you had a bag of excelsior, like gunny sack material, and others had just wire which was about 6 inches each way; your hips would fit right into that sometimes. Originally, they issued two

blankets and that was it. The excelsior of course got loaded with bedbugs and lice. The big difficulty—if you were cold and uncomfortable, the bedbugs and lice weren't so bad— but the minute you got warmed up and comfortable, they got active, so sometimes it was a real battle. If you were on a lower bunk, which I was for a while, I remember going to the bathroom one night sixteen times. The cold damp of the bottom bunk, it really had a bad effect on my kidneys. But they were three high, two wide and two tiers deep. We called them tiers. They had a whole series of these down one side and then they had a room where the person in charge of the barracks was, and then they had an open kind of area with a couple of tables and half a dozen or maybe a dozen—I'm not sure—stools, and then more bunks and had just some light bulbs hanging, bare bulbs, Course, there were not many in the whole room, but there were about four hundred men in each of these buildings.

**MA:** How were the buildings organized?

**RCJ:** We were all kept in nationalities, in other words, Russians had their compound, Aussies had theirs. There were hundreds of nationalities there; it boggles your mind. Indian, there was an Indian compound. You could get around camp from compound to compound by driving by gate guards, and it varied because gate guards are like anybody else, there's good and there's bad, there's tough and not-so-tough, so sometimes it cost you more cigarettes than another time.

Changes tape.

**MA:** You were just describing the organization of the barracks. They were organized by nationalities, but was there a hierarchy within?

**RCJ:** Well, there was always a barracks commander—that could be a person who wasn't an officer necessarily. The officers were segregated from us, but I had a couple of friends that were officers that had traded identities with GIs because the officers weren't allowed to leave camp for any reason, whereas we were sent on work details on a daily basis. One of my friends who was called Ace Langberg—he was kind of an adventuresome sort of guy and he would go out just to make plans to escape and in fact, he tried to escape four times. And another person, Tony, did escape and I have never been able to find him, but he did escape. At least Ace told me Tony had escaped because I did see Ace after the war. Generally, officers were kept in another section of camp. Mostly the people in Stalag VII-A initially were foot soldiers and such. Air corps were kept in air corps prison camps, but as the war squeezed from the east and allies from the other direction, they kept moving these people out of those camps and because we were in the southern part of Germany, the last part of Germany to be captured, we got so big you couldn't get in the latrine at the end. It was just horrendous. We had tents and we had people sleeping outdoors—course it was the spring of the year so it wasn't too bad. We had one of the coldest winters, I've

since heard, in Germany the year I was prisoner that they ever had. In fact, I had frosted feet and a lot of other people...

**MA:** What was the daily routine?

**RCJ:** The daily routine, if you're on work, you'd get up at 5:00 or 4:30 or somewhere around there. They'd roust you out, they'd come and bang on the doors and open the doors and tell us to get out, and if we didn't and you delayed too much, they sent the dogs in. That emptied the barracks in a hurry. Out the windows and every place. But we would eat breakfast, what little we had, they'd usually bring in—it's called an ersatz tea, but the only thing good about it was that it was warm and lots of times, after we'd eat, somebody'd wash their feet in it. It wasn't that good and then you'd leave and you'd march to the train station, five abreast, everything the Germans marched in five, and the joke was they could count because it's how many fingers they had on one hand, and stuff like that. Anyway, we would get in these box cars and go to Munich or sometimes the other direction to Landshut, which is a smaller place that was further north. Both rail centers, Munich being the larger, of course. That's mainly what we did. Sometimes we worked on civilian areas clearing debris out so they could get the streets cleared. You could take a couple of thousand guys and each one picks up a rock, that's a couple of thousand rocks, and it's a matter of mass rather than skill and so forth. But we would go in and our object was always to make it look like we were doing more than we did. It was more for our self-satisfaction. I'm sure we didn't have one iota of effect on the war effort. One day we were cleaning out a bunker that had been partially collapsed and so it was underground. So, we were shoveling this stuff up these steps and we had kind of a chain gang, and when the guards weren't looking we were shoving it back down. One day we were on a railroad thing. Germans don't drive their spikes, they screw them in with a big hand [unclear]. I happened to be in a switching area where there was a whole lot of tracks and I spent all my working day on four spikes—screw them in and screw them out—and they didn't notice. I moved about that far [spreads hands about one foot apart] and [unclear]. Made me feel really good, but how much good it did... That sort of thing. There were good parts of being worked. It broke up the monotony and you got a chance sometimes to trade for civilian bread or other things and also steal anything you could.

**MA:** What did you have to trade with?

**RCJ:** Cigarettes primarily, soap sometimes. Cigarettes were the big barter item, and American cigarettes were more valued than the British cigarettes or the German cigarettes.

**MA:** Where were you getting the cigarettes from?

**RCJ:** They would come in parcels. We got what they called Red Cross parcels, a carton about so square [gestures with hands] and we were supposed to get a parcel a week—that's the Geneva understanding. Usually it was one to six men,

that was the most common, sometimes it was one to three. We got a Christmas parcel once and that was one to two and that was great and that was a little special. In fact, I don't think for the American parcels, they had American, Canadian, about five countries, I can't think of the other ones. It was American, Canadian, British, well it's not important, but there were five countries that I know that supplied parcels. Now maybe some of the other compounds got different ones, I'm sure they did. But if I hadn't had the items that were in that, I don't think I'd be here because I weighed under one hundred pounds when I was liberated. So, you know, without those parcels I'm sure I would have gone away like some people did just from malnutrition. I used to trade cigarettes for vitamins. Used to put C tablets because of the citrus need and I used to trade cigarettes and they'd say, "Here's crazy Jackson." I'd get more tablets than I could use because when they heard Jackson was giving away cigarettes for C tablets, that was crazy. And I didn't smoke initially. I didn't start smoking until just maybe a month or two before I was liberated and I limited it to three cigarettes a day. And the market fluctuated. At one time, two or three cigarettes would buy a loaf of civilian bread. But later on, I remember a pack would get you a loaf of bread. That's the way it would go. Food was very critical. The amount of food they gave us was very limited. You got some boiled potatoes, but not every day; once in a while you'd get a piece of sausage, but the mainstay was the military bread. It was about so square [gestures 6"x 6"] and you'd get a slab about like that [gestures by spreading thumb and forefinger] and you'd get that usually every day, but not always, and the difference in the taste of the military loaf and the civilian bread was like night and day. In fact, the military loaf made me sick initially. Somebody said, "Well, sawdust is tough on your insides." And I've got a formula in there, it's a joke, but I've got a formula in there for the military loaf—how it's made.

**MA:** Was there much interaction with civilians?

**RCJ:** Well, we did trade. I had a very interesting experience with a blond one time. I had a couple of tea bags and I had a bar of soap, and I'm trying to trade with this blond for bread—she had bread in an open sack—and I'm struggling with the language and she's letting me go on and grinning, and I'm wondering, "Why's she laughing at me?" and finally she says, "Why don't you speak English?" She was a London gal who had married a German just before the war. Except for a little accent, she was speaking English really well. That sort of thing went on. But I did end up getting bread.

**MA:** Were there any recreational opportunities in the camp?

**RCJ:** No, I guess early on, I know Ace—Ace was shot down in Africa flying for the British, so he'd been in the war a long time, and of course the officer's thing was a little better than common GIs. He said they even had access to a small library when he was first in prison, and they had a kind of gymnasium that they worked out in. They had in our camp, it was never used, like a recreation center. All it

was was a room that had a stage like this, but I never saw it used. I don't know. They never had any plays in there or anything that I know. They had some bands that were GIs and where they got the instruments, I don't know, but somebody, the Red Cross or somebody got them. But they would have these band sessions. They would just be in a barracks in one of the areas or they would be, if it was warm enough, outdoors sometimes.

**MA:** What was the relationship between the prisoners, was it cooperative, or every man for himself?

**RCJ:** Yes, you're all in the same boat. You don't trust anybody. We had food stolen while we were on work detail. You always tried to manage so somebody in your tier didn't go. They were sick legitimately or otherwise, and that was mainly to draw water because we had two taps and if you waited to do it at night, you'd never get water. So, they would draw water during the day and kind of keep an eye on your gear. So that was kind of a routine, and desperate people do desperate things and the true nature of individuals comes out in situations like that and true natures are always not good. [Unclear]

**MA:** What's your general opinion of your fellow man after your experience there?

**RCJ:** I used to really upset people because when I got back I was a small-town big hero, but people would ask me, "What are the Germans like?" Well I said, "They're just like you and me." People had heard the propaganda and just couldn't believe it. I saw Germans that were no different than us. We were sometimes confined in the same air raid shelter as the Germans while American bombers were dropping bombs on their homes from above. I saw Germans react real negatively and I saw other ones defending us, so you get the whole gamut. The day I was liberated or, not the day, but soon after, I actually collapsed with the fever I had, and two of my friends took me to a German home and this mother and her daughter were taking care of me like they were my mother and sister, bathing my head with a cold washcloth and really concerned. It can go anywhere and I think that's universally true and I have felt this way all during our so-called Cold War. I don't think the Russian people are any different than we are. We've got a hierarchy that's no better than their hierarchy. I think people universally... I'm a photographer now and I've traveled—I've been to Africa three times and I've spent time with people all over the world, different nationalities, and I find that universally we're pretty much the same.

**MA:** Now tell us about liberation. Did you have a sense?

**RCJ:** We knew. We were pretty much in tune with the war. We had some radios, which were of course not legal. And we had the German propaganda; we used to get written releases from the Germans on a regular basis. And we used to be able to hear BBC. Well, the BBC broadcasts were for Europeans and Germans and so forth and they really weren't a news agency so much, and so their

propaganda was loaded, the German's was loaded, and we'd come to a compromise in the middle and that was about right. But we knew from towns—when they talked about town—we knew that they were favoring the Allies because there was big concern during the [unclear] because the towns reverse [unclear]. But generally, we knew pretty much what was going on. We could actually hear the shelling, and the bombing raids we could hear a lot further than the shelling, but we knew things were coming to an end. The day, it was a Sunday—I had a lot of things happen on Sunday, I got captured on a Sunday, this started before that, but I got captured on a Sunday, I was liberated on a Sunday, our first big attack was of course on Sunday, stuff like that. But, the day we were liberated, we were liberated by Patton's outfit, the 3rd Army, and in fact there was a lot of shelling, rifle fire and stuff coming inside the camp, and you were saying, "I'm this close, don't let it happen now," so we're all keeping our head down pretty much. Eventually a tank burst near the front gate and we of course went crazy, out in the streets, shouting. The guys could hardly move the tank through the area. There was only one main gate through this whole camp, all the entrances and exits were made at that point but the third day, I think it was May 1<sup>st</sup>, Patton came in in a jeep, pearl handled pistol, shiny hat, dressed and all. I think he was a soldier's soldier. In fact, if they hadn't cut his gasoline ration, we probably never would have had a divided Berlin and I think the war would have been shortened in other areas, too. But I guess they held him in tow by not issuing him gasoline.

**MA:** Logistically how did it work being liberated? A tank comes in the front gate, what happens now?

**RCJ:** Well, a lot of guys ran out of camp. I guess the surrounding area was loaded with ex-prisoners-of-war. But then the Americans put actually more guards around us than the Germans had. Actually, we would have been a nuisance, would have slowed up the traffic and everything, and people could have been killed. There was a lot of guys that did some pretty bad things in town, I guess, after that point, but they tried to confine it. Several of us went out of camp later. It was even possible to get out even with the additional American troops because those guys weren't unfriendly. They kind of closed one eye when we went past them. They didn't want a lot of us on the highways creating other problems, I'm sure.

**MA:** Food start coming quickly?

**RCJ:** Fairly quickly. I remember the day I had my first slice of white bread and stuff like that. We had nothing fancy, it was still GI rations, but boy that was so much better than any meal. The day we got out of camp, we went to an artillery unit that was set up and they fed us and then all of us got sick. We couldn't handle the food. Stupid—we knew it and yet we did it. And they loaded us down with stuff we took back to the camp. I imagine this was happening all...

**MA:** When did they start processing you out of the camp?

**RCJ:** Well, of course, it was hurry up and wait, which is a common occurrence in the service. I can't remember the day sequence, but we were all ready to go, you know. I had been feeling not-so-hot but they were taking units out each day. We knew that. If it wasn't your unit, you were really disappointed because you went out as a group. Finally, our turn came and they trucked us to Landshut which is a town north of [unclear] where they had just a small airport, it wasn't even paved or anything. That was when I passed out and they took me to the German house and some guys came and got me and took me to a field hospital. This field hospital was set up right near the runway and these were just tents with roll-up sides. We saw a sight that I'll never forget and that was much of the Germans surrendering that had access to airplanes—junker planes, fighter planes, anything that would fly that they could get their hands on. They'd load all their families that they could into them and then they landed there and it was so chaotic because all these planes were trying to land but sometimes they crashed into each other. So, the Americans were controlling their landing by firing machine guns on them so they couldn't land until it was organized enough to do it safely. So, we saw dozens of planes come in. The orderlies in our tent rolled up the side curtains and here we are, looking right out at this. I never thought, "That could have been crazy dangerous," because we were close enough that if a plane veered off one hundred yards, it'd come right into our tent. But we were so excited watching this.

**MA:** Now these were mainly the people who wanted to be captured by the Americans as opposed to Russians?

**RCJ:** They were coming from....

**MA:** Higher levels?

**RCJ:** All kinds, I couldn't tell you. See, these planes land and the doors would open and they'd start coming out, all kinds of people, kids, women, men, whatever. So, they were evidently loading up all their friends that they could and were taking off from some army airfield in the east somewhere and coming and surrendering to the Americans.

**MA:** When did you leave this camp?

**RCJ:** I was flown out within a day, I think it was the next day because they were trying to fly us out. This had been an area where they had assembled people who were wounded or whatever. They were flying them out on C47 stretcher planes. These were 47s that had been converted to stretchers. And they couldn't take off because of these German planes coming in. So, finally that got straightened around so the next morning I flew out on a 47. They flew me to a hospital in France, near Reims. They couldn't find out what was wrong with me. They thought I had malaria. And I didn't test positive for malaria. But I ended up, they found I had African sand fly fever which is kind of like malaria, but doesn't have



the same reoccurrence. So, once they discovered that... Some smart doctor finally asked me, "Where have you been, what countries have you been to?" and I said "Well," and I told him, "I landed in Africa." I saw lights in his eyes and the next day they had me diagnosed and then treated and I got over it in a hurry. Anyway, I went from... There they gave me my own travel papers and I traveled from near Reims to LaHavre where they had what they called Lucky Strike disembarkation, kind of a collective center. And from there people mostly shipped out. They didn't fly out, they shipped out. Some got slow ships back to the states, I got a seven-dayer; I was lucky.

**MA:** Was there anything in particular that you wanted to do which you had been thinking about for a long time once you got out of the prison camp?

**RCJ:** Eat [Laughs]. No, I was of course anxious to see my family and I had been engaged just before I went overseas and I hadn't seen my fiancée. In fact, April 29<sup>th</sup> I think was the day we were liberated and I think it was the 26<sup>th</sup> or somewhere around that time I got my first letters from her. She had written every day. So, that was good and I hadn't.... In fact, I didn't know she moved. I was going to pull a big surprise. We landed in New York, of course, and I think we were taken to New Jersey, and then eventually were allowed to go home from there. So, I was going to pull a big surprise and appear. I got to Syracuse like 5:30 in the morning, went to where she used to live and knocked on the door and the landlady came. It was kind of dubious, she opened the door and this scroungy looking guy and finally she recognized my voice and let me in. Turns out Irene had moved [laughs] so the joke was on me as a surprise. But she insisted I had breakfast, because I looked kind of skinny, and then she insisted on driving me across town where Irene had moved. So that was a surprise to her.

**MA:** During your time as a prisoner-of-war, did you ever consider escaping or that just wasn't practical?

**RCJ:** I was in the escape unit—I mean I helped to organize. I had no second language. Even if you had a second language in something else, French or Spanish, it didn't have to be German, it was a big help, but a single-language-speaking person seldom got very far even with clothes and some... Our documentation wasn't [unclear] we couldn't do as good a job as they did, but some of the stuff we did was fairly good, but it was usually from an authentic document that we doctored up. We didn't have cameras and that kind of stuff. But I had a map, in fact I have it with me, that we used to do tracings. It was an old, old map but it had a lot of detail on it and except for maybe the size of towns and some newer roads, it was very reliable. So, we used to use that for tracings for people making legitimate escapes. The rules of the camp—there was organization and it wasn't written and posted like you find it in a regular place, but there were rules. If you wanted to escape and you were legitimately honest about it, then the escape unit would help you, get you maps, get you some concentrated types of food, stuff you could carry without being bulky, that sort of

thing. But if you're just doing it for a lark, and some guys did, the escape committee wouldn't work with you. So, that was kind of in there. I have an idea the same thing went on in the British compound and the Canadian compound and so forth.

**MA:** Many people try?

**RCJ:** Quite a few, I think.

**MA:** What was the success rate?

**RCJ:** Not high. I only know of one person who truly escaped. I think he was from Yonkers. Tony. He was the one who traded identity with a noncom. But, I've always said, I had no complaints and that's the way I feel about it.

**MA:** Looking back at your service experience, any general thoughts to sum it up?

**RCJ:** I would not make a good soldier today, because it's too much political. WWII, and I can't speak for any other, who was your enemy you knew, and you knew where you stood, and rules of war were kind of somewhat followed, if there is any such thing. But subsequent battles and non-wars that we've had are so ill-defined that I would find it hard to do. So, I understand, I didn't initially, I remember one-time I was kind of a hawk in terms of discussing this because this became a big issue at our church and I remember I was sitting in sessions with our ministers and they were both on the other side of the issues. Now I find myself on that same side. I changed that way.

**MA:** Now, you got home. What's the first thing you did when you got home?

**RCJ:** I decided I did want to go to college, but it was the wrong time to start because I was discharged in November. I possibly could have picked up in January, but I wasn't sure where I was going to go at first and so finally I decided I would go and I decided I wanted to be a veterinarian. But I couldn't get into vet college at that point, so I went into a major as a health and physical education person because the basic programs have a lot of science and general ed, so that's what I started and after two years I applied to Cornell for veterinary medicine but didn't make it.

**MA:** Where did you go to school first?

**RCJ:** Brockport. In fact, that's where I ended up graduating from. Ended up being a teacher administrator for thirty years. I have no regrets on that either.

**MA:** Do you know any people who went to Samson?

**RCJ:** Yes, personally I knew some people. It was, of course, a base here in New York State. In fact, some of the Samson barracks ended up on the college campuses as housing units.

**MA:** You have something to show us?

**RCJ:** Sure, if you want to see it.

**MA:** Sure, I'd love to.

**RCJ:** This is the old map I talked about, the tracings, and it really is an old-timer. 1801.

**MA:** That's marvelous. Where did you find the map?

**RCJ:** In a house and we liberated it, but it really is old and it's on cloth backing. [Displays map]

**MA:** That's marvelous.

**RCJ:** But we used this for tracings.

**MA:** What did you keep your log book on?

**RCJ:** Oh, they were distributed; I don't know how many. I never saw another one but there could have been more. They were distributed at camp through the YMCA, the National YMCA, through Geneva, Switzerland.

**MA:** An actual log book?

**RCJ:** Yes, in fact that's what its entitled.

**MA:** Because we have in our collection a fellow's log diary, and it's on the back of cigarette wrappers.

**RCJ:** Well, I wrote on anything and everything until I got this book. [Unclear] [Displays poster board with photos and other memorabilia] This is of course my great basic training experience.

**MA:** Fort McClellan?

**MA:** Yes, here I am on KP. This is the notice of my missing in action, MIA, and this is the actual document of my being a prisoner [unclear] and that's my engagement picture with Irene and this is the 34<sup>th</sup> Division—this flag goes with that—and this is a lot of the letters I wrote to her, my GI dog tags, and a couple of things are missing because they're out because I used them in the book. There's my German dog tags and that's where the map was. This is an aerial photo of the POW camp taken April 9, '45. There's our engagement picture again. This is a letter I wrote to her. This is the type of form you could use. Here is the type of form they could use to write to me. Also, you could use, regular, and this is another form and this is another.

**MA:** You did write on everything.

**RCJ:** Yes.

**MA:** Very nice.

**RCJ:** We were limited in how many we could get, so you didn't waste them. This is a map of prison camps in Germany and actually also in Czechoslovakia and Russia.

**MA:** You were where?

**RCJ:** Stalag VII-A was down in the southern part, points to map. There's Moosburg. This is a photocopy of a honey spread we got in a Christmas parcel produced in Groton, New York where I was born. There's the one room school I talked about. That's our farm home there.

**MA:** Nice.

**RCJ:** I had spoken to the Groton Historical Society and of course this thing hit me so I had made these up. Some of it's changed.

**MA:** So, you got your first letter when?

**RCJ:** Oh, just before, in April.

**MA:** Marvelous grouping.

**RCJ:** This is the 34<sup>th</sup> Division.

[Displays picture and article entitled, "Champion Hard-Luck Division" by Milton Lehman.] You'd think I had more combat line time than any other division. Was not a great thing to be known for.

**MA:** Well, thank you, sir.

**RCJ:** You're welcome.