

**Dante C. DiPietra
Veteran**

**Arnold Gelin, interviewer
Gary Ford, videographer**

**Interviewed on May 21, 2004
At the Rome Free Academy High School
Rome NY**

Q: (on camera for his self-intro) Good Morning, my name is Arnold Gelin and my Camera person is Gary Ford. We are here at Rome Free Academy on May 21, 2004 to interview Mr. Dante DiPietra who was in the U.S. Army Air Force and he is a Vet from World War Two. (Now off camera...) Can you please state your full name, and what service you were connected with?

DD: My name is Dante C. DiPietra, and I was born on November 8, 1922 and I was with the Rome Army Air Force. At that time, the Air Force was not a part as its own entity. It was in 1947 that it became the US Air Force. I was a Ball Turret Gunner on a B-17 (Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, heavy bomber plane).

I got shot down on my fourth mission. Our target was Aushesphebein (?) and we shot down thirty airplanes on that particular day. I bailed out, I was with my Radioman. The two of us were in the Waist of the aircraft. I asked him, "Joe, do you have your D-Ring (parachute hardware clipped onto ejector) in your hand? Then go ahead." He said, "No, after you." We went back and forth saying that, then I pushed him out. And shortly after that, I jumped out. I looked over and saw we had a fire in the radio room. The Number One engine of the aircraft itself had a runaway prop (propeller malfunction) because the prop was hit by flack (metal debris) and that sheered the hub of the propeller from the hub of the engine. So it was just windmilling (spinning with no effect). Engine Number Two was on fire. Engine Number Three was feathered which means the blade was just cutting into the wind and cut off.

The only power we had was from the one remaining engine, so the Pilot rang the Bailout Bell. They were up front, the Pilot, the Co-Pilot, the Bombardier, the Navigator, and the Engineer in the forward part of the plane. The Tail Gunner had his own exit in the tail of the aircraft. The Right and Left Waist Gunners had already bailed so it was just Joe Bennett, the Radioman (@3:08 spelling?) and myself who were left in the Waist area. This was where we exchanged pleasantries so to speak. (Dante smiles)

Well, I looked back into the front part of the airplane and saw the radio room on fire and I jumped. To me, it seemed as I felt the parachute didn't open up soon enough. So I reached down and opened the flap and started pulling the parachute out. I had a chest pack. I was falling head first, on my back. When the chute opened, it tended to bend me in half backwards and I let out a big grunt!

A short time later, there was a fighter plane circling me. I thought he waved to me, so I waved back. He had the guns, I didn't. (Laughter) I landed in a three-foot bank of snow. I was loose

for about four hours and while I was loose, there was a lumberjack who came up the hill with a double-bladed ax who was looking for me and yelling "Comrade, Comrade!"

I took my parachute and buried it in the snow. Then I put my arms under my armpits and buried my head under a brown bush because my flight suit was the same color as the bush. He came within arms' length, that close to me and kept walking down the hill still yelling "Comrade!" I stayed there for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he came back up the hill, but I did not see him after that. I had to get up and stretch because I was in that position for an hour or so. I put my foot into the bush and then I followed his footprints up the hill. I did not want to make any fresh footprints so I followed him up the hill and wound up sitting on a log. I was getting my bearings and trying to figure out what I was going to do next. While I was sitting there, I turned around and there was a Stormtrooper (German specialist soldier) He had a rifle and a side arm and he went like this... (Dante signals with his hand to come closer).

He marched me down to the bottom of the hill to a lumberjack's cabin. There was a group of men sitting there, and I saw the man that had come right by me. They offered me a cup of coffee. I did not have anything to eat since three o'clock that morning, and it was now about four in the afternoon. The coffee they gave me was black, no cream or sugar. But I found out later it was oak-bark coffee. It was warm and liquid, this was all I wanted. So I drank that.

Then the Stormtrooper asked me about my "uber" which is the German word for parachute. I said "no, no." Then he picked up a gun and threw it in a chamber and asked again "Where is the parachute?" So I told him and we marched back up the hill with the lumberjack. Then I pointed to his footprints and where I was hidden in the bush and I laughed. I was trying to make this a funny situation rather than a serious one. Then they caught on and the three of us were all laughing. I picked up my parachute and started to walk back down the hill. But I was struggling with the nylon material which was slippery and falling apart. The lumberjack took off his belt and wrapped it around the parachute. He had a walking stick that he stuck into the belt, put it over my shoulder and we went down the hill.

I was there for a while, then they took me to a railroad station which was nearby. People were coming out of work and getting onto the station. There were a few young girls nearby looking and pointing at me and so on. I winked at one and Oh! That was the biggest thing on earth that happened to them. (Dante laughs) Here I was, what they called a "terrifier". They were given propaganda that Americans flew over to bomb hospitals, cemeteries, churches and stuff like that.

Anyway, they had found a letter that had my Waist Gunner's name on it. We were told the only thing you take with you was your dog tags, no other identification than your dog tags. If we were going into France then we would bring our 45s with us. But being that we were going into Germany, we were told to leave the 45s behind. If we got caught by the Underground in France, you could turn over the weapons to them. There were six dead Germans because they knew how to use the guns.

So the only thing I had were my dog tags around my neck. But Bob Livingston (@10:05 spelling?) took that letter with him, which was crazy. He should never have done that. They asked me if I knew this fellow, I told them "Nix, I don't know him".

Anyway they put us on this work train, and we went to the town of Nordhausen, which was a German base. We were put in a sub-cellar and lo and behold there were the rest of my crew in that sub-cellar. Of course I acted like I didn't know them. One guy was ready to wave, but I shook my head "No." So that was it, we were all strangers. While we were there they gave us some dehydrated onion soup. Where I was brought up, you sit at the table and my father would say "You eat what is on the table", and that was it. So this could not be poison as far as I was concerned and I ate the soup. My Bombardier said "I don't want to eat that stuff! Do you want it?" So I ate his and mine both.

We got to the railroad station to be taken to a solitary confinement camp for interrogation. But he passed out at the railroad station so one of the fellows had malted milk tablets which were very rich. We put one or two in his mouth and believe it or not he came to and was well enough to walk. He was brought to a different part of the camp. This was in Frankfurt, Germany, it was called Dulag Luft. There, we were interrogated by German officers. They asked me questions, but the only thing I said was I would give them my name, rank, and serial number, that's all I am going to give you. They said I was "this and that." and quizzed me along. I said I was a fighter pilot, I did a lot of exaggerating.

Q: Was their English that good?

DD: Oh yes, very good. So they put me in this room all by myself. There was an electric heater and the walls were knotty pine. To keep myself busy I counted all the knots in the walls. I don't remember how many there were. I found a wire clip and I took the heater apart and then put it back together again just to keep busy. They had taken my shoes. Then they took me into see the Commandant sitting at his desk who wore a bunch of medals. I looked under the desk and saw he had his feet in straw booties to keep them warm. He asked me my name, I told him my name, rank, and serial number. He was reading from a paper and said "You did not finish high school. And your sister went to this high school. You did not have all of your phase training." You see, we needed to get three phases of training before we were sent into combat. I had finished two and a half, but they needed a crew member so they picked me and pulled me out of the class.

I come to find out the Germans had infiltrators at Headquarters in London who had contacts in America that gave him all my information that he had in front of him. He asked me if that information was right, I told him again I would only give him my name, rank, and serial number. He told me I was being insolent, but I told him this is all the information I was going to give him. He asked me how I would like to spend three more weeks in solitary. I answered him that I was ready. With that, he barked an order for a German guard to come in and take me back to my room.

The next morning we all shipped out in these 40&8 boxcars. Those held either forty men, or eight horses. But there were about fifty or sixty guys in there with no facilities of any type. We went through the city of Nuremberg, Germany. I don't know if you have ever seen this big wide building which had a big swastika in the middle of a German wreath. It was a beautiful building, I tell you. They stopped at this railroad yard and opened the door to let some air into the boxcar. One of the fellows jumped out and he relieved himself right outside the door. There were people standing by, but he did not care about it. He got back into the car, people

were laughing and pointing at him and so on and so forth.

We were taken to Stalag 17 where I was assigned for sixteen months. They ran the clippers through my hair and took it all off. They took all my clothes and put them through a delousing tank which had cyanide gas in it. I had cigarettes in my pocket. In the meantime, we had to take a shower.

You figure there were about three or four hundred naked men, no towels. No windows, it was January or February. It was just a bunch of sweaty bodies standing around. After a couple of hours, they gave us back our clothing and we got dressed. I had a piece of silk parachute panel that I used for a hat. I put it over my head, and it was warm believe me! I can see why women's legs don't get cold because of the nylon material. (laughs)

Then they walked us into the trucks, we got into the trucks and wound up in our barracks. I was in Barracks 19. There was 19-A and 19-B, which was the back end of the barracks. Our chain of command was a Group Leader. There were about eight groups in each end of the barracks. Then there was a Barracks Chief who was in charge of 19-A and another Barracks Chief over 19-B. Every so often the Group Leaders would meet with the Barracks Chiefs and try to get things evened out. So the chain of command was the Group Leader, the Barracks Chief, and then you had the Compound Chief. Also, there was what we used to call "The White House". We had three different Compounds and the Compound Chiefs used to meet at "The White House" with the Camp Leader. He was like the President. The Compound Chiefs used to meet with the German high command to iron out different problems that we had in camp.

The funny thing was we ran the elections just like we would with the Democratic Party, the Independent Party, all that kind of stuff. Then you had guys campaigning for one another and the Germans could not figure out what was going on. Finally, we explained that this is the way we run our government in the United States. We elect our own President, Congressmen, Assemblymen and so on. Then we had a vote and each guy would root for who they liked. Every once in a while someone would come into the barracks and vote for the guy who would say "I promise you this and that." (laughs)

Q: These were all enlisted men? The Officers were in a separate compound?

DD: Yes, the Officers were in a separate camp far from us, about four hundred miles away. We were all Non-coms, Corporals and up. I was a Buck Sargent, I had three stripes. The PFCs (Private First Class) were asked if they wanted to volunteer to work at the Officers camp. We would call them "dog robbers" (valets) who would polish shoes, iron clothes, and do laundry for the Officers and so on. In all of this, we would get paid what was called "Lager marks". With these, we would submit all our pay to the Camp Commander. He would appoint people to go downtown to bargain for things that we wanted.

On Sundays, we would get barley and raisins in our parcel to have for breakfast. We used to get a Red Cross parcel once a week. In it was a vitamin-D bar which was about that size (Dante makes a rectangle shape with his hands) that had six squares. A vitamin-D bar went for three packs of cigarettes. Everybody got six packs of cigarettes in their parcel, some were unheard of brand names, I can't think of any of those names, but we also did have Lucky Strikes, Chesterfield, Phillip Morris, all those brands which were donated to the Red Cross. A can of

powered milk would go for about nine packs of cigarettes. The powdered milk was put out by Klim (milk spelled backwards) and other companies I can't think of, but this was what we used along with powdered coffee.

After the war, powdered coffee was selling like somebody just discovered America. But powdered coffee was old hat to us, brand names like G. Washington, Beech-Nut and all of that. If you got invited to another barracks by one of your buddies, you had to bring your own brew. So we had to bring a can with powdered coffee and milk. He would supply the water. (laughs)

Now the Germans used to give us at one time, a quarter of a loaf of bread. It was German rye bread that if you let it sit for one day, it would be hard as a rock. As time went on, and things got scarce it went down in portion to an eighth of a loaf. We would use the milk can covers and punch nail holes in them, turn them over and use the cover as a grater. We would grate the bread, season it with bouillon cubes to make a gravy for our mashed potatoes. (laughs) The way we made mashed potatoes was we would boil them down until the water was almost gone. What was left was almost pure starch. I'm telling you!

We also used to get cans of corned beef that we gave to the cooks. We had our own cooks in the Mess Hall, they were all volunteers. The cooks would mash up the corned beef and mix it up with mashed potatoes which was a good, hearty meal! We also had SPAM (canned spiced ham) and the way we cooked our SPAM was to cut a cone out of the top. Then we got a small can of strawberry preserves and put it into the hollow part, put the cone back in and put it in the oven. Anyway, this was all food to us and this is the way we ate. Some of the guys would not eat.

But the main thing was, we kept our resistance up. The English YMCA would send us music, instruments and sporting equipment like baseball bats, gloves and balls. We set up our own basketball court. In the gym, we made our own weights and lifted them. In other words, we kept as fit as we could you know? My normal weight was one seventy five, but I dropped down to about one forty. But I was like a washboard here (Dante points to his abdomen muscles), I had no fat at all. We ran, lifted weights and the muscles we made, we stretched by playing basketball and so on.

Some of the fellows tried to escape through a tunnel. They dug a tunnel under our barracks. There was the open area where you could walk around, then you had the warning wire which was ten feet from the main fence. The main fence was a double fence and in between the fences, which were barbed wire about ten feet high, there were tin cans. So if you did manage to get over one of the fences and walked through the tin cans it would be as noisy as the dickens, you never made it over the second fence. There were German guard towers at each end. If we played ball, and the ball went inside that warning wire, we would have to get a striped jacket, put it on, and get both guards' attention to let them know you wanted to go get the ball inside the fence. They would wave an OK sign. We would run in, get that ball, and come out.

Anyway, they managed to dig a tunnel one time that got part of the way to the warning wire. The Germans found out about it and made some of the fellows go in there and cover the

tunnel up. They would dig dirt outside while one man was deep inside the tunnel. He would pull a cardboard box into the tunnel, fill it and the guy outside would pull out the box, dump it to be filled again. I was in the tunnel, talk about being claustrophobic! It was unbelievable. You had to put the dirt down and pack it in and every once in a while a German guard would check to see if you had packed it tight. I did three refill trips in the tunnel.

Q: How did the Germans find out about that tunnel?

DD: Oh, they would have what we called “moles”. These guys would put on coveralls and climb down underneath the barracks. This was how they found out about the tunnels. We used to say “There goes a mole, watch him!” Anyway, we covered that tunnel up. Another place, across the road from us which we called the “old timers” the German’s found a tunnel. What they did then, was flood it and in time it caved in. You could see above ground where it had been. One fellow did manage to get out and the German guards went wild and started shooting. Some shots went into the barracks, one guy was lying on his bunk and he got shot in the leg. They took him to the hospital and fixed him up.

One of the stories that was in The Stars and Stripes (military newspaper) was about a fellow who was flying a mission and got hit by flack and his arm got blown off. What the Officers did was pull off the rip cord on his parachute and dumped him overboard. It so happened that the Germans picked him up and took him to the hospital and that was what saved his life. Once he healed, he wound up in our camp. One of the Officers that threw him overboard was grounded for doing such a crazy thing, but later on they found out he was alive in our camp. This fellow was working out with one arm. You should have seen him pull himself up on a chinning bar! He had terrific muscles on that one arm. But the thing was, he lived, he was alive. Afterward, they promoted the Officer for his clear thinking.

Overall, some of the movies you see were supposed to be funny, it was satire. We had one fellow that we smuggled into camp was on his way to Switzerland. We had to hide him somewhere, so we had a latrine at each end of the barracks. They rigged up a boatswain’s chair (device to suspend a person on a rope) so he could be under the floor of the latrine. He was there about four days hanging between the floor and the excrement. It was unbelievable! When he came out, his face was so pale. They gave him some food and fixed him up with an escape kit. They managed to smuggle him out of camp and he did make it to Switzerland. In Switzerland, you were not considered a prisoner. You were considered an internee. We got pictures and letters from fellows who were interned in Switzerland. They were skiing and ice skating and having a wonderful time. Uncle Sam paid for all of this. These fellows knew the language and got by.

Q: Speaking of language, we were talking before about your fluency in Italian. How did that work into any of the experiences that you had?

DD: In one experience, in our camp, we had nineteen thousand men. We had forty-five hundred Americans in three different compounds. They had Serbs, Poles, Czechs, Aussies, some from Italy, Greeks, Turks, we had all languages. They were all in separate compounds. Once in a while, they would bring in a group of Italians to work in our camp. I wound up talking Italian to these fellows. While I grew up, my father said “In the house you speak Italian.” Well, at the time I did not particularly like that idea. But I am glad now that I know another language. I could read and write it and so on. I would converse with these fellows in

Italian.

There was a point when the Germans were getting closer to us. You could hear their guns going off and shells bursting. So the German high command gave orders to the German Commandant to line us all up and shoot us, or march us towards the American lines. The Commandant said when the day of reckoning comes, they were deathly afraid of the Russians. They did not want to be sent to the Russian front.

They marched us in groups of five hundred towards the American lines. While we were on the march, the US Air Force came over and they knew we were on this march. They would fly over us and buzz us. The German guards would scatter and took to the ditches. We were told to take off our hats. It was beautiful to see these P-38s (Lockheed Lightning fighter air crafts) come over and buzz us and wag their wings, it was something!

One time we marched about three days and then given one day to rest. We marched about three hundred kilometers, which is about one hundred and seventy miles. They put us up in this one particular farmer's courtyard. The courtyards were a box shape situation, as you went into the front gate of the box shall we say, on one end were the stalls for the horses. Next to that was the hay loft, next to that coming around the front was where the farmer lived with his family. Then you went around to where the equipment stalls were kept.

He also had chickens running around in the courtyard. We grabbed a chicken one time, squeezed it, and put it under our arm until it would not move anymore. We plucked it clean. I remember my mother plucking chickens, she would dip it in hot water and pull the feathers off it. Well, we did not have any hot water. We just plucked it, cut it open, buried its intestines and feathers in the hay loft and we made a soup. The Invalid Parcels had elbow noodles in it. We had a small milk can, added water to it and boiled the chicken, then threw in the noodles. Well a pound of noodles kept growing and expanding to almost two pounds of noodles! We ate it all, I don't know how we scattered the bones, probably in the hay loft. That soup fed about fifteen guys.

Once when we were on our one day of rest, there were some Italians in German uniforms. I couldn't figure that out. I could hear them speaking Italian to one another. I asked them, how come they were speaking Italian, but dressed in German uniforms? You guys must be traitors. At that time, I did not realize the gravity of what I had said. One guy answered me "No, we were starving. In order for us to eat, we had to join the German Army. We have families." A few days later I thought about what I had said to these guys. I had put my life in my hands and didn't realize it by calling them traitors!

Anyway, we went on and marched towards the American lines. On route, we passed a river and figured now was the time to take a shower/bath. The Germans could not figure out why we always wanted to take baths and showers. Downstream was where we took our showers, on the other end the fellows washed their clothes and above that we would get the drinking water out of the stream. While the guys were getting washed in the water a group of bicycles went by of both men and women. They were watching us taking showers and baths without our clothes. They were pointing down at us and laughing. We did not care. We were clean and that was what was important to us.

We marched on and reached the Inn River which is on the German-Austrian border. They put us up in a big aluminum factory which, of course, was shut down. It was warm in there and away from the elements. We were liberated by Patton's 3rd Army. They were so close you could hear the tanks' guns going off and the projectiles whistling, and the explosions which was good. But in the process of liberating us, the German guarding us were taken prisoner.

This one particular German guard named Sargent Gerlock, I have never forgotten his name, was a high school teacher at one time. He spoke Italian, English, and German of course. Once, at one of our stops, there were four or five of us at the end of the chow line and we did not get any food. So he said, "You come with me to my house." It so happened that he lived in the town of Clam in Austria which has an ancient castle. I saw the castle, it was beautiful.

He pointed to his sidearm and let us know if we tried to run away, he would have to shoot us. He took us to his house, we met his wife and his two little boys. She scrambled some eggs for us and gave us some homemade German rye bread which was delicious. To us it tasted like we were eating desserts! We played with his two sons, had fun, and then he took us back to our group.

After the point of liberation, Patton's 3rd Army left and the 80th Infantry Division came by and took over. They picked one POW man at random and photographed him and took an x-ray of his stomach which had shrunk down to one-third of its normal size. We asked them about three days later where is Patton's 3rd Army? They told us "He's about thirty miles up the road." This was how fast they were going, you know? They took us over the river, which had a big pontoon bridge, and put us on C-47s (Douglas Skytrain transport aircraft) and flew us to La Harve, France to Camp Lucky Strike. They called that a "Ramp Camp" which stood for "Returned Allied Military Personnel".

They fed us plain boiled chicken. I looked at it and thought, boy I could use some salt and pepper, some kind of seasoning. While I was eating, who comes alongside and sits down next to me but General Eisenhower! He sat alongside me and asked "Hi Sargent, how are you doing?" I answered "Fine Sir, but I could use some salt for this chicken." He said "I know, I am eating the same thing you are, but they know what they are doing in the kitchen." (everybody laughs) Anyway, we ate and they took us across the river where they gave us some clean clothes. We were allowed to shower and they gave us a little toilet kit.

Q: Can we go back a second? What did you think of Eisenhower?

DD: Oh! He was a terrific guy. He talked to you just like you and I are talking together. A wonderful person, yeah. The guys asked me, "Did you talk to Eisenhower? What did you talk about?" I said "Yeah, I talked about the food, what else!?" (everybody laughs)

After that we were put aboard transports called C-4 Transports, the name of the ship was (@45:45 name unclear) I never forgotten that, and it was run by a Navy crew plus Merchant Marines. While were coming across the Atlantic, we saw a big iceberg. This Navy man had binoculars and said to me "Here, take a look Sargent." I look at it all the way around and said "Boy, that's a long one." He said, "Yeah, about three miles long." They had a gun on deck, about a three-inch size, and they were shooting at it. They never hit it because it was too far

away. (laughs)

From there we went to Camp Shanks (in Orangeburg, New York @46:40) where they had a regular chow line with regular food. Of course, we were limited to how much we could eat. They had an Italian crew on K.P. (Kitchen Patrol) and they served the food. He gave me some string beans, a very little portion. I told him in Italian "Give me some more." He told me "No, no." I slammed my tray down and said I wanted more and he gave me more. From there we went to Fort Drum (New York) and given a partial payment and from there we went home.

While I was overseas, my folks had bought a house. I used to live in Astoria, which was right across the river from New York City, it was in Queens. They bought a house and wound up in Nassau County, in Floral Park, New York. I did not know where I lived. All I had was just the address. So when I got off the train from the Long Island Railroad, I saw this policeman. I asked the Officer who had on a "Ruptured Duck" pin (an Honorable Discharge lapel pin) if he knew where the address was and he said, "No, I just got out of the Force two weeks ago. I don't know my way around here at all. Go over there and ask that cabbie."

So I went over to the cab driver. He said, "Yeah, I know where that is, get in." To find my house was no problem at all because my mother had put my picture in the window. He said, "Is that you? He said, go ahead buddy, this is on me!" So he gave me a free ride. When I got home, my mother was down in the cellar washing clothes. Then she came upstairs because she heard somebody coming in the front door. Of course, it was the usual shed of tears and so on. I was glad to see her. She said, "Sit down, are you hungry?" It is the first thing an Italian mother would ask! I said Yeah, and she gave me a big plate of spaghetti and meatballs. This was on Tuesday, we usually had spaghetti and meatballs on Sunday. She put that in front of me, I ate two forkfuls and I was full already. She asked "Don't you want anymore?" I said "I can't eat anymore." She said, "Oh my God, what did they do to you?!" Typical mother, you know? (laughs) It took a while for me to get back to my usual diet. I was eating milk, crackers, and broth for the longest time. The heaviest thing I could eat at that time was rice mixed in with a little milk or in soup.

One experience I will never forget though. Our camp was right on top of the hill in Krems, Austria which is about fifteen kilometers Northeast of Vienna. While we were on this death march, we went through Austria. We saw the Danube River, it wasn't blue it was muddy! (laughs) But it was a beautiful country. I will never forget this, we passed by a farm house with a white fence and a gate. There was this woman with a loaf of bread, she knew we were prisoners "*Gefangene*" is what they called it. As we passed by, she was cutting off slices of homemade bread and passing it out to us fellows. I will never forget that as long as I live.

Anyway, the experience taught me an awful lot as far as people. People were good wherever we went. They treated us well. Of course, we were prisoners and they thought being from a different country, it was like we were from outer space or something like that. But they found out we were just as human as they were. Wherever we went, the people treated us nice.

I was a Prisoner of War for sixteen months. Of course, I lost quite a bit of weight while I was there. We did a lot of reading, I learned to play bridge. I used to play violin and mandolin, the fingering is the same on both instruments. We had a ball, we had our own theater. With our

“Lager” marks, we would go downtown and barter for makeup so we could put on our own shows. We would buy colored powder, mix it with water and make our own sets. We had some fellows that were good with electrical work and would lower these cans into water to dim the lights in the theater. We had an orchestra, instruments and music which were BMI, or ASCAP (musical performing rights organizations) arrangements. We had a jazz band.

The German Commandant used to come out and listen to and see our shows. Once in a while we would throw a dig at the Commandant, and he would laugh just like anybody else would. We had a lot of fun. One fellow dressed as a woman and sang like Helen Morgan and her famous song “My Man”. He would lean over the piano in his evening gown with a slit up the side. This guy had legs that wouldn’t quit you know?! (laughs) I’m telling you, the guys were whistling and howling and all that stuff. But it was fun believe me. I met fellows from all over the country, some we used to call hillbillies and rubes. We would joke to the Southern guys to take the marbles out of your mouth when you talk.

Q: Is there anybody in particular that you remember?

DD: Oh yeah, one guy, and I never forgot this, he would sing a song called “*The Letter Edged in Black*”. I don’t know if you are familiar with it? Years ago, when there was a death in the family they would get a letter and the envelope would have a black edge on it. You knew right away it was a death notice. He would sing this song. Another guy sang “*The Earthquake of Santa Barbara*” and I accompanied him on the guitar. This was an old song that went back to the middle of the eighteen hundreds written about when there was a big earthquake in Santa Barbara, California. And another fellow, who had a Southern drawl as thick as could be, sang a song called “*Cowboy Jack*.” Another favorite song loved by everybody was “*The Wabash Cannonball*.” Even the guys from up North learned the words to that Southern song.

The atmosphere in the barracks was mixed. Some were sad, one fellow was worried about losing his teeth because of malnutrition. Another guy, during the night, bailed out of the top bunk and hit his head on the edge of a table and yell “Air raid!” There were all kinds of weird things going on in the barracks. We would kid one another, you know? But it was an experience I will never forget as long as I live. Are there any questions?

Q: When you came back, what major change did you notice immediately? The people around you changed and events, what struck you when you first settled in so to speak?

DD: Well, I realized what family was. That was the first thing. I hadn’t seen my mother and father in such a long time. (Dante gathers his emotions) My sister and I used to fight and argue with one another. When I got back, she was another person and I realized what the relationship was within the family. The friends we had that used to come and visit my father and mother. We would exchange dinners and go to each other’s houses. It got to one point with one family that if we were in church, we would tell them where the key was to the front door. They would go in and start Sunday dinner, my father would have put everything out and she would start the Sunday dinner. Also, the flowers were different, the house was different. It took a different shape, you realize an awful lot.

Q: What did you think of the B-17 airplane?

DD: It was the best, I tell you! We had some airplanes in our outfit, we were The 3rd Bomb Group, and came in on a wing that had a big bomb hole in it. Big enough for three men to

stand inside that hole, and yet we made it back!

Q: What was the name of your plane?

DD: “Man’s Gotta Live!” was the name of our plane. They had a top hat, white scarf and gloves, and a cane. That was our symbol. There were some weird names like, “Calamity Jane” which had a picture of a girl with a short skirt, cowboy boots, a cap and a vest with a gun in each hand. One plane had a naked lady painted on the nose of the plane. They were comical. Some had the amount of missions painted on their fuselage. I was the Ball Turret Gunner underneath the plane. I could not see up, only down and all the way around.

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I used to get letters people would write to me and other prisoners. It would come in a condensed form such as this. (Dante folds up the letter into a POW envelope and holds it to camera. Then he reopens it to show us the handwritten letter) My sister wrote this first and then there is a short note from my father and also my mother. Neither one could write in English, so they told my sister what to write. I do have a letter that my mother wrote to me in Italian.

This is my rogue’s gallery picture (slang for collection of photos of known criminals) they took of us when I first arrived at camp. (Dante holds up two black and white photos holding up a slate of some type) It’s the typical rogue gallery pictures of the front view and the side view of you. This is what I looked like when I went into the service. (Newspaper clipping of head shot of young Dante in uniform.) The article shows I was missing in action.

Q: How did you get those pictures?

DD: (Holding up his prisoner photo) When we were told to march towards the American line, some of the fellows managed to get into the Commandant’s Headquarters and they lifted all these pictures from the files. It took about three or four days to get to me, but most of the fellas who had pictures like this got them back. This is an original picture, by the way.

Q: It is a picture of an American original as well! (laughs)

DD: Oh, here is that letter, I must have folded it up. This is my mother’s handwriting, her name was Serafina. (Camera zooms to the envelope showing Mrs. Serafina DiPietra’s address in Long Island) We see her Italian text beginning with “Mio Amato Dante” which translates to “My loving Dante” it was dated June 21, 1944. Imagine that, sixty years ago?! Almost to the day, isn’t that amazing? She wanted me to write to her in Italian. But I said, “Mom, I don’t know how to write in Italian”. She told me to write it the way it sounds. In other words, phonetically. She said, “I will correct your grammar when I write to you.” Well, she never corrected my letters. She just read them and put them away. I still have some of those. Mom was mad because she had to wait until my sister came home from school to read the letters if they were in English. This was why she wanted me to write to her in Italian. (laughs)

Here is one of the things we made up, a T.S. Certificate.(Dante holds up a sheet of paper with black text stating “Certificate of T.S./ You’ve Had It/Chaplain’s phone number) Once you got

shot down, it was the usual phrase (@1:05:45 initials not explained) and everybody went “aw...” Of course, there were some phrases we used that I would rather not repeat here. (laughter)

The Rotary in Rome, New York honored The Former Prisoners of War. We have a Central New York Chapter here. We meet every quarter, in fact there is a meeting this coming Sunday at the Franklin Hotel. I won't be able to make it because my daughter sings with the Oneida Civic Chorale. She asked if I wanted to go to the dinner, or hear her sing. So, do I have a choice?

The Rotary was honoring me in 1998 with *The Paul Harris Award*. I don't know if you fellows are members of the Rotary Club, but it is an award that not very many people get. (Dante holds up a color photo of himself, an unidentified woman and unidentified Rotary presenter at podium)

I have a letter here from my high school photography teacher, Mr. Scottal (@1:07:16 spelling?)

He used to have a studio in Mt. Vernon (@1:07:25 name of studio unclear). It is dated November 17, 1944. I got shot down on January 11, 1944, which was the early part of the war.

We had fellows in our camp who got shot down in the Schweinfurt Raid, which was in August of 1943. There were some very heavy losses in those raids. The Schweinfurt Raid was in the Ruhr Valley, Germany where there were big, industrial plants such as aircraft, tank factories, armored vehicles factories and so on. This was one of the areas of our targets. Our goal was to knock these plants out. Our target was in Aushesphebein which had an aircraft factory.

Here is the letter my photography teacher sent me. (Dante holds up a typed letter) I am a photo-bug, and he would teach us the different methods of colorizing black and white photos. I still have some of those pictures that I took. One lesson was how to get a picture of an orange, the proper highlights and shadows and so on. It was really something.

I also have a map of the bases in England. Mine is highlighted in yellow, it is the 303rd Bomb Group and I was in the 427th Bomb Squad. (He holds up a layout map titled *Eighth Air Force England 1942-45* Dante's base is farthest West)

Q: What was the name of the base?

DD: Molesworth, (@1:09:50 spelling of base) England which was not too far from Northampton. This was what they called “The Wash” up in here. (Dante points north of his base) It was a B-17 Base, the 41st Bomb Wing. We had four bases in our Wing. Our symbol was a triangle C.

This is our Mission Summary of our particular date. (Dante is reading from a typed sheet) The enemy losses were thirty. This was what they called an “M.E.”, a Maximum Effort Mission, to take out that aircraft factory. We have the listings of the tons of the bombs, we had “five-hundred pounders” and all these different types of things. Our particular Squadron took off, and the enemy's losses that day were thirty, this is that Summary Sheet. I have a thick pile of these from the different missions that we flew. This shows the history of what we did that

particular day. (Dante shows us what he was reading. It is a typed grid of statistics with the heading 303rd BOMBARDMENT GROUP... SECRET MISSION SUMMARY.. Camera zooms in, but too tiny to distinguish clearly) We had eleven losses. There were ten men in each crew, so that was one hundred and ten men which were either shot down or taken prisoner, lost or killed or what have you.

I don't know if I mentioned the fellow that had his arm blown off? He was at our camp. We had all kinds of stories, believe me and that made it interesting. As far as our crew was concerned, there was one man in particular. We had what they called a "303rd Bomb Group Organization, Inc." begun by my Co-pilot (@1:12:35 name spelling?) Fred Rikel, who started out as a mechanic. Then he went to OCS (Officer Candidate School) into pilot training and became a pilot. I hear from him occasionally and we were going to have a reunion in one of the Carolinas. I was all set to go with my wife, but she became sick and we had to cancel. The end result of that illness was her triple-bypass about a year later. That ended our traveling days.

On June 8th, we will have been married for fifty-eight years. We traveled all over – to Hawaii, Italy, Cape Cod, Frisco, Walt Disney World, Los Angeles, and all up and down the Florida Coast staying a few days in Key West, the Southernmost part of the United States. We had our best lobster dinner in Cape Cod! (laughs) We did our share of traveling and I am glad we did. Overall, I keep in touch with my crew members. Our Radio Man, Joe Bennett (@1:14:34 spelling?) passed away, but did stop in to see me when I was living in Rome, NY. At that time, they had the Honor America Days and all the hotel rooms were booked. So he went to Syracuse to stay and came back the next day and looked us up. He passed away in 1999, I was sorry to hear about that. As far as other crew members, Bob Stewart (@1:52:23 spelling?) was a Waist Gunner, he lives in Binghamton. Bob Livingston was from Rochester whose father "Skip" Livingston was a high school principal in Rochester. I did go to see his family as a crew member, brought some flowers to his father who was glad that I had stopped in to see him. I also keep in touch with my Co-pilot once in a while. The Pilot, T.L. Simmons (@1:16:03 spelling?) was from Lillington, North Carolina, he is not too well. Of course, he was older than we were. Leon Hasting (@1:16:15 spelling?) our Tail-gunner, who was about thirty-four when I was twenty-one, now I understand the poor guy is in a nursing home. He was a quiet, soft-spoken guy from Duncan, Oklahoma. In fact, I went to see him one day on my way to Amarillo where I was sent to Aircraft Repair School for high-stress performance planes when that was open. He was glad to see me and invited me to his house for dinner. He had come from a Protestant family, but he asked me to say grace over the meal. Which I was very glad to do so. His wife writes once in a while. That's it. Our Bombardier, Dick Vaughn (@1:17:23 spelling?) lives in Florida with his wife, they never had children. And Bill Clyatt (@1:17:30 spelling?) whose wife just passed away recently, and I correspond with Christmas cards every year and give a brief synopsis of what is going on in our lives.

Overall, I do try to make these visits when I can but I have to have someone stay with my wife. My daughter was nice enough to say recently "Dad, I got a deal for you." I said, "Oh oh, this is going to cost me money!" "No, no money involved, if you want to go see your sister in Florida, I will stay with Mom overnight." So she did that and I flew down to Florida not too long ago. I'm glad that I did, she lives in a beautiful area. You talk about a lost weekend, that was it! (laughs) We went to a dinner-theater that was fabulous. The show featured a time period that

was in the 30's with Lindy Hop music and all that jazz and whatnot. It was good. The place was big, it held about eight hundred people.

So I spent a nice week with my sister talking about old times. We caught up on relatives, had a good family talk. So that's it, the whole thing in a nutshell. Do you have any other questions?

Q: No. You did very well. When you look back on it, what do you think it all means? That experience in the scheme of your life?

DD: As I say, it makes me realize what family is about. I look at my son and daughter and what they mean and what they are going through now. We are watching our grandchildren grow up, they are pretty smart! I have three granddaughters. One graduated from Tufts University last June with a degree in Chemical Engineering and Microbiology. Right now she is a Research Lab Technician in San Diego, working for some big firm. My oldest granddaughter has been married now for two years. Both she and her husband have Masters Degrees from Syracuse University and are both Special Education teachers. In fact, she called me Monday and said "Grandpa, I have good news, I just got my permanent certification to teach Special Ed!" So I am happy for them. And the other one, Jennifer, she graduated from Fredonia College in Computer Graphics (@1:21:13 unclear) Right now she got accepted as an NFL Cheerleader with the Buffalo Bills! She is in the Bahamas right now on a calendar swimsuit shoot! She is having a ball. (laughs) Let her enjoy her life.

I look back on this overall picture and can say I am very happy for my family. I've had a lot of fun with all three granddaughters. My son-in-law is having some kind of a feud with my wife. They are throwing barbs at one another jokingly and they are enjoying their lives.

He is my daughter's second husband and took over raising the girls like they were his own. He helped to put them through college and so on. He is a member of the Keily Law Firm in Caslistoga (@1:22:20 spelling?) and he is doing good.

Q: We thank you for this great interview.

DD: My pleasure, believe me.

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@1:04:08 Jim, I added an side note I found uniquely insightful. On the top of the stationary of the letter written by Dante's Mom we see these instructions: WRITE VERY CLEARLY WITHIN THE LINES . IN ORDER TO EXPEDITE CENSORSHIP, LETTERS SHOULD BE TYPED OR PRINTED IN BLOCK CAPITALS. Please feel free to omit if you feel it is intrusive to his story: PAGE 11