

April 29, 2005

My name is Sebastian Stavella. I am recording my experiences in World War II.

I went into the service in 1943. I was shipped out to Fort Dix and after a few weeks there, we went for our basic training in Florida. At that time, of course, it was the early part of the bombing campaign and they were looking for aerial gunners, mostly volunteers. Along with a few of my friends, I volunteered. They then shipped us out to radio school in Madison, Wisconsin, Truax Field. We were there a few weeks, learning Morse code. From there we went to Boise, Idaho, where we assembled our new crew. It consisted of ten men: a pilot, co-pilot, top-toward gunner, 2 waist gunners, navigator, bombardier, tail-gunner and a ball-turret gunner. My position was a ball-turret gunner, unfortunately. From there we went gunnery school in \_\_\_\_\_ Arizona for about 2-3 weeks where we learned to fire, skeet shooting, ground to ground firing. After that, we went to Casper, Wyoming where we flew practice missions, navigation missions, and night missions.

After our training, we picked up a new ship in Salinas, Kansas. The new ship was a B-17 Flying Fortress. We flew it out to Bangor, Maine, and then to New Foundland, Labrador and then to Prestick, Scotland. The plane was assigned there to a new 8th Airforce Bomb Group. While based in Prestick, Scotland we had a refresher course for about a week or two. Then they assigned us to a bomb squadron, the 407 heavy bombers, B-17 Flying Fortresses. On July 28, 1943, we set off on our mission early in the morning. The ship we had was named Patches – an old ship. In the early part of the war there were not too many bombers flying at that time and very little fighter escort. The fighter escort would take the bombers to the coast of France and they wouldn't have enough fuel to go any further; they would turn around and go back. From there on, the German fighters picked us up. Because our escort had left, they would go into the formation – and the battle was on.

We went over our target. On that day it was Kassell, a ball bearing factory in

Germany. The flak, or anti-aircraft, was very heavy. We dropped our bombs without any problem. On the way home, we were being attacked by the fighters again. ME-109s with the Messerschmitts and FW190's. We were hit with flak and slowly dropped out of formation. We were attacked by five FW190s. They were hitting us from all sides.

Things happened so fast. As I was sitting in the ball-turret I noticed parachutes going by underneath. I didn't know what was going on because my intercom system and warning signal were destroyed. I had no contact with inside the ship. When I looked up, I saw the pilot coming through the bomb base and he was waving his arms. The two waist gunners were still there and, of course, I was there. The rest of the crew had already bailed out and that's what I saw going underneath the ball turret.

I quickly got into position to get out of the ball turret and as I did, an FW 190 attacked the side of the ship and hit it with a 20 millimeter, ripping off the side of the ship and hitting one of our waist gunners, killing him. The other waist gunner was hit in the back with shrapnel and of course I had a little shrapnel wound, too. I had no chute on; you can't wear a chute in the ball turret because there is very little space. I got my chute on. The waist gunners were gone, except for Jerry who was just lying there, full of blood. I'm sorry for that.

When you're up in high altitude they have, what you call, a bail out bottle, a small bottle of oxygen that you strap to your leg or put in your flight suit. You put the tube in your mouth when you bail out so you can get they oxygen. Everything happened so fast, so it's hard to say what happened. I know I jumped out and the pilot was the last out. He followed me. The next thing I remember, an FW190 was circling around me and I didn't know what was going on. When he was circling, I guess he was radioing my position to the ground so I could be picked up. After that, he just waved and took off.

I blacked out. I don't remember too much after that. When I woke up I was in a field. This was near the Holland/Belgium border. When I came to, the first thing I did was upchuck, on account of concussion, which I found out later. I lay there on my back. An elderly man and woman were looking over me. I don't know why, but all of a sudden

they started to take off. As I looked up, I saw three Germans coming across the field with rifles and they were screaming. I just laid back again thinking, "That's it, it's time to go." The first thing they asked me was if I had a "pistola" which was a handgun. I had a 45 and that was the first thing they took. That was in the pocket of my flying suit. They took me to what I thought was an underground airfield and put me in a wooden cell. I was exhausted and just laid back down. It looked like it was an underground or a camouflaged airfield. I don't know how long I was laying there, but I later heard some rapping from the next wooden cell. It was conversation from one of my crewmembers.

We couldn't find out what happened to our tail gunner, but he was found dead and they said the chute hadn't opened. We lost two crewmembers out of our original ten. The copilot, I understand, landed in a tree and his leg was shattered and broken. We were all captured.

The officers were sent to a better camp than the enlisted men. They got us together after awhile and took us to an interrogation center, to try to get information. It was outside Munich, a place called Muessberg. They kept us there for about a week. Then they shipped us off to Stalag 17 in Krems Austria. Incidentally, they made a movie out of Stalag 17 that's still on every once in a while. It stars William Holden, Peter Graves, Don Taylor and a few other actors.

At Stalag 17 we were assigned to our barracks and my particular barracks was 39B. There were over 100 men in that barracks. We were pretty well organized after a while. The camp commander was Kurtenbach. He just recently passed away. At Stalag 17 we had a diet of tea in the morning, which was some kind of flavored tea. I'll never forget a loaf of bread that tasted like sawdust. It averaged 15-20 men to a loaf. 3 small potatoes a day, if we were lucky. We used to take these potatoes and make the best of it. We'd take the skins off and boil them. Then we'd have flavored potato soup. Then we'd take the skins again and toast them and have potato chips. So we had three meals out of that. We used to get a tub of dehydrated soup that had little creatures floating on the top. If you happened to be at the top of the line you'd be lucky and get some meat in your soup-primarily worms.

Each barracks was divided in groups. You had Group 1, 2, 3 and so forth. The first group would be the first in line and they'd go around. If you were lucky, you'd get be able to get seconds. Once in awhile you'd get a small can of horsemeat distributed, starting with the first group and so forth. On occasions we'd get Red Cross parcels. I think we got 2, 2 1/2 in the 3 years I was there. We used to ask where our parcels were because they told us they were sent from Geneva. They told us that we bombed their railroads, so they couldn't get through. We bombed their warehouses where they were stored, so that was it. Our parcels, when we got them, consisted of a can of powdered coffee, Nescafe, powdered milk, liver paste, chocolate bar, a pack of cigarettes or maybe two, sugar and a can of Spam and, of course, oleo. But as soon as you got your parcels, you had to line up. The German soldiers would take their bayonets and puncture all the cans so you couldn't store them; you had to eat them right up. What we tried to do when we got back to the barracks was seal with the punctures with the oleo. We used to call it pay day, the day we got our parcels. When we got back to the barracks we would go around with our parcels and if you didn't like liver paste or coffee or chocolate you would trade for cigarettes or Spam, or whatever. Incidentally, cigarettes were popular, chocolate bars were popular and coffee.

We tried to volunteer for outside work, but they wouldn't have any part of that because of escaping. After two and a half years, towards the end of the war, we were sent on a forced march. The Russians were getting close on the east and the Americans on the other end. We were on the forced march for 28 days. There's a lot more to tell about Stalag 17 but I don't have the time to do that right now. After 28 days we wound up in the real heart of the forest in Austria, about 11 kilometers from Branau, Hitler's birthplace. On May 3, a scouting party from Patton's third army liberated us. A couple days later the ordinance crew came up and shipped us down to an aluminum factory in \_\_\_\_\_ in Austria, where they fed us, cleaned us up a little bit. Then they shipped us off to Le Havre, France, which was called Camp Lucky Strike. We were there for a few days and were

then sent back home to the States.

We found later on that out of the five fighters that attacked us we did shoot down two. Their stories I could tell you about at the camp itself but there's no time to do that.

I do have to tell you that when we were in Stalag 17 the food was kind of scarce.

We used to take the grass around our barracks and had to guard it. We'd boil it and get a little flavored soup out of that. We also set traps for their guard dogs if we could possibly get one of them we would have probably skinned him. It doesn't sound very nice but when you're hungry, you'd be surprised what happens. The bread, as I said, tasted like sawdust. Tea was just flavored tea, but other than that, there's not much more I can say.