'I TOLD THEM I WAS A BAKER’S HELPER, SO THEY DECIDED I WOULD MAKE A GOOD ARMORER GUNNER.'
Charles Becker’s Journey to Stalag Luft IV

Interview by Audrey Iacone
Introduction by Paul Roberts, Editor

Charles R. Becker was born on Pittsburgh’s North Side. His mother and father bought a home with a bakery in the Woods Run section of Pittsburgh, and with his parents and four brothers, Becker says, he was there “until the day I was called up for the draft.” It was 1943, World War II, and Charles Becker was 19.

After about a year of training, he was assigned to operations of the 15th Air Force, 460th Bomb Group, 760th Bomber Squadron, in Italy. As “armor gunner” in the belly machine gun turret of a B-24 bomber, Becker was credited with 37 missions during a three month period in 1944. The 37th was his last mission because his plane was shot down on June 30 over Lake Balaton, Hungary. Half of the 10 man crew died and Becker, captured by the Germans, was a prisoner of war for almost a year. This is the story of his training, his missions, his capture, and his POW experience.

Becker was interviewed in 1988 by Audrey Iacone, now Librarian at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. While Becker is Audrey D. Iacone is Librarian at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. She wishes to express her gratitude to Chuck Becker and to his wife, Norma, who welcomed her into their home for this interview. Photographs: Pittsburgh’s Charles Becker as a young teenager, with his brothers, and as an older teenager in his Air Force uniform, 1944.
visibly uncomfortable talking about these painful events, now nearly a half-century old, he, unlike many ex-servicemen who recount their experiences, veers far from the purely "military." His account, in fact, seems almost fictional in its perfection as a story, owing in part to the dramatic pauses and tension-building that Iacone’s skillful, open-ended questioning supplies. The interview has been edited slightly for publication. Occasional bracketed insertions are meant to clarify the original text, although every effort was made to maintain Becker’s descriptive, conversational style. Brackets indicate editorial additions, while parentheses are used when Becker’s statements called for them. A full transcript of the interview is in the Archives of the Historical Society.

After returning from the war, Becker began a career as a plumber. Now retired, he and his wife Norma live in the Brentwood section of Pittsburgh. Of their three children and 10 grandchildren, three also entered the Air Force.

In helping prepare this interview for publication, Becker related a few other interesting facts. The Germans, Becker said, “had special respect for” rank, so the Air Force ranked all of its personnel as sergeants or higher. When captured, they were assigned to Air Force-only camps (Staling Luft) and generally were not forced to perform physical labor.

Becker began his service at Fort Mead, Maryland, with aptitude testing. (“I told them I was a baker’s helper, so they decided I would make a good armorer gunner,” he jokes.) Then nine weeks of training began at Laurie Field in Denver. “We were mesmerized with movies of taking .50-caliber machine guns apart, day after day — take ‘em apart and put ‘em together. In about eight weeks, I could take ‘em apart blindfolded, quite everything known about a .50. In fact, I think I might still be able to take one apart today.”

The next site was Eagle Pass, near Laredo, Texas. “Now, they give me a parachute and a harness and a .30-caliber machine gun to practice with,” Becker recalls. “I’m carrying this all to the plane, and I’m trying to get the machine gun into the plane, and I couldn’t quite reach it so I’d set the machine gun on the ground, I’d get up on the wing and then I couldn’t reach down for the gun. I was really shook. I had a harness on that was so big and I didn’t know how to adjust it.”

Interviewer Audrey Iacone asks, “Wasn’t there anyone there to help you? Or was this ‘do-it-yourself?’”

Becker: No, nobody, we were on our own. So, a friend of mine who was going to get on the next plane saw my predicament and he came over and quieted me down and says, “Now you get up in the plane and I’ll hand you the gun.” So I did that, and he handed me the machine gun. And there was a steel rail around the back that you clamped the gun on to and it swivels on this rail. But I never did get the harness adjusted, and I kept thinking if I ever have to bail out of this thing I’ll go right through the harness, it’s hanging down off my shoulders. So anyway, the pilot came out and he jumped up on the wing and he says, “Are you ready?” And I said, “Yes, sir.” And he says, “Well, if you hear a little bell ring … that means we’re in trouble and if you see something going past you … that will be me and then you better jump!”

So then he got into the cockpit, and I closed my eyes, and we taxied out and we’re going down the runway and I had my eyes closed. I had never been in an airplane and I was so scared. After it took off, everything was smooth … I could feel we were going up and I opened my eyes. Oh, gee, it was wonderful! I could see the Rio Grande River and all the desert and a good bit of Texas. I thought it was great!

So the idea is he signals me and then I stand up in this plane. Now there’s a hook on the bottom [in the floor of the plane] and a hook on the bottom of my harness that I have to hook so that when I’m standing I don’t fall out of this open cockpit. When he signaled for me to stand up, I looked out and there was a plane pulling a big sock that I shoot at.

Iacone: That was your target?

Becker: That was the target, a moving target. Now all my bullets were a color; everything is color coded. If any of my bullets hit that target, it would leave either a red, blue, or green mark — whatever color my bullets were. And other guys would shoot at that and their colors would show up and they would just count the colors. And the pilot told me, “Now when your done firing, you just raise your hand and I’ll know you’re done.” Well, when I was done, I raised my hand, and I was still in a standing position. All of a sudden, he turned that thing over, I don’t know what happened, but I’m looking up in the air at the Rio Grande River and the desert. I knew this wasn’t quite right, and I’m still in the standing position holding on to that gun for dear life. When he came out of that dive, then I hit the seat, and fairly hard. That was my first experience in an airplane.

I: Now when you were all done with that, did they tell you what success you had had in hitting your target?

Becker: I never did really know. Apparently, well enough to go overseas.

I: Good thing they didn’t make you do that again. Where was your next assignment after Laredo?

Becker: I had a leave at home, a short leave, and then I went out to Salt Lake City, and there I met the crew that I was going to be with all through the war. We took a train ride down to Biggs Field, Texas. Everybody flew, we got to know each other, all about each other, and went through quite a heavy basic training of bombing and different things — shooting machine guns.
Now my pilot was a cowboy from Wyoming and he loved to shoot guns. So he would always come into the back and ask me if he could shoot at the targets. They had big cloth targets up in the desert, and we would shoot our machine guns at 'em. And he loved to do that. So, he said, "If you let me shoot, you can go up and fly." So, I used to go up in the front and get in the pilot's seat and fly the B-24 'round the desert. The co-pilot was there watching, and he [the pilot] would go in the back and shoot the guns. And he loved that and I loved what I was doing!

I: What were the different positions?
B: Okay, you had your pilot and co-pilot, bombardier and navigator — they were officers always. The rest of the crew were Tech Sergeants or Staff Sergeants or Sergeants. I was a Staff because I had a rating with the armor, knowing the guns and the bombs and everything. We had a radio operator who was a Staff. We had what they call an engineer. It was his job to switch gas tanks when one got low; he could switch from one to another while we were in flight. Then we had the tail gunner. I don't know who I missed now.

I: Yourself.
B: Well, as an armorer gunner, I was also the belly turret operator. Right above me and back about eight foot were two open windows with machine guns in them. The radio operator and the engineer operated them. The assistant radio operator was the top gunner. We had a turret on the top right behind the pilot, too, a nose gun.

I: And did you ever switch positions, except for that time with the pilot, or were you always a ball-turret gunner?
B: That was my position, ball-turret operator. So, after Biggs Field we went to Topeka, Kansas. At Topeka we picked up a brand new airplane, brand new B-24. We flew around there for about a week, learning to get along with each other, to fly in a new plane, whatever. Then after about a week, then we started our long journey.

I: Did you get along with the other men? Was there a closeness there?
B: Yes, always a closeness between the crew.

I: Then you flew your B-24 to where?
B: Well, the first place we went was to West Palm Beach, Florida. We spent a night there. I remember one little thing about there: we had to have ... it was a big black ... like an aerosol bomb, and we had to spray the plane before we left the States in case of carrying insects, bugs or anything from one country to another. When we went from there we flew down to the island of Trinidad. We sprayed there, too. We spent the night there under mosquito netting — hot and muggy, terrible.

I: Did you sleep on the plane or near the plane?
B: No, they had tents set up for us and a lot of mosquito netting hanging around. The next morning, after the plane was refueled, we took off for Brazil, the part of Brazil that juts the furthest out into
the Atlantic Ocean. We spent a couple days there getting the plane prepared for overseas. Then we took off and we had between a 10- and 11-hour flight over to Dakar, North Africa. There's an air base outside of that, somewhere there.

I: How long did you stay in North Africa?
B: Well, after we landed in this North Africa area, they told us our tents were down the road a little piece, and go ahead down and get a tent and I thought, "Well, I'm going to hurry up because I want to get a good bunk in the tent." We're out in the desert and the sun's so bright. I went down and I threw the flap open and I run into the tent only about three feet and I stop dead in my tracks. There was something in front of me, and as the light, you know, as I started to be able to see again, it was an Arab in a white robe with a big knife. I thought he was gonna kill me. I didn't know why he would be in the tent, you know. He was selling [the knives]. It just scared the life out of me, just walking in from light to dark and then seeing this white robe appear with a big shiny blade. I didn't buy one of the knives, I couldn't even talk to the man.

I: Did anyone buy a knife?
B: Not that I know of. Anyway, the next day we had a turkey dinner at that base. I recall that. As we were eating it, they told us it was turkey, but we kept looking up in the air and we saw these buzzards flying around and we were wondering whether we were eating turkey or buzzard. It was a good meal anyway. Then the following morning, we took off for our base in Spinazzola, Italy. We flew up there the following day and landed at that base.

I: How long were you at Spinazzola before you actually started your routines? Did you have a break before you started?
B: We were only there two or three days, I believe, we were sitting in our tent — all six crew members were in one tent, and the officers had a tent in another area. This lieutenant came in and he said, "You men sit down. I want to talk to you." And I was holding my flak helmet in my hands, sitting on the bunk. He says, "Tomorrow you're going on your first raid." And the helmet just fell out of my hands and hit the floor. He laughed. He says, "Don't worry about it. That happens a lot of times here." So, we were assigned a mission.

[At this point, Mr. Becker goes upstairs, returning with the record of his missions.]

I: What was the date of your first mission?
B: Yeah, it was the 15th of April, in '44, and we were gonna fly over to Rumania — Bucharest, Rumania. That was not one of the longest missions, but a good sized one; it was 7 hours and 4 minutes, over and back [always to home base at Spinazzola].

I: Now, in other words, from the time you went in, in April of '43 to your first mission, took a year of training?
B: Right, exactly one year. I was inducted the 15th, and exactly one year later I had my first mission.
I: How many missions did you fly?
B: Actually, I flew 26 missions, but I have credit for 37.
I: Could you explain that?
B: The first raid — that Bucharest, Rumania — if it's a certain parallel north or degree, whatever they're using, and you cross it, you have credit for two missions. Now, this one took 7 hours, it's quite a long mission. We had others that took 10 hours, and they were considered double missions. I think more the length of time than anything had a lot to do with it.

I: Were there a maximum number of missions that you were expected to fly?
B: We were committed to 50 missions total, and then you would be sent back for rest, or whatever.
I: Sent back to the States?
B: Back to the States.
I: You said that there were 10 in your crew and that you all had your assigned positions?
B: We all had assigned positions.

I: You went out together on every mission?
B: Well, I flew extra missions.
I: With other crews?
B: With other crews. If they were short-handed and needed an armorer gunner on a crew, it's permissible to sign up and ride on that mission. I had several of those. I wanted to get my 50 missions in, and I flew extra missions.

I: In between missions, what did you and the other men do?
B: We were sort of out in the country. From our tent you could look out and it was a big beautiful poppy field out there. If you wanted to go to town, the nearest big town was called Bari; it's on the west coast of Italy, about half way up. To get there you had to put your uniform on, stand on the side of a water truck and ride up the dusty roads and down through the mountains to get to Bari. I didn't ever really go into Bari. I just stayed on the base.

I: Were there several days between missions or would there be weeks?
B: No, usually every other day, or every third day. You flew a day and you were off a day. They tried to keep a rotation as best they could. Sometimes a lot of planes were shot down, then you might have to double up 'til they got more replacements.

I: What were your targets?
B: The biggest targets were oil fields, ball-bearing factories, bridges, and a few troop installations where they knew that the troops were massing for an attack. Then we would drop fragmentation bombs in those areas.
I: Can you recall the names of some of these targets, place names?
B: Yeah, we had the Ploesti oil refinery. Now that was 7 hours and 15 minutes to make that trip, and it was one of the worst trips you could possibly make. When they said Ploesti, everybody started to sweat. It was a heavy flak area, really well protected with fighters and flak.

Then we had one in Wiener-neustadt, Austria. As we would fly north over Austria, they had a train with the anti-aircraft guns on and they used to run that train as fast as they could to keep up with us, and we would have flak for miles, following us, you know. When we were done with the target, and coming back, they would turn the train around and follow us down through Austria.

And we had some what they call milk runs over Italy that weren’t too long. They were supposed to be easy raids; most of them were, some of them weren’t. Some of them had a lot of flak — a lot of fighters, depending on what they were trying to protect: maybe a troop installation or something like that.

I: So you would either encounter German fighters in the air or the flak from the ground?

B: Right. And both. On most missions outside of Italy you would encounter both. We did have fighter escort. We used to take off as a group and assemble in the air and fly to a certain destination and meet the other groups that were in Italy. Then we’d go over as one big tremendous ... it was tremendous to look out and see all these B-24s heading across the Adriatic Sea.

I: You don’t know how many were in that large group? Hundreds?

B: Oh, no, I wouldn’t know how to count them really.

I: Those giant forces would be used for special missions?

B: Not really. There is so much cloud cover in Europe in the Balkan countries that when you would go over as a big group, certain groups would go straight into one target. Now, maybe another target was so clouded over they figured that you couldn’t bomb that one. So there’s always a secondary target. Maybe this group, after we got past their fighters, would peel off and go to a different area. Then you try to regroup after and come back.

Now I was told by one of the pilots that we always had P-38s [U.S. fighter planes protecting the slower bombers from enemy fighters] over the target area, circling about 5,000 feet above us when we were doing our actual bombing. But coming to the target and from the target, we had the P-51 Mustangs and the P-47 Thunderbolts. They would come so far and turn back, refuel and come out and meet us on the way back again.

I: What happened as you approached most of the target areas? You, as the ball-turret gunner, what did you see?
B: That is the area where the enemy fighters just disappear because now you're getting into what they call the flak area. You would see the flak come up in bursts of three. The first one would be way out, and the next one would be closer, and you could almost judge where the third one was gonna hit. And we would fluctuate our altitude a lot to avoid that [third shell].

Also, we had boxes of Christmas tree tinsel, and the two waist gunners would stand there throwing that tinsel out. Now, as this tinsel floated down, it affected the radar on their anti-aircraft guns. Then all of a sudden you'd see the first shell hit out there, and when they threw tinsel out, the next one would be hitting lower and lower instead of coming up right at you.

Now, when you get over the target area, not having to look for fighters, only worrying about the flak, I used to just keep my turret on the bottom rotating, slowly rotating. Then when the bombardier opened the bomb bay doors, I could take the tips of my guns and actually stick 'em up in the bomb bay and see all the bombs hanging there, and it was sort of my job in a way. When he said, "Bombs away," I would watch 'em come out and I'd follow them down with my turret turning, you know, just guiding them right down. When they would get close to the ground, they would disappear; and then all of a sudden you'd see this big flash. And the bombardier would always call back and say, "How'd I do, Charlie, how'd I do?" And I'd say, "Well, you did pretty good; you got two wheat fields and a couple little buildings." I used to tease him a lot, 'cause not every bomb would hit the target.

You could set your bombs to drop at different intervals depending what you were trying to hit, and you would start maybe fifty feet, a hundred feet, two hundred feet. And you would start your bomb run before you actually got to the target, a little before, hoping that your bombs would cross the target and at least one of them would hit the major part of the target.

Then the bomb bay doors close and I spin my turret some more, and we fight: fly our way back through the flak fields and then we run into more enemy fighters and our fighters. We didn't have too much trouble with the enemy fighters because our fighters were very good, and there was a lot of dog fights up there and they kept them busy 'til we got out of that area.

I: Did you ever fly over Anzio, the beachhead at Anzio?
B: Anzio, when they landed there, they were sort of stalemated for a while — the ground troops. So on quite a few short-run missions, all the planes in Italy would take off and before they would head for their target areas, we'd all fly out over the Mediterranean and come across the Anzio beachhead at not too high an altitude, maybe 10,000 feet. It was a morale builder — that they knew that we were going up there, and we were with them and they weren't alone down on that beach, you know.

I: Were you ever hit at any time during your first missions by the flak or by any fighters?
B: Yeah, we were on a raid, and on the way back we encountered some flak and our bombardier was shot in the leg — he had flak in his leg. And a piece of flak came into the top gunner — he's behind the pilot...
and up high — and it came right through the plexiglass and was ringing around his turret, but he never got wounded.

But they also did some damage to our wing tanks, and on the way back across the Mediterranean we were running a little short of gas. The pilot called back and says, “Everybody prepare to ditch.” Which means we’re gonna go down into the water. So the nose gunner and all the rest of the crew all come into the back of the ship, and what you do is, anything that’s loose that has any weight to it, you throw ‘em out the window. You want that ship as light as possible. I was throwing all our ammunition cans, our machine guns, anything that’s loose. The nose gunner, a friend of mine, picked me up and he’s carrying me. I said, “What are you doing?” He says, “He said throw everything that’s loose out!” He had me over by the window!

Anyway, we all got in our positions to ditch and hit the water, and the pilot called back and said, “We’ve sighted the island of Corsica. Hang on, we’re gonna to try to make a landing.” Well, the island of Corsica only has a fighter strip on it. A fighter strip is a lot shorter than a bomber strip; we need a lot more room to land and take off. He made one turn, come right down and hit the runway, and we stopped about, oh, maybe 20 or 30 foot from the edge. When we looked out over the end, there was a big ravine way down there, maybe a 100 feet down, big sloping area. There were B-17s sitting down in there. What happened is, the B-24 has a nose wheel, and when we hit the brakes, we can ride on that nose wheel to slow us down. Now the 17s only have a tail wheel, and if they hit the brakes too hard, they would just go right on their nose. So, consequently, they were just going off the edge, just going down into the ravine.

I: Everyone landed safely on that particular occasion?
B: Yeah, everything would come out fine. We spent the night on the island of Corsica, and they sent another plane out the next day to take us back to our base in Italy.

I: Chuck, can you tell me what happened the day of your last flight? That was on June 30, 1944.
B: Yeah, we were on our way. We were told that we were going to Blechammer — it’s, I think, on the German-Polish border somewhere. This is the first time we were going to fly all the way to Odessa on the Black Sea, bomb on the way over, land there, be refueled and reloaded with bombs by the Russians, and then hit another target on the way back.

On the way over, we got over Hungary, and there is a lot of heavy cloud cover and some flak. My own recollection is that we were hit behind Number 2 engine with flak. The pilot did not have complete control of the plane. We didn’t go down, but we were on a different course, and he couldn’t keep with the formation. I have a letter stating that the rest of the crews up there saw our plane leaving the formation, and they don’t know what happened to us.
I: But you of course know what happened.
B: Once you’re singled out — the enemy fighters wait for that. You’re just a lone duck out there. Two Messerschmitt 210s (a light bomber with a lot of machine gun power in the wings) got on our tail. The

![INDIVIDUAL FLIGHT RECORD](image)

**INDIVIDUAL FLIGHT RECORD**

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MISSING IN ACTION 6/20/44

**OVER HUNGARY, THERE WAS 'HEAVY CLOUD COVER AND SOME FLAK. MY OWN RECOLLECTION IS THAT WE WERE HIT BEHIND NUMBER 2 ENGINE WITH FLAK.'**

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first one was shooting right through into our plane. I could see his tracers: they were just above me hitting the plane because I'm a little under the plane [in the bottom turret]. That one plane took out the tail gunner and the two waist gunners. I saw them later. I'm trying to call the pilot to get the tail up, get the tail up, because my bullets are going under him. Finally, the tail raised a little and I shot the second one. I know I shot him because I could see my tracers going right through the front of that plane.

The plane leveled off again, the tail came down, and I had to stop firing because gasoline was pouring [inside] my turret and I didn't dare pull the trigger [because of sparks from the firing mechanism]. I heard a rap and I turned my turret guns down, opened my door, got up into the plane, and the engineer was all shot to pieces. He was laying right beside my turret. From his waist to his knees was nothing but bone showing in the front, everything was gone. I wanted to help him, I wanted to get sulfa drugs or do something, and he just laid there and shook his head and says, "No, get out."

So, I looked over and the radio operator, he was down on the floor, he was dead. Then the door from the front opened and the bombardier and the co-pilot were coming back [to get out of the plane]. I ran over to open a trap door on the floor about three foot square, and I'm trying to pull it up and I can't get it open, and I see the bombardier is in such a hurry that he had his foot half way over the door. So I bumped his foot off, opened the door, and him and the co-pilot bailed out.

I turned around to put a chute on. You're always wearing your harness, and the chute attaches to it. Now, we had two different types of harnesses and chutes. Some had a ring on the front, some had snaps. My chute was further up in the plane by my turret, so these two fellows wouldn't need theirs, so I grabbed one of theirs. My harness had rings, and his chute had rings. So I grabbed the next chute, and just then the plane went into like a flat spin. I was thrown down on the floor beside the radio operator.

I'm trying to pick the chute up — it was the kind I needed — and I can't get it off the floor, and I'm pulling it up over my legs just above my knees. I'm trying to work it up my body to snap it on, and as the plane is going around, his body kept coming into mine, and I had to keep pushing him back so I could get the chute up. I finally didn't even have it connected, but I had it part way up, and the plane leveled off, why I don't know. It just all of a sudden ... I snapped the chute on, went over the hole and rolled out.

And as I looked out I could see trees, the tops of trees going by. I didn't bother to count to 10 or anything. I just went out and pulled that cord real fast. I don't know how high I was, maybe 500 feet, and we had just cleared the top of this hill.

I: The pilot was still in control, more or less?

B: Somebody was, maybe the co-pilot. I don't know. No, I take that back because most everybody had bailed out. I think the pilot was still alive, and he must have leveled the plane off. When I got out, I saw the plane go out maybe a 1,000 yards and roll over and make a turn and come back. And there was a farm house there and he crashed right in front of the farm house.

I looked off and there's the other German fighter, the one that was still left, circling me, and I could see that guy in the waist there with his machine gun trained on me and I'm hanging in mid air. It's an awful eerie feeling, you know, there's no place to go to hide, nothing you can do. I just hoped and prayed that he wouldn't shoot me, and he didn't. Then I took one quick look and I saw Lake Balaton and I was down on the ground.

I pulled my chute off and I realized I was in a bean field, on about 4 foot centers, with 6 feet poles with "early beans" — the beans were to climb up, you know. The farmer had planted beans, those climbing green beans. I keep thanking God that I didn't look down because I'd probably have found one of those poles underneath me. I was pulling some of the beans off trying to hide my chute and I heard this voice saying, "Americano. Americano!"

I looked down the field towards this farmer's house and he was coming out through the yard. He had a fence rail on his shoulder, a piece about 4 foot long, and I thought, "Well, our airplane just crashed in front of his house, machine gun bullets are going off, there's bombs in there, he's not too happy and he's carrying a fence rail." So, I decided that I'd better crawl up this hill, and I did, through his bean field all the way up to the top of this hill, maybe 100, 200 feet up, and I started down the other side and I found some bushes and I crawled under them and ... I guess I went into shock then and I, I didn't want to wake up. I don't know how many days I laid there.

I: Now this happened all in the morning?

B: That part of it, yeah. On June the 30th.
and it was all soft and muddy — reeds. I had to sort of lay down and skim my way out to get to good water. I got a drink and I came back. It was getting close to dawn and I didn’t think I could make it back up into the hills before dawn. So, there’s a big hay field and I thought, “Well, I’ll, I’ll hide under a hay stack ’til tonight and then maybe I’ll try to head towards Yugoslavia, the partisan area. These people, the Yugoslavs, will help you get back to Italy.”

Now, also, what happened when I had bailed out, I had these fur-lined flying boots on, and when the chute opened they both popped off my feet. I had on a pair of army dress socks, walking through all these hills and wheat fields and all.

Anyway, getting back to the story, I decided to take the third [hay stack] from the water’s edge. I figured if they pick up hay tomorrow and they take a pile or so then I can go hide in the bulrushes down in the lake. So the next morning, early, I hear a lot of noise and I look out and, oh, I don’t know, half the village comes out to pick up hay, I guess! The one young fellow came down past me, down to the first pile, he had a two wheel cart, horse drawn two wheel cart, and I thought, “Well, he’ll put one of them on. When he goes I’ll see if I can make it” [back down to the rushes in the lake].

So he put that first hay stack on and he stopped his horse at the second one, and I thought, “Well, maybe he’ll get a little bit on.” He did, he got it all on, and I thought, “He’s got to go now.” So he came up to my pile and I heard him stop the horse again! I thought, “There’s no way he could put any more on that little cart!” I could hear the hay coming off of me and I could start to feel the pressure with the pitch fork and I thought, “This is it!”

So I stepped out. I crawled out and stood up and I put my hands up and said, “American!” and the kid was frozen, you know, just like a rabbit would scare you or something, you know. I had to say it two or three times before he could come to his senses. So, then the villagers all got together and looked me over and took me up to the end of the field and gave me some Hungarian ham and green beans and Hungarian rye bread and a little glass of wine, and then they decided to take me into town. On the road into town, an old man with a big rifle had it up at my forehead; he wanted to kill me for some reason.

Maybe he lost family in an air raid or whatever, I don’t know. They talked to him a little bit and then they slowly took the gun away from him.

Then they took me into one of the houses in this little village, and the people were getting maps out and they were asking me, “Chicago? New York?” They were trying to find out where I was from, you know. I’m scared, too, and I’m young, and I’m not telling nobody anything! I pretended like I didn’t know what they were asking, you know.

Then I noticed that the one lady of the house ran to the door and looked out. They had a beautiful tree out there, in bloom — I don’t know what kind it was. They looked out and they came back in and they grabbed me and took me out and put me under the tree and turned me around, and they all moved away from me. I’m standing under this tree, then all of a sudden she comes out with a camera and takes a picture! (laughter) Then they took me back in the house and, apparently in the meantime they had called for the Germans, and then they came and took me to a small fighter base where they had some cells to lock me up.

From there...
I: Were you interrogated at all by the ....
B: Not there. From there, a day or two later they put me on a train with a guy named “Flak Happy Pappy.” He was a tail gunner. I don’t think he was in my group, but he was burned pretty bad and he was Jewish. Him and I were in one of them little compartments. Now your talking the middle of July, I mean maybe about the 7th, 8th of July, little compartment, hot train, and the guard was sitting in the back.
And we’re riding on this train and his bandages were falling down and you could look way in and it was all charred, everything was charred and cracked open. And he says, “They’re gonna let me die, they’re gonna let me die because I’m Jewish.” Then the guy came to feed us, and what he had was rye bread and salami, and I looked at his face and I looked at that salami, and no way could I eat, so I didn’t eat anything.

Anyway, we got into the big town of Budapest. It was getting dark and we got off the train just in time for the air raid signals to come on, and they took us into the main terminal, put us in one corner, and a lot of people were in there. The British would come over to bomb the train, the railroad yards. Well, they didn’t pin-point bomb, they pattern bombed: they would just come over and drop bombs hoping to hit something. They had no idea. They could not see. They didn’t hit the train station.

Then they took us from there to the Hungarian Air Ministry building, locked us in the basement. I had a long wooden sheet of plywood with two 2-by-4s for a pillow for the night. The next day then they took us to the state prison there, right on the Danube River.

I: Were you in need of any medical assistance at all?
B: No.
I: What about your friend, “Pappy?”
B: Well, they took him, put him into a truck and they hauled him away. Now I heard, oh, way later, that some German doctor took pity on him and treated his burns and that he came out of there fine. I never have seen him, you know, since then.

I: Now, what about the rest of the men in your crew? Did any of them besides you survive that crash?
B: Five. Five died, and five lived. Everybody in the back of the ship, outside of myself, was killed. The top turret operator [W. Rowe] was killed, and the pilot [R. Evans] was killed, and [also C. Bowles, engineer; H. Barksdale, tail gunner; and Guy Marsh, radio operator]. Now, the co-pilot [S. Mills], the bombardier [J. Conlon], the navigator [R. Berger] — who am I missing again? — and the nose gunner [R. Freidman], they were the five that — and me — we were the five that lived.

I: Now, after you were taken to this place where you slept on the board and had the 2-by-4s for pillows, what happened next?
B: Well, the next morning they took us to the main prison and there we were locked in separate little cells, and then each one in turn was interrogated by a German officer who had completed his college courses in Chicago at a university, a very well spoken man. When he asked me my name, rank and serial number, I gave it to him and he says, “Oh, you’re with the 460th Bomb Group, the 760th Bomb Squadron,” and a few other details about my plane and my crew and he says, “We don’t need you anymore.” So, that was the end of my interrogation.

I: Was he frightening or was he polite, or...?
B: Oh, he was a very soft spoken, well spoken man. A few of them — a friend of mine — wouldn’t answer anything and they didn’t know too much about him. Now, they put him in solitary confinement there for a few days, a dark cell down in the basement somewhere. When he came out he looked like a wild man, you know. Apparently he wouldn’t give them any information at all. I was very fortunate, I had nothing to give him that he didn’t already know.

So I spent a few days in that prison and we were “de-loused.” They have an area where you take your clothes off, and they throw them into steamers, and you walk through showers and they spray you — kill whatever you might have — and when you come out
the other side you get your clothes back. You just got what was steamed and you wore them again.
I: Then what happened?
B: Well, from there, then they put us on a truck and we were riding through the heart of Budapest, and the German guards happened to hit a pedestrian, no, hit a young man on a bicycle. They stopped to see if he was hurt, and a crowd gathered. And one Hungarian with the big plumes on his shoulders and big ostrich feathers out of his hat and a long saber came up to the corner of the truck [where Becker was sitting]. He had his saber out, saying something loudly, and I'm in that corner! I tried to back up, but there were so many of us on this open truck that there was no place to back up to. Fortunately, the one guard saw him come around and pushed him away. Then we went to the train station, and from there, in box cars, up to Stalag Luft IV.
I: And that was your first prison camp?
B: That was our first prison camp, yeah.

I: And you travelled by train from Budapest to Stalag IV, which was where?
B: Well, to the best of my knowledge the camp was located at Grosstychow, in Pomerania, about 20 miles southeast of Belgrade. They also told me it was north of Berlin about 50, 60 miles. I have no idea [how long it took]. We were locked in box cars, slatted type box cars, cattle cars, and they would stop once a day at different stations, feed us barley soup, and we'd get a ration of some type of wheat bread, looked like sawdust bread. Each person got that, that was it. And water, a little water at every stop.
I: And what happened to you when you first arrived at Stalag IV?
B: [The train station] was about 2 kilometers from the camp and a couple of guys were pretty well hurt, and I helped to carry one of them up into the camp. Now the usual procedure is there is a German Marine captain who meets the trains with a detachment of German Marines — this didn't happen the day I arrived — and when you get off he starts 'em running those 2 kilometers into camp. The ones in the back are usually jabbed with a bayonet. Not enough to hurt them or kill 'em, just enough to maybe draw a little blood. The German captain rode a bicycle. The men were told that anybody who fell down, they weren't stopping for them. In other words, he would be dead.

Apparently the family of this German captain, from what we were told, was killed in a raid in Berlin by bombers. And he didn't like American bombers. The day I arrived there, he had to go to Berlin for some reason, and I got to walk up and carry this guy up — again, very fortunate. So far, I've had a few mosquito bites through this whole thing, and that's about it; hunger and different things like that, but no wounds. Then we got into camp and assigned to a barracks and that's the first time I saw one of my crew members.
I: Who was that?
B: Bob Freidman, he was the nose gunner. He got to camp earlier than me. If you recall when I told you that when I bailed out over the top of this hill, the other four guys had bailed out before the hill, and the Germans saw them coming down [and captured them], but once we crossed the hill where I got out, they didn't see me.
I: So did you see him shortly after you arrived?
B: Yeah, he was standing right inside the gate.
I: That must have been a nice reunion.
B: It was, it was very nice, yes. It was nice to know that he was alive, too. I didn't see him come through the back of the plane, so I didn't know.
I: Were you assigned the same barracks?
B: No. He was already assigned and I was assigned to another barracks.
I: What was the barrack like?
B: Well, the barracks were not too bad; wooden barracks built up, maybe two foot off the ground. Eighteen men in a room, and the room was surrounded with wood beds, three high, like three tiers. You had three or four slats to lay across. You had their bags that they buried their dead soldiers in — that type of bag, paper with a little bit of straw, very little straw. And when you crawled up on your bunk, you had to put your fanny on the one, your shoulders on another slat, your head on another one, and your feet on another one. And you didn't do much turning at night.

And occasionally, they would come in, 2 or 3 in the morning, and turn the lights on and, with their guard dogs, holler, "Rouse! Rouse! Everybody out into the hall." They would go in every room and search for anything, whatever they thought you might have. They pulled everything apart and when they were done, and you started into your room, they went out the door and turned the lights out, and you had to find your way back into your room and your area and see if you could find your mattress in the dark.
I: They did this almost every night?
B: No, no. It was like a spot check. And maybe once a week they would check for radios and whatever, and we did have radios.
I: Where did you get the radios?
B: I don't know. And we always had like two maps in our room. Our men somehow fashioned one and had it hidden somewhere and the information was passed from barracks to barracks: where our front lines were after D-Day, you know, when they were coming across France. The Germans would give us information where the front lines were, and the two never coincided. We knew they were a lot closer than they were telling us.
I: Would that have been a good morale-builder then, knowing that the boys were coming closer all the time?
B: Oh, yes. But then it so turned out that the Russians were getting close to our area first, and the Germans decided they had better move all the prisoners. So, some were marched out of camp through Germany, heading east. Others were thrown into box cars — I was one of those — and we went up into a little town called Barth, Germany, on the Baltic Sea, right on the coast. They had a camp up there, Stalag Luft I.
I: How long did that trip take?
B: That is another one I cannot tell you. It was days; because of the war our train only moved when the tracks were available. If there was anything, troop trains, food, whatever was moving, we had to be derailed immediately. We just spent days going that short distance.
I: Well, how many men were they moving? How many men were in Stalag IV?
B: Well, it was supposed to eventually have a capacity of 6,400 and I think we were very close to that at that time. We had a combination of English and Americans in that camp, [all Air Force people].
I: At the second prison camp, was your routine any different than the first one? Was the day the same? How did you spend a typical day in the prison camp?
warning wire and the fence. They would just run a bead of bullets right down through there once in a while.

I: How was your treatment by the Germans? Were they cruel?
B: In our camp, no, I thought that they did the best they could under the circumstances and conditions. All they wanted you to do was obey the rules of the camp: don’t step over the warning wire; at night make sure that your windows were barred; no lights shining out. If you got caught with a radio, I guess you’d be in a lot of trouble, whatever.

They didn’t have much food to give us, and potatoes were the main diet. You’d get a couple of potatoes or maybe beets, whatever they could gather up and bring in with a horse and buggy and drop. We had like a little kitchen, big vats, and you’d just throw everything in there and boil it.

I: You prepared your own food then?
B: Well, our own men did cook it, yeah. Occasionally, if a horse would die, they would drag him in and we would have some red meat with our potatoes. And everyday your little ration of bread. There are Red Cross parcels, but the rail lines were so blown apart, and they were trying to move troops and they just couldn’t get the Red Cross parcels to us. When we did get ‘em, they would have to be divided into four. Four men would share a parcel.

I: What would you usually find in a Red Cross parcel?
B: A few packs of cigarettes, a heavy “D Ration”, chocolate (you really had to bite it), crackers, little things of jelly, sometimes oleo — a lot of little things like that, that you could use.

I: Would you get these as often as once a week?
B: No, [although] sometimes for weeks in a row we got them once a week. Then the Germans would open them all up and slice all the packs of cigarettes, break ‘em open and look, make sure that they weren’t sending something in to us, you know.

I: Now what did this deprived diet do to your overall health?

B: Well, I went into malnutrition and when I left the camp, all my teeth were all loose, every one of them. I could just move them around. One time I couldn’t go to the bathroom for I think it was close to 8 to 10 days. I had a terrible time, because you didn’t have the liquids or anything, you know. It was all that bread and potatoes, just starch.

I: Did you lose a lot of weight?
B: I lost a lot of weight. I went into the service at 165, and after I came back to the States, I was up to 129. And that’s after eating a lot of steaks and ice cream [in Europe, after leaving the prison camp]. So, I don’t really know how much I lost over there.

I: Now, how long were you in the first camp?
B: I was in there the longest, probably about 8 months. I remember once they had us fall out and they told us that our president had died, Roosevelt. Everyday that whole barracks has to line up out in a field, and the Germans come down and they count all the men, so they know if they were all there or not. You had that in the morning and late in the afternoon. Well, when we were out being counted one day, in May [1945], the commandant told us, “Your president has died.”

I: What was the reaction of the troops at this point?
B: Sadness. We were in doubt what was going to happen; you know, the president gone and … you just hoped for the best. We didn’t know what was going to happen then.

I: How long were you in the second…?
B: I’d say a month or so, and then General Zvukov (he was Colonel Zvukov then) was bringing his troops, the Russian troops, across Germany. Supposedly, he moved his troops north because he had heard that his daughter had been captured by the Germans [in the region where the camp was]. We went to bed that night and when we got up in the morning there wasn’t a German in sight. We wondered what happened. The gates were still closed, but we had some of our own officers in the towers. The Russians couldn’t understand that; they wanted to take the

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THE CAMP ‘HAD A BALL AND A BAT, AND IF YOU FELT STRONG ENOUGH YOU COULD PLAY BALL — NO PROTECTION, NO GLOVES, NO NOTHING — YOU JUST PLAYED BALL.... MOST OF THE DAY, YOU JUST WALKED, CIRCLED THE CAMP. YOU JUST WALKED OR TALKED TO YOUR FRIENDS.’
tanks and knock the fence down and let us go. We had our two fighter aces, Colonel Zemki and Gabreski, who said, “No. You just leave those men in there. We're going to get them transported out of here. If you knock the fence down, they'll go all through Germany and we'll never get 'em all home.” Which was right in a way. Then they flew B-17s in from France and marched us into town and flew us to France, to Camp Lucky Strike. Then we went to Le Havre and got on a big boat, and Victor Mature was the mess officer, and we came back on that ship, back to the States.

I: What was your reception when you got home? Did you land in New York first?
B: We landed in New York and Victor Mature got off and kissed all the nurses and the WAVES and the WACS, and we got on the buses and went to Camp! They processed us for not too long. We were in the one in New Jersey — Fort Dix — for a short time. I had 90 day leave, I think, and I went home and went to my old address.

In the meantime, being as the war was on and they had drafted me and both of my older brothers (one was a Marine, one was in the anti-tank), my mother couldn't keep the business going. And I didn't know, being in the prison camp, that she had sold the baker's shop and moved back to another home on the North Side. So, I'm standing outside this closed baker's shop wondering what happened to my family, you know.

I: Had they been notified that you were rescued or that you would be returning?
B: I don't know. All my mother knew was I was a prisoner of war.

I: So how did you find your way back to your family?
B: Well, one of the neighbors came out and greeted me and told me that my mother had moved back up on the hill on Chautauqua Street.

I: I'm sure that she was a happy lady when you walked in the door.
B: Oh, yeah, she surely was. I was happy to see her.

I: What today lingers in your life, Chuck, as effects of your confinement?
B: I don't think I realized it until just a few years ago, the psychological part of it, that I lost my crew and they were like my family. I was a young fellow impressed with my new family and when you lose them, you don't want to make new friends because you're afraid you might get too close and they could die, you know. I had never realized I was like that most of my life, but I was. I've never made real close buddies. I was talking just about a year or two ago to
that guy lives and what he does — but I just knew him as "Hey, Joe!" I didn’t want to tell them anything and I didn’t want them to tell me anything and I never knew why, you know, just ’til recently.

I: Have there been any physical effects?
B: My teeth — my gums will go. I get loose teeth yet. I’ve had a reoccurrence of that malnutrition and pneumonia once.

I: How about your hearing?
B: Oh, my hearing, well, I think that was a natural thing from flying high altitude time after time, going up and down and your ears expanding and contracting all those times, plus the test chamber tests. I think it affected my hearing a lot, yeah.

I: Of the five survivors of the original 10, have you had a reunion with any of them? Do you see any of them?
B: Yeah, two of them were from Pennsylvania, and three of us got together, with our wives. We talked and had a good time. The fourth man, the navigator, Ralph Berger, lives in Peoria, Illinois. I neglected to tell you that the day we were shot down, the body that was rolling all over me was not one of the members of my crew. He was a replacement. Like I was flying extra missions, and he was replacing our radio operator that day. The regular radio operator was Frank Serro, from Harmony, Pennsylvania. He had to go to a special school for two days, so he didn’t fly. This fellow replaced him and died in his place. Our bombardier, Jerry Conlon, lives up in Roaring Springs, Pennsylvania. The nose gunner, a New Yorker named Robert Friedman, passed away a few years ago.

I: Now the one who was a replacement that day, I remember you had said there was something, that it was his last mission, his 50th?
B: Yes, he was on his 50th mission. That would have been his last mission and he could have gone home when this was over. That’s fate. Here’s a man on his last mission and he died, and I survived and not even a wound, nothing worse than a mosquito bite, and that’s truly fate.

I: Thank you very much, Chuck.
B: You’re more than welcome.