Don Casey Oral history Interview

April 23rd, 2012

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CASEY: Good morning, I'm Don Casey, I'm a World War Two veteran, this is April 23rd 20-12. I'm happy to talk to you about my World War Two experiences and I think it's quite remarkable in some respects, I think most people's stories are remarkable when you get down to it and get into it, but unfortunately not enough veterans are seen fit to record their experiences and talk about it and I'm one of those that got over that and I love to talk about it.

JOHNS: Well thank you for coming in Mr. Casey, I'll get started with some general background, when and where were you born?

CASEY: I was born November 6th, 1924. The president was Coolidge at that time.

JOHNS: And where did you grow up?

CASEY: I grew up in River Forest, Illinois, on the west side of Chicago, just west of Oak Park in a lovely suburban area with a lot of vacant land and had a wonderful grammar school there just a half a block from my house. It was really [word garbled] growing up there.

JOHNS: And tell me about your family, did you have any siblings?

CASEY: I had three brothers, I now have two, the oldest one died but yes I was number two, I was the second one. All together I think we had a great family and…

JOHNS: Tell me about your childhood, did the economic situation in the United States affect your family?

CASEY: My father was in the investment banking business and the depression really hit hard on that business, but he stuck with it and was able to keep us in a fairly nice house out there and send us to good schools. I went to, after grammar school I was sent to a Jesuit high school and boarding school in Wisconsin, Campion Jesuit High School in Prairie du Chien Wisconsin on the Mississippi River in southwest Wisconsin. The Jesuits were great teachers and they taught us a lot of things and it was a great benefit for me to go there.

JOHNS: Excellent, and what was school like there, did you, oh sorry go ahead.

CASEY: Well the school was fairly strict and the joke at the time was that the high school was for encourageables (laughs), I didn't consider myself that although one of my teachers said I was (laughs), but all in all I got a good education and I still have a lot of friends left from there. It fitted me for what I wanted to do too. I was 17 years old as a senior in December, 1941 when the war started, and I can remember standing around the radio, we didn't have television those days, standing around the radio in the, sort of the common room, listening to news about the war. I think it was, my reaction was common among my peers that I thought, this is the chance for the great adventure of a lifetime, to be in the war and I waited my turn until I got to be 18 the following November and the next month I went down and signed up for the US Army Air Corps, Aviation Cadet Program.

JOHNS: Wonderful, and were you a member of the ROTC previous to that?

CASEY: Yes they had ROTC there for the second, third and fourth years so I had had some

experience with the military training there. I would say that it didn't really make a lot of difference, but I did have some edge on the people that I was with when I joined up.

JOHNS: And what was your family's reaction to your enlistment in the Air Corps?

CASEY: My father was a World War One veteran in the Air Service and served in France, and his brother, his older brother was killed in action in August of 1918 just a few months before the armistice was signed. But he had joined up when the war, World War Two started he joined up himself and went into the Air Corps and helped out with his experiences of air service in recruiting air crews. So when I came time to join up he said, "Be sure that you get into a position where you can become an officer, because the stratification between officers and enlisted men is great, very, very substantial". And the Air Force was in need of young and fairly bright kids to man their air crews on the bombers, particularly, and I realized that that was the way to get a commission and fly, which I really wanted to do. I just came back from Dayton, Ohio this last weekend and I went to the Wilber and Orville Wright Museum and there they have the original airplane from 1913 that these men figured out, all by themselves, and tested on the windy shores of North Carolina until they had an airplane that would fly and they kept trying and different things. So when I look back to that and then look at World War One, the aviation of World War One was really fairly primitive and the Americans in World War One really didn't have any airplanes and used the French, the British airplanes that were available. When I was growing up aviation was the most exciting thing I had ever encountered and I wanted to fly and the Air Corps was the opportunity to do everything I want to.

JOHNS: Understandable. Now, before you had your processing and training did you attend university at all between…

CASEY: I went to Purdue University for one semester and I didn't finish that one either. That was something that I did just because it seemed like something my father might want me to do and the science turned out not to be my bag. But I was called up in February of 43', which was really fairly fast, and by October, the end of October 1943 I was a Second Lieutenant with navigator's wings. I chose navigation only because the talk about pilot training was that the failure rate was huge, more than 50 percent failed the test was so hard, and they didn't tolerate any mistakes, they didn't have time they had to take the best ones that they could get. So I escaped that part of it and walked right into navigation which instead of being a 15 month course as pilots had mine was only 6 months once you get by basic training, it was really fast. There I am in November I'm a Second Lieutenant and I'm flying and by January we were assigned to bomber crews and we picked up a new B-17 bomber in Kearney, Nebraska and flew it all the way across the country and then across the ocean from Newfoundland to Iceland to Scotland and I did the navigation, so it worked and I was really proud of myself for that. When we got to England then you were in a new ballgame completely, the war was going on already and the Air Force was doing most of the fighting, other than the landing on North Africa, which I don't minimize in any degree. The ground troops had not been in any combat over there, but the Air Force was doing it every day and casualty rates were extremely high. At first it was like, one in four, you'd get one in four chances of surviving, and as we built up our fleet of planes from a few hundred to now in the thousands the odds got

better for success but they weren't, there was still a lot of danger and a lot of people were getting killed. I think you had to be a youngster because you had to believe that nothing was going to happen to you, it was too bad about Joe he went down, that's too bad, but it wasn't going to happen to me, but then it did. And it's kind of like pushing the envelope a little too far. And you rack up these missions where you're going out flying from England over Europe for an average of eight hours on a mission and over Europe you're exposed to attacks by German fighter planes, where our planes flew 150 miles an hour their planes flew 350, so the comparison was, it's kind of stunning, but then on top of that the Germans had anti-aircraft cannons which they used to shoot down as many of us as they could. When on a combat mission we were usually flying a group of about 36 planes and we had practiced over and over again formation flying, getting as close together as we could. That had a couple of purposes; one, to prevent the Germans from flying through our group, they couldn't do that when you're closely bunched up, and also it enabled us to perfect our bombing so that when the planes are grouped together closely and all drop at the same time the bombs fall in the same pattern as the airplanes are flying and it made our bombing more effective. It also exposed us to more gunfire, I have to laugh about it, my grandson once asked me, he's now 16, and he said, "Grandpa, were you ever shot at?" And I said, "Hundreds of times" and I, so that he would understand I said, "When we flew to a target, we were flying straight and level from a certain point called an initial point to the target, and that was an average time of about eight minutes, and you're most exposed when you're flying for the target because you're going straight and level you're not dodging or

evading fire and the Germans got pretty good at shooting these cannons to the point they could fire and reload them and fire again in five seconds. So if you're firing over a target with 300 guns and they're firing every five seconds you can imagine how, on an eight minute bomb run, how many times you can get shot at. We looked at that as something that wasn't going to happen to us, we were going to be all right, and we would sit in the nose compartment of the B-17 and watch these shell bursts right out in front of us. You could see them exploding, and they had kind of an orange-reddish part to them where the explosion took place and then what was left in the air was a black puff of smoke. These were anywhere from 88 millimeter, 105 millimeter, 125, 150 millimeter cannon shells they were firing at us. I said we came, I'd get, getting fatalistic I think would be the word, but not morose, we didn't fear, anybody who says they weren't afraid on these missions is lying because you were afraid for everything that you had and you kept doing it and doing it and then you come to the point where you say, well how many more times can I do this before I'm going to be hit? That's what happened to us, we flew, before my last mission I had a mission that I think is really unique now only because it was a case, in my case, of mistaken identity. We were told to take our plane, not fly with the group, fly down to another air station and they said, "Just get out of your plane when you get there and they'll tell you what to do". So I'd had 24 missions by that time, I was a veteran. But we just got off the plane, landed after about a 20 minute flight, it was close by our base, and they told us to get on board this newer ship. When we got in there it seemed to have equipment I'd never seen before for navigation, and it turned out to be equipped with RADAR that could see through the clouds and

enable the bomb group to bomb without seeing the target. This was the best we had and it wasn't perfect by any means but it enabled us to keep on bombing even in bad weather. So we took off and at that point it finally got to me, well let's see, what am I doing here? What am I doing here? Two other men got on board on the nose and one was a bombardier and the other guy was a RADAR man, well I didn't know that and so the next thing you know we're taking off and I, I'm it, I'm the lead navigator. Well there was an actual course you were supposed to take to be a lead navigator, it was a two week course away from the base where you concentrated on navigating for a large group of planes and a large group of planes cannot make sudden turns it wheels like a fleet of ships and it takes time for it to maneuver in the air. So there I am and it was a fairly short distance that day, we were bombing behind the invasion lines in Normandy and it was only about 100 miles from the English coast to the lines. First mistake I made was that I didn't realize that I was in charge of telling the pilot when to head for the coast and I'm sitting there, well we'd lost three minutes that's nothing, a short time, but what happened was that when we got to the coast to leave for France there were other groups already there, we were late, they were on time and so we had to fishtail around to drop back behind them and then we flew on to our destination, so that was mistake number one. But it didn't cause any harm and when we got the target, the target was covered over with clouds so it came time for me now to give another order to the pilot and it was a very simple order, I said, "Start a slow turn to the left". And what we were doing was flying a little bit east of southeast to come to the point where the RADAR operator can take over, he had to work on a specific

format to do that, so he took over from there, we went on to the target, dropped our bombs through the clouds, we didn't see what the results were. And now back to me, I'm now in charge again so we headed due west over the ocean, not very far, we're still in France when the bombs were dropped and we continued on for a short distance until we got over the ocean again and then we came to, the maps said we were supposed to make a right angle turn from west to north and I thought, well why make a right angle turn, we'll cut across. Well that was wrong, but it didn't cause any problems, no harm done, and when we got back to the forward base where we'd taken off we landed, got back in our plane and went back to our base. We got back there they said, "We want to talk to you", me, "We want to talk to you at headquarters, please come in". So I went in there and they said, "Uh, that was a mistake, you weren't supposed to do that because you haven't taken the lead navigators course, but since you did we're going to promote you". Oh boy! Promotion sounded great, "So we're going to promote you to Deputy Lead Navigator", "Well what is the job of the Deputy Lead Navigator?" "The deputy lead plane flies right next to the leader, so that if anything happens to the leader the deputy can move in and take over the lead of the mission". That took training and schooling and I didn't have that, but they said, "Well since you did this we'll make you deputy". Now what they left out was that, number one it was the hottest spot in the formation because the guns are trained on the leaders and you're flying right next to them so if they miss they're going to hit you and we'd already lost, this is something they didn't tell me, we'd already lost three deputies in prior missions. So it was a bad place to be, but I didn't know and I went with another crew and we

started flying deputy lead. On the second mission as deputy leader we were bombing Hamburg, Germany from about 23,000 feet and our bomb run started over the ocean and it came down on Hamburg, which is in the northwest corner of Germany there, where we were bombing oil refineries. Our targets, I think all in all our targets were legitimate military targets and oil became the prime target and got so that we were bombing their oil supplies out of existence and without oil, without gasoline, they couldn't fly, they couldn't drive their trucks and that eventually collapsed the German defense. Meantime there was a big raid in Romania on the oilfields there that really shortened up and tightened up the supply of oil. So we're flying this mission to do that, to hit the oil refineries and we… according to the report that I read later after the mission the results were good, we only lost one plane, that's a very acceptable loss, well I was in the one plane that got hit. And when you're hit, I think it was the first time I'd ever heard the flak shell exploding, before you'd see them out there, but you didn't hear them. Then this time I heard the flak burst, we were hit in our right wing right by the number three motor, it was a four motor plane, and we were on fire. So the pilot gave the bailout order and I could see out my window right near my navigators desk, the flames. So there's no question and the first one out was the copilot who, I'll talk about him later, remind me to talk about him later, but I was probably two or three out and the pilot stayed with the ship to make sure everybody was gone, was out, and he was in it when it blew up. Fortunately he survived, but one of the fellows on board was killed in the explosion and two of the fellows that were gunners that bailed out over Hamburg, they apparently opened their parachutes rights away and so they were spotted from

the ground. Another one who did that was the copilot and he, he shouldn't have been flying that day he was not mentally up to it, but he opened his shoot and they saw him and they shot him to death in his parachute. Two of the men that landed were captured by civilians, this is something they never warned us about, the civilians of Hamburg were told by Hitler it's ok to take you revenge on fallen fliers. I was just lucky to land in a safe spot; two of these fellows were killed on the ground by the civilians, shot, beaten to death. It was, you know you think in previous raids over Hamburg, in 1943, by the Americans and the British, over 30,000 civilians had been killed, so you can say well what do you expect from a population that's been hit that hard, and they see a fallen flier they're going to take their revenge. I was lucky and landed across the street in a suburban area from a low-rise military hospital and I could tell that because I could see the soldiers with bandages all over them leaning out the windows watching me, and what did I do, they're less than a block away, I hid my parachute and they're watching me. Well, that was what I was supposed to do, your mind works differently, like when I was parachute, when I was falling without opening my parachute I had in my mind the instruction, "Don't open your chute to early, delay opening your chute, let yourself fall" and it was harder to do than it sounds, but it worked and it probably saved my life. It controlled where I landed and it controlled the lack of exposure to angry mobs that I might have been captured by, but when the two soldiers drove up in the car I was hiding in the bushes and I knew it was over I came out with my hands up, that was it. They took me to an air raid shelter not away, just walking a short distance, and they took me inside the air raid shelter and there are the German

civilians and you can imagine the looks they gave me because it was obvious who I was, I had my parachute in my arms when I walked in there because they made me gather it up and take it in there. The air raid was over quite soon and the men then took me to a stockade camp there north of Hamburg, in the city. And when I got there I was interrogated by four or five German soldiers, not officers and not trained interrogators, only one of them knows how old I was because I had this baggy face, I didn't shave yet, and I think I allowed myself to let the idea that they were saying, "America must be losing the war, they're sending over the boy scouts!" That's all I looked like, but they didn't beat me up or mistreat me and I must say I had a good experience until the end with the Germans, that showed they were reasonable and respectful of the enemy, as badly as they hated us. I was in this building, a low rise building, for about an overnight and then the next night we took a train from Hamburg down to Frankfurt which is in southwestern Germany, and when we got there it was the official interrogation center called Gulag Luft, gulag means temporary and luft means for Air Force prisoners. So after the experience I had being interrogated was quite amusing too. When I walked into his office after a couple days of solitary confinement there on his desk was my navigator's briefcase from the airplane. It had blown up, it had survived the explosion, it had been found to Frankfurt, Germany a 150 miles away, all in three days, that's how good they were. So when I walked in there I saw my briefcase I go, "Uh oh", you know, now he knows everything I know. But as it turned out they weren't interested in young kids like me, they knew we didn't know anything about the invasion or the strategy and so he said to me, "Where you from?" Well I wasn't supposed to say anything,

but I answered; I was just caught flat-footed, I just said well I was from Chicago. "Oh!" he said, "I was with the World's Fair 1933 there!" Well now, that could have been a lie, but it kind of took me off guard so he asked me where I lived I told him Chicago again, he asked me for my father's address, I wasn't supposed to give him that either, but I gave him that and actually that was not a serious breach of our orders, but it helped get the word to my parents that I was alive and the sequence there is that they got a telegram from the army saying that I had been shot down two weeks after I was shot down. So I was shot down June 18th, two more weeks is they're now into, uh, late June and the telegram told them I was missing. That's a frightening thing for parents to have to look at because it doesn't, what does it mean? They don't know where I am, the army doesn't know where I am, but as a result of my revealing my father's office address they got a telegram two weeks later than that, after the first one, saying I was a prisoner, so they didn't, but during that two weeks they told me that it was just terrible on them, the not knowing. Fortunately they found out, in time, that I was alive. When I was transported to permanent prison camp from Frankfurt we took a train east and the destination was the great escape camp, it was not known as that at that time, but the great escape had already taken place three months before I got there, and that was a sad, sad story even though great heroics it took to dig the tunnels and get out, the bad news was that 76 got out, 50 were executed for trying to escape, 3 got away and they were all Europeans, that's how they got away. I really feel that Americans had no chance, they didn't' know the language, were not dressed properly, didn't have money and so forth, there's no way to get out of Germany, deep in Germany and

here we were in western Poland. The camp turned out to be quite hospitable actually. It was a camp that was designed for airmen and there were only officers in that camp, there were other enlisted men's camps. We had, as I said, four officers onboard, one was killed the others of us were scattered, we were captured in different places because the plane is moving as you go out and so I didn't see the pilot until I got to the prison camp and he had stayed with the plane as I said and saved himself by opening the parachute. He was captured by farmers who had a rope around his neck and were ready to hang him when German soldiers came up, as he told me, as took him away and the soldiers made no bones about their disagreement with the civilians trying to hang us, so it showed, I'd say some respect for the enemy that was lifesaving in his case and many others too, but it was unfortunately not the case many other times. And I've never seen any record of this, of the number of airmen who were murdered by the civilians, there seems to be no record of that. But in the prison camp there were 10,000 flying officers divided up into five compounds or camps within the camp, north, east, south, west and center. 2,000 prisoners in each one, walled off by barbed wire so you couldn't get to the other people. There were fellows there that had been shot down over a year before I was and they had more than the brunt of that part of it, they had helped for newcomers like me, or latecomers, I was considered a latecomer the guys that were shot down early were early birds. The interesting thing about those who were shot down in the early days, 1943, I have a record of all the prisoners in my compound and it's interesting to see that most of the early birds were shot down on their first five missions, they never got beyond five missions. That was because the fighter

attacks were excellent because, terrible for us because we didn't have any escort to go take us in that deep, well by the time I got there, spring of 44', we had escorts so we saw fewer German fighters. One mission that I'll never forget was when we were bombing the oil refineries of Stettin in northwestern Poland on the Baltic Sea and we had flown for, the total length of the mission was 11 hours, you don't have time to eat, you're not eating anything, but that day we could see our own fighters turning back and going back west and we were alone. So we're 30 ships in this one formation, but you knew that that wasn't a good thing to see your escorts leaving, and within minutes a swarm of German fighters, I would guess about 40 or 50 of them pulled up alongside our formation, out of range for our guns, and they had a hard time slowing down to our 150 miles per hour and they looked us over and the next thing you know they sped up, went ahead, and came back and came at us head on. I was lucky, the guns they weren't aiming up our high flight, they were aiming at the low quadrant, they shot down three of our planes in one pass and then they disappeared. Now we sustained a bullet hole in our right wing where the gas tank was and I could see the gasoline raining out and that meant that we were going to lose an engine, and we did. When we lost the engine then we couldn't keep up anymore and the group pulled away on us and we're there all by ourselves over Poland and I think it was, I've said to people, like going to your own funeral because it seemed to be just a certainty that the Germans were going to come back and shoot us down by ourselves, that we were unable to defend ourselves against even a couple of airplanes even though we had 13 machineguns onboard, fighters are so much faster. So I would say that's the time I said, well we're dead, we're

going to be killed, because there's no protection really in the plane other than our guns and the planes are not armored they're light aluminum hulls and bullets go right through those and so a fighter attack would be not only hit the plane but it would hit you. I must say that I just really, for a moment there I just lost all hope I thought, well this is it we're dead. As the formation pulled away we followed the course home, which we were supposed to do, that was my job to get us back on the course to stay where we were supposed to be. Well we got to Denmark, well we were flying over Denmark down by ourselves and we saw some fighters coming up behind us. The tail gunner sitting in the back, he's looking backwards and he can see these planes and he reported there were four fighter planes coming up on us from the rear, well it turned out they were our fighters and, as the pilot explained to me later, those fighters were stationed along our return route in case a cripple would come along, like us, and they were there to escort us. Well once we saw those planes we just relaxed, it was a time of great comfort to see that we were now being escorted by our own planes, and we got back. But I must say that that particular mission changed my outlook certainly, from one where nothing was going to happen to sort of anything can happen and it almost did. And so what I did as a result of that was I decided to, number one I was going to get a new kind of parachute because the parachutes we had were about the size of a small briefcase and you wore a harness, but the parachute laid on the deck and you would put it on and open up and I thought well, nice to have it convenient there but what if there's no leisure time to do that and you have to leave and you don't have your parachute and you might die because you couldn't save yourself. So I changed to a front, chest

pack loading to a backpack loading and wore that whereas parachutes were sort of put there for later I wore my parachute from then on from the moment we took off until the moment we landed, I was not going to get caught short without a parachute, and it did happen to some guys. And it also took away the confidence that I had had before and it didn't get any better after that, the missions that we flew, I'm talking about getting shot down here so I've got to go on with that. That was the end of my missions and I was captured and I'm in the great escape camp and that was quite comfortable, we had books, we had musical instruments, we had sports equipment. Our compound of 2,000 was counted twice a day, we would march out to the parade ground there, it wasn't really a parade ground it was an assembly ground, but we lined up and they counted us, physically, twice a day. Food became the primary concern and at first we, each prisoner had an 11 pound package of food form the American Red Cross, or International Red Cross I should say ever week. That's June, but by September they cut that ration in half, now we were getting five and a half pounds of food a week and what we did in the room, we wound up with 14 of us in this 18 foot long room, I don't know how deep it was, how wide it was, but we had four triple decker bunks and one double decker bunk and of course the latecomers got the top bunks. The bunks had bed board and they were hard so you got a mattress which was full of, I can't think of it, straw, something like that, and it spread that over these bed boards and you got to sleep I think, you got to sleep and we got used to the life there. It was, as I said we were getting enough to eat until September, then we were getting less, but we got along. One thing about the prisoner of war life is that when you get there as a newcomer,

first of all, you're interviewed by the senior officers, we were all officers but we had colonels and majors and captains and we respected the ranks so they ran the camp, our senior officers, first thing they did was to check you out and make sure you were an American and knew who was in the world series and who was a few things like that, so they did check us out and then you get to your room, you tell your story how you were shot down because you never mention it again because everybody there had been shot down, that's how they got there, so once the story is told there's no need to repeat it for anybody. And I had the greatest bunch of guys there, one guy from Tennessee, one from Mississippi, one from Texas, California, Minnesota, Michigan, I was from Illinois and everybody's in the same boat so you get along. We did have arguments but it was mostly about impeaching somebody who had told something that maybe he couldn't prove, you could say well the earth is round, well nobody argued with you then, but if you said, one story I remember was one of the guys was talking about how he had this fellow on his crew who would have a habit of taking his machinegun apart, 50 caliber machinegun is a huge gun, but it's mounted through the hull and it's got a spring on the butt end of it so that it floats. Anyway, he was regaling us with the story of this fellow his crew who was continuously taking the gun apart in the air and putting it back together and he made some statement about the gun wasn't fire fast enough. And so he took it apart, put it together in the air, I said, "Jim, that wasn't necessary because on the 50 caliber machine gun there's a little screw in the back, you put a screwdriver in there and you can turn it, make it faster or slower so it wasn't necessary". He was mad as heck because he'd been doing that, but you really looked for chances to skewer

somebody who said something they couldn't prove. We played cards, we read books, we had some marvelous books there, we had a modern library it was a great collection. I read the thickest, heaviest books I could find because it's a way to pass the time. I was an accordion player when I was in grade school, I had taken lessons and sure enough there was an accordion, there were two accordions and one was played by a fellow that was a professional and one was played by a fellow that was a professional, oh my gosh! I was just a kid playing so he gave me a few tips on it, but I was not offering any promise of improving, but I overheard one of the fellows one day say, he said, "If you want to see somebody who's over the wall and out of here go into the washroom and watch Casey playing the accordion" because I would make all kinds of faces and I could really loose myself in the instrument I was playing by ear, I knew songs by ear. Well that went along until (knocking sound) oh! The winter time, and we had Christmas there, that was a sad particular time for us because not only was it Christmas and we're in jail, but the Germans had attacked in the battle of the bulge and were making some headway to maybe drive the American forces back out of France and Belgium and that made us worry quite a bit, and we thought oh my gosh we're going to be here a lot longer than we thought because we were hoping the Americans and Allied forces would conquer Germany and come and get us, which they did, they did. But at the same time the Russians were coming on from the east and why Hitler had ever attacked Russia I don't know, and I think that's what cost them the war because Russia really was weak when the war started in 39' and communism had not really worked there and Stalin had killed off many of the officer corps, but they had millions of people there

and they were fighting to the death for their homeland and with our help. We supplied them with airplanes, trucks, tanks and they could have lost that war to Germany if it hadn't been for our support. But Russia finally developed its own ability to manufacture airplanes and eventually outnumbered the Germans ten to one in the airplanes and just rolled over the Germans at the end. Because of Hitler's mistakes and not withdrawing his troops, letting over a million be captured and killed, that was a disaster for the Germans. So we hear the guns coming from the east, and we knew we were going to be overrun, but we didn't know that Hitler was going to give an order, which he did in late January of 45' that the American, the Allied prisoners were to evacuated and on January 27th we began a march at midnight westward in a blizzard at about 15 below zero. Fortunately being from Chicago I knew about winter and I knew how to take care of myself, I did not suffer any frostbite, but a lot of the guys who did not know how to do that suffered from frostbite which is a permanent injury, even after you're recovered from it when winter comes you feel it. So I coped with the march and it was almost 15 miles long the first night, we stopped a couple of places, once in a church where you could get out of the weather, once in a barn, at least barns and I was able to get in a barn and lie down in the hay and take off my shoes and get a little rest. My mother had sent me a package, it was the only one I got and very few of them got through to anybody there, but in the package was a pair of fleece lined slippers which didn't look like they were going to be of much use, but they saved me they really did because when we got into the barns with the hay I was able to take my shoes off and my socks off, the socks were damp, I put the socks under my armpits to dry, I

put on these slippers and covered myself with the blankets, I had a couple of blankets and I also put my shoes under the blanket to keep them from freezing because a lot of guys had trouble putting their shoes back on when they froze, we finally got to a place called Muskow (??), I'm not sure whether it's in eastern Germany or western Poland but it's close to that. We got inside for the first time in about two and a half days and we got inside pottery plants where there's heat and for the first time then we were able to take our clothes off and lie down and rest in heath, warmth. We stayed there the next night too and then we started for another 10 mile hike to a place called Spremberg and there we boarded cattle cars for transport back into Germany, to the west. Those cattle cars were built, some of them in World War One, they were called a 40 and Eight, either held 40 men or eight horses. So they piled 50 of us men in there and there wasn't room for everybody to sit down at one time, we had to take turns. We went westward from there and the first night we pulled into Regensburg, Germany, which is near the Rhine river so we were getting quite a ways west. The guards, there was an air raid siren that went off, the guards locked us in and left, they went to air raid shelters and we were left in this railroad siding not knowing whether, it was night time, whether the British knew we were there or whether they were going to bomb this railroad yards, which they might have, and we really had great concern over that. Fortunately the all clear signal came and we were back on the trip again. Got to Bavaria, a town called Moosburg and when we got there it was nighttime so they kept us locked up again for another night and then let us out the next day and all they had was tents, it was February! And the worst winter they'd had there for 25 years, it was really terrible

weather. So we stayed in the tents somehow, I don't really remember that that well, it was a few days and then we were indoors, but the conditions indoors were horrible compared to what we had had before. They had barracks buildings, I can't even relate the dimensions, but what they had done they put four triple-decker bunks together, build them as one piece so take two triple-deckers and push them against two more triple-deckers and they were made to stick together, made of the same supporting wood. We had to cut lots, draw lots for beds and I lost, I had to sleep on the floor for the first month, but at least it was warmer than it was outside. We then discovered that there were flees in the barracks and below the floorboards they found them when some of the guys crawled underneath and cut some wood off for firewood because we didn't have any heat, nothing to cook with either. They would get down to little wood chips and they made, some of the guys made stoves out of stacking tin cans, they were powdered milk cans and you'd cut the tops and bottoms off and stack them up and create kind of a stove and you'd put the chips of wood in the bottom and light those, then the heat would go up, would rise and then there was sort of a burner that would be a the top that you could actually heat food with. The food there was terrible, we weren't getting our Red Cross parcels and all, or what little we got, was not enough and we began to starve. We still got news of what was going on in the war because the older prisoners had figured out how to make a radio. They bribed the guards to get a radio tube and with that tube they could make a radio and we received the British Broadcasting Company's broadcasts and the news would be circulated amongst us. Every day they would tell us what the progress was being made, about the Battle of the Bulge which was

disheartening. In the first camp where we had space for it we'd actually built up a war room where we were keeping track of where the battle lines were, east and west, and the Germans would go in there and look to see what our version of the battle lines looked because they were not necessarily the same as they were getting over their radios. But that was really bad, really bad at Moosburg because it just was miserable. My routine was, wake up in the morning take all my clothes off, go through my clothes to find the flees and catch them between my thumbnail and my forefinger and break their little skins and the blood would spurt out, that was your blood. There was no DDT there; there was nothing we could do about them. Some of the guys figured out, I found out about this too late, but the flees would lay eggs in your seems in your clothes so if you took a candle and passed the candle under the seams of the clothes you could hear the eggs popping, the fleas, you could hear them pop. Well I never knew about this so I just, I would go through and find what I could and kill them if I could, they'd jump and you didn't always catch them and kill them, but it was just a never ending progress I mean there were thousands of these fleas there, you'd never get ahead of them. So as the war got better we were feeling good now in Bavaria that we knew they were coming and they came April 29th, 1945. That was our liberation day. Patton's army, the Third Army was coming onto our camp and was going to liberate us and the division of it within the army was the 14th Armored Division, they had a battle outside the camp with the SS men then were guarding us and drove them off and killed them. Then they were at our camp and the tanks rolled right through the barbed wire fences and we were liberated, it was just a marvelous feeling and three days later General Patton came

himself! Drove in standing up in his jeep with his ivory handled pistols on him, and we formed up in sort of an assembly of companies with an isle down the middle and he walked down the middle and I heard him say, “Have you got enough to eat?” But he had a scowl on his face, I thought what is he scowling about? We’re happy, we’re so excited, we can’t, why isn’t he shaking hands with us? Why isn’t he cheering us on? I found out later that the excuse given for the scowl was that he was so angry over the way we looked in our rags and our gaunt physiques and that’s what he was angry about. But I came up with my own version because I read a speech that he gave after the war, which kind of confirmed my feelings. The speech he gave to his men just before the invasion of France said, “My soldiers don’t surrender! And I don’t want to hear of any of you being captured unless you were wounded, and even then I expect you to keep on fighting!” So my distorted mind said well he must be looking down his nose at us for being captured, but maybe he hadn’t thought of what it’s like to come down ina parachute hundreds of miles behind the lines, and what are you going to do? You don’t have any weapon and you couldn’t get away if you tried. But I read the speech as I said a couple of years ago, I was satisfied that he was not putting us down for being captured, but a great man, one of the greatest generals in American history I think. Because he taught the British how to fight, in my opinion the British were more anxious to get credit for the progress that was made at the invasion, which they never would have been able to bring about by themselves, ever. It was the largest invasion force in world history and I don’t see how it can be topped again because there will never be another world war, in my opinion. It’s just, the weapons are too… too violent and the atom

bomb it just makes the war totally silly. Why would you ever drop an atom bomb if you know you're going to get it right back? So I think that it's hoped we'll never have a World War again, not a big one like we had, but at the time it was the war we had. I must say that, I'll give you an example of how I felt after liberation, I was in a daze, I really was, and they told us stay where you are we're coming to get you and I remember one day a buddy of mine and I took a walk, and the war is not ended yet it was May the eighth, that was nine days later. So we took a walk to the east and we came on an army field kitchen and they offered us food and I said I couldn't eat it because I couldn't swallow it, but we rode back from the military kitchen, the field kitchen, in a truck, an army truck, our army, and on the floor of the truck were hand grenades, Sherman hand grenades rolling around on the floor! And the driver said, "Oh don't worry about the hand grenades!" He said the guys use them for fishing, they pull the pin, throw it in the water, boom! Out come the fish and they'd pick they'd pick them up. (Laughs) But finally we got flown out of there, it was after VE Day, a couple of days, I remember because on VE Day to celebrate, we were liberated, so they burned down one of the guard towers to celebrate. We got to, they took us about 20 miles away on trucks to an airfield and we got onboard the C-47 transport planes and they flew us to Le Havre and landed there. There they had camps and we'd gotten a new designation, Recovered Allied Military Personnel, R-A-M-P, so we were RAMPs instead of prisoners. They gave us nothing but milkshakes and creamed chicken and mashed potatoes, it was about the only thing we could eat, you know we couldn't eat a steak at that point. They took good care of us there, I remember we got a chance to take a hot shower over

day! I think from the time I got to Moosburg in February until April I had one shower when I got there and I don't think I ever had another shower again for three months (laughs). As I say it took me a long time to come out of my shell and even when I got back to my country, the United States, I couldn't talk about it and fellows that I'd met in college cause I went and started college in the fall of 45' and they said, "We knew you'd been through something that you didn't want to talk about so we left you alone" and that went on for a long time. The thing I had done as I was in training and prison I'd written letters home and my mother had saved all the letters, every one, and those became like a diary. I finally, in 94' I sat down and started writing my book because my first wife died and my second wife said, "Either do something with these or I'm throwing them out!" So I was a good typist and I'd been, of course, back in society for a while, 50 years or so, I knew how to type so I sat down and typed all the letters out just the way they were, I didn't change them. I then circulated the book, the draft, among some of my buddies, got some comments, and then I went back and filled in things that I wanted to add in beside the letters, so the book kind of wrote itself and I'm glad that I did it and glad that I have a chance here to tell people about it.

JOHNS: Just one question related to you know, when you got back, your family had clearly been aware of what you were going through, but when did you first get to see them when you returned?

CASEY: When did I do?

JOHNS: When did you first get to see your family?

CASEY: It was June, we took a troop ship from Le Havre to New York, took us 13 days. Yes

the war was still on with Japan, but there were no Japanese submarines in the Atlantic, that was impossible they never, I mean even people talked about it, but there was no way you could supply a Japanese submarine beyond the Pacific ocean, there weren't any threats but we zigzagged our way, took us 13 days. One of the things I remember, there were 3,000 officers on board that ship, prisoners, x-prisoners, so they picked me out as officer of the guard, so we had enlisted men stationed around the ship, it wasn't that big a ship, I had to go around and replace the guards with fresh guards and relieve the others and after I did that a couple of times, this showed you how I felt, I said to the Sergeant I said, "Look, I'm not going to do this anymore, you do it, you take it over. I'm going to be in my bunk if anybody wants me." And that's what I did. The bunks were canvass racks attached to the hull and you couldn't turn over without bumping the guy above you so, so but we had food, we had more soft food and that was the main thing we wanted. I don't remember a single conversation with anybody I had onboard that ship, but. Got to New York and got to Camp Kilmer and they put us on a train for home and when I arrived my family was there to meet me.

JOHNS: Did any of your siblings serve as well?

CASEY: My Older brother was in the Air Force also, Air Corps, he want to pilot training which was a 15 month course so I got to the point where I was a Second Lieutenant and he was still an enlisted cadet! He would have none of that. I got a chance to go to Florida before we were to take off for Europe, going over, I was a Lieutenant, he was a cadet, he was always bigger and stronger than I was so he wrestled me down to the floor and pinned me down and I was yelling, "I'm going to call the military

police on you!" (Laughs) I always had a good sense of humor; I tried to keep that up, even in the book I talk about things like that. But that was a great experience I wouldn't trade it for anything, I'm glad I lived through it. I would say that when it came time for my boys, I have four boys, to be eligible for the military service, only the oldest one was eligible, I had no hesitation about saying to them how, "I'm not going to subsidize you if you run to Canada, but if you take advantage of your opportunities for exemption by going to college I will cover that and you go ahead and do that and take advantage of every legal opportunity there is to avoid being drafted". So that's what they did, so none of them were old enough except him and none had to serve. But I really felt strongly about that, I felt my family had given enough, there's no such thing as enough, but my uncle who I never saw was killed in World War One, I was a prisoner, I felt that we had done our share.

JOHNS: Now after you returned from the war you went back to school, what did you study?

CASEY: I went to Dartmouth college which turned out to be the best, it was a men's school, and I was at the end of the, well not the end but we were coming to the end where they were going to go co-ed, but I really was not intent on becoming Phi-Beta-Kappa or anything like that, I took some courses I knew I could pass due to the training I'd had like in trigonometry and geometry, solid geometry, spherical trigonometry, astronomy and then I took reading and writing classes and speech classes and took economics, the major was economics, I felt that was a good course for me to take.

JOHNS: And where did you career take you?

CASEY: From college my father was still in the investment business and I loved the idea of

going into that business so I took a job from college in Wall Street as a trainee in investment banking making $250 a month. Now you could actually in 1948 in New York city we had a duplex apartment there under rent control that cost $130 a month for the whole apartment and so three of four of us split the rent and the subway was a dime, the phone was a nickel and you could eat lunch for 35 cents if you could find the place so we managed on $250 a month and I really had a lot of fun too, it allowed me to really come back to life I guess. It was just that. Then they sent me from New York to Denver and I worked for a company there that I felt was going nowhere too, so I quit that job and went back to Chicago and went to work for an insurance company and I kind of liked insurance except with a big company I've quickly perceived that working for a big corporation was not for me, I couldn't do it, I didn't want to play the games that people play in those companies where they try to get credit for things they didn't do and try to avoid blame for things they did and that just turned me off. So I started going to night school with the insurance company and I met a kindergarten classmate of mine who was the CPA and he told me he was going to night school as well, law school, that's great so I started doing that and I fell in love with the law right away and I came to the point where I said I can't work for the company where I'm travelling and I can't do that and go to school too so I quit. I had an insurance license and just barely succeeded to stay alive while I was finishing law school and I had a real good opportunity with a law firm that my father had used and he wasn't their only client by any means, but it helped. They had a great array of clients one of which was the Chicago Bears football team and there were two senior partners and three associates and that size

firm was representing the Chicago Bears. You couldn't do that anymore, when the senior partners died off then we lost that. I got into, because I knew insurance, I got to do work for insurance companies clients at the firm and I captured one of those clients and became an expert in insurance law and I also became a trial lawyer because they, one of the two senior partners was a trial lawyer and he was a super guy so he took on a client for us that threw us into court. He told the client, he said, "I'll give you, you want rock bottom rights you'll have to take whoever I give you!" Here I am, just a recent graduate and I'm going to court every day! So you throw them in and see if you swim and I managed to survive that and I enjoyed it so much that's what I became, a full time trial lawyer for the rest of my career, I just retired last year after 54 years. Best thing I ever did.

JOHNS: have you participated in any veterans organizations since your service?

CASEY: I'm a member of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, but I'm not active in those organizations. One of the reasons I came to the Pritzker Library was that I had heard about it, I had come to some of the sessions that you had with speakers and I came down here thinking, well now that I'm retired I've got to find something to do and this seemed to be something could be useful in doing and also contribute something, so that's why I'm here and I have enjoyed it ever so much.

JOHNS: Wonderful. Have you had a chance to travel back to Germany or Poland?

CASEY: Yes. In 92' my second wife and I flew to Frankfurt, Germany and took the trains from there all the way east to Poland where we rented a car and drove back to the camp and then we took the trains south to Bavaria and we visited the second camp, Moosburg. I think that was a great experience and looking back as I say I have no

regrets, I'm sorry for the people we lost that died (??) or got shot down and I'm sorry to see all my former prisoner buddies die off, but… I just came back from Dayton, Ohio where we had a POW reunion for the prisoners of the camp in western Poland, Stalag Luft Three, and that was quite an experience too.

JOHNS: Do you remember hearing about how your experiences in your camps related to experiences that other POWs had during World War Two?

CASEY: Well, in World War Two yes, but not to the Japanese prisoners, not to any other war's prisoners because in experiences what keeps you together is going through this experience together. It's a great experience to get back with the fellows in Stalag Luft 3 and Stalag 7, 8 and just speak in code as far as outsiders are concerned talking about the words we made up for things and, and we're just a brotherhood now, it's just a unique group that nobody else can really know about.

JOHNS: And, of all your experiences in the military what was most beneficial to you when you transferred into your civilian life?

CASEY: Well I would say that I was so young, I think that I've used this line so it's not original of this moment, but I was learning about death before I knew anything about life. And I was thrown in and I swam and I made it, I didn't drown. I was heartened by a conversation I had with one of the early birds when we got to the second prison camp, and he said, "Forget about being a latecomer, you went through the worst part of it in the winter march and in this hellhole in Bavaria, and you don't have to apologize to anybody". He was a great friend of mine, he's passed on now but… He was kind of a mentor when I was in the first camp and I

stayed with him in the second camp, he was kind of a rock you could grab onto. I went to visit him after the war in Mississippi and my kids loved him, he had his five and that's the… I have one other cellmate who I contacted who was in, well there are two of them, one died in Washington State, the other is still alive in Fort Worth, and we've shared or he wrote sort of a book and it's like mine but I sent him mine and he didn't come up with any contradictions (laughs).

JOHNS: And you mentioned that you had some stories about your copilot that you wanted to share?

CASEY: Yes. The copilot, his name was Milton Miller, and Milton was our copilot, my copilot all through training and all through the first 24 missions of combat, finally he got promoted. We didn't know it at the time, Milton was having a nervous breakdown and once he got promoted he was the airplane commander on a B-17 and he was in charge. So one mission he completely cracked and dived the plane out of formation as if to crash it and his own crew took him out of the seat forcibly and subdued him and when he got back to the group hospital they didn't have any care whatsoever for him. No psychiatric care, psychiatry itself was a black science at the time, nobody knew anything about it except Freud. Well Milton was in the hospital and, I should say before he gets to the hospital he was promoted he was flying his own, I think I said that, he scared the hell out of his crew and he was hospitalized and he was so afraid of what the Colonel would do of him for trying to avoid flight duty he volunteered to go up again. He was not fit to fly, as demonstrated by what he did when we were shot down. I was sitting no more than three feet away from the hatch where I saw him go out; I was in the nose

compartment he came down from the pilot's compartment, he was the first one out, released the hatch cover and dived out of the ship. Now what he did, I couldn't see but I'm sure is what happened, he opened his parachute immediately and he was shot to death in his parachute when they got close to the ground. He should have been fine that day and it's such a sad story, I've written a story about it for the Eighth Air Force News and I hope it's published in the next year pointing out the failure of the doctors as well as the group commander to recognize a case that cried out for relief, that he should not have been flying. If he had not been that sick I doubt that he would have pulled his parachute open. I did what they told us to do, I held off doing that and that's how I saved my life. So that's one story I'll never forget, and his mother and father wrote to my folks and asked if they could ask me what I knew about it and I was in prison camp and I never got back in touch with them when I got home, I kind of was closed up myself too. I've come to the conclusion from my experience with post-traumatic stress disorder that every prisoner of war has it to some degree or another. I finally convinced my pilot to go seek treatment himself, and he was reacting as you'd expect in the days when mental illness was looked on as shameful and scandalous. He couldn't come to admit that he had the problem, I finally convinced him that he did and he's getting treatment for post-traumatic stress himself and he was one of the bravest fellows I've ever met. Just tell you one story about him and the top gunner which I think is a priceless story. I only flew as I say two missions with them, but the pilot and the top gunner got into an argument after one mission, I was not there he told me about it. They apparently had been attacked by a German fighter and the chief engineer

top gunner has got two machineguns and he didn't fire them right away and when they got back on the ground the pilot said, "What were you waiting for?" He said, "Well, I wanted to let him get a little closer so I could make a sure kill" the pilot said, "Don't do that anymore! Even if they're out of range shoot! Shoot! Scare them away!" But that's how one of these two guys worked (??), but turned out they were captured and got together after being shot down and they were on a train together and the train came to a stop and the guard left the car or wherever they were and they opened the window and jumped out! They were in the process of trying to escape when they stopped the train, I wasn't there at that time so I'm just relating what they told me, but they stopped the train and got off and found them and captured and put them back on the train. There's a little, I don't know whether you'd remember Errol Flynn the movie actor, but he was the greatest adventure film star of the day and I said these guys are like Errol Flynn, they defied death and did things that nobody else would do.

JOHNS: Are there any other stories you'd like to share with me today?

CASEY: Well I'll tell you one more, I'll tell you one more, which I want this preserved because I think it's one of the best stories I've ever heard and I know it's kosher because I know the guy very well. So when we were liberated most the guys stayed around like I did and waiting for them, my friend Vince had another young latecomer, real latecomer, maybe three months or so, and they took a German car away from the Germans or whoever it was, this is after liberation, and drove to Paris. When they got to Paris and they were still wearing their ragged clothes, these guys were really entrepreneurs so they found out there was new uniforms, you

could get fresh clothes, they were dressed in these rags so they went to a military depot and they got a whole set of new uniforms, they were lieutenants. Then they found out that there were two more depots so they put the rags back on and went to these places and got two more sets of uniforms, then they sold the excess uniforms that they didn't need and they now had enough money to move into a nice hotel so they moved into a nice hotel. This gets better as it goes along. So they're sitting in the lounge and this very attractive French woman comes in and sits down and so they contact the waiter, they say, "Could you ask that lady if she'd come over and join us?" And the waiter said, "No, you don't do that, you ask the lady if you can join her!" So she acquiesced, she could speak some English so they're sitting there with her and she said, "What are you doing this afternoon?" they said, "Nothing". She said, "Well come with me I'm going out to the racetrack, my father's the manager of the racetrack." So they get there to the racetrack and they meet the father and he says, "Are you betting on horses?" They say, "Well yeah we're trying to, but..." he says, "Here, bet on these." and they all won. So the guy said, "Would you like to come back tomorrow/" "Well yeah!" so they came back, they left there with about 3,000 bucks which was a small fortune. In America at that time, in the 40s, you could buy a house for $3,000, that's how much money they had. So they figured they wouldn't get away with that, getting back on the troopship they'd somehow have to disclose what they had so they went out and spend it (laughs). But I thought that's a story for the ages! I know the fellow well enough and I saw him after the war and at prisoner of war reunions and I didn't write about it in the book, but I think that's a priceless story. Two entrepreneurs parlayed their status enough

to really live the highlife in Paris for a while just spending the money because they didn't think they could get away with it (laughs). And I saw him at some of the reunions so I have a picture of him, Vince, what a great guy. Oh there's one more story about Vince let me tell you about. So Vincent was in the same barracks I was but he was across the hall and there was a room next to us on my side of the building and in that room was a son of a huge American fortune for the, what the heck's the name of it, Eaton Manufacturing Company. So somebody said to Len one time he said, "Len do you know who you're playing cards with? You're telling him about you were a soda jerk before the service and you'd go out on dates with a dollar and a half and have a good time. This guy is rich beyond belief!" So Len after the war came through Cleveland and he called up Eaton Jr. and he finally after many calls got to talk to Eaton's secretary, she says, "Well how do you know Mr. Eaton?" Well he said, "I played bridge with him every day for a year" (laughs) and that broke the ice and she said, "Well I'm so sorry that he's out of town today and I'll tell him that you were here". How did you know him, I played bridge with him every day for… But that's the story that I think is one of the greatest I ever heard, and Len never did get to see Eaton, I don't think he ever showed up at any of our POW reunions that I recall anyway. That's a fraternity, those prisoners of war are just the most exclusive and getting more exclusive by the day, but I don't regret the experience. I'm glad I survived. And I made the title of my book *To Fight for My Country, Sir* out of something I said myself. I was standing in inspection in advanced navigation school one Saturday morning and this officer comes by and spots me as the kid of the whole group, got in my face as they say today and said,

"Casey, why did you join the army?" Well I was kind of baffled, but I said, "To fight for my country, Sir!" And my classmates all laughed when they heard that, it's just a naïve kid saying what, what else am I going to do? I didn't have time to think. So that became the title of my book.

JOHNS: Well are there any questions you expected me to ask that I didn't or any other stories you'd like to share?

CASEY: I don't think so, I mean I think post-traumatic stress is an important topic, I'm not qualified to talk about except to say that the Veterans Administration has just done so many wonderful things for me. As a former prisoner of war I'm entitled to everything they have for free, whatever treatment, I get new glasses when I need them, I need hearing aids every four years, they can't do enough for us. So whenever I get a chance to I trumpet the VA for being the most honorable organization and if you're an x-prisoner of war you're missing out if you're not partaking of the great services they offer.

JOHNS: Well thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me today and for your service to the country, we greatly appreciate it.

CASEY: Thank you for having me and I enjoyed it and thanks for being a good interviewer.

JOHNS: You're very welcome sir.