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Interview with
Mr. Eugene R. Cronin
February 1, 1972

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas
Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello
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Oral History Collection

Eugene R. Cronin

Interviewer: Dr. Ronald E. Marcello

Place of Interview: Dallas, Texas

Date: February 3, 1972

Dr. Marcello: This is Ron Marcello interviewing Mr. Eugene Cronin for the North Texas State University Oral History Collection. The interview is taking place on February 3, 1972, in Dallas, Texas. I'm interviewing Mr. Cronin in order to get his reminiscences and experiences while he was a prisoner-of-war of the Germans during World War II. Mr. Cronin was shot down over Hungary in late 1944. Mr. Cronin, to begin this interview, why don't you very briefly give us a biographical sketch of yourself. In other words, would you tell me when you were born, where you were born, your education--things of that nature.

Mr. Cronin: I was born in St. Joseph, Missouri, on September 28, 1917, and was educated in parochial schools in Kansas City, Missouri, and attended Rockhurts high school and two years of college in Kansas City. I was transferred to Dallas by my employer in the late part of '41 and went to the Army from Dallas.

Dr. Marcello: How did you get into the Army Air Corps?

- Cronin: We were married in late '41, and I was drafted into the Army in 1943. We were expecting a child, and I had an opportunity to enlist in the Navy--having a Navy commission. I chose instead to wait and be drafted and went into the Army when our child was six months old--as a draftee. I was put in an engineering outfit and volunteered for flying training. That was my background for getting into the Air Corps.
- Marcello: When did you go overseas?
- Cronin: In the summer of '44. It was late summer because we were the last group to go by what I believe was called the northern route through Newfoundland, over the Azores, into Africa, and ultimately to Italy.
- Marcello: Did anything extraordinary happen on that trip from the United States to Italy?
- Cronin: Several things, but they might not add too much historically. We were weathered in at Newfoundland for about three or four days and had several experiences with Canadian Air Force personnel. I remember something that might be of interest. In those days it was the Army Air Corps; the Air Corps was part of the Army. The Army never let its right hand know what its left hand was doing, and we were issued equipment for the jungle. They thought we were going to what they called the China-Burma-India Theater and were issued rations for the crew of ten men to live--I think for fourteen days--stowed in the bomb

bay of the aircraft. We picked up a new airplane. If I remember correctly, we had sealed orders when we left Mitchell Field in New York. I forget where our first leg was--somewhere up in Vermont. We thought we were headed south, and we found out we were going to Italy. Oh, we had such things as mosquito netting, jungle kits, all types of escape kits for jungles in our equipment. While we were in Newfoundland, we tore open some of our escape kits, got fishing equipment, and went fishing in the canoes up there in Newfoundland. I think the only people that were fooled was our own crew. I'm sure Intelligence knew where we were going a long time ago.

Marcello: What were your feelings or your reaction when you found out that you were going to Italy rather than the CBI Theater?

Cronin: Everyone was much happier. I think there was greater fear of flying combat against the Japanese because so much of the time was spent over water, and ditching an aircraft is a treacherous thing. There was very little chance of survival.

Marcello: What sort of an airplane were you a part of? In other words, what sort of a crew was this? Was it a B-24 or a B-17?

Cronin: It was a B-24J aircraft that we picked up at Mitchell Field. It was manufactured in Dearborn, Michigan. I

remember it was the very latest type of plane. Its speed was some five to ten miles faster than we were used to traveling. One of the interesting things that the crew noticed occurred when we were coming back from a raid over Vienna. We were a new crew, and when we got into Italy they took our new airplane away from us and gave us a piece of junk. We were on one of our first trips, and we were in this old airplane, and we had a near air-to-air collision somewhere over the Adriatic, I believe it was. When we nearly had this collision we had to make an evasive left turn, and we lost altitude. I remember looking and seeing this other craft making a right turn, and as we pulled out, we were pulling out close to a squadron below us, and one of the aircraft flying alone behind this squadron passed us and going just fast enough--I'd say ten or fifteen miles per hour. We looked over and 2,700, I think, was the number, and a couple of us screamed over the intercom, "Look what's passing us!" It was the aircraft that we had taken overseas. It was on three engines. We were on three engines at the time, too, but it was kind of interesting. I'm sure it is of no historical value, though.

Marcello: Well, in a way perhaps it is. Why did they switch airplanes on you when you got to Italy?

Cronin: In the Army it's all seniority. We were a new crew, and

we got the worst equipment.

Marcello: Did the crews have quite a bit of confidence in the B-24, let us say as opposed to the B-17?

Cronin: Very much so. It was the old Ford versus Chevrolet argument. I could give you some statistics, and a B-17 man would tell you I was wrong. We used to fly higher, fly faster. We would be taking off when the B-17's were forming, having been in the air about an hour earlier than us, and we'd get to the target at the same time. So there were many pluses. The B-24's a lighter aircraft, but I won't get into that. But they were comparable.

Marcello: Where did you land when you got to Italy? Where was your base of operations?

Cronin: We went to a place called Foggia. That was a staging area, and from Foggia we were assigned to our base.

Marcello: And where was the base then?

Cronin: It was in a little town called Cerignola. It was outside of the town of Cerignola. Cerignola was so insignificant that we were instructed that if for any reason we should have to stop or be in this little one-horse village, we were to abandon the jeep and walk out because everyone and everything six months old and older was infected with malaria and all types of disease. I doubt if you could find it on a map, but there was a

town called Cerignola and another town called Spinazzola.

Marcello: How many missions did a crew have to fly before they were rotated back to the States again?

Cronin: In those days there was a difference between mission and sortie. A sortie was a trip over a target. A mission was defined by the brass as the length of time you were in the air. We could have one sortie and get credit for two missions. You could not have one sortie and get credit for three missions. But you had to do fifty missions or twenty-five sorties.

Marcello: How many did you have before you were shot down?

Cronin: Well, this is of historical importance--it was the thirteenth.

Marcello: The thirteenth. Incidentally, what was your function on this bomber crew?

Cronin: I was a nosegunner and a toggler.

Marcello: What is a toggler?

Cronin: A nosegunner fires machine-guns from the front of the ship and sits in the front of the ship. He toggles bombs on a lead ship. Contrary to most people's opinions at the time, when we went overseas there was not a bombsight on every plane. In a squadron there was one, and generally a back-up plane had a bombsight, and everyone else toggled or triggered as the lead ship dropped his bombs. It was sort of a pattern-type bombing

thing.

Marcello: Right. In other words, one man had the Norden bombsight, perhaps, and . . .

Cronin: Maybe twenty ships would bomb off of that one.

Marcello: Right. When he gave the signal or when he dropped his bombs, the others did likewise.

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: Well, did anything happen on any of the first twelve missions that might be of very much importance. I gather that most of your raids were over either central or eastern Europe for the most part. Is that correct?

Cronin: Always East, yes. We didn't have the fuel capacity to meet the 8th Air Force unless we refueled somewhere. There are many interesting--I guess they're interesting--things that happened to us as a crew. Some of the dangerous--maybe it's dangerous . . . little things like that I might think of.

Marcello: These are some of the things that I think ought to be a part of the record.

Cronin: Well, the blue Danube is a dirty, muddy thing that was quite a shock, and I remember my reaction and the crew's at how brown and dirty it was, after hearing so much about the blue Danube. I'll never forget how nasty that looked to us.

Marcello: What was the greatest danger on these raids? In your opinion, were you more afraid of the flak or of the fighters?

Cronin: No, the flak. We had very few fighter attacks. Flak was truly fearsome. We were briefed that . . . well, at the briefing is when you're told of all the various things that you are to do and the things that are going to happen, and they have a briefing before a mission.

Marcello: This is usually a pre-dawn meeting of the pilots who are going on the mission that day.

Cronin: Right. But in all the briefings those who allegedly knew would say that when you're in flak, if you see red--the German 88 was the gun being used--if you saw red you were getting hit. You were very close. They always seemed to me to come up where you could see them. There would be four explosions at once--they're separate explosions. We later saw them being fired from the ground by German ack-ack gunners, and it was a unit of four guns, and they fired in stair steps.

Marcello: When you say they fired in stair steps, do you mean at different altitudes?

Cronin: Right.

Marcello: The four guns fired at different altitudes.

Cronin: I remember one of the first trips over Vienna. Being up front there, I saw the four red flashes as they went by and heard a lot of noise and racket, and you're scared and screaming over the intercom, but I remember seeing this on probably two different bursts. First of all, we were the last squadron that day, the last group in.

You see this black cloud and you know you've got to go through it, and that is the thing that scares you. I remember we were very scared--everybody was--but when we'd get in there and I saw this red--a couple of other men saw it--you know you're being hit. And when we came out of our run, the old cliché was that when you drop those bombs you're on your time--you're on Army time up to that time--so when you come out of there you turn the aircraft and go as fast as it could possibly go and get out of there. And I remember we were pulling away, and there was a big hole between my legs, and . . . oh, oh, coming off of the run, I was not toggling that day. Ray Miltimore was and said, "My God, the switch was knocked out of my hands." So we toggled our bombs late. As we were coming off, Ray said, "There's a hole between your legs," and he said that he lost the toggle switch--the switch that he had--he had dropped them. We salvoed the bombs that day, but in any event, it blew this out of his hand, and this hole went right between my legs, and it cut him up a little on his hand. It didn't harm me at all.

Marcello: This was a chunk of flak.

Cronin: A piece of flak. And we found the flak in the compartment later on, but we had a bunch of holes that day--maybe forty or fifty holes. That's what was hitting us most

of the time. We got hit more that day than the day we went down.

Marcello: Was the flak always pretty heavy over the targets that you bombed?

Cronin: Yes. The only time that you had light flak was if you took alternate targets. Say the weather was bad . . . I think they knew you were coming. They'd tell us that some of the guns on the target . . . we knew they were there. When you're in the high squadron, you're lucky. One day we were high plane on high squadron, and I believe we were up around 24,000 feet.

Marcello: How come you met very little fighter opposition? Did you have your own fighter escorts?

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: Did you have the Mustang at this time, the P-51?

Cronin: The Mustang was always out with us going up and coming back--not always. There are two reasons why we did not experience fighter aircraft: First, was that there were several squadrons of fighters that would meet us and escort us in. They always stayed out. It was interesting to watch them peel off and stay away from the flak area. Of course, they didn't have to go in with one exception, and I want to be sure and give you that exception. That would be interesting to young men hearing this. We did not experience fighters partially

because of that and partially because when I got overseas at this time the German war machine was being torn down significantly, and our targets were always oil targets, ball bearing targets, or aircraft plants, or we had secondary targets of airfields.

Marcello: By the time you got over there your particular flights were not undertaking I guess what you would call saturation raids. You were doing more what you would call precision bombing. Is that correct? You had some specific targets in mind?

Cronin: I had a brother who was a pilot that flew these so-called saturation raids on Dresden, but, no, I think it should be very heatedly pointed out to historians that we had specific targets, we had specific alternates, and the only time we saturated or dropped bombs promiscuously was when we were in trouble. If your aircraft was hit and you were losing altitude and had to get out, we would salvo the bombs, but we always had specific targets and that's real important.

Marcello: Well, this was the whole theory behind daylight bombing from the American standpoint. Isn't that correct?

Cronin: Right.

Marcello: I think the British probably engaged more in the saturation bombing, as they would probably have to, because they were bombing at night, and I would assume precision

bombing was hard enough in the daytime let alone trying to do precision bombing at nighttime.

Cronin: Well, we were to become a night crew, and being a night crew, we had . . . we were knocked down on our last daylight mission, and we were to become a night crew, so we had a little verbal training which might be of interest later on. We were to coordinate with the British, and I know very little about it, but it was not the pinpoint bombing that we did. But that's important, I think. The people should always know that as far as I ever saw and anyone I ever met, we never at this stage of the game had targets of opportunity. I'm sure the fighters had targets of opportunity, but we were in at targets, and they were specific war targets.

Marcello: I presume that everybody wanted to get twenty-five missions in and get out.

Cronin: That's all you thought about. That's what I feel so badly about these poor devils over there today. All you thought about was the twenty-fifth target or the fiftieth mission, whichever. We had one man from Tampa, Florida, who took a position on one of the guns on this trip. We had a man who had a bad cold and stayed back, and he went up with us. His name was Fernandez from Tampa, and he was on his last mission. That's all he talked about, and he spent the rest of the war as a

"kriegie," and the kid that stayed behind, we had letters from him, and it's kind of like you're reading a book about what someone else did. It was kind of pathetic to read this man's letters who stayed behind. He almost wished he was with us because when he wrote the letters he didn't know what had happened to us.

Marcello: What is a "kriegie?"

Cronin: Krieg in German means war.

Marcello: Right.

Cronin: And a kriegsgetangener is a prisoner-of-war, and as a nick-name they called us "kriegies."

Marcello: I see. And awhile ago you mentioned a man by the name of Miltimore?

Cronin: Ray was the one that got hit in the hand--he didn't get hit in the hand, but the switch got knocked out of it. It was quite a coincidence.

Marcello: Incidentally, did these B-24's have a ball turret gunner?

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: Was that considered one of the more dangerous positions on the plane?

Cronin: I considered it dangerous because I didn't like the thing. Well, picture yourself flying outside the aircraft in a ball, laying on your back, firing a gun through your knees. Your knees are spread, and you're firing a gun through your knees lying on your back, and you're totally

disoriented unless you can look and see where the wing or the tail section is. If your electrical system would go out, someone . . .

Marcello: You had to hand-crank that thing back.

Cronin: . . . had to hand-crank it up and then get the man out of there. So if one were suffering from any claustrophobia--of course, if they had that they wouldn't get in these airplanes--but everybody was in a compacted space, and if the ball turret were turned in the wrong direction you had to crank it back. Of course, this was true of any of the turrets, whether it was the back turret, in the tail, or the nose turret, but I didn't like that ball turret. I've flown in it just for the thrill of it, but I didn't like it. I would hate to sit there through a fighter attack and get hit.

Marcello: I understand that at the first sign of any trouble in the airplane that ball turret gunner got the hell out of there as fast as possible.

Cronin: If he had any sense. It was against regulations. He's supposed to stay there, but I'd have gotten out of there.

Marcello: I think everybody had quite a bit of sympathy for him, also.

Cronin: Yes, I think I'd have gotten out of there. I did not fly in it during any air combat or anything like that, so I didn't have any experience shooting from it except

in fun, just up messing around in the aircraft.

Marcello: Had you ever had any experience at all bailing out of an airplane?

Cronin: Never in my life. I think if I were to fault the Air Corps, I would be very critical of them for not teaching men more about the proper procedure for parachute jumping. I guess it was just the grace of God that I didn't get seriously hurt. We wore harnesses with chest packs, and you attached your chest pack to your harness, and the proper way to go out is to have your harness just as tight as you can stand it. Well, I never had mine very tight, especially loose around the legs, and we were getting on the aircraft that morning . . . I had been lucky enough to get hot in a poker game the night before, and I gave a billfold containing a hundred dollars to the crew chief, the ground chief, and told him to save it for me, and as I climbed up on the cat-walk, he kidded me and said, "Wait a minute," and he tightened the straps on my chute. I might have been hurt in the fall because no one ever really told us what to do when you bail out.

Marcello: How could you get scratched from a raid? You had to have a pretty good reason for not going on one of your scheduled raids.

Cronin: Yes. Well, if you had a bad cold you couldn't take altitude; your sinuses would block. I guess that's about

the only thing that could keep you off a mission.

Marcello: Well, it was considered more or less a court martial offense, was it not, of the pilot brought his plane back again and really didn't have a good reason for continuing through with the mission?

Cronin: Oh, yes, if you aborted without reason . . . we did not do that. We saw some instances of men bringing ships in under conditions that I don't think were too manly, but I was never around any of them that did that. I certainly wouldn't abort one. You hate what you're doing but you do it.

Marcello: You want to get those twenty-five over and get out.

Cronin: You asked something a minute ago about what the roughest part of a mission was. A lot of times it's getting the aircraft in the air. I mean, you're loaded and you've got a lot of gas, and we had a 5,000 foot runway--5,500.

Marcello: How many pounds of bombs were your planes carrying?

Cronin: Well, let's see, we had about 5,000 pounds. I think we had nine 500's and ten . . . I think we had places for ten 500's, or you'd have all types of bombs. But just to get that plane in the air was a sweat a lot of times.

Marcello: You mean with all that weight?

Cronin: Yes. You've got a lot of other weight in there. You've got every ounce of gas you can get; you've got all your ammo; you have what flak suits are given to you and all that you can steal, borrow. You've got a loaded airplane,

and you're roaring down there at a little over about 125-130 miles an hour to get it in the air, and when you go through all that, it's pretty silly to get up and get chicken at that point. You might as well get that way before you take the aircraft up.

Marcello: Especially after you've been up since before dawn, and, like you say, it is one more mission closer to home, and I suppose most of you did not want to postpone the inevitable, you know. You wanted to get those twenty-five missions over with and get out of there--the sooner the better.

Cronin: I think it's more like life itself--it can always happen to the other guy, but it's not going to happen to me.

Marcello: I see. Well, I think this would take care of most of the preliminary questions, and we can more or less get down to the point of talking about your being shot down and your eventual capture, unless you have anything else that you think ought to be in the record prior to talking about that.

Cronin: No, just instances that I think would have no bearing--just personal instances. Oh, I can remember when we hooked up with a man when we first got in Foggia who was recuperating from a bayonet wound from hand-to-hand combat. We had not even seen a shot fired at this point, and it was a great experience to be with this man. He

admired us because he had never been in an airplane and was afraid of flying. We admired him so much because he had been through two years of combat. He was the middleweight boxing champion of New Zealand, or had been, and we struck up quite a friendship with him. One of his closest friends was a cook who was shot in this same fight. The Germans had overrun their position. Little things like that would have no particular interest, I guess, except from the standpoint of the story. But we had, you know, little things like that happen.

Marcello: From what I gather, the ground combat in Italy was perhaps about the roughest in the Second World War because it was just like fighting from hill to hill with the Germans usually holding the high ground.

Cronin: We supported them. In those days, you had fighter aircraft and intercepting aircraft and then medium bombers and heavy bombers. Now today one aircraft does it all. So it was odd that we did support the ground troops from 20,000 feet up in heavy bombardments by bombing targets ahead of them. I know we were on one of those raids, I remember, the opening of some kind of a front there in Italy, and I remember our first raid was to support them, get the ammunition dumps in front of the advancing ground forces.

Marcello: Incidentally, when you go over there as a rookie bomber

crew, do they more or less ease you into the rough stuff, or do they throw you in right away? In other words, I would assume that perhaps this mission giving ground support to these troops was perhaps not as difficult or as dangerous as one of the missions going farther inland and having to go through the flak.

Cronin: No, sir, no, I don't think so. I lived with some members of the crew who went down their first mission in interior Germany. No, there was a pretty extensive training program. I think one of the hardest parts of flying combat, or it was for us, was the type formations we were forced to fly and camera bomb the various installations along the East Coast. I remember once we were to go up and bomb Paris Island--the Marine and Navy base. We went over it--I don't know how many airplanes, probably twelve, fifteen of us . . . and some of what they called F-40's, I believe is what we called them . . . the Marines had them, and they, of course, with cameras instead of guns were to protect the airfield. We were so loosely formed that they flew right through our squadron, and that takes a bit of flying. Another day we had three airplanes crash--fly into each other. We tried to learn to fly close formation, so you're pretty well used to looking out and seeing the man's wing in your ear right next to you. No, once we got in

there, if it called for a eight or nine hour raid, if your number is ready to go you go.

Marcello: Okay, let's talk about the raid which led to your being shot down and your eventual capture. Let's start from the time the raid began in the morning, in the pre-dawn hours. Let's take it right from the beginning and recall as much of it as you can. This was raid number thirteen, is that correct?

Cronin: You know, I don't remember anything of the early morning, except we were kidding that it was raid number thirteen for the crew. I had won a hundred dollars playing poker. I was getting even with my buddies who had pretty well taken me for the month before.

Marcello: Was this the major pastime of the crews when they were off-duty?

Cronin: Yes, playing cards. We would go into this town of Cerignola when we could, you know. We pretty well stayed within our group.

Marcello: Did you ever talk much about the missions?

Cronin: I guess we did. I don't really remember. I'm sure we must have. We couldn't get over certain things, like thinking that that airplane we brought out of Mitchell Field in New York would be beating us on three engines one day. I'm sure we must have talked about that. I incidentally met the crew up in Boston that brought that

airplane home--something about that that kept following us. But, anyway, back to the day of the raid, I don't remember the first part of it except that it was the thirteenth, and I was afraid of the thirteenth. I was going to mention that October 13, 1944, was a Friday, and I remember that day. I sound like I'm very superstitious, but I'm aware that there is a thirteenth because good things have happened to me, too. I sweated that mission out, and we had a hell of a time that day. We had a very bad, bad, bad day on Friday, October 13, when we went to an oil target in Germany. But this morning when we were knocked down, I don't remember much about it except when we got into formation to go up . . . I guess we went up the Adriatic that day, and going into Germany we were having trouble with the plane.

Marcello: Did your briefing officers give you any sort of hint as to what was coming? In other words, did they tell you what to be on the lookout for on this particular mission?

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: What was the danger?

Cronin: The danger was that it was an oil target, one of the worst oil targets in Germany. We had been close to it before. Yes, I think they told us there were 485 guns on the target.

Marcello: These were all mostly 88's.

Cronin: They were all 88's . . .

Marcello: Which everybody respected.

Cronin: And that meant we were going to catch hell up there. We didn't get to the target, however, but, no, we knew that we were in for it, and we knew it was a long, long, long, hard day on oxygen, and we were to extend our gas consumption to its maximum. It was a big raid, maximum effort that day.

Marcello: I assume this was one of those synthetic oil plants in Germany. That's what you were trying to knock out, I assume.

Cronin: I don't know but it was an oil target.

Marcello: Well, of course, they didn't produce practically any of their own oil in Germany, and I think just about all the refineries there were producing synthetic fuel.

Cronin: I don't know. I don't remember. I believe we had an airfield as a second target. I can't remember, really.

Marcello: Okay. Well, anyhow, continue.

Cronin: You mean what happened as best as I can remember?

Marcello: Right.

Cronin: My first recollection of the day vividly begins with number four engine acting up. Now the engines on an aircraft are numbered left to right--one, two, three, four. Number four was acting up, and I think we were flying a slot that day, flying about number eight, but I can't remember exactly. But anyway, we started

slipping. We couldn't hold the speed of the squadron with this number four acting up. We tried to feather it, and it wouldn't feather. It had an oil leak. You feathered hydraulically, but this doggone oil leak prevented feathering. As I remember, the prop was windmilling. Now when they windmill it shakes the aircraft, gives you drag, and we knew we were going to start falling behind. I remember another airplane was lagging, too. At about this time we started having trouble with another engine on the other side, on the left side, number one.

Marcello: In other words, it was just one of those days.

Cronin: It really was. It was the thirteenth mission (chuckle). Anyway, at that point we salvoed the bombs, and we thought we would not be able to get back over the mountains, and Jack Gabriel, the pilot, talked--we all talked. Three of us, Ray Miltimore, Jack, and I were the oldest in the crew, and we decided to try to get to the Russian lines. Now the Russians at that time were trying to get into Budapest. We were going to try to get over their lines and try to get escorted into a field or jump.

Marcello: Was this a standard procedure? Did other crews do this?

Cronin: No. Well, we knew that if we could get into Russia, get behind some friendly lines, that we would eventually

get back to the base. When we went to Vienna, quite often--well, we went there twice--we could see planes peeling off for Switzerland because they were hit. Of course, they were interned. But all we wanted to do was to get to friendly hands. I remember calling out that we had fighters in the area. We heard fighters were in the area.

Marcello: By this time you had already lost your formation?

Cronin: Well, they were up ahead of us.

Marcello: Right.

Cronin: I don't remember how far. We knew we weren't going home that night. Somewhere along the line one of the men screamed, and we took a direct hit on the left wing on the number two engine.

Marcello: Flak?

Cronin: Flak--big hole out there--nothing was working.

Marcello: Had you been catching flak all along when you were falling behind?

Cronin: Well, I don't know. I don't remember that, but there was a lot of shooting going on but nothing like a target area. There was always a chance of getting shot, but in any event that engine went. Now number three engine in the B-24 is the one that's got all the guts--your electricity comes from it and so forth--so things were working. At this point we were going down, and Jack said, "Let's get

the hell out of here," and I got up, went from the front of the aircraft, along the catwalk. Jack was getting up. He had his automatic pilot set. We were in a--I don't know--maybe a forty-degree angle, going down pretty fast. He had red-lined this number three engine. It was just screaming as we tried to hold a fairly steady course. And I went to the back of the ship to get out, and I guess I was the last one out--I don't know--but the one thing that is very vivid to me is that . . . no one was afraid to leave the airplane. You knew you were going to die if you didn't, but everybody got behind each other and shoved the man in front of him, and I was behind Ray, and I gave Ray the shove, and at that instant it dawned on me--this is very vivid--I wished to God I could have jumped in front of Ray and he could have pushed me. It was harder for me to know nobody was there to push me, and I knew I had to jump. But that's real vivid. Anyway, I got out of there, and I remember I always said if I jumped and if I was ever lucky enough to have a home of my own and have a nice den, I wanted to save the ripcord and frame it. I remember thinking when I pulled the chute of what an insignificant stupid thought that is when life is hanging, and I remember throwing it. I guess another big thing that I remember as I went out of the airplane was that

I screamed a prayer very loud, just screaming it, and the next reaction I have--and this is very vivid--was the noise and the racket and the clamor of engines, aircraft engines. We were right under them--you get an idea if you stand next to an airplane taking off at an airport--but to be right under one that is pulling all the power it can pull, it's a terribly noise thing, and this thing was probably going, I don't know, 150 or 200 miles an hour. So when I jumped, it just seemed like in a split second that noise was gone, and the quiet then becomes noisy itself. It's a funny feeling. Absolute quiet is something that is deafening; it does something to you. I remember going through a cloud, and hearing a cloud is a very odd sensation.

Marcello: How do you hear a cloud, never having done so personally?

Cronin: Well, I think I might be able to tell you like this. It's a "whish," and I guess that's why people love to skydive. I would think that one could learn to love it under perfect conditions. It's from a God-awful roar to a heavenly peace, you might say, as far as sound is concerned. And I remember the other thought in my mind was what a dirty trick on the baby and Rita this was. These are all vivid. I don't remember a lot of things that happened, but I do remember that.

Marcello: Had you ever talked about being captured?

Cronin: No.

Marcello: Had anybody ever discussed the matter?

Cronin: We were going to become a night crew, and it used to scare me to have to find my way out at night, but I always thought it would be terrible to have to fight your way out of a foreign country when you couldn't speak the language. I used to think that would be terrible, but I don't think it bothered us too much. It was going to happen to the next guy but not us, I guess. I don't remember.

Marcello: Well, again, it probably isn't the type of thing that one would talk about, I don't think. You might think about it, but you might not say much to anybody else about it.

Cronin: No, I don't think there was that hint of bravery or the like. I don't think it was that. Maybe we did talk. I do know that once you're down in a POW camp, all they talked about was the harrowing escapes. I remember that and food is all they talked about. But I can't remember us talking much about it. I think it's kind of like your work. You've got a job to do, and you come in--you think and do other things, I guess. I don't remember talking about it.

Marcello: Okay, so you've now bailed out of the airplane.

Cronin: The next thing we were picking up . . . I couldn't believe

it but they were shooting at us--rifle fire.

Marcello: In other words, you were dropping right into the thick of the Germans.

Cronin: No, we were in a little town. We thought we were in Czechoslovakia, but we were in Hungary, and I remember vividly hearing this whistle of a slug and then hearing the report of the rifle, so it was small arms fire. And I remember hitting the ground, and it was fairly warm. I guess it must have been in the forties, and it had snowed and thawed, so I hit in the mud, landed in the mud, and here again I don't think we had the proper training for this. We knew how we were told to roll, and I hit the ground right, but I believe if I'd hit on concrete or hard ground I might have busted a leg or something. But I hit in the mud, and I was hiding my chute in a bush, and some guy came up to me with a real old-time rifle--looked like about an eighteenth century model--and leveled it at me and motioned to me to come over. A bunch of other people who were very shabbily dressed also came over.

Marcello: Were these people in uniform?

Cronin: No. These looked like old farmers. And I had my shoes hooked onto my harness, GI shoes. Now we wore heated flying clothes, so I was in what looked like bed slippers, and this man tried to take my shoes away from me, and

we had always heard not to ever give up your shoes. I wouldn't give them to him, and he tried to trade my shoes for his, and I remember just saying no, no, no, and there was twenty or thirty people behind him.

Marcello: These were Hungarian civilians?

Cronin: I didn't know then who they were, but they were Hungarians, and I remember that I just would not give him my shoes. And we had escape kits that we kept in pockets at our knees, and this man evidently knew about these. He had been around other fliers, and he reached down and took this escape kit from me. I had a ring of my wife's on my little finger, and he tried to get that off, and it wouldn't come off, and they took a watch-- they cut that watch off my arm.

Marcello: In other words, do you gather that these people really weren't loyal to anybody, that they were scavengers more than anything else?

Cronin: In a more pleasant day, I believe that I probably would think that they were terrible victims of the war, and anything they could get they took, and I don't think that they particularly hated me or they'd have shot me, but I believe that they were subjected to a lot of hardships on the part of the Germans, and I don't think they had anything. I was to see later that it was like I imagine America was a hundred years ago. But I remember

we had fifty new one dollar bills in our escape kit, and I remember he knew about them, and he got those. And we had a rubber balloon-type thing, and it was filled with these little white pills, and these were water purifiers, and we could fill this balloon up with water and put one of these pills in. I think you had to wait--I don't know--eight hours or something like that, and you'd then have drinking water. And I remember this man walking away, and he took these and bounced some in his hand, in his right hand like peanuts, eating them, and he had my watch and the money and these pills, walking away eating them, and I thought, "My God, he'd be dead by the time he gets home."

Marcello: He was going to have the purest stomach in town, huh (chuckle)?

Cronin: And then as he walked away and as the other people did also, a squad of German soldiers came up, jumped out of a truck and surrounded me. I knew where I was then, you know, that I'd had it. I thought I was the only one caught, and some of them got the parachute and they took me into town.

Marcello: They didn't rough you up any at this point?

Cronin: No.

Marcello: You hadn't been touched at this particular point yet?

Cronin: Nobody touched me, no. I remember somebody ordered one

of the men to get the chute, and we went into the edge of this town. Now something real odd happened here, and it may have accounted for any bravery I had, and maybe this will be of interest. I went off of oxygen somewhere around 20,000 feet and talked a little bit to Ray and Jack. I guess I was the first one off oxygen, and then I'd worked my way back to the back of the plane to get out, so I had exerted a lot of energy at high altitude, and on the ground I was so tired that I wasn't myself--I just didn't care. They got me to the edge of this little town, and by little town, I mean very, very little, and this squad of about eight or ten Germans got behind me with this Jerry screaming orders, and they started marching. I kept standing still, and they kept telling me to march, to move out, and they were going to march behind me, and they were keeping their regular cadence of about the normal Army cadence, and, of course, I was slow.

Marcello: These were army troops that had captured you?

Cronin: Oh, yes, this was a German Army unit--infantry--and they had been sent out there to get me. Now what I didn't know was that a parade was coming up. I guess you'd call it a parade. And we later found this happened quite a bit, and this would be of interest to people studying the war. There were a bunch of church bells

ringing, or some bells ringing, and they were marching me, and they wanted me to get marching, to move faster, and I couldn't. But the thing that I vividly remember is that I didn't give a damn. I couldn't and I'd say I walked a block, and then this little town was only maybe two or three blocks long, and then we walked by a bunch of stores or homes or something that were two stories high, not too big. It reminded me a lot of New Orleans. There were homes and stores, and people were standing on the second floor next to the sidewalk, and they were making, I guess, an example out of me. They had caught the Fliegerschwein, a flying pig. I remember real well looking over, and a lady was patting a baby. She had the baby on her shoulder and was patting him, and I remember his britches were soiled, and while she was patting she gave me the V-sign. Now in those days, Winston Churchill started it. Everybody gave the V-sign, and it meant comrades-in-arms, it meant . . .

Marcello: Victory over the Axis.

Cronin: Yes. And I thought or I was dumb enough . . . and then another man did the same thing, and I was dumb enough to think that maybe later on that evening they were going to come to help me. But anyway, I remember walking down this street, and then they put me in this jail. It was a typical little jail in town, and it had straw on the

floor and bars, and I remember being very down in the dumps because I was the only one caught, and about two hours later they brought one of the other fellows in.

Marcello: I would assume that this did a little bit for your morale, perhaps. Misery loves company, I suppose you could say.

Cronin: Well, I was never so happy to see anybody, and before the evening was over, or before nightfall, they had about six of us together. One of the men was killed, and I believe that they finally got all eight of us together and couldn't find the other one. The other one, a wild Irishman from Cleveland, we saw about two months later and didn't even recognize him, and he could hardly recognize us because we had all lost so much weight. But anyway, we were finally together, and then we were in jails all across Hungary and Germany and to an eventual PW camp.

Marcello: Well, when you were in this jail, what did you talk about?

Cronin: I imagine we were so happy that one of your buddies was there, and I'm sure all we talked about was how lucky we were to, I guess, be together and talked about the plane. I don't remember. I guess we talked about all the real important things in our life at that time. I don't remember.

Marcello: Were you worried about the prospect of having to sit out the rest of the war in a POW camp?

Cronin: I can't recall what our feelings were at the time. As it went on we became pretty depressed, but I can't remember at that time.

Marcello: How long did you remain in this jail in Hungary, this original one where you were first interned?

Cronin: Just overnight. The next morning they put us in a truck-- I hadn't thought of this for a long time--they put us in a truck, and it was our first experience in an automobile whose engine was propelled by burning wood, and it was a very slow process, but they took us . . .

Marcello: This should have given you some indication that all of your missions probably had not been in vain. If they were down to burning wood in vehicles, fuel was apparently pretty scarce.

Cronin: That's right. Well, more vivid was the grass-type roof on homes and cobblestone streets that were exact replicas of pictures that I had seen as a youngster, and I remember somewhere from that first day we had a German guard that could speak English, and he said that the people in this town had never seen a telephone, so we were in an eighteenth century atmosphere as far as we were concerned. But anyway, the reason, I guess, that they got us out so quickly the next day is that they

took us in this truck that broke down a lot, but they took us out to an open field, and if my memory serves me right, we might have been in this truck two or three hours. But they took us out into this open field, and I remember on one edge of the field was a sort of a hill, and there was a slight mist, and it was in the neighborhood of eleven o'clock in the morning, and somebody blew a whistle, and out of this long, low hill I guess a hundred men came out.

Marcello: These were Germans?

Cronin: These were German soldiers, and they all lined up, and we were a terrible looking sight. One man had hurt his knee because he hit a tree or something on the way down. We were half-carrying him. None of us had hats. We were just a sorry looking crew, obviously, and some high-ranking officer got up and read what was a citation, and we realized that this bunch of people were being given some kind of a citation while we were standing out there, and this was quite a big thing, I guess. All of a sudden, all hell broke loose, and sirens started blowing, and this officer gave a command, and these people took off through the fields, and all over this great big field, just out of the earth, 88's started sticking in the air in series of four. It was only then that we realized that we were being brought to this group of gunners, and they were told that they shot us down, which was a

bunch of baloney, but in any event they were being given credit and were being cited that day by this high-ranking officer. I'm sure it was a morale thing, but they made us stand there and pretty soon we could hear the drone of aircraft, and I remember we remarked to each other this was just about the time we'd be coming in, and pretty soon these things started firing, and it was a very cloudy, overcast day. Of course, they were working on radar. We didn't know then what they had, but anyway, they fired and fired and fired away, and I remember as we stood there, the flak started falling on us, and we were bare-headed and we began to worry. Some of them were jagged pieces, but we didn't get hurt or anything, but that was kind of odd because they had nothing to do with shooting our aircraft down, but anyway, they were told they did. From there I remember they took us to a jail, and this will be of interest. This jail was located in Győr, and that is one of the big cities. Anyway, they put us in a regular jail.

Marcello: This was the next day?

Cronin: Yes, the next day. And they had a man interview us individually. Now of particular interest to my story is that I told you that we were being scheduled as a night crew, and I was wearing dog tags that evidently were . . . and I was to learn later on . . . well, maybe

I'd better keep this story in its logical order. We were being taken out of the cell into another room, and a man that spoke English as good as any English teacher was interviewing us, and they kept asking me a lot of questions about radar, and I didn't even know what radar meant, you know. I knew nothing about it and . . . I forgot to tell you that our ship exploded. As I said, this engine was going as fast as it could go, and a couple of others were just windmilling, but there was still quite a bit of gas in the tanks, and it must have really blown up, and there was very little evidence. What pieces that could act as evidence were being carried by some German soldiers with us as we went along. They carried such things as some of our parachutes, a couple of oxygen tanks, and various things that they thought might be revealing. So the interrogating, unbeknownst to me at the time, probably had some significance, but they interrogated me several times about navigation and radar, and I didn't know why, and I truly stated--as we all did--you know, I'm an airman and all this and that and just name, rank, and serial number. But at this jail, this particular man--I forget his name--has a part in my story later on in France, but he said he was raised, I think, in Maine. One of the interrogators was from Maine. Anyway, he gave us a pretty hard time. He took his pistol

out and hit Jack one day, and he hit one of the other men, but he never . . . no one ever touched me.

Marcello: Now was this man regular army? Was he a civilian? Part of the Gestapo?

Cronin: I don't know. He had a German uniform on, and he was an officer. He was probably a punk, but he could speak good English, and he had somebody snowed.

Marcello: And you said he was raised in Maine?

Cronin: There was a couple of people that I later reported to the teams. The Air Force had teams going in to hunt these men, war criminals, and I reported them, and this was one man that they were hunting for at the time, and several men had reported this individual.

Marcello: Did he ever threaten you in any way?

Cronin: Yes, he certainly did, but he never did hurt me or hit me.

Marcello: What sort of threats did he make?

Cronin: Generally just that he'd shoot you or hit you with the gun or something. He'd take the gun out and lay it on the table and talk to you. Jack said he actually hit him. But anyway, for some reason they were grilling me, and I couldn't figure out why. It seemed like they grilled me a little more than the other fellows, but maybe that was my imagination. But in any event we were grilled pretty strong by this guy, and then they put us on a train, and they took us--I guess this was maybe the

third day--into Vienna. Now older men began guarding us at this point. I think they called them the Wermacht, the People's Army, but these were the old geezers left behind. I remember coming into Vienna. It was an odd sensation. Here, too, we were coming in right before noon, and I remember thinking, "My God! They'll hit here!" It was a beautiful day this day. This was the wrong time to be here. And that was the first time we saw prisoners at work, and there were thousands of them in this railroad area.

Marcello: What sort of prisoners were these?

Cronin: We later learned they were French, Russian, Belgian--everything but American.

Marcello: Now these were military prisoners, or were these civilian prisoners?

Cronin: Both. But just men, all men. They were repairing the tracks. Now we had bombed this very place we were going, and as the train came to a standstill, I remember that all the tracks were in perfect place. They had bombed Vienna the day before, and the guards--a couple of them could speak English--said that a couple hours after the raid they had the tracks back in place. As we pulled in, I remember seeing one of these small European locomotives upside down on top of a two-story building. Concussions had sent it up there. Anyway, they took us off the train

and marched us into a magnificent hall, and it was there that I saw for the first time in my life a picture of Hitler that portrayed him as a nice-looking human being. It was like a big tapestry, only it was a tremendous picture in a big auditorium, like a basketball court with chairs in it, and in the middle was this tremendous picture of Hitler in a leather-type coat, jacket, and he looked human. And there was a picture of Goering almost the same size, and he, too, looked good. I had never thought of him as being anything but a . . . you know, you have a pretty low feeling of contempt for the man, but they had pictured him to be a nice-looking man. We saw several after that, but it was a shock to see him as a decent human being. But I guess when you reduce Hitler and Stalin to a clean-well-fed baby and realize a mother's love, why, I guess you can put everyone in a good position, and by the same token, the big-shot emperor puts his shoes on like you and I. I guess it's the way you look at things, but it was a shock to see this man as a real human being.

Marcello: Did they do anything to you in this auditorium, or what was the purpose in taking you there?

Cronin: It was to keep us there for some reason I can't remember, except . . . oh, we hadn't eaten.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what sort of care they had been giving you.

Cronin: We hadn't had anything to eat yet, and it was the third day. We got a piece of sausage, I remember, somewhere, and some cheese somewhere else, and we were getting ravenously hungry, I remember. And they gave us our first . . . it was our first encounter with rutabagas. Now if you ever talk to any American Air Corps personnel, they'll know what rutabagas are. It was not rutabaga soup. It was garbage, but it was hot, and we ate it and were thankful for it, but even as hungry as we were I remember I didn't like it, but we learned to live with rutabagas from then on. But anyway, that was the first warm thing we had, and the first day we had a lot of bread, not a lot, but a little bit of bread, but I remember we were ravenous. And they interrogated us, but it wasn't rough interrogation there, and then the next recollection I have is that we were put on another train and we were sent to Regensburg, and in Regensburg we had to sit in a depot. Regensburg is the city over which was fought the largest air-to-air dog fight probably in the history of the world. It took place over Regensburg-- German Air Force and the Americans. There was--I don't remember now, but you research that--hundred planes over it. I remember in this railroad station we were sitting

with civilians all around us. No one was harming us or anything, and they knew who we were.

Marcello: I was going to ask you what sort of a reception you got from these civilians, since obviously all these German cities were being subjected to air attacks.

Cronin: Now we were not in Germany.

Marcello: That's true. You were in Austria.

Cronin: We were not in Germany yet, so people were not too bad at all. I don't have any feeling of recollection.

Marcello: You couldn't sense any hostility at this time?

Cronin: No. In Vienna I remember vividly that one man was walking through a gate as we were coming out of a gate, a rather tall distinguished looking man, and he had a distinguished voice. He probably was a little human being. I remember he wanted to impress everybody, and he made a smart remark at us and called us a dirty name for the benefit of the people around, and he was probably pretty high on himself, but, no, we had no problem at all at this point with civilians, but we had probably one guard for every three or so prisoners.

Oh, here's an interesting story. I was telling you about the P-51's that flew with us and flak. Radar will lock onto an aircraft, but it doesn't know an airplane from a piece of tin foil, so one of the very few times I ever saw this was on our last raid . . . no, it was

at a Vienna raid a couple of times before this. A P-51 goes screaming in from a very high altitude and throws a bomb out of some type. It explodes and there's tin foil flying every which way. Well, we had a Negro P-51 pilot that went down in the same area that we did this day, and we met this man in this hall in Vienna, and we lived with him until we got to a permanent camp. Now, this man belonged to a . . . in those days the Army was segregated, and he belonged to a colored fighter squadron, and he was one of the finest men that you ever want to meet. He was a graduate of Tuskegee, and you could tell he was always . . . you know, he was afraid that he was going to be made to suffer for being black. Later on they took a boy out of our group that had a Jewish name and segregated him, and we didn't know what happened to him, but this man was apprehensive about being black, and he was later taken away from us. I don't know what happened to him, but he was a fine gentleman. But I wanted to mention that some P-51's that did get into that flak. I told you they didn't awhile ago, but they got the hell out of there at about 500 miles an hour. But anyway, we're back in Regensburg, and they put us on another train, and they took us all through the Black Forest. It's beautiful.

Marcello: Incidentally, what sort of trains were these? Were you

in a passenger car, or did they load you in a boxcar?

Cronin: No, at this point we were in passenger trains that were of a vintage still many, many years ago. I'd say they were comparable to 1920 trains in America. They had stiff seats and were just old time trains. But anyway, we went through Germany, and they took us to Frankfurt. It's called Frankfurt am Main, and there is where we started getting our baptism with the German populace.

Marcello: Could you describe some of these incidents?

Cronin: Yes, well, I remember in Frankfurt one of the men--Bob was still hurt with his leg--and I don't know who it was, but I think it was Bob who wanted a drink of water, and we had to drink out of a horse trough. I remember standing there and they crossed--Frankfurt's a big station--and across the tracks maybe thirty feet from us was a German boy on crutches with one leg gone, and the people started talking to each other, and I remember that the murmuring got louder. Even though we were outside--we were not inside the station and remember that the guards were very old men--and we thought that we were going to have a real problem because these people were looking at the man who lost his leg, and they were looking at us and we were Fliegerschwein, and they didn't like us at all, and we knew that these people would not protect us, but as it developed nothing happened.

Before we got to Frankfurt, something happened. I told my family this story. We were coming out of a tunnel--the train was--when all hell broke loose, and there were aircraft shooting at the train we were on, and there was about eight of us, and they knew we were Air Corps, and I remember people started shaking fists at us in the train and so forth, and the train stopped.

Marcello: There were civilians on this train?

Cronin: Oh, heck, yes. It was full of civilians, and there were a lot of soldiers, and we jumped out and everybody ran back to the tunnel, and three things happened that were very, very vivid to me: one was, "God, I hope those fools up there shoot at this engine only," because we were through if they strafed the train. And there were two P-47's that were . . . we finally saw them come back, and they hit the engine only, and this is important. They did not strafe that train, and they blew that engine up. They didn't blow it up. Steam was coming out of it. They hit it. I think one of the greatest things I ever noticed in the war . . . this and something that happened in PW camp were two things that if I were a man of words, if I had the type wherewithall to put what I saw in writing, I know that I could have a best-seller. There was a mother with two children. First of all, they got us off the train, and we had to stand there and let every-

body run to the tunnel. And we stood there, and this mother with these two children came running by us. Now she looked at us and her two eyes got literally, it seemed, as big as saucers, and they told a story, and the story was the terrible fear for her lovely children--she was a nice-looking woman--the fear of her own safety, obviously with those guys up there shooting, and the look in her eyes as she looked at us who were maybe a cause of it. It wasn't a look of hate, but it was a look that just told me volumes about the lady, about the kids, about the situation, about us, our relationship, that the feeling we had that, oh, if these guys strafe this train, you know, school's out because they'd have clubbed us or something. But they hit only the engine, and that was all. And I guess if you're teaching history that is important. I said awhile ago the only thing I ever saw bombed was specified targets, and I lived through this, but if these boys in these P-47's would have strafed that train, we wouldn't be talking now. But anyway, the look in this lady's eyes was something that . . . it's too bad that a great writer like maybe a Costain or a Hemmingway . . . maybe a man who was a romanticist like Costain would have to do it, but what I saw in that lady's eyes was a deep chasm. It told the whole story of war in her eyes.

Marcello: It wasn't exactly a look of hate, but a look of kind of like, "Why are you doing this to us?"

Cronin: Yes, and why am I here or why are you there and my children . . . this lady would probably tear your eyes out if those kids had gotten hurt. I can still see the fear that she expressed in her eyes. But anyway, then we came into Frankfurt, and I told you about coming into Frankfurt.

Marcello: Incidentally, was the train able to make it into Frankfurt under its own power?

Cronin: We had to wait there and they brought another train, if I remember correctly, and pushed us in or pulled us in or something, but we were close.

Marcello: I gather also that up to this time you were just kind of like going from place to place and maybe staying overnight. You weren't staying at any one place up to this time, were you?

Cronin: No, we were only down about four or five days.

Marcello: I see.

Cronin: Well, we weren't down too long because we hadn't had nothing to eat yet, and where we were going they found us this food and baths, so it was inside of a week now. I would say it was probably in the third night and the fourth day or something. I can't remember, but this is something that will be important, and you might want to

check this with other American fliers that may know more about it than I do. At Frankfurt am Main . . . well, anyway, they took us from Frankfurt, put us on a street-car, and took us to a place where they were going to feed us, get a meal and a bath.

Marcello: Incidentally, Frankfurt was hit pretty hard by Allied bombing raids.

Cronin: There wasn't a piece of it . . . there wasn't . . . no glass . . . it was torn all to hell. The yards were hit hard but the tracks were perfect.

Marcello: Did you ever have any remorse about what you were seeing? In other words, it's one thing to be up in the air, I would imagine, to drop bombs, you know. It's kind of an impersonal thing, perhaps, but you know here you are on the ground now, and you can perhaps see for the first time the damage that was being done.

Cronin: I think I had a feeling of sorrow for the people, but I think my feeling was probably one of selfishness to want to live, but I know as we went along I had a feeling of sorrow for the people. But I also had a feeling of pride in America because one of the things I got to see for myself was that the Germans broke down as compared to America breaking down because they take orders one from the other, and nobody does anything on their own initiative unless he's told. For example, the first

night in this squad that kept me, I think there was probably a corporal, or he had a stripe on his arm, and he wasn't the lowest soldier, but he damn sure wasn't very far up. And next to us they kept guards in this jail, and he walked into a room, and the other ones stood up and clapped their heels when this guy walked in. I'd say he was probably a corporal. Now I later saw and was told that if the men in charge were out of action, killed, the next man could not step in, whereas in the American Army I believe it's a matter of record that you could take all the noncoms and all the officers and kill them, and some GI back there will take a washing machine motor and make some engine work. I think there's that difference between the two countries, and that basically is the reason that we can elect a president and they follow one man. It's a political thing, but I believe that's the difference. Now to the extent that these people cannot think for themselves--and maybe they really didn't have the opportunity like we did--I do not feel sorry for them, but I feel sorry for anybody that's getting his house bombed or who's in a war or who's on rations. I feel sorry for anybody who lives out of Texas (chuckle). So, you know, I feel real sorry for those poor devils over there. But anyway, we were in Frankfurt, and they took us to a place you want to

remember to check on. I don't know how to spell it, and I can hardly pronounce it. It's called Oberursel. It was an interrogation camp where they interrogated high-ranking English officers at the beginning of the war. They used every trick known to man. We were told in our briefing, in our intelligence briefing, that this place was so infamous that the English Air Force bombed it with their own men down there because they were using women, they were using all types of attractive hunting trips or partying, anything else to get secrets from high-ranking British officers. In all the searching that went along on me, I had concealed a compass, and we were in this . . . they took us into this big room and made us strip, and when they stripped us I remember I handed them this compass because I knew they were going to find it. I said we were all bare-headed, but we weren't because one of the men, Jack, had on a cap, flight cap, and then this guy looked at it and he said, "Oh, you trained in San Marcos, Texas." I remember this cap had a tab on it that said San Marcos, Texas, so that gave him away, and when I handed this man the compass he was writing stuff down. I remember telling Jack or Ray, "Jack we're in Oberursel." We knew where we were, and we knew this was a very infamous camp at one time. Now I don't know whether all Air Corps personnel went through

there or not. Maybe they did. We met most of them that did, but I can't remember whether we asked that question or not. But instead of giving us something to eat, feeding us, they took us and put us in solitary confinement, and it was a little cell. They took our shoes and our belts. We had no light. It had bars in front with a door, and it had a little opening down on the floor as I remember, or maybe there was an opening where they could hand you a bowl of soup, and . . .

Marcello: How big was this little cell?

Cronin: Just a cell. Just for one person. I've often thought about this, and I can't describe it too good. It was dark and it was my only taste of solitary confinement, and I guess that's why I'm concerned about these people in Vietnam because I only had a few days, and I almost lost my mind.

Marcello: What was it like?

Cronin: The loneliness of not knowing what's going to happen gives you a certain terror. Now my story picks up from the interrogation back at this town in Hungary. They called me into the interrogator, and there was a man who spoke excellent English, as this man back before did. And he was maybe from Maine or the other man was from Maine. One of them was from Maine, I remember, and he spoke beautiful English. And they gave you these little coupons that looked like theater tickets, and these were meal

tickets, and if you talked you got a meal ticket, and you handed a meal ticket to the guard when he came by and he gave you your food. So they gave me my meal tickets, and they started asking me a bunch of questions about radar, and I told them that I didn't know anything about it.

Marcello: They were apparently extremely interested in finding out all they could about radar.

Cronin: Well, you'll know in just a second why they were asking me. So he kept asking me about this damned B-24M radar ship. Well, we had a B-24M model assigned to us, and we were on the last daylight raid, and we were supposed to become a night crew. And so I don't remember how often I went in there in that room. I guess I was there maybe four times in two days, but each time this guy would get madder, and he'd take my damned food tickets. If you don't talk you don't eat, and I remember once that he cussed and he said, "You're so damned smart . . ." and all this and that. He cussed me out. He didn't hit me. He hit a couple of other guys, I was told, but he didn't touch a glove on me. We had technical instruction books--the technical books that were blue--on every phase of aircraft, anything you did, and after cussing me out good he pulled out an aerial photograph, and then he'd say, "You're so goddamned smart . . ." and he told how great the German army was. He went

through a great political tirade about how terrible America was and how they were going to tear us up, and he pointed to our tent. He said, "This is where you live."

Marcello: This was where you lived back in Italy?

Cronin: He had an aerial photograph, and he pointed to our tent. He told us what our aircraft was. He pulled out the blue technical book--it looks like a great big binder--on the B-24M that I'd never seen, and he knew that we were a "mickey" crew. Hell, nobody knew this.

Marcello: What's a "mickey" crew?

Cronin: Radar.

Marcello: This is what you were going to do when you went on night duty.

Cronin: This was our last day raid, and this guy knew this, and we later thought that they probably thought that I was a mickey--a radar bombardier--and was being trained for it because no one else fit the description. But I finally convinced them I wasn't. They had gotten my name at this point. They had my name and everything at this point. They had a dossier on us that wouldn't quit at that point.

Marcello: Did this perhaps tell you something about German intelligence?

Cronin: It damned sure did. As a matter of fact, from that point on . . . we were told to be careful of our folks

at home if they're ever in Germany, but you know, you don't think much of that. At that point I changed my . . . from there on I'm carried under an address of the company I work for, and that was my address from then on. I knew that these folks knew everything, and they knew who I was and there was no question, and I got my food and I was let out the next day.

Marcello: I gather their knowing all this about you kind of shook your confidence quite a bit.

Cronin: It really did. When they showed me the picture of our tent . . . but it was obvious after it was all over what he was doing. He now had the correct information on me, and he was just showing how smart he was. He knew that I didn't know the questions, but I don't think any of our men ever did anything except identify what they did on the aircraft--they did fly a B-24, obvious things, and then request that I can't give any more but rank, serial number, and that sort of thing.

Marcello: Were you still under the control of the army at this time? Had they turned you over to the Luftwaffe?

Cronin: No, I don't know who this was in this Oberursel bunch. I don't know where the hell they were from, but this was a big organization, big office they took us into. They knew what they were doing. They were rough. I got out the next day, and I heard a lot of stories about

men being kept there, you know, a couple or three months. Another man got out that was with me--a radioman. This was the best man I ever knew. Nobody can take his place. He was just a pure, honest-to-God man. I know that I was visibly shaken in there because there wasn't anything to do but just, you know, wonder what the hell's going to happen next. They were on me about this "mickey." They knew Bob was a radio operator, but . . . he said, "Did you hear the church bells every hour," whatever this was. I'd heard it, but I didn't think anything of it. So he made a novena, and he knew how many novenas he had made and how long he had been in this dark room. A novena is a succession of nine somethings in the Catholic faith. He made a novena, so time went by better for Bob, but Bob always was a better man than any I ever met, but he also was the roughest, toughest guy, too. But anyway, that might be important to you. If you check names as you meet Air Corps men, they will probably have gone through Oberursel. If you ever meet a British airman who was down in the early part of the war, he very surely went through.

From there we went to a staging camp, and I'll tell you something about a man from Belgium. We were put in this camp, and it was a temporary camp. Now several things happened. I'll name several of them quickly. The

first morning we were there a priest came in and woke us up and said he was going to have mass, and this priest had been captured a short time earlier at a parachute jump. Oh, what was the name of that? Antwerp, do you remember? In any event, when he jumped . . .

Marcello: It was close to Arnhem.

Cronin: Yes. This would have happened like about a month ahead of us. When he jumped he lost a package of hosts that had been consecrated, and some soldier actually found those on the ground and brought them to him. But that's quite miraculous when you think how big an area you're jumping in, but this was quite a man. There was a bomber group that went down at this raid. This was one of the big, big raids where they . . . oh, the paratroopers stayed there so long. In any event, there was an Irishman named Pat O'Rourke, I think his name was.

But this Belgian had washed out of the RAF. He was a real young boy, and he got himself to Canada and volunteered and became a gunner on a Canadian bomber and was shot down. This man had a hate of the Germans that was so deep and so terrible that it just scared you to listen to him. It was the direct opposite, maybe, of what I saw in that lady. It was a terrible, terrible, terrible hate. This man's sister had been killed by the Germans. He told us the mayor of this little town

he was from was keeping a package of fingernails that they had taken off of people getting them to tell stories about downed fliers and things. He said he saw a German truck one day just for no reason at all veer up on a sidewalk and run over a bunch of people. I'm beginning to let you know how I began to feel about the German soldiers. I don't think an American GI would ever do something like that. But anyway, he had these thoughts, and he said that every German baby when it was born they should snap its head off. I mean, it just scared you how this man . . . he was just terrible. And we tried to talk him into some sense, but there was a "Spit" pilot there--a Spitfire pilot--who had been with him maybe three or four days, and he said, "You just can't change this man. He's crazy. He's just nuts. They'll kill him." So they called us out, and I remember the Battle of the Bulge had started, and they called us out to tell us that they were going to the sea and our goose was really cooked and all this and that. And they also called you out twice a day to count you, so they were counting us, and they asked certain questions of men as they walked by them. And some German--one of the guards or the soldiers--walked up to this fellow and asked him a question. We knew . . . you know, he just . . . God, he hated. It's terrible to have hate. And he spit in

this German's face, and they grabbed him and hit him with a rifle butt and dragged him off, and that's the last we saw of him. And here again was something really horrible to see--hate--and put that into a nation and you've got problems.

Marcello: You were still just in a staging area. You were not really in a prisoner-of-war camp.

Cronin: No. And from there they put us in the proverbial "forty and eight" that you hear about--the old, little, narrow gauged boxcar--locked us up, and took us to Stalag Luft #1. It took about three days to get there. We were in a boxcar with, I guess, three or four German soldiers, and they all had something like a sub-machine gun or something, but they were heavily armed at one end of the train. And I remember we were at Magdeburg one time going up--they said it was Magdeburg--and they got off and locked us in. They went to a shelter during an air raid. Thank God they didn't hit the yard we were in. But then we went to this Stalag Luft #1, which is at a town called Barth, Germany, thirty miles from Sweden.

Marcello: Now by this time, I gather, you were turned over to the Luftwaffe.

Cronin: No.

Marcello: Didn't they run most of the camps?

Cronin: No, we were still in the hands of the Wermacht. I think

the only thing of any interest that you might like to hear about is they were marching into Barth . . . Barth is a peninsula and the camp is at the end of the peninsula. And there was an old man that was picking bricks up from the side of his house. Just the corner of his house had fallen down into the street, and he was real intent on picking the bricks up. And we were marching three abreast, I remember, and there were a lot of guards with us at this time because we were going into the camp, and, of course, we had picked up . . . there must have been a hundred of us.

Marcello: But most of your crew was still together yet?

Cronin: Well, no. I was just with Bob at this time. They let us out of Oberursel one at a time. It was just Bob and I together. And this old man--now here's the compassion for the people that the men had--he looked at us, and I remember they swung the column to an oblique left to go around this rubble of bricks. And he had a shovel or something in his hands, and I remember him raising it, and I'm glad I wasn't on that side, and he started running at us. And here was a man who . . . this was an Air Force camp we were going to where they kept fliers, and he came out at us in his old way, and he could speak enough English, and I remember him crying, "You sons of bitches." He was going to take us all on

because we had destroyed his home. And I remember feeling for that man, but the guards stepped right in there and he stepped back. But then they took us into camp, and we lived a very monotonous life there.

Marcello: What did this camp look like? Can you describe it from a physical standpoint?

Cronin: If you saw that movie Stalag . . . what was that picture? It looked exactly like it. Twenty-four men to a room. In the standing area you could stand maybe ten, so you had to stay in your straw bunks, three high. Ersatz coal burners and they'd give you a couple of lumps a day after you get there. We lost a hell of a lot of weight. We got very little to eat.

Marcello: What was your weight, incidentally, at the time you were captured? Could you estimate it?

Cronin: They estimated me to be under a hundred pounds after we went for a period of about three months. But the bad part about this time of the war . . . the Jerry PW camps through '42, 43, and '44 were not bad places. They were allowed to get Red Cross packages. They had plays. They had a lot of things. But they were real hellholes because they wouldn't feed us. Now I don't mean to say that they were rougher than the Japanese, but they were bad, and we were hungry. I've seen American soldiers scrounging through their own garbage

cans and through the Jerry garbage cans. There were cats that mysteriously disappeared. It got bad. There's no question about it.

Marcello: Well, again, what did you weigh when you went in?

Cronin: I weighed about 150, and I figure I lost about fifty pounds. Bob, the man I spoke of, Bob Hinckley, was about a 190-pounder, and they estimated him at about 115. They did it by stones, so many stones. You know that arithmetic? I forget. We really did lose a lot of weight.

Marcello: Did you lose very many prisoners, that is, did very many die?

Cronin: No. I don't know of any that died in there. I know there were some, but I didn't know any. A lot of things happened that might be of interest.

Marcello: What sort of food were you usually getting?

Cronin: We had absolutely no food. It was bad. I don't remember what we had.

Marcello: Did you get quite a bit of bread and soup, perhaps?

Cronin: Yes, we had that black Jerry bread made from sawdust. Sometimes they wouldn't get it all mixed up right, and the sawdust would flake away. But I remember in the darkest hours it was colder than hell, and the days were only about four or five hours long, you know, the long nights.

Marcello: Had they given you any more clothing than what you had when you were captured? Obviously you were just in that little flight suit which wasn't very warm after you hit the ground.

Cronin: That's right. I had a flight jacket. At this roughest time they started letting us go over every afternoon, and they'd give us a bowl of soup and a piece of black bread. Up until that time I remember we had some Red Cross jam and this black bread and some butter, and they'd give us some Red Cross parcels, but they were meager. There were a lot of cigarettes, and I smoked a lot in those days, and we bartered back and forth for D-bars which was concentrated chocolate. Something interesting there. We had an underground newspaper. The Germans could never find it, and I forget how often they would pass this paper, but they would pass it from barracks to barracks and from room to room. I remember I was the commentator or something for quite awhile in our room, and we'd get news that way.

Marcello: Well, how did this underground newspaper work?

Cronin: I was never . . . none of us were allowed to see it. See, we were comparatively newcomers. We were only in that camp six months. But it was over in the older section, and we got an actual printed copy.

Marcello: Was it printed just like a regular newspaper?

Cronin: Well, you could tell it was an oldtime press, but it was American-style printing, or English-style printing. And it would be maybe a sheet or two sheets or a sheet and a half, and it was mostly stories about "Joe Stalag." Nighttime was a horror time because the floors were real thin on the barracks, and the Germans would turn these dogs loose. They were vicious things, and you'd feel like they were coming through. But a lot of guys get the "GI's," and they spend a lot of time at the end of the barracks in the can, and if the dog heard you move, why he'd bark and try to bite you.

Eventually the Russians liberated us, and when they saw our condition they sent about a battalion out. Oh, I don't know how many men they sent out, and they drove everything that could walk into the camp, and they set up a slaughter operation right there outside the camp. They killed cattle and worked a hoist and skinned him, hung him up, started cutting chunks of meat out, and we'd just line up and go get it and come back and cook it. Everyone got sick eating. You're not supposed to eat much when you're in that shape.

Marcello: I gather that while you were in the prison camp it was a humdrum routine. There was really nothing to do.

Cronin: We talked about food and our experiences and that's all . . . women, not women the way healthy guys talk about it, but your girlfriend, your wife, your mother--with

much more respect.

Marcello: Were there just Americans in this camp, or were there other nationalities as well?

Cronin: Well, the camp was divided into four sections, I think, or five, and one section was British Air Force and the rest was American.

Marcello: Did you ever have any contact with the British contingents, or did they keep them segregated?

Cronin: I did because I had an infection in my gum, and the guard took me to a makeshift hospital, and there was a British doctor there that was captured at Dunkirk and an American dentist in there. And the dentist lanced this gum, and I got to spend two heavenly days and nights there. Incidentally, I got to meet the world's champion bridge player--I mean the champion of Britain--and we played quite a lot of cards, but that was quite an experience in itself. But I did get to spend two days in there, sleep with sheets on and . . .

Marcello: I gather the medical facilities weren't too bad considering the circumstances.

Cronin: Yeah, I was surprised to even know there was some type of a hospital there.

Marcello: Were there ever any escape attempts at all at this camp?

Cronin: There was one man who made it, and he was fairly well known in those days--this was at the beginning of the

war. No one could ever escape since then. He escaped when the camp was first opened.

Marcello: Did the Germans ever warn you as to what would happen if somebody did attempt to escape and he was caught?

Cronin: Oh, yes. They had a line just as in that movie, and if you stepped across that line you got shot. We had a standing order . . . the minute you came into the camp they told you that you were not to plan an escape without the approval of the ranking officer. The ranking officer was a full colonel. I only met him, didn't know him. He was a fine man. A Russian general was at the head of the column that liberated us. He had a column of Dodge trucks as far as you could see.

Marcello: Is that right?

Cronin: He made us all wear black armbands, you know, because Roosevelt had just died.

Marcello: Did anybody ever think of trying to escape? Did you ever plan elaborate schemes or anything like that even in your spare time?

Cronin: No, we knew it was absolutely futile because we were at the end of the peninsula. The temperature was cold. There was no way to swim.

Marcello: You must have been on the Baltic Sea. Is that where you were?

Cronin: Yes, we were in Barth, Germany. Now the city of Barth

was between the end of the peninsula where the camp was and the mainland, as I remember, so you had to get through Barth. There was no way to get out of it. So at least as we remembered it, there was never any thought, but we were told if you had a plan you had to clear it.

I'll tell you something that happened that's vivid in my mind. They established radio contact, and . . . well, first of all there were orders to kill all American soldiers, you know, in PW camps. We know that that was a fact from Hitler. Well, the camp commander did not do it. There were some German girls up at this hospital that helped American soldiers and were good to American soldiers. The colonel had their heads shaved to look like men and put them in GI uniforms and sent them back to the compound we were in, put them in a room and locked and said, "Anybody that does anything to these girls will be court-martialed immediately when we get out of here." But they had established contact with SHAEF, that's Eisenhower, you know, Allied Command, and they were going to send in two or three hospital ships, and then they were going to fly us out.

Marcello: Why did he do this to these girls?

Cronin: They had helped the Americans.

Marcello: Oh, I see.

Cronin: The Russians were tough. Oh, God, you . . . we were liberated by actual frontline shock troop infantry, and they were rough.

Marcello: This was when you were liberated?

Cronin: These were the guys that liberated us.

Marcello: Right.

Cronin: They cut us off from . . . well, the morning that we got up and the guards were gone they found a man, his wife, and three or four of his children shot not 200 yards from . . . a man had killed his family. Right after they came there . . . we knew there was a place where the Germans lived, and there were German Army women, and they'd come in and drag one out of there and take them out for the night. I didn't see too much of it, but they were tough. They loved the American Air Corps because evidently we did a lot of ground support. They loved us, but, God, they hated those Germans, and the feeling was mutual. So anyway, they told us that . . . we got the word that they would fly us out. On this Saturday afternoon the hospital ships would come in, and they would arrive like at 1:30, we'll say. Well, everybody got out in the open there, sitting around, oh, surely three hours before these planes were supposed to have come, and we waited and waited, and the appointed hour came and there were no planes. I remember it was

terrible waiting, "Are they really going to get us out of here?" because you can't think anything good's going to happen. And pretty soon. . . we were the far camp away from the action that started, and the British compound was up maybe 100 yards up, 200 yards up, and we heard this noise. We looked and there was two or three specks out there. And these guys started yelling and then we started and it was the plane. They were hunting us, so they finally got their bearings and they flew over, and, of course, everybody was going nuts and they came back, and I forget what pass it was, but they came in as low as they possibly could, and I'll never forget this sight. Now we were dirty, physically dirty. Everybody had his own combat tale and his own heart, and some men had really gone through hell, and others didn't, and everybody had their own hopes and dreams. And I'll never forget when this plane came by because it was the first time any guy in that camp had seen an American star--an American plane. It was the first time we saw any friendly plane, and I remember that that plane turned. It came in on a bank and it couldn't have been over 200 feet in the air. We could see the people in it. As it turned everybody turned with it, and I remember being distracted and looking at the man in front of me. He was a great big guy, tall, I remember, and his dirty face was in tears.

And then I looked at everybody, and I was crying, and all these men were crying. It was the first time they saw a plane, and it was a touching thing to see this plane. We finally knew that something good was going to happen. And, of course, they took the sick . . . there were a lot of guys that were hurt and sick, you know, and they took them out. Then they sent doctors and everybody in, of course, and in a couple of hours they were in camp. But those were some of the good things. I don't think that's of much interest to you as far as this is concerned, except that the human end of it to see the thrill of seeing your own country again.

Marcello: To go back just a minute, are there any individual German guards or officers that stand out in your mind at this camp either for the compassion that they showed or for the atrocities that they committed?

Cronin: No, the only thing that stands out in my mind that really was bad was that I saw an American soldier spill his guts. We were being interrogated, and I was in the next room. And I heard this man . . . it's funny, I know his name, I know where he lives, I know everything about him . . . he didn't do anything except he didn't have the nerve to keep his mouth shut and just not talk. That's a vivid thing.

They had a punishment box. There was a colonel

that had to go sit in that thing for a couple of weeks. He was punished pretty severely. He was written up in Life magazine many years later as a squadron leader, or a group leader, in Korea, but, no, there weren't too many . . . I don't . . . I can't pick any particular person out.

Marcello: Awhile ago you mentioned the box.

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: What was the box and what was it like?

Cronin: Well, I was never in it. It was kept right out of the compound, but as I remember it was a concrete box, and I was told that you couldn't stand up straight in it. You couldn't lay down, stretch your legs in it, and it was a sweat box. And in some movie I saw they had one just like that. But I was never in it. Now we were told we'd get stuck in it. There wasn't any reason to flaunt the guards or do anything that would put you in there. I don't think the men had the strength to really get in a lot of trouble.

But this fellow Bob Hinckley one time . . . we didn't get any food. When the Russians liberated us they found thousands upon thousands upon thousands of Red Cross parcels that the Germans wouldn't even give to us. They gave us these parcels along with this beef that we were eating. But we got pajamas from the Red Cross, I believe.

Bob took his and snuck out of our compound. I tell you, this is the greatest man that ever lived that I've seen. And he snuck into another compound and he sold his pajamas for so many cigarettes. And he brought me the cigarettes because he knew I liked to smoke. That's the kind of man he was. But anyway, he could have been stuck in there, but Bob could care less. He would not flaunt authority, but he'd thumb his nose at it if he thought it was wrong. He'd be a great man today. If he was a young man he would assert his rights much stronger than most people.

Marcello: I assume that you were subjected to more questioning and more grilling in this prisoner-of-war camp again.

Cronin: When we first came in they get it all over and they kept a dossier or something, and the Russians found a bunch of these, and I was lucky enough to get mine back. It's just a form that they kept on us. We went through the same thing. But once we were in the camp, the thing I remember from when we first came in, was the night it was snowing so badly. They deloused us and they interrogated us and gave us some damp straw to put in a sack and that was our mattress. I remember the misery of that cold night. But things eased up, you know, and everybody else was in the same boat. Misery truly loves company. If the other guy's doing it you can do it.

Marcello: What sort of diseases were you most likely to contract in one of these camps?

Cronin: Well, the only thing that we noticed--and I got one of them bad--was that you'd get a bad cold. As for a disease, I don't remember a disease.

Marcello: How about bedbugs or lice?

Cronin: Now there was a fellow that I slept next to there that first couple of nights, and he had lice or something. I thought it was terrible, but I don't remember that we had lice as a problem or bedbugs. We were allowed to bathe once a week, as I remember. I can't remember bedbugs being a problem. I remember having a terrible cold that I couldn't get rid of from sleeping on that damn bed.

You asked if there was anyone that was particularly good or particularly bad, but I don't have any real recollection. I do remember that you were always threatened that if anything happened you'd be shot. You were called out twice a day and they counted you. And the guard was armed when he counted you, and periodically they'd search us. They'd make you go out and then they'd search the rooms.

Marcello: What sort of items were off limits, or what sort of things could you not have?

Cronin: Oh, they were strictly after escape material. Now something they constantly tried to find was the press that printed the paper.

Marcello: Did they ever issue any articles such as toothpaste or toothpowder or razor blades or anything of that nature?

Cronin: The Red Cross had a package. When you came in they gave you a little cardboard-type suitcase and it had a razor. I hadn't thought of that until now. It was brownish, and there was stuff in there. The big thing was food. We didn't have any food, and in the last analysis, when they keep you hungry you're going to keep out of trouble, and they kept us hungry. I remember that. We decided one time that we would . . . it was a room rule that you could not talk about food, and that was so terrible that we decided we would. And I remember writing . . . the Red Cross to send us some tablets. This is the idiocy of this stuff. They had tennis rackets and things like that--but I didn't see those--but never food. They were keeping that away from us. But in this tablet--I brought it home--we wrote what sounded good to us. And if you want to get sick, just read this. I remember I wanted bananas dipped in milk chocolate. That was one of them. You get to craving things. But we found it was better to talk about food.

Marcello: Did you ever imagine that you could smell a particular type of food cooking someplace?

Cronin: Oh, yes. They had a D-bar. Now a D-bar today, you just

wouldn't . . . I don't think you'd eat one. But I remember dreaming of barely scraping it--and you'd savor this thing--of scraping it against your teeth and enjoying it in the smallest amount to make it last longer. And I used to go back and think of dinner at my aunt's house, a Christmas dinner. I guess I ate that thing a hundred times over. The thing was that if you ever got to eat it, you want to eat a little bit at a time and enjoy it. You just go nuts thinking about food.

Marcello: Were you able more or less to keep up with the course of the war?

Cronin: Through this underground newspaper, and I guess every room did it the same. You know, they'd say that Patton was somewhere. Well, somebody had to decide where that somewhere was. And I remember I used to interpret that, and I didn't know where half these towns were, and I used more baloney than anything else and got by with it. But the men liked it. They wanted to hear what they liked to hear and it helped.

Marcello: Were the radios hidden in the camp?

Cronin: No, not that I saw. But they got this . . . yes, they had a radio. They had an underground radio and an underground newspaper, but the place, but I know nothing about. But I'd read many of the letters that came through.

Marcello: Now as the time was drawing closer and closer and closer to the end of the war, did you wonder what was going to happen to you . . .

Cronin: Oh, yes.

Marcello: . . . when the Germans lost.

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: In your own mind, were you convinced that they were going to kill you?

Cronin: No. Oh, no, no. I couldn't imagine any such atrocity, but I guess I was naive. But here again, I think you always think it's going to happen to the next camp or the next guy. No, there was never that thought. We were just thinking about when we would get home.

Marcello: Well, apparently there was no hint that you were going to be liberated from what you've told me. Just one day you woke up and the guards were gone.

Cronin: That's right. We woke up one morning and they were gone. It was a shock, a real shock.

Marcello: In other words, I imagine they wanted to get the hell away from the Russians.

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: They probably were heading west, or heading east actually.

Cronin: Well, yes. They were cutting them off from the south, and they wanted to get into American hands, I imagine. We understood that fifty to sixty of the men were killed. Immediately that morning word came down by word of mouth,

"Stay in this camp. Don't leave. We will be liberated. Somebody's coming." And all this and that. The Russians were coming." There was, I guess, a cavalry of Russians. I don't remember that first morning. We were so wild with excitement. But the word came down, "Stay put. You don't have the strength. You could get lost. There's a lot of killing going on." Fifty or sixty of these guys took off anyway, or maybe more, but we heard that many got killed, so we stayed put.

Marcello: What were your reactions when you saw those Russians come in?

Cronin: They didn't come back to our area; we went up to theirs. I guess it was curiosity, and a couple of them could speak just enough English. I think we were ecstatic with joy to see a Dodge truck and then to see that airplane a few days later. See, the Russians had us for maybe a week, quite awhile, maybe two weeks, before they actually got us out of there and before we saw Americans.

Marcello: I assume your contacts with the Russians were rather routine.

Cronin: Yes, and they . . . the Russians . . . my recollection is that we knew he loved the flier because these were combat troops. These guys had really been through it, and they got support from the American Air Force. And you know, "You're combat personnel, you're a flier,

you're my friend." And they'd give you anything. If they asked you for something they'd give you something.

Marcello: Incidentally, what prisoners were doing the work in this camp?

Cronin: Russian.

Marcello: This is something I wanted to bring out because some of the other airmen that I've talked to mentioned that just about all of the work in their camps was done by Russian prisoners.

Cronin: Yes. You asked me awhile ago if there was anyone nice to us. There was a Russian major who was cleaning latrines and the like. They did not join the Geneva Convention, and we used to slip him cigarettes. That would be a stiff penalty if they caught you, but we felt sorry for these guys. They treated them badly.

Marcello: Apparently this was one of the things I think that ought to be brought out--that these Russian soldiers were treated like dogs.

Cronin: Well, they disappeared, too, one day. They were no longer there.

Marcello: You figure the Germans probably shot them?

Cronin: No, I wouldn't say that. I don't know but they got them out of there. I'm sure that if the Russian Army coming in had found their own men cleaning latrines, they'd

have killed everybody. Of course, the German guards were gone, too. There was a funny story of a Russian who was in this little town of Barth. They had cobblestone streets, as I remember it. But anyway, the story was--I did not see this--that he was drunk, and he was riding a bicycle, and he couldn't manipulate this bike. He had a tommy gun over his shoulder and it kept falling. He finally fell, got up, took the gun out, and emptied a whole drum, probably twenty or thirty shells, into the bike and sent people screaming everywhere. The shells were ricocheting. Those people were nuts, but they could care less about shooting and killing Germans. But they would protect us with their lives. But the smart boys stayed in that camp, and, of course, lived to tell it.

Oh, I told you about these girls. This is something that I detest to this day. Word came in through that radio to this colonel and down to us that we were going out and that we were to get in these planes, but we were to leave all German civilians there. We don't bring any. They made this deal with the Russians. Now this is unfair. We walked out of that camp leaving those girls there, and God knows what happened to them. We should have brought them back. This is an indictment of our . . . I think that young kids that you teach today should know that we did try to pinpoint bombs, that guys did not shoot up

that airplane, and we did go by our treaty and leave those poor girls back there because we said we would. And I think this is important. The law of contracts must stand, I guess, or a country would go down, but I think it was an indictment against us that we left those people there.

I'll tell you something that will be interesting for your class. In the barracks next to us, there was a young man who was born in Budapest. He went to school in the United States and could speak Russian and German and Hungarian and English and French. When the Russians came in, no one could speak their language. And this colonel got him up there and made him a "light" colonel. He told the Russian general he was a lieutenant colonel and would act as his liaison. They went across town the next day, and he came in to see us that night, or else we went over to see him to see how it went, and he was sick. He wasn't throwing up, but he was about ready to throw up. They went into an underground camp with soup--and he did this with the Russians--and they had different rooms, and he said that when they went into this one room, there was old men and women that were just skin and bones living in there, and some of them hadn't seen daylight in a couple of years. And he told us that they

brought food into this one room, and one of them dropped dead. One of them had a baby, and one of them just had no control over his bowels, and they just went completely bananas over this food. And this was part of the people that were persecuted by the responsible authority of Germany, and, of course, we couldn't believe it. This man was sick. We thought he was lying, but we knew he wasn't. He couldn't lie. And then, of course, we later heard of all the terrible camps, but he told us that one night, and this was a . . .

Marcello: In other words, these were political prisoners of some sort.

Cronin: Some sort, yes. We knew nothing of it, but the Russians, I guess, had a vicious hatred because I guess when you're on the ground and seeing all these you would get pretty rough with the populace. But I don't think that could happen in this country, but maybe it could. But anyway, this was something that might be worth asking people as you go along. This guy told us that, but I didn't see it.

I'd like to give you another tremendous impression I had. I could go on, but we were flown to France. I remember we were in a B-17, and they took us out, and we were getting out of the airplane on the airstrip on the apron in a city called Rouen in France, when the treaty was signed. But there was a guy walking out of a mess hall, and he was eating a piece of white bread, and every man ran over just to see the white bread. I remember that

but we went through a big camp, a tent city that they said was the size of Cincinnati, and it was there that you reported the names of any Germans that you wanted picked up, and I reported these two men that I spoke of.

Marcello: These were both the interrogators.

Cronin: Yes, and I made a special point to take to . . . well, I got stuck in the hospital, and after this ten days or so in the hospital, I went back to make damn sure that these guys were reported, and I gave them the message of the man in Gyor, and they looked it up and said that they had a team out looking for him and that I was like the 150th or the 510th or something man to report him, and they were really after this guy.

Marcello: At the time that you were liberated were you kind of bitter toward the Germans?

Cronin: I guess I was. I don't know. I think I was so happy to get out . . . I never called them German. I didn't give them that much respect until . . . well, until real lately I used to call them Jerrys. I guess I was. I must have been.

Marcello: But I gather that time has healed any sores.

Cronin: I think it's healed it to the point that I don't remember that I was bitter, but I don't remember things too well anyway. There's a lot of detail that I'm sure I've missed. But I want to give you the things that stand out.

Marcello: Awhile ago you very briefly mentioned a Jewish flyer or a couple of Jewish fliers. What sort of treatment did they get in this prison camp?

Cronin: The Germans were very conscious of your last name, and I don't even remember this fellow's name. Anyway, they asked him to put his belongings together and they took him out of the room where we lived. Now I know they did not kill him because we saw him later on, but they took him out, and I guess they put him with other Jewish people. The Germans thought, I guess, that they would contaminate us or something. But anyway, they were very conscious of whether you were Jewish or not. I don't know whatever happened to this colored boy. I think he wound up in our camp. I can't remember what happened now, but that was a great guy. And this Jewish fellow was a wonderful fellow, too. We all felt so sorry for him, but there wasn't a hell of a lot we could do at the time.

Marcello: Several former prisoners have commented that if one commits a criminal act and is caught and is sentenced to prison, he knows when he's going to get out. In other words, if he's sentenced for three years, he knows he's going to get out in three years, or maybe in less time for good behavior. But on the other hand when one is a prisoner-of-war he doesn't really know when he's going to get out. It might be a month, might be a year,

might be ten years. Is this something which you and your group kind of experienced, also? I don't know what sort of an experience this might possibly be or how you would classify it, but it is kind of like a future of nothingness or something.

Cronin: That is the most terrible feeling to have nothing to look forward to, and that's why I feel so sorry about these Vietnam fellows. Now remember I was just in solitary for about three days. Now these fellows may have not talked to another American for God knows how long. They're still hungry, and they have nothing tomorrow. Look at the compounded problem. I feel very strongly about this, and I also feel the frustration that must be the colored man's when you take away his freedom-- and I don't mean to say that I'm gung ho to change anything-- but when you put a free man in a free society under the frustrations of him not being allowed to be a free man-- and this I experienced in a PW camp--I have great compassion for that. And yet I still like the status quo, too. But, yes, I understand your point. I would love to be able to expound on it, but there's nothing as bad as the frustration of the nothingness of prison camps or "I can't go anywhere because I'm a Catholic, or I'm a Jew, or I'm a black man." It must be terrible. In my little experience it was damn frustrating. And I

feel for them, but I don't mean that I would want to change things within the framework of the law. I'm not critical of the government or anything like that. I'm just saying, "Yes, it must be terrible in Vietnam." And that's the thing that hurt us the most.

Marcello: Did you live from day to day?

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: Is that the only way you could do it?

Cronin: Yes. You always thought tomorrow maybe it'll be better.

Marcello: Did you have to be a great optimist?

Cronin: I don't know.

Marcello: Or did you really have to more or less be a realist?

Cronin: I don't know. I hadn't thought of it in terms of . . . I don't know. I think you'd probably have to have a little bit of optimism in you. I guess that that would be a good word. I think that if I weren't an optimist, I probably wouldn't have taken the life of a salesman where you live by your wits. You have to be optimistic about what you can do tomorrow. But I guess on the other hand everybody is that way. I didn't find too much pessimism in there. A lot of bitching, griping, hell-raising, people hating it.

Marcello: I would assume that prison camp brought out the very best and the very worst in individuals.

Cronin: Yes.

Marcello: I would gather you knew what a person was really like.

Cronin: Yes, and you knew what his brothers were like, and . . . but you also . . . most of them with a couple of exceptions would compensate and not let their worst parts show. A jealous individual is a jealous individual if he's in a PW camp or sitting in a cocktail lounge with everything going for him. So the little petty things come out. I never saw a fist fight in camp. I saw arguments.

Marcello: How about stealing?

Cronin: No. I think there was some stealing once but, no, we didn't have any problems. I think that the American soldier of that war, if all of this research is put together . . . and many years from now they're going to read about it as being a pretty damn fine upright hell-raiser that maybe came home and tried to do too much for his family, and maybe he didn't take care of things as much as the previous generation, but the fact that he was so good he let it get a little bit too liberal maybe. I don't know but I think that history will prove them to be a real bunch of fine guys.

Marcello: From all my interviews, I get the impression that those who survived are what I like to call tough men. Do you think that's a fair characterization?

Cronin: Yeah, I don't know about the word tough, but I guess they'd

be men. I know this, that God, I hated to go to that Army. I was so nuts about home, but so was everybody else, but I don't know. I wouldn't think of goofing off and not going with the crew on a flight if I had to, but I hated to go to that damned airplane, but so did everybody else. I think that this may be the mark of a collective race of men and women. I don't know. I don't know. I feel today that a lot of our young people would let us down, and that's a terrible indictment of them. But some of the kids that you teach, I think, would let us down. And that's an indictment that I think is as rough as I can make. Now maybe I'm wrong. I hope I'm wrong, but their standard of values is not . . . some of them . . . I just wish that they could have the opportunity to see how the upper crust lives in some of these other countries. West Dallas is heaven to southern Italy. We had this crazy navigator from Cleveland. Tell your class this. He was about half-stoned one night, and we found him in this town of Cerignola. And he was at a lamp post, and he must have had fifty kids lined up there. And he had chocolate, little penny Kraft chocolates, caramels, in all of his pockets. He was a happy-go-lucky guy. These kids would always come up and ask you for "caramels, Joe?" or "chocolate, Joe?," you know, and he'd say, "Okay, wash your face." They all were

dirty. These little kids lined up with just a white spot around their face. They'd go wash their face in the horse trough. And he'd talk to them. There was one little kid that kind of took his heart, so he asked this kid to take him home, and this kid took him to his home. Now this was close enough to walk, and they went into this house. He was a sharecropper is what we figured out. In this big room of the barn in one end they had a wood stove and a table and a bed and a little bed and a chair, dirt floor; and on the other end was animals, like a pig and a cow and a goat and chickens or something in the same room. And that's all these people had. That was the civilized country of southern Italy. There's no comparison between southern Italy and northern Italy, but sure we've got some starvation here and we need to stop it. And the fact that we have people living better than that family and those people in southern Italy doesn't mean that we shouldn't improve it even more, but it does mean that I wish some of these kids could see that maybe it's not as bad as they say, and it is coming along and if we tilt it too far their children and their children's children are going to suffer.

In that line there's something that I'd like to get into this record, and that is when we came home. I came home as one of about five men. That's quite a story in

itself now that I think about it, but I was with part of an infantry division that was being given a fourteen days delay enroute to go to the west coast to go to Japan. But I was coming in and being assigned to what they called the Zone Interior, and I'd never had to leave, but we hit the . . . on a loud speaker system of this ship they told us we'd have to land at Boston instead of New York because there was so many boats going into New York. I thought this was a shame at the time, but anyway, we came in close to land and an experience not unlike seeing a first airplane took place. Uncle Sam--some guy dressed up like Uncle Sam--came out, and there were boats everywhere and girls singing on both sides of the ship and fire boats, you know, and just . . . oh, man, really welcoming us home, and they sang all the state songs, you know, as the boat started to dock. When a soldier leaves this country he's a number. I don't care what rank he is, he is still a number and is going out to do a job. And, by God, you get out there and do what you're told and all that, but when you come back and set foot on this ground and you've done it . . . the experience that I had, and every man that I saw and talked to had somewhat the same experience. It's another story. It's a welcoming program from the minute you hit until you're out. For example, we walked off the ship and there

were a bunch of ladies there--mothers giving us coffee and donuts, Red Cross gals. They took us in busses over to Camp Miles Standish. I was segregated from this group and put with combat men coming in. Then I was put over with a PW group. And they took the precaution to stop and tell us . . . there was maybe a hundred of us in this group . . . well, in a speech a general welcomes you back. First of all, they welcomed us back in France. Eisenhower came over, and he was a great man. He was a great salesman. He came over and . . . this was nothing but guys coming out that were PW's. Anyway, they did such things as tell us, "Now don't call home. Don't be positive that your folks know that you're alive. We've had several men call and someone will drop dead or have a heart attack. Call somebody close to home and tell them you're going to call in an hour. There's a battery of maybe a hundred telephones in there for your use, and you'll be able to get through." I was scheduled to go to St. Louis, and I wanted to go to Kansas City. I had them change that, and they gave me a sleeper car. When I got into Fort Leavenworth there was about 200 men being processed, and they called several of us by name. They stood up and welcomed you back. And that's something for them to stop the routine of an

Army camp to welcome you back. And it was a genuine welcome. Oh, I got ninety days, I think, off. A month after I was there a letter came through that my wife and I can have two weeks anywhere of four or five spots in the country on the government. But still it's typically Army. You go there and you have to sign for towels, and it's a buck and a half a week or something. It's still an Army screw-up, but it's still . . . there's something that when you do get home all the bitching and griping makes it worth while in that the country officially does appreciate it. And I think that this experience is something that a lot of guys are less men because they refuse to take the chance to have it, and this is something that a lot of these ultra-liberal kids would say, "Garbage! Why kill?" and all that. True, nobody wants to kill, but what I'm saying is if we live in a society where it happens that this country is as good as any welcoming you back. And they're as tough as any sending you out, too. But I think it's important this should be included, and I think that that's probably the reason that you say these guys you interviewed are of a certain caliber. It's because they've had that experience. And all the other b.s. put aside, it is something worth considering as being more than the stuff we see down at Lee Park and all. It's worth it to

keep this thing going. But I would want that included in anything that I have on record.

Marcello: I have one last question. As you look back on your experiences, what do you think pulled you through more than anything else?

Cronin: You're speaking from a mental attitude, I guess. What pulled me through? I don't know. I think I was just one run-of-the-mill going with the group. I lacked one month being too old to volunteer to get into the Air Corps. I think that having been a little bit older and having loved ones at home was probably a great thing for me to have.

Marcello: This was an incentive to get back.

Cronin: Yeah. I'm sure I had another incentive, but this was the driving incentive to get back. I guess something that I swore when I hit Boston was that I'd never leave this country again. I still get a little perturbed at people that have to go to Europe when they can't tell you what Yellowstone looks like. But I think probably I had a tremendous desire to come home, to get back to America. When you see the other countries, you realize what you've got. I don't know. I think that that and the might of the American Army to get us free, to free us, pulled me through. This is the thing that struck me. We could have bombed that Haiphong Harbor and

won this thing in three weeks five years ago if we'd
wanted to. If you're going to get in a fight, win it.
We got in that fight and we won it.