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Provided by Voris Riley to
JoAnn Myers

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INTERVIEW WITH VORIS RILEY
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I was concrete construction foreman with the post engineers down at camp Barkley, the 8th corps area, war department. To the best of my knowledge we got the first contingent of POWs. There were suppose to be 600 of them. I may be a little off once in a while on some of these figures but it is the best as I can remember.

I was told right quick that I was going to be in charge of the work details in and around the camp. I was also informed that I would be the only civilian that would be allowed to have anything to do with them as far as that was concerned, which was neither here nor there: it didn't make me any difference.

They got them in there . I was working for a living, that was all I knew to do. Anyway, the first thing we had to do was build them a playground, a recreational area. It had to be out of barbed wire, similar to that one we saw in the picture with the overhang and so on and so forth. I got better acquainted with them working on that recreational area than I did anywhere else. The man they assigned to me as an interpreter; his first name I know was Hendricks, and I don't remember the second one but it began with an "H"--something like Himmel or something. He formerly had been a professor of languages at the University of Berlin. Hitler had enlisted him, drafted him into the army. He was a foot soldier, that all he was. Nice young fellow, well educated. He knew basic language but he did not know English. They did not instruct him in English over there. He learned his English on the ship coming over. (referring to the ship that transported him as a POW to the U.S.)

And I will relate a few of the things he told me happened on the ship coming over. By the time he got here he was pretty well taken with the Americans and with their way. In the first place they had a shakedown or inspection on the ship that ran him over. Of course in a military shakedown you are allowed so many pairs of socks, so many pairs of drawers, and so forth. I been through many of them. They were allowed 3 bars of soap, and he had 5. He had a watch, his grandfather's watch. There wasn't anything valuable about it--I saw it. But he had taken and hide it in one of these bars of soap. Well, anyway, he was use to the German shakedown and when he got everything stacked out he put the bar with the watch on top because he figured they would take 2 of his bars. He figured they

would take the 2 bottom bars cause that's where he'd have something hide. Then they just come along and take off the 2 top bars--that's all they're interested in the soap. He was quite sure what it was all about so he went to a Lieutenant right quick and told him about it. The Lieutenant said "we don't want your watch, all we are after is the soap. We'll issue more soap when you want it. Do you know which one it was?" He said "yeah". He said "hell we'll just trade with you." He brought him the bar with the watch in it--they didn't even look at the watch. That kinda impressed him.

Then a colored MP sergeant come along and he had a pair of boots the sergeant decided he would like to have so confiscated them. It didn't not have anything to do with military. So he goes back to this Lieutenant about taking his boots and I want you to know that the Lieutenant called the Sergeant on the carpet and said they were his (the POWs) boots and that the Sergeant did not have any business with them. He made the Sergeant give the boots back and put the Sergeant on report for stealing from him. So he had a very good attitude towards the Americans before he came over. Most all of them were nice young fellows as I have told people.

I would estimate that 1% of them out of 600--I doubt that there were over 6, maybe as many as 12 hardcore Nazis. Some of them might not have let on but most all of them did. They had a tendency to brag. They would meet you somewhere, and they could speak enough English--all the hardcore could speak a little English, quite a bit--and they had a tendency to brag. That's where I got the first inkling of an idea of the so-called buzz bombs. I didn't believe it. It sounded so far fetched to me that I really didn't believe it. But he told me --they got these bombs and going to fire them off in Germany and they are going to land in England and it won't be two weeks until we have England on her knees and then we are coming over here and it won't be too months until we have ya'll on your knees. I had two of them tell me that one thing. (?-had there been any buzz bombing up till that time?) None. (?After they told you that there was?) Yes. (?Do you remember, was this early 1943 he told you this or wht?) Bound to have been early 1943 or late 1942, I don't even remember the dates they brought the first of them over here. But I didn't know anything about the buzzbombs until I went into the service. I think I did tell one Major about it but we laughed it off--it just sounded too ridiculous.

Anyways, they put on this detail, on this building this recreation area. I had a kind of funny feeling when I

first started out but it didn't take me but one or two days to find out that they were just people, that's all they were--they were just educated different than I was. I know they were very sloppy workmen as a rule but I thought at that time it was because they were sloppy. I figured out later on that the reason they were sloppy workmen was on account of the war effort. Now, you can believe you me that everyone of them knew every blasted detail of the Geneva conference. I didn't. They did--they knew everything--they knew every detail, everyone of them did. But because of any work we did around there on their place was really good work. They later took my interpreter away from me and I had done found 2 or 3 more by that time.

One of the men, quartermaster, truck driver, delivered something up there one day and asked me how many of these guys can speak English? I said I dont know--probably a third of them. They understand what I tell them. I dont have to have that interpreter. I found that out the first day. I said "wait a minute--I'll show you something" We had one called Frank. Nice looking young fellow, smart. He was standing up on the ladder doing something and I casually walked up under him and said "Frank, where did you learn to speak English?" He said "In Industrial School in Berlin." I had done found out that some of the hard core could speak it. Later on I questioned Frank as to why and what the deal was. He said they had promised him a governorship, a state, a territory or something like that in the United States after they conquered the United States. He did not know what territory or why but they just told him he would have at least 10,000 people under him and he needed to learn to speak English. (QUESTION: Was Frank an enlisted man?) Yes, a foot soldier. We didn't have any officers in this camp at all. All were enlisted men but what rank or rating they were I have no idea. (QUESTION: Did you have any NCOs in there?) Not that I know of. Their leaders wore no insignia at all but it seemed that their leaders weren't consistent.

If I had a detail out here with pick and shovels doing something and it came time to go in and eat or quit for the evening and one of them would bark some command in German and they would all line up and throw those shovels over their shoulders and goose step to the mess hall. I did not know one word of German. When I ate with them, which wasn't often but once in a while, they were very nice to me. Anytime I went down to eat I had the seat of honor at the head of the table and I had an interpreter on either side of me. They were not rude. Anything that was said anywhere up and down the line they would tell me what was said. Now this was the impression I got, there

might have been something said I don't know or they might have misinterpreted something but I didn't think so at the time and I still don't. If they could speak English, even mediocre English they would try to tell me in English what they wanted. They always treated me very good.

After we got the recreational area fixed up they were going to have a soccer game. I had never seen a soccer game. I did not know anything about it back in that day and time and in this part of the country. It was going to be on Sunday afternoon. I was issued a special invitation by the prisoners to be their guest of honor at the soccer game. I went out---it was cold and all I wanted to do was get home but they had asked me out and I was working with them and so forth and I couldn't have been treated any nicer anywhere. They made sure I had a cup of hot coffee if I wanted one or if I wanted something to eat or whatever. There were two of them there who were working as my aides all the way through. Now they left me under the impression, and I was pretty hard to fool even as young as I was then, that they were not doing this for any political purpose but that they were doing it because they liked me. (QUESTION: Was there anything you could do for them?) Oh, no I wouldn't say there was anything I could do for them--I couldn't even make their work easier. They didn't even have to work if they didn't want to. I treated them nice; I didn't mistreat them at all. They found out on the cruise ship coming over here that the Americans weren't just all that mean or tough. I guess they had found out how tough they were but they weren't vindictive. They discovered it right off the bat. They were ordinary, average German boys, that's all they were. (QUESTION: What age would you say they were.) I think the youngest was 17 or 18 and I don't think the oldest would have been over 28.

(QUESTION: What was their physical condition when they arrived in camp?) Excellent! (QUESTION: Did it get worse or improve?) No sir, it sure didn't. They took exercise. I liked to eat with them. They had good meals, they had good cooks. They picked the cooks, KPs; all of their regimentation within the camp was handled strictly by them. Their sanitation everything. If they had a repair job in there that they didn't know how to do or even if they did know how to do it, it was my job to see that it was done. I generally got some of them and if they didn't know how to do it I told them. They weren't well acquainted with some of our plumbing. Carpenter jobs they did themselves. Now electrical work, something in the wiring, I generally had to do myself. All they had in the way of electricity was light bulbs. I don't think they had anyone who knew electricity.

They had some funny ideas. If they were carpenters they were carpenters. If they were ditch diggers they were ditch diggers. If they were shoe cobblers they were shoe cobblers and they had some in there who repaired the shoes as far as that was concerned. They were the tightest closed shop--the union couldn't be any stricter. Believe me, if a man wasn't a carpenter he didn't pick up a hammer. As far as that was concerned I had a couple of them build me a couple of saw horses one time. They worked practically all day building the saw horses. When they got through with them they were so heavy one man could barely lift one. They were crude looking things. They didn't do it to sabotage--that was just how they had been taught to do it.

I think I more or less fascinated them because I could do any of this. When building the playground we had some old anchor posts, 6 or 7 of them buried down 5 or 6 feet into the ground. Only sticking up 2 or 3 feet. We needed them out and they were going to do them up. I just jumped in the pickup and drove off a couple of hundred yards where they had a big "cat", big old bulldozer. I just hopped on, kicked it up, came on down, whirled it around, backed it up--they were sitting there looking at me their mouths hanging open---one of them got the chain and he tied it around the post and I yanked the posts out. I took the cat back up where I got it, got in the pickup and came back down. That happened probably in the first week I was there. They seemed to be fascinated about the fact I could do all of this stuff.

Now I had some of them finishing concrete one evening. They were suppose to be concrete finishers but I finally had to run them off. It was just a little job. I had to straighten it up myself. They just couldn't finish concrete. I never thought of it at that time but years later I did. I think the reason they were trying to botch it up was on account of the Geneva Conference and the so-called war effort. By the Geneva Conference they were not suppose to even be asked to do anything which would further the war effort against Germany. They knew that. (QUESTION: What was this concrete job--something for their own camp?) No, it was something down in the enlisted men's quarters, regular soldiers. It had something to do with the Army. I never would try them again on concrete.

I took some off, we were doing some dirt and ditch work out in firing range. I had 4 or 5 of them. I didn't even have a guard with them. The guards didn't even carry guns--all the guards had were billy clubs. The only reason they sent an MP with them anyways--and they might send

one MP with a hundred prisoners--all the MP was for was to keep the local people from hassling them. And it didn't take long for them to find out that the local people didn't even give a damn. They didn't even pay much attention to them. They let me have them out there and I said something about running off. I told them if they wanted to run off not to look to me to stop them. I said "If the coyotes don't get you the rattlesnakes will, if the rattlesnakes don't get you you'll starve to death in the desert." You know I don't think one of them got out of sight of me all day.

They were fairly likable but they had a doctrine, I guess they were indoctrinated, propaganda, or something other--they just didn't think of things right. I wasn't around them long enough for them to learn to get things all straightened up. Their main trouble "war effort". Propaganda!--you don't know the half of it. One asked me one day "By the way Mr. Riley just how bad is Detroit damaged?" that caught me with my face hanging out. Detroit damaged?! He said "the war is over for me, probably for you--you can tell me just how bad it is." I asked him, "Where did you get the idea it was damaged?" "Well" he said, "what about New York harbor?" I said "Man you've got to be kidding." He said that they had been told that Detroit had been almost obliterated by bombers. That was an industrial center as far as they knew. He said that New York harbor had to have extensive damage. I asked him where he got that idea. He said "Well if it wasn't how come they shipped us in here to the Texas coast (they unloaded them in Galveston). I guess they thought New York was the only deep harbor we had. I knew there was no need to argue with them. What I am talking about is the propaganda they had instilled in them over there. They were full of it. For a while they didn't believe anything anyone told them.

Back to the general escape. I don't know the number--seems like it was 37. But you've seen these prisoner of war pictures where they moved the stove and dug down. That's exactly what they did in one of those huts---nobody went in there--nobody cared anyway--they had all the time they wanted to. They dug a hole down through this hutment they lived in. I think they had probably dug 75 or 80 feet. I don't know what they did with the dirt, nobody ever asked them. Probably the same thing they did in these high-powered movies. They were engineers enough that they had come up under another hutment outside the fence that they had used at one time for surplus soldiers, for sleeping. At the time I was there, just before this happened, at one time we had 85,000 soldiers--American soldiers--at Camp Barkley. We shipped out several units from there. Anyways, they came out underneath one. Those old hutments set up

16-18 inches off the ground. I think they would sleep 16 men, so you know about how big they are. They takes off. Anyways, they discovered it the next morning at roll call. The MPs discovered it and nobody got shook up. A telephone call came in after a while--some farmer--and he said "Come out here and get these cotton pickin yokels. They're setting out here. Wife just fed them breakfast. Come and get them--they're in the way". And they sent a jeep out and picked them up and brought them back in. Somebody else picked one up on the highway. By noon they had most of them in. Still no on particularly gave a hoot. I think they had all but two in by dark that evening and they caught those two on a freight train somewhere between Midland and Odessa and they didn't know where they were. The MPs out here at terminal (Midland-Odessa Airport area) are probably the ones that picked them up. There could be no punishment because according to the Geneva Conference as long as they kept on the POW uniforms they were clear and they had them on. They never took them off. (QUESTION: What did the POW uniforms look like) They were just more or less kind a plain trousers and jacket and had "POW" across the back--that's all it was. (QUESTION: So there was no doubt that if anyone saw them they knew they were prisoners?) Yes. They were kind of a bluish-grey looking color. (QUESTION: Where they allowed to wear their uniforms?) You mean their military uniforms? No! None whatsoever. They were issued all their clothes, shoes, everything.

Anyways, back to the escape--they got'em in and the Captain asked them what was the idea--didn't they like the food, the beds, what's the idea? They said they weren't trying to go anywhere. "Just look how much we took out of your war effort." They thought the whole camp would get disconcerted and turn out thousands of men and spend thousands of hours and gasoline trying to find them. I bet two bits there wasn't 10 gallons of gasoline used in the whole bit. The only time they used any man hours was for someone to go and get one. Someone would call in and say "Hey, I just saw a couple of your boys walking down the road awhile ago."

But now according to the Geneva Conference they were allowed to work if they wanted to and their pay was in the neighborhood of a dollar a day. And it was their money and they could do what they wanted to with it. Transportation and all furnished. Now civilian help was very scarce and so they got a bunch up picking cotton. I didn't go out with any cotton pickers. I had the work details around camp. They picked cotton for 2 or 3 weeks and one morning they just balked and wouldn't go out. So someone asked why and they said "we're helping the war effort." A man named

Oral Joy went out to talk to them and they said you use the cotton to make gunpowder. Oral said "yeah, but look at those shoes you're wearing." The shoes were cotton topped with rubber or leather soles. Oral said "Look real close there--that's all made out of cotton." They talked about it for 2 or 3 days and someone finally convinced them that there was only about 1/10 of one percent that went into gunpowder and if they didn't pick it someone else would. Finally they all went back out and to work pickin' cotton. But that's what I am telling you about the Geneva Conference. They knew it. Picking cotton would further the war effort as far as they were concerned.

(QUESTION: The prisoners got some money like a dime or so every day even if they didn't work didn't they?) Now I don't know but I really don't think so. But now the men that working for men on building this recreational area---I didn't keep it---but one of the MPs kept a complete record of who went out, where and when and they were getting paid. The war effort seemed to be the biggest thing.

After I got in the service I had a group picture made and sent it back home. My folks and wife lived in Abilene. A friend of mine worked at the camp and he got hold of it and he took it out there to show and it disappeared and he couldn't find it. It turned up about two days later. These German prisoners had hold of it had worked int he carpenters shop and had made a frame for this picture. They brought it back to him to give to my wife. It was a very nice gesture as far as I was concerned.

They had a shake down--they hadn't been there very long. Someone reported knives and so forth and little bits of this and that missing and so they had a shakedown and the MPs just went through the whole camp. They got a bushel basketful of home made knives and dirks and things like that these boys had made. It was against the rules and regulations. If I am not mistaken I believe if the blade wasn't over 3½" long they let them keep it. That shocked them. They took them away from them on account of rules and regulations. What surprised them so much is that when the MPs found a knife they didn't give a hoot whose knife it was they just got the knife. They didn't punish anybody.

(QUESTION: Do you have any idea what they wanted the knives for?) Nobody had any idea what they wanted the knife for. Maybe the same reason any young man or boy or even the old ones wanted a knife for. I sure wish I had that tub full of knives. Wouldn't that make a collection! I imagine they took them all down and threw them in the junk pile. I don't think they were thinking about a revolt. They just made them in their spare time.

Why do you say that? Well, because after the got aboard ship and all the propoganda he had been fed but there were minor incidents as far as we were concerned but they were major incidents as far as he was concerned. He liked the country, the people, he liked the whole thing and he didn't mind telling you. He said this war could end very very quickly. I asked him what he had in mind. He said if we had gotten Hitler, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin and put them all in a tall pen with a knife and said just one of you are going to walk out the war would end quick. He was not a Nazi. Not many of them were. A lot of these young men had come up through the brown shirts or youth movement. Frank had come up through the ranks of this youth movement. (QUESTION: Hitler youth and into the Brown Shirts?) Yes. I really didn't stay there too long. I really didn't care anything about it. I was working for a living and it was part of my job.

(Question: How did you get the job?) I was working for War Department. 8th Corps area engineers and I was concrete construction foreman. We didn't have much concrete coming and I was very versatile and I had had about 18 months experience working American Stockade prisoners. They were in for anywhere from 6 months to 20 years. (Question: Where were you working the stockade prisoners at?) At Camp Barkley. We couldn't get civilian labor. Camp Barkley was 9 miles from Abilene. These old boys in the stockade were in for murder, rape, robbery, cussing officers, for every darn thing. They helped work unloading coal and anywhere they needed them. I couldn't get help up there in my work so they gave me 24 of them. I tried 7 out at first. The 7 I tried were trusties. They were pretty good but not real good. I started building some swimming pools. I had 24 of those guys with a shotgun guard for every 3 of them. (8 shotgun guards) They carried 3 shells in each gun loaded with buckshot. That's were I got started. Since I had worked them and been highly successful with them they then put me in charge of these German prisoners. I didn't even have a shotgun guard with me--that made it a lot easier.

(Question: How long did you work with the German prisoners?) I couldn't say for sure but probably 4 or 5 months.

(Question: When did you go into the service?) I'm not for sure--sometime in early 43 I think. (Note: in later conversation it appears that this should have been 1944).

(Question: How did you get from being a civilian employee of the government to being a member of the military?)

I got a letter from the President of the United States saying "greetings". (Question: Could you have been exempt because of your job?) That was my trouble. I tried to get in the Seabees when they first organized and they talked me out of it. They talked me out of it telling me I so important there. I had strict orders from the Colonel that when I get a greetings letter I was to take it to his secretary and that's it. Well we shipped out at least three divisions out of there. There was the 315th engineers; 13th armored; a bunch of them. They just went out in a flood. They were getting ready for Normandy. We got down to where we just didn't have that many men. I got another "greetings" and took it down to the colonel and he looked at it and looked at a list and said he was sorry but he couldn't save me this time. I said "I'm not trying to get you to save me, I'm suppose to bring them down here." He said that was right but there would be no exemptions for just about anyone. The next time they sent out greetings this fellow Oral Joy got his the next couple of months. He even went as far as stood his physical and had his orders to leave when they passed a law saying if you were certain age and so many kids you didn't go. I know I was already in there. If I could have stayed out for another 3 months they never would have got me. It didn't make any difference. I had the duration and six. (Question: How old were you when you went into the Navy?) I was an old man when I went in the Navy. I was 33 years old. I was about 32 when I worked around the Germans--I was a little older than them.

(Interviewer: Let's go back to the soccer game.) I had a written invitation I kept for years. It was written in English. It was brought to me personally by the Captain in charge of the stockade. The regular MPs didn't have anything to do with the stockade. The Captain and MPs were specially trained for it. The Captain's name I think was "Peterson"--a pretty nice guy. He asked me "How come you go back and forth through this stockade gate when you want to and I have to show them a pass." I said "I don't know, probably because I don't give a damn whether I get in or not and you've got to go in." He said "That's probably it; by the way I've got a pass laying over on the desk for you whenever you want it." I never did get it. Man if they had turned me down at the gate I would have gone somewhere else. Anyways, at the soccer game I had two orderlys to get me whatever I wanted. They treated me like I was company coming. I was the only civilian that was allowed inside those stockade gates. (QUESTION: What did you think of your first soccer game?) Well it looked to me like a lot of running for nothing. After they explained some of the rules and so forth I knew it was something different. I went up there as a courtesy to them.

I was working for the war effort and they were working against it. They still had POWs after I got discharged.

Our orderlies after I got down at Ft Hancock, where NASA is now, were POWs. That's where I got discharged. (Question: What do you mean by orderlies?) The people who carried the pots, did the sweeping, cleaning, the laundry, the yard work, make up the beds, everything. When I was being processed to be discharged I didn't even have to make up my own bed. We had POWs to do that.

(Question: How did the POWs work on something other than what they thought might be war effort--something for themselves and so forth?) They did good work but they were so cotton-pickin slow. Now when it came to anything outside that camp they were sloppy. That barbed wire fence we put up, 8 foot high and all, they did real good. They stretched the wire tight and didn't even make any facilities to get through it. Why should they. They had a nice warm bed, plenty to eat and didn't have to obey Rommel's orders. They came out of North Africa--they had it made. (Question: What did they say about Rommel---did they talk about him much?) Not much was said but what they did say was that he was a great officer, a good officer. In fact one of them mentioned the fact once that if Rommel had been in Hitler's place they would have been much better off. (Question: Did they say anything about the SS?) Not a word was ever said about them. (Question: How did they talk about Hitler?) Let me put it like this--they didn't say anything derogatory about him but you could catch the undercurrent. For instance the way the average civilian talks about lawyers. They didn't think too much of Hitler. But here is what they were up against---they were indoctrinated to the extent that they really felt when they got here that one of these days they could walk out of the camp and take the whole area over. They had some hard-cores over here. You know people--they go with the tide. So why get yourself in jeopardy and express your real thoughts. Especially raised in a country so full of propaganda. They were propaganda stuffed until it was horrible. So they are not going to say anything against Hitler but come to think of it I never heard any of them say anything good about him. Most all of them according to undercurrent I felt was that they personally would have been much better off without Hitler. There was another thing I never heard mentioned while I was there. Jews. I don't remember the word every being brought up. We didn't know anything about the death camps. We knew all the jews had been persecuted and shipped out but we didn't know that. I have my doubts that any of them knew. I don't think they knew much about the SS.

(Question: 600 POWs arrived in the first shipment-all from Rommel's African Korps. While you were there did they receive any others?) No. We only had Germans. No Italians. They shipped one or two of them out. One was my interpreter. They shipped him to Camp Polk(Louisiana) because he could speak English good.

(Question: How did their schedule go?) What they did before they ate I don't know. They went on army schedule. I got out there of a morning around 8 o'clock. My detail was always waiting for me. They ate their lunch at noon. They were brought back there to eat if they were working for me. I won't swear they were if they were working in the cotton field. I had to turn them loose by 4 in the evening. (Question: Do you have any idea what they did after that?) No, but they were very much on exercise and cleaning up. They kept that camp spotlessly clean. They kept an MP on the gate and another moving. They kept 2 or 3 MPs. We didn't have a tower. To be honest with you I wasn't overly fond of them; I didn't care too much for the job to begin with; I didn't get overly friendly with any of them. As individuals I saw the human side of them. When they got in there they were just nice young men from a different country.

(Question: You were there when they first shipped them in. Did they seem real scared to you or worried at that point?) No, they didn't seem to be but remember they had been in the hands of the United States Army for a month or longer. They didn't seem to be scared but they had a sullen attitude as a whole. I say that sullen attitude lasted about a month or so. This Frank I told you about earlier was very sullen until I made him come out with his English. He was very secretive and sullen. He never smiled. He did just what he was told to. After that he kind of warmed up. But none of them were going to warm up to the American public as a whole by the time I left there. I believe about 25% of them at that time felt Germany would win the war and invade the United States. Many left me under the opinion after they had been over here for a while that they thought it was a lost cause. It was 2 weeks before they asked me about the bombing of Detroit and New York Harbor and I still don't know if they believed me. I didn't go out of my way to try and convince them of it.

(Question: When they were brought into Galveston do you know how they were transported to the camp?) No I don't but I think it was by train. The reason I think it was by train is that they were unloaded in the camp itself off of a train.

(Question: How did they react to the West Texas Countryside?) That's hard to say. I wasn't around them that long and not in the summer when it got real hot.

(Question: Do you any idea how many POW camps there were in Texas?) Not in the least. The only camps we even knew of were this one, Camp Polk Louisiana, and Camp Swift. Camp Swift was mid-way between Bastrop and Elgen. I helped build it.

(Question: Let's talk about the physical layout of the camp. You said there was about an 8' fence around the entire POW camp.) Yes and it had about a 3' overhand on it. The fence was barbed wire. It was no electrified. It was only a single fence and no guard towers.

(Question: How many guards were on duty at any one time?) Even with the detail I never saw more than two for 600 prisoners.

(Question: You said Captain Peterson was in charge. Where was his headquarters?) It was just outside the gate. The MPs barracks was out there close to it also. It was only 200-300 yards to the nearest hutment(regular military barracks.)

(Question: These hutments where they lived; we discussed them earlier and looked at some pictures. They look like temporary single story tar paper shacks) Yes, and if I'm not mistaken there were 50 men sleeping in each one. Of course they had their mess hall and dining hall too.

(QUESTION: Did they have search lights mounted around there?) Nope! They didn't give a damn if they escaped--they weren't going anywhere.

(Question: You said they played soccer) Yes, they played it in the recreation area we built. It was fenced in also but there was a gate between the compound and recreational area. They played soccer; they did a lot of jogging around the perimeter of the recreational area. And they did some wrestling. They had a baseball field out there but I don't think they knew anything about it--I never saw them playing.

(Question: Did they ever have anything like a band or orchestra or library?) Not while I was there but remember we were just getting set up and trying to feed and house them.

(Question: The dining hall--was it big enough to seat all of them?) I would say the dining all could only seat 200-250 at a time. They had to eat in shifts.

(Question: You said the Germans cooked, prepared and served their own food.) All the army did was haul it up there in trucks and the prisoners unloaded it. They then took it through the gate to the commissary. (Question: What did they eat?) About the same thing the army did. GI food. About the same amount. They had all the food they wanted. (Question: You said they ate there sometimes. Did they seem to try to cook German dishes out of the food or what?) They didn't seem to. It was just like eating in a cotton pickin mess hall, except better prepared. They had better cooks than we did. They had all the help they wanted. Three meals a day.

(Question: Did they have a canteen there or something like that for shaving stuff, etc?) All that was furnished to them by the army and I don't remember ever seeing one of them smoke--I'm sure they did but I never saw them. Now the red cross got their nose in it quite often and brought them stuff but I never had any connection with it. (Question: Did they actually receive some red cross parcels while you were there?) Not that I can swear to but I heard that they did receive some. Wait a minute. I do remember seeing one of them smoking and he was rolling it and I thought that was rather odd. Remember they were just getting started. What we had to do was feed them, house them, and make sure they were clean and find something for them to do.

(Question: What kind of shower facilities did they have?) Army bath houses. (Question: So the latrines, the whole bit were just standard army facilities). Just standard army bath houses. I know--I put them in. They had three of them out there. There could be 10 men take a shower at one time. Straight old army type commodes--5 or 6 of them and 3 urinals. I know there were 10 shower heads for each bath house and there were 3 bath houses. (Question: One bath house for about every 200 people?) Yes. That was about normal. The army had one bathhouse for every 150-200 people. They were big bathhouses.

(Question: You said they had pull chain electric lights in the barracks--did the MPs or someone cut off the lights at a master switch at a certain time each day?) No they could have them on as long as they wanted. They appointed their own master at arms for every barracks and he was the one who told them when, where, why and how many. He was the one that got them out every morning and probably told them lights out. We never paid any attention to it. They could run them darn little old 60 watt bulbs all the time--we didn't give a hoot.

(Question: What about religion--did they have any place they could practice religion?) That is something I don't know--they didn't at that particular time although they didn't work on Sunday. I imagine later on they fixed them up something for religious purposes. (Question: Did you ever hear of the army chaplain coming over?) There was no army man allowed in the cotton pickin thing unless it was the captain in charge of the MPs. Regular soldiers were not allowed to go in there at all.

(Question: What about medical facilities?) There was a hospital not very far from them. (Question: Did they have a regular sick call every day?) That I don't know.

(Question: Remember earlier you were talking about the "great escape"--how many people did you tell me escaped--37?) I know real sure but that is the number that sticks in my mind. It happened right before I left. (Question: Did they find any more tunnels or any more single escapes through the wire?) Not that I know of. All they did was fill the tunnel up. There was a culvert off down there that ran under the fence for rain water that a small man could have crawled through easy enough. (Question: It almost sounds as if the fence was to keep other people out rather than the POWs in.) That's right. That's what the MPs was for--to keep the people from hassling them. If they were marching a detail and some smart ass soldier caused a problem that was what they didn't even carry guns. They just carried billy clubs.

(Question: What did they do if one of the POWs broke a rule and had to be punished?) That I don't know. (Question: Did you ever see something that looked like a separate jail for punishment?) Nope but I guarantee you one thing--they were the most disciplined bunch of people I ever saw. They followed orders. The man that told them to fall in and so forth--whether he was a sergeant or what I don't know. Or whether it was the same one every time I don't know. There was no need for them throwing their shovels over their shoulders and goose stepping into the compound but they did.

(Question: Do you know of any assaults by any POWs there on American civilians or soldiers or they were attacked by the Americans?) Nope. (Question: Do you know if the Germans ever assaulted one of their own?) Not that I know of. The American prisoners at the stockade were a different story. It was a lot easier handling the POWs than the stockade prisoners.

(Question: How did the civilians around there react?) If there was any reaction no one ever knew. I never heard

anything said against them. Some of the town people said they felt sorry for them as boys away from home. You know how women are with that motherly instinct. (Question: Do you know of any instances when they were out picking cotton?) No--they were the only ones out there picking cotton--maybe the old farmer was around but that was it.

(Question: Did you ever go into the barracks after they were set up?) One time. They were army metal cots just as neat and nice and clean as anything. They had a little old footlocker each. (Question: Was the barracks broken into cubicles or open?) It was just a big bay--slept about 50 men.

(Question: Did you ever hear anything about restricting their movement at night?) No--long as they stayed in the barbed wire fence. They went to the latrine as far as that was concerned. It was all enclosed in the same barbed wire.

(Question: When they had the escape and dug the tunnel did you see it?) No. They hid it under an old pot bellied heater stove. The stove was heated by coal.

(Question: This is all so different from the way Germany treated our POWs?) We knew they thought it was funny but they didn't say so. They couldn't figure it out. They couldn't figure out why they got all the food they wanted; had their recreation area. We were just started out then.

(Question: Were they ever given alcoholic beverages?) That was strictly taboo. If I remember the MPs were worried about some doughhead trying to sell them booze through the fence. As I said it wasn't over 1/2 mile off main highway. Between the camp and the highway was the entire sewage system, tanks and all, for the whole post--85,000 people. I wouldn't want to try and cross it at night.

(Question: What other kind of work did you have them do?) Oh, that's all other than putting up fences and digging drainage fences around the army camp. I had them out in the field fixing a miniature railroad track that pulled a tank target. There was a crew of them that worked in the base carpentry shop. There were quite a few civilian carpenters too and a lot of machinery. They took a bunch of POWs there every day. There was another crew worked somewhere else. A bunch went out and talked cotton. When I needed a crew I might get the same men and I might not. I had the same interpreter all the time.

(Question: Do you know what kind of work they did out in the community other than pick cotton?) To my knowledge

they did nothing other than pick cotton. If they picked cotton it had to be in the cooler months. So I guess they got there late 1943 and I left in Spring of 1944. They didn't give us any trouble to speak of. We weren't worried about the germans here--we were worried about the germans overseas.

(Question: When the prisoners got there the huts were already built?) Yes. The fence was already built too. We used soldier and civilian labor for that. The recreational area we didn't have. I think the fence was built with stockade help. It went up in a hurry--we didn't have much notice they were coming in.

(Question: Do you remember how much you were making then?) Yes I was making \$1850.00 a year. Then when I got in the navy the highest I made \$72.00 a month. I lived pretty high on the hog on \$72 a month in that outfit.

VORIS RILEY INTERVIEW
MILITARY SERVICE ANNEX

In the navy the highest rate i took was petty officer 3rd class. I didn't want any higher. 2nd class was only \$4 more a month and a lot more responsibility. I was standing 1st class watch.

I went to San Diego for basic training. I took a general classification test. Takes about 2-4 hours. Then they say according to this you are qualified for this and that. I had my choice of 5 schools. I decided on electricians school. They sent me to a highly technical college in St Louis. They crammed 2½ to 3 years of electrical engineering down us in 16 weeks. We went to class 45 hours a week. Sat there in class--not counting eating or anything else. Then Navy grades you on grade points and I did pretty good. There were 5 college graduated electrical engineers in my class and I came out 5th in grades. They then give you your choice of next assignment based on class ranking. I took advance training at Consolidated Edison in New York City. I then was assigned to a ship--I went to pre commissioning training for a carrier at Norfolk. The USS Lake Champlaign, CV 39. At the time we went into commission it was the largest fighting ship in the world.

Once we got on carrier we went on 3 week shakedown cruise. It is pure hell--you go through everything. Try to find out who and what works and doesn't work. We lost 16 men on the shakedown cruise--killed or died. One died of heart attack. A gun in a wing of a parked plane went off--it is impossible they can't go off but it did and shot him straight through the heart. A couple fell overboard. They are training you to save your live. Not counting the air crew the compliment was 3200 men. With the flyboys, mechanics, etc we had several hundred more men. (Note this is probably an underestimate). We had 116 planes--F4U corsairs and a few bearcats. All we had was fighters. 1700 horsepower--4 blade prop. When they are warming up at sea you can get in behind them and take a bath in fresh water! The water comes off prop tips and comes together at tail of plane. You get wet in a hurry--especially on a foggy morning.

We had been off coast of south america and the first atomic bomb was dropped. We were going into Yorktown Virginia to load up with ammunition. We came out of there and took gunnery practice. We were suppose to leave--go thorough the canal top San Diego and put on two new guns and head for Asia. We got a 6 day leave. Our choice of 6 days on west coast or east coast. You couldnt fly then so we had to ride train. I figured it out- if I left east coast I could stay home 3 hours IF everything ran on time--and

of course it never did. On the west coast I needed an extra 24 hours just to get there. I took my leave and went up to Boston to see some friends. While I was there they dropped the second bomb. I had come in from Boston and was waiting for a train--3 1/2-4 hour layover in New York. At 7th Avenue it came over an electrical sign that we had peace with Japan. I was in a serviceman's building and looking out the window when it came on and I saw 10 million people go crazy. I left there to get to Penn station and I couldn't hardly get into a subway station. I got back into the ship in time and the old man came back the next day from Washington with orders.

We took the planes off and had 5000 bunks welded into the hanger deck. We headed for England and picked up 8th air force personnel in Plymouth England and brought them back and unloaded them at Staten Island. Refueled and went to Naples Italy and got 5000 GIs. On the way back we set the record for ocean crossing that lasted for over 20 years. On the way back my name came up for discharge and I didn't argue with them. We unloaded those guys. The next morning I packed up and I got out on the point system--5th man to leave the ship.

From the time I went on active duty until the time I reported to the ship was 9 or 10 months. I was in service less than 2 years.

My job on the carrier was main control board operator on the electrical system. The catapults were electrically operated. Most were steam but ours were electric.

(He then drew a diagram to show how catapults worked.) We got a series of pulleys. Cross section of pulleys shows 5 or 6 grooves. There is a 24" hydraulic ram. Cables go through the grooves. The rams are operated by hydraulic oil pressure. The motor that drives it is at least 100 horsepower. Drew 600 amps. These wheels come in close together and they hook plane onto it. When these rams go and start spreading the wheels in a hurry. These wheels with all these cables start spreading the hook travels about 100'--doesn't take it long to get to 75-100 mph. Like I said most were steam. A 100 hp motor can put a lot of pressure on the ram. If total difference rams travel each is 5 feet that totals 10 feet. And you've got 6 turns on the pulley it means the hook travels 60 feet.

When they landed they caught the tail hook. There is a 5/8 to 3/4" cable every 10 feet across deck of the carrier. They are about 4' above the deck. Where the end of the cable disappears into the deck it runs into a cylinder, sealed on top. It has an air escape. Like a door closure.

These cables across deck are raised and lowered flush with deck by hydraulic saddle. You can step on one and mash it down. When plane comes in the hook catches one of the cable and it stretches the cable--maybe 40'. This hydraulic cylinder has air in it and that is where the retaining force comes in. The more pressure builds up the quicker it slows the plane. Some one runs out and kicks the cable loose from the tail hook. The pistons drop to bottom of cylinder.

If that doesn't work they have hydraulic presses--kind of a webbing type stuff--5 of them. Very strong. They are hydraulically operated. One button raises and lowers them. If they miss all the cables or the cable breaks the plane goes into these webbs. I have never known a plane to get through the 5th webbing.

If plane is wrecked the on board crane picks the plane up and dumps it overboard if they can't get plane clear of deck quickly. Sometimes they can put them on deck edge elevator if not too badly damaged. They get the men out of there--they come first.

They don't have to shut down any other ship operations to launch or recover the planes. We had plenty of electricity. We had four 12,500 KVA generators. It was run by fuel oil converted to steam.

I grew up around Edwards Plateau--cowboyed until I was 20 breaking horses. When I first got into navy an old chief told me that a man who got sea sick was a damn fool. He said until you get use to it it is liquid on stomach that makes you seasick. Eat something heavy--drink as little liquid as possible. You won't get sea sick!

My birthdate is May 13, 1910.