Interview with Ernest Thorp

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Thursday, December 17, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm going to be interviewing Ernest Thorp in what I think is going to be two or three sessions. Ernest is a veteran of World War II, a B-17 copilot, was downed and was captured, and so spent the last part of the war as a POW in a German POW camp. Good morning, Ernest.

Thorp: Yes, sir. Good morning.

DePue: Looking forward to this one, (Thorp laughs) because you have the ability to put together a good story, Not only that, but you wrote practically every day a diary, and I'm holding it in my hand. It's titled, *My Stretch in the Service, 1943–1945*. And there are some fascinating entries in here. We'll talk about the process of writing the diary as we get to that point, but let's start with when and where you were born.

Thorp: Well, I was born February 3, 1921, in a hospital in Clinton, Illinois.

DePue: And where did you grow up?

Thorp: I grew up here on Route Three what they call Box 252, Clinton, Illinois, though I'm only two and a half miles from Wapella, Illinois.

DePue: Okay. It's pronounced Wapella (Wah-PEL-a). How big is Wapella?

Thorp: Oh, about five hundred people.

DePue: Where did you grow up, then, on the farm?

Thorp: I grew up on the farm. I went to eight years of Thorp Grade School. Then I went two and a half miles to Wapella High School, and that's where I graduated in 1939.

DePue: Okay. Well, we're going to take some time here, because you're one of those people I like to talk with about their experiences during the Depression and growing up on the farm in rural Illinois. Let's start with a little bit about your parents and how—first of all, where are we sitting right now?

Thorp: We're sitting on a piece of property that my grandfather took charge of in 1881.

DePue: Eighteen eighty-one. Is that when he immigrated here?

Thorp: Well, he had loaned people the money that owned this farm, and they couldn't pay, so he took over. Across the road is where I was raised as a boy.

DePue: When did your ancestors get here, then?

Thorp: Well, my great-grandfather Joseph came over in, let's see, 1858—oh, 1851. Then he bought land in 1851 and moved here in 1856. Because when he first come from England, they worked at the textile shop in Fall River, Massachusetts, and they worked there five years getting enough money to pay and help farm when they come to Illinois.

DePue: That's an interesting time to come to the United States, since it's on the eve of the Civil War. Did you have any relatives involved in the Civil War?

Thorp: Well, my great-grandfather is listed as a deserter. The rumor has it in the family that he paid somebody to take his place when they drafted him in the Civil War. I did have a grandfather on my mother's side who served in the Civil War, was wounded at Shiloh, and came back to DeWitt County to be state's attorney and county superintendent of the schools and a lawyer—he was about a half a dozen things. They gave him credit for getting the headstones for about 150 veterans of the Civil War after the Civil War. So he was a community man, more so than my Grandfather Thorp. (laughs)

DePue: Are we sitting in DeWitt County?

Thorp: Yes, this is DeWitt County.

DePue: Just on the drive here, I noticed that deep, rich loam soil.

Thorp: You betcha—some of the best farm ground in the world.

DePue: Absolutely. When your ancestors got here, was this good land to farm, or was it underwater to a certain extent?

Thorp: It was land that too many people considered all it was good for was ducks and malaria fever because there were so many ponds, no drainage, and everything. So in other words, if you weren't close to a creek to get your ground tiled to, all you had to suffer was ponds most of the time.

DePue: So there was a certain amount of hard labor to get it to be farmable.

Thorp: Exactly, exactly. When I was a boy, my dad had thirteen ponds that I could count just going to grade school.

DePue: What's happened to those ponds now?

Thorp: They're tiled out.

DePue: They're farm, then?

Thorp: They're farm. You bet, you bet.

DePue: You were born in 1921. You were eight years old when the Depression began, so I would imagine you have a lot of memories about growing up in the Depression.

Thorp: Yes, I do, and hearing other people talk, because I was one of those fortunate few that had a dad who was a good farmer, and also he was a good machine operator. He committed himself to buying new equipment right on the eve of the Depression—like 1929, 1930, and then having difficulty getting it paid for because so many of his customers—when corn and wheat and stuff like that was so cheap—couldn't raise enough money to even pay him for his custom work. And I can remember them worrying about him owing money. But he said, it was his salvation—and this is interesting, he was a Republican—but he had a job sealing corn in the corn cribs for the farmers so they could get government money on this corn that they haven't sold at the elevator. And he said he was so lucky to have that job, and here he was, I thought, a good farmer, and he had all this machinery, but the machinery wasn't worth anything to anybody else. When he couldn't get paid for the jobs that he was doing with that machinery, it kind of put him in a bind.

But we never suffered. We always had a good garden, and of course we had—my dad didn't—but my grandparents butchered hogs and stuff of that type, that we didn't lack for meat. But my dad did get enough money that we could buy groceries and not be handicapped to the point that we were deprived of good food and proper clothes. In other words, our hired men and some of the neighbors weren't that lucky, but we were. So I was one of those lucky individuals.

DePue: I wonder if you can describe the farm for us—how many acres and what kind of farm it was.

Thorp: My dad had about 320 acres of ground, which made him a big farmer back in the ’30s. Our crops were corn, soybeans, wheat, and we had some barley during the Depression and when the prohibition was over. The trouble with barley was that the chinch bugs liked the barley, too, and my dad ended up plowing 120 acres of barley up, just plowing it up, because the chinch bugs were eating it, and that was a total loss.

DePue: What was the barley intended to be used for?

Thorp: Beer. And my dad was not a drinker. (laughter) Alcohol was very strictly forbidden in our family, and I was able to keep that habit of not using it. But so many people had hogs and chickens and cows and all that. And this is another strange thing as far as I was personally concerned—we didn’t have a cow. My dad didn’t like livestock; he got out of it as soon as he could—and I had to go to the neighbors to buy milk, you know, a tin bucket.

DePue: Did you have chickens on the farm?

Thorp: Yeah, we had chickens.

DePue: Hogs?

Thorp: Well, no hogs. When I was six years old, we had a tornado that come through the farm and took down all our barns, all our hog houses, and everything that had to do with livestock. My dad sold what was left alive after the tornado and he used the lumber out of the barns that was destroyed to build a big machine shed and a shop so he could take care of his equipment, machinery. So we weren’t a typical farmer in those days. Of course, I had an uncle who thought my dad was so good that anything he touched turned to gold. Well that wasn’t the case, but my dad was a good worker, and he recovered from the Depression. But he was not a land hog either; he didn’t go out and buy land just to be buying. He took care of what he had.

DePue: What was your father’s name?

Thorp: Claude.

DePue: Claude Thorp. And how about your mother’s name?

Thorp: It was Louise.

DePue: And what was her maiden name?

Thorp: Carter.

DePue: And how long had her family been in the area?

Thorp: On my mother's side, they came up from Kentucky and that area. And when they come over, I don't know. I know more about the Thorps than I do about the Carters.

DePue: Yeah, so much of that immigration from Kentucky, from the upper south, happened in the early 1800s.

Thorp: Yes. And of course, a lot of them was looking for jobs up this way, too. There was a lot of people that were farmers that were hired men to start out with, and they was able to get enough together to get started farming.

DePue: You've talked about machinery quite a few times already. Was that common?

Thorp: No.

DePue: And you didn't mention anything about oats.

Thorp: Oats was another current crop. Oh yeah, you bet, very important because of the horses and all. But we didn't need them ourselves because when I grew up, I only had one team, and as soon as I was big enough to hold a wheel, I drove a tractor.

DePue: So that was the machinery?

Thorp: Oh, gosh, my dad had about six tractors and three combines, four thrashing machines, two corn shellers, and plows and disks, and he would go out and be plowing for farmers and custom work of that type. So I grew up on a tractor more than I did feeding hogs or milking the cow.

DePue: That's an incredible amount of machinery for that time, I would think.

Thorp: Oh, it was. It was.

DePue: And you say he hired himself out to work on other farms, then?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. He did a lot of custom work for people. We'd have no less than two to three hired men. Normally you had a hired man for 160 acres. Of course, my dad had about 320, but with the machinery, they were on the machinery more than they were on the farm.

DePue: You don't need to have so many hired hands if you've got a lot of sons.

Thorp: Well, my dad had two sons. I'm the oldest of the second family. My dad had two families. His first wife died, so I had an older brother twelve years older than I was, and an older sister, a half sister, and then I'm the oldest of the second family.

DePue: How many in the second family?

Thorp: Five.

DePue: One boy and four girls?

Thorp: That's right. So I come along in life a lot better than my…Now, you want to talk about Depression, my brother would be the one to talk to, who was twelve years older than I was. He got married right in the heart of the Depression. Lived right here in this house and raised a family and raised chickens, and talking about how hard it was to get along on what he raised, even despite my father paid him what he could for work. But I didn't suffer that way. I was one of those fortunate, lucky kids.

DePue: What kind of chores did you end up doing? You said you spent a lot of time on a tractor—what else?

Thorp: Well, pulling weeds. I hated that job, but my dad put me out in corn fields and in wheat fields pulling out stray weeds and barley. And one time, he told me—when I was a little smaller—You work a half a day, and you can play a half a day. And of course we had a neighbor, a hired man, that had about seven kids, and another neighbor had four kids, and we had about a dozen, twelve kids my age. So we used the creek, dammed it up to make a swimming pool. We even built an old tin shed, and we called ourselves the Willowshackers. And we had more fun playing Indian and cowboy and pirate all up and down the creek and built forts. We just had a big time playing, and my dad let me. My brother thought I should be doing more work, but that was a good thing, that he could let me play half a day and work half a day. But I hated to pull the weeds, but I had the weeds to pull. There was a lot of them. We didn't have the herbicides then. Really, I had a good youthful life.

DePue: You talked about damming up the creek, but you had all these ponds on the land, too.

Thorp: Yeah, right, and we even went swimming in some of those ponds. One time we did that coming home from Thorp's Grade School; three of us was in there swimming, skinny dipping, and here come the girls and sat on our clothes. (laughter) I'm planning to drain that pond this year if I can get the time to do it. It's still got water in it, and we just never got it drained, but I think we can get it drained. They can now with better equipment. But anyway, that's what we did then.

DePue: Is that the last pond on the land?

Thorp: It's my last pond, um-hm.

DePue: Well, you mentioned the schoolhouse. Where did you go to school during grade school?

Thorp: Thorp Grade School, which is just a one half mile east of my house.

DePue: Well, describe that school.

Thorp: It's a one-room school, typical rural community school where you have all eight grades in one room, and you hire a teacher—mostly it's a local farmwife or a local single girl, whoever would teach—and this is what we had. One of them ended up being my aunt, and my mother was a Thorp schoolteacher, and my first wife was a Thorp schoolteacher. So anybody that was single that come out to teach at Thorp school had a chance sometimes of maybe marrying a Thorp.

But anyway, I thought they did a real good job, as far as I was concerned, on education. I can never remember thinking I was not properly taught on reading and writing and arithmetic in this grade school.

DePue: How much of the teaching was done by the older kids?

Thorp: Very little, as I remember. Now, we had some older girls who kind of helped the first graders, but not too much. It's amazing to me how we really learned in that one room (laughs) when people would be reciting, people would be walking back and forth in the school, but we got an education.

DePue: I wonder if you can walk us through, from the moment you get up in the morning and what kind of chores you did, and then going to school until the time you went to bed. If you can walk us through what you would consider a typical day when you were maybe in fifth or sixth grade.

Thorp: Well, for myself, it would be a matter of getting up, eating breakfast, which was usually rice or mush or something of that type. Once in a while we'd have dry cereal, depending on whether we had the milk or not, because I always had to get it at the neighbors. And getting ready and then walking to school. What we did at one time, the neighbors beyond the schoolhouse furnished us the milk, so I'd go down to the neighbors, pick up the milk, come back and then set it at the schoolhouse and not take it home until I went back home that night. Now, that's a little unusual. That's not the way to do it, of course, but it worked for us. So many of the kids had to get up—and this is what my brother had to do—and help milk the cows, and then eat breakfast, a heavy breakfast, and get ready and go to school. Of course, that meant getting up maybe 4:30, 5:00 o'clock in the morning. I didn't have to do that and so you see, I'm one of those lucky ones of that era. So many of them had to get out and even shuck corn in the morning before they went to school—by hand. I didn't have to do that because my dad had a corn-picker.

DePue: Wow.

Thorp: See, my dad was about twenty years ahead of everybody else in his farming. He was the first one to use fertilizer; he was the first one to get good tile and do everything that needed to be done to be properly farmed.

DePue: Everybody you went to school with, though, was basically a farm kid?

Thorp: Yes, or hired men kids. There were a lot of hired men kids, because every farmer had at least one hired man, and of course we had two, and my dad, his hired man, the main one, had seven kids, and they were the same age as I was, and so I grew up together with them.

DePue: Where did they live?

Thorp: Well, they lived in houses, but you don't see them now. But over this way was several houses, and they're all since destroyed since the seed company was sold. I can go down the road and just point out dozens of places where there used to be a house and a family that's not there anymore.

DePue: Okay, we got you at school. Then, school roughly started when?

Thorp: Nineteen twenty-seven.

DePue: No, I mean what time of the day did it start?

Thorp: Oh, It was nine o'clock. She'd ring the bell and everybody would come in. And of course I always enjoyed recess, because a lot of games we could play—Andy Over and Steal Sticks[1] and whatever, you know—hide and go seek. There were some kids that even rode ponies to Thorp School. If they had two miles to come, they'd ride a pony. He had an old shed built in the corner of the schoolyard for the ponies. But I always had to walk, because it's just a half a mile. But we'd have neighbors who lived further and would always take the kids to school in a Model T or a buggy, and they'd pick me up, so I could ride the rest of the way along with the other kids.

DePue: Riding in style, then.

Thorp: Oh, yeah, we thought that was fun. Because my dad was always busy. I don't recall he ever took me to grade school, but then half a mile is not too far, and there was always neighbors going by, and they'd always pick me up anyway.

DePue: Were there any chores or expectations at the school?

Thorp: Well, you would help clean the blackboard or carry in the coal. And of course the teacher had to be the janitor and all, making sure that you had the stuff picked up in the yard and all that, try to keep things as neat as possible. Most of the kids cooperated; some wouldn't. But I can remember working with the

[1] A game where you threw the ball over the roof of the school for someone to catch. E. T.

eighth graders when I was in the first grade, and they said, Oh, I was so helpful that I could help them lay the brick, because they were trying to lay a brick walk out to the toilet. (laughter) It wasn't much of a job, but anyway, I thought I was helping out, because I was just in the first grade. I always remember that, and they even complimented me on helping, when really I didn't do much, but…anyway.

DePue: Obviously you had an outhouse, then.

Thorp: Yeah, we had two of them. And, of course, (laughs) sometimes the boys would chase the girls, and they'd always run into the outhouse. When one of them would run into the outhouse, here comes the teacher, and of course he got chastised. I was lucky—we never had any teachers that gave us a whipping. I only had two teachers in grade school. If she'd get mad enough, she'd let you have it, but I was lucky enough that I didn't… I got reprimanded several times and had to go sit in my seat, but I did not do anything that was destructive or out of the way, that a teacher thought so, anyway. Of course, one teacher turned out to be my aunt, but she wasn't my aunt at that time.

DePue: But some of the other kids, did they get a whipping?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: Well, what do you mean by a whipping?

Thorp: Well, you have a paddle and slap it across the rear rump. Usually a couple of strokes is about all our teacher did, but some teachers really gave them a whipping and would even make the kids go out and get their own switch. But our teachers that I had never were that way. But they was disciplined; you did what she said, and you didn't question it.

DePue: Of course, today if something like that happened, the parents would be outraged. What was the parents' reaction back then?

Thorp: If you get a paddling, well, you'll get one at home. And that really happened a lot. As far as I knew, none of the parents come in supporting their kids if they got out of line. They said, If you got a paddling or a whipping, you deserved it.

DePue: How many children were in the one-room schoolhouse?

Thorp: It was about fifteen. Eighteen was the most at any time in Thorp School. But it varied a little bit, depending on if a family would move in, say, five or six kids, and four of them was in grade school. That happened sometimes; when they left, you got less.

DePue: I'm sure they didn't have a cafeteria. What was lunch?

Thorp: What you carried in a sack or in a dinner bucket when I was going to school. Of course, a banana was a real treat if you had bananas, which we didn't have very often, and oranges, and if you peel the orange, the poor kids would want your peelings from the orange. I could never eat them, but they did

DePue: They ate the whole peeling?

Thorp: They would eat the whole peeling. I could never get over that.

Thorp: They were hired man kids that never got any oranges. Yeah, that was something I always remembered, was them eating those peelings of an orange when I wouldn't even think about eating…

DePue: Otherwise was the staple a sandwich?

Thorp: The staple was a sandwich—usually a couple of sandwiches and maybe, if you had it, a piece of cake or a cookie. I'm thinking in terms of what my mother would fix me. And that was usually sufficient. Of course, I could always remember, the best-looking girl in the school gave me a piece of cake, and I thought, man, that was the most glorious thing she could ever do, to give me a piece of cake (DePue laughs) because my mother never made cake. I always had either cookies or a cookie, but no cake. Yeah, she at that time was the prettiest girl in school.

DePue: She must have been sweet on you, Ernest.

Thorp: Well, I don't think she was. She was older than I was. I think she was still four or five years older, but I thought such a treat that she gave me that cake—just a piece of cake, you know.

DePue: What time was school out, then?

Thorp: Let's see. About four o'clock. Not as early as what we get out now. And we'd have two recesses, one in the middle of the morning and one in the middle of the afternoon, about ten minutes—just enough time to get a ballgame started, and then she'd ring the bell and we'd have to come in. But we always enjoyed the recesses.

DePue: I would assume the expectation was you'd come straight home, and I got some chores for you?

Thorp: Most the time, yeah. In other words, we had chickens. I had to take care of the chickens, or feed them, and also sometimes—well, I didn't clean the chicken house until on Saturdays. But that was always a job I hated, was to clean the chicken house, but that was one of the jobs that needed to be done.

DePue: The chicken droppings, I'm sure.

Thorp: Yeah, you bet.

DePue: What'd you do with them?

Thorp: Well, you usually put them on the garden. We had a pretty good-sized garden, and that was another one of my chores, was to take care of the garden. I didn't mind doing it. In fact, I could get my best grades, even in college, on gardening and horticulture. (laughs) But I liked it.

DePue: As long as it wasn't pulling weeds?

Thorp: It wasn't pulling weeds, but I did pull weeds and hoe weeds, but I just hated… We had butterprint and some of those big, tall weeds, and my dad said, "You can't use a hoe, you've got to pull them up by the roots, because if you cut them off, they'll grow back again." This was true. He was right. So we had to pull, and some of those weeds got pretty big.

DePue: Well, that gets us to the evening. What typically was on the table for supper?

Thorp: Well, a very little bit. That's a good question when you stop to think about it. I was never a food connoisseur. I ate what Mother fixed. I know I always liked a chocolate drink that she could make, or a pudding, and I liked that especially. But usually it was all bacon or maybe sometimes she'd have pork chops or meat, and she was always particular—even in those days—she was careful about lettuce, making sure we got lettuce. She tried to give us a balanced diet. My mother was a schoolteacher. So she tried to give us—to me it was a variety of food. I can remember even dried cereal, like bran flakes, for example, and corn flakes particularly. Those were always good if you had the milk, but we were always short on milk because we had no cows. That was one of the first things I got when I got married; I bought a cow, because I'm going to have all the milk I wanted! (laughter) I found out that was a dream too, because they go dry. And of course, at six o'clock, we had *Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy.*[2]

DePue: So you had electricity?

Thorp: Yes. We had a Delco plant.

DePue: A Delco plant.

Thorp: Um-hm. In other words, we had an engine that generated electricity.

DePue: Just for your farm.

Thorp: Yes, just for the house.

[2] A radio program which was a favorite of young boys and which taught many life lessons.

DePue: Well, that had to be unusual, too.

Thorp: You bet it was. As I said, my dad was way up and far and beyond any of the neighbors. And it was in the basement. It made a lot of noise, but we had electricity. And we had running water. That was something else unusual.

DePue: Indoor plumbing?

Thorp: Indoor plumbing, you bet. So, you see, until I got married and lived in a three-room house with just electricity but no running water or a bathroom did I suffer the—and prison camp—the ordeals of outside privies. (laughs)

DePue: Well, most of the kids must have thought you were one of the rich kids.

Thorp: Exactly. They did, they did, yeah. We were in a sense. I never considered myself rich, or my family never considered themselves rich, but we were, compared to all the neighbors up and down the road.

DePue: So you oftentimes would listen to the radio at night.

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: The whole family?

Thorp: Yes. *Jack Armstrong, the All-American… Orphan Annie*, and there was some—I can't think of some of the names, but the old guys that—oh, Walter Winchell and "all the ships at sea." And he'd give the news. And my dad, of course, he was not a politician, but he was always interested in politics in the standpoint of these conventions and all that. He'd stay up almost all night listening to them to see who he was going to nominate. But he never ran for public office.

DePue: Was DeWitt County a traditionally Republican area?

Thorp: Yes, very much so. If you was a Democrat, you was (gasps). (laughter) We got along well together. We had some good Catholic friends that were Democrats. I couldn't believe that anybody could be a Democrat; everybody had to be a Republican. (laughter)

DePue: How about a telephone?

Thorp: Oh, yes, we had a telephone, the old crank types in the wall and on a party line. My mother was very notorious for listening on the party line. We kidded her about it, and she said, "Well, that's the only way I can find out any news." She got smart enough that she got a towel and put it over the mouthpiece so they couldn't hear her breathe. Some people said, Well, that Thorp lady's on the telephone, and you can hear her, you know. So she got a towel and put it

over the mouthpiece so they wouldn't hear. We weren't proud of my mother doing that.

DePue: She probably wasn't the only one doing it. (laughs)

Thorp: We were lucky. Just two shorts[3] was all it took to get us. When I come home from service, I had to have five shorts, so I had to start counting before I knew whether my telephone was ringing or not.

DePue: So you knew everybody else's ring as well, I'm sure.

Thorp: Just about, yeah. (laughs) Yeah, it was something funny. But it was a social thing, and yet it was very important to the neighborhood.

DePue: Does that mean a lot more farmhouses had telephone service than they had electricity or indoor plumbing?

Thorp: Come to think about it, that's right. Because the REA[4] didn't come through with electrical power until in the late '40s—well, yeah, early—it started pretty strong there prior to World War II, and then afterwards it really got going.

DePue: I know during the war itself it really kind of slowed, because all the things you needed for electrical service were what they needed for the war.

Thorp: Right, right.

DePue: Okay. We mentioned just briefly your Catholic friends. Was the family a churchgoing family?

Thorp: Yes. We were very strong Methodist. Just a mile and a half down the road was a little country church, Prairie Center.

DePue: Prairie Center?

Thorp: Um-hm. And it was in the center of the prairie, and still is. It's still up. It's not being used as a church, but it…

DePue: What was the expectation for Sunday, then?

Thorp: Oh, Sunday school. And my dad was stricter about attending church than my mother, which is a little unusual. Usually it's the other way. But my mother had five kids, and she said, "I can't get them all ready for Sunday School in time to get there." She would usually go to church at night, but she wouldn't go to Sunday School and church in the morning. But my dad was always there. He was Sunday School superintendent. He was a lay leader, and he was very active in the church. He inspired me for his feeling and attitude towards

[3] Two short rings were created by quickly turning the crank over twice.
[4] The Rural Electrification Administration was established to electrify rural farms and homes.

people. He was a good example as far as I was concerned for a good Christian man. Even though he worked with machinery and I heard him swear very little. I'm afraid sometimes when I got involved, I can say some words that I shouldn't say because they would aggravate me that much trying to fix them or work with them, you know.

DePue: Well, I would suspect, though, whether you're working with horses or machinery, there might be occasions where you…

Thorp: (laughs) Yes. My brother now, who's older than I was, he said, "I learned to swear by plowing corn with a team of mules." (laughter) Now, see, I was far enough behind that when I come up to that stage, I could drive a tractor and plow corn. I didn't have to use a horse. So I missed all that work that a lot of farm boys my age had to go through.

DePue: Well, we're getting real close to Christmas right now. I wonder if you have any special memories about holidays in the Thorp household back then.

Thorp: It was always interesting on Christmas trees. My dad would pick the Christmas trees out. I could always remember that one time he never got a Christmas tree until Christmas eve and we didn't decorate it until Christmas morning. I was just a kid and I was so disappointed because I was looking forward to a lot of presents on a Christmas tree, but we didn't have a Christmas tree and we didn't get it until that night. But to me it was always commendable. It was always special. Mother always decorated it.

I remember getting up at two o'clock in the morning to get down to the Christmas tree—yep, there's my presents. And my dad got up and said, "Son, what are you doing up this late?" I said, "I'm grabbing my Christmas presents." He said, "Well, you'd better go back to bed." But that was something to look forward to. We didn't get a lot of presents, but we got one or two, and whatever it was, it was very important and very vital to our feeling at that particular time. I had four younger sisters, and of course, they was always right in there too. And I even helped with my younger sisters—I mean, bottle-fed them or even changed their pants if I had to. It didn't bother me any, and I just… And we still get together, us five kids.

DePue: You still get together, you say.

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: That's outstanding. Was there an extended family? Did you all gather in one house to share the meal?

Thorp: Normally with Christmas we usually went to my Grandmother Carter's that was up by Gridley, Illinois. That was an occasion because my dad would always buy five gallon of ice cream, and one of these old-type freezers they had, and he tied it on the front bumper of the car, and we'd take it up to

Grandmother's so we'd have ice cream. That was always something special to have that much ice cream all at once. (laughter) That was in the '30s.

DePue: Let's get you to high school. Where did you go to high school?

Thorp: Wapella High School.

DePue: How big a school was that?

Thorp: At the time I was going, about eighty students.

DePue: For all grades.

Thorp: For all four years.

DePue: How many in your class, then?

Thorp: Twenty-eight started, fifteen graduated.

DePue: What happened?

Thorp: They just dropped out and got married or got them a job or didn't like school or just took off, just quit and went to farming. Some of the farm kids never even started high school back in those days. I took agriculture. Well, you either take Latin or agriculture. That was the choice you had as a boy.

DePue: In high school?

Thorp: In high school. You took your other subjects, but that was the only one you had a choice on. The rest of them, like the algebra and the English and all the other courses that they taught at that time, were required. But you either took Latin or you took agriculture.

DePue: Was the attitude, that if you're going to go into farming, you don't need all that schooling?

Thorp: That's right

DePue: So what was the attitude in the Thorp family about school?

Thorp: Get all the education you can get. My dad insisted I go to college, that I want a Thorp to get a college degree and you're going to be the first one.

DePue: He didn't have a degree.

Thorp: No, he went one year to University of Illinois. My brother went one year, my sister went one year, my mother went one year—nobody went beyond one or two years of college. Either they thought they had to work or they couldn't afford it or…they didn't go.

DePue: Why was it so important for your dad that you went to college?

Thorp: He thought we needed more education than what he got and he wanted me to prove that I could do it. I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to stay home and farm. (laughs) I wasn't going to fool with that.

DePue: Well, I don't want to get to the college yet, because that's going to be an important part of the story, but…

Thorp: No, high school was good. My biggest problem was mathematics: algebra and geometry. Come history, man I could get straight As, and English literature and composition, I could do just fine, but boy, when it comes to algebra and geometry, I wasn't there.

DePue: With a class the size that you had, were there any opportunities for extracurricular activities?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. Basketball, baseball. They had me talking in plays. I was in about every play that they had in high school, all four years, even when I was a freshman. I was surprised at that and I liked acting or whatever. At least I got along with it, and I had teachers that encouraged me. I had an English teacher that was a wonderful woman and she encouraged me to do things that I didn't think I could do. I kept it touch with her all her life. I even sent her a pair of wings. (DePue laughs) And she was the only one that I had outside of the family to read the diary when I come home—my English teacher.

DePue: Was she proud of you?

Thorp: She was, yeah, at least she said so.

DePue: Now, you're going to high school, you graduate in 1939, and you know there's a lot of stuff going on, in Europe especially, but also in Asia; it was pretty obvious to people who were paying close attention that things weren't going real well. Now, how closely were you watching all of that?

Thorp: My English teacher, and she's also the history teacher, told the class that she got up at three o'clock in the morning or something like that so she could hear Adolph Hitler talk, give his speeches back in the '30s, because she was afraid that something was going to happen as far as the world was concerned. She couldn't understand German, but she said she couldn't get over the Fuehrer and the roar of the people hollering, responding to everything that he said. So we were warned in the history class that things are going to happen, the way things were going was going to be worse. She was a prophet in that standpoint. Of course, she was reading history. We got little special pamphlets in our history class that polished it up internationally-wise, news-wise, so you kind of get a trend, how Japan was striving for more oil and more resources and how upset they were when they had the steel embargo and some of those things. But anyway, all the events that went on. I can always remember the

shortage of nurses. We needed more nurses at that time. And other employments were high, so you didn't need to train for them. But I thought she kind of gave us a good perspective of what we could expect in college or in later life.

DePue: This was during the time when the United States Congress is passing a series of neutrality acts, and the storm clouds of war are building in Europe; we have no business being over there. What were your personal feelings, or were you too young to be thinking like that?

Thorp: Well, no, I wasn't. I was a fan of Lindbergh, and of course he was my hero because he went across the ocean in 1927. My grandparents, even though they drove a horse and buggy, they bought me a watch with a fob on it and a compass depicting the trip to Paris, and every time they went to town, Peoria or some big city like Bloomington, they'd buy me an airplane. So my grandparents were pushing me, encouraging me more than my parents did as far as flying was concerned, but my parents didn't say I couldn't. And I followed Lindbergh. I thought Lindbergh is not too far off base, you know, when he said, Stay out of the European war when it started. I was in grade school; I don't remember him saying too much at that particular time.

DePue: You would have been awfully young at that point.

Thorp: I remember Roosevelt, and what he did and what was all bad or wrong, but we was all strong Republicans, you know, so… (laughter) But I can remember my dad kind of wavering; he said he just began to wonder whether things were really done right and what the Republicans put up to run against Roosevelt would do with the job if they got it. And I don't know how he voted, because he never did tell me, but I don't think he voted Republican in the Willkie run, and when—

DePue: That would have been 1940?

Thorp: Yeah. No, back in '36 when—I can't think of his—I think it was a fellow from Kansas running at that time.

DePue: We'll get that into the transcript. I should know that myself, and I can't recall right now. Landis [*sic*]?

Thorp: Yeah, Landon[5] was one. They used the sunflower as their emblem that particular time and I remember as a kid following that. This was when we'd get into discussion in high school on politics. Then we found out which side they were on, you know. Then you'd have a big time. My teacher would try to get them lined up to discuss one side or the other. We had some kids in there that was real hot politicians, (laughter) and that was good. I mean, she brought those things out. She's forever in my mind as a teacher's teacher.

[5] Alf Landon was the Republican candidate that year. Wendell Willkie ran in 1940.

DePue: This was the English/history teacher.

Thorp: English, history teacher.

DePue: Now, you already kind of hinted at this, but what did you think you were going to do with your life when you were in high school?

Thorp: I was going to farm. We had these class histories, and they said, "Ernest Thorp will farm a thousand acres and raise seed corn." Another farm boy just down the road says, "I'm going to be an airline pilot." He ended up being the farmer, I being the pilot. (DePue laughs) You know, it was interesting how the history—but they predicted me pretty well—a thousand acres, and being in the seed business. And of course my dad started the seed business in 1936.

DePue: Started his own seed business or growing seed corn?

Thorp: Growing hybrid seed corn.

DePue: For what company?

Thorp: Funk Brothers Seed Company in Bloomington. My dad went in the seed business. He got me enough seed corn for one acre for a project when I was a freshman in high school. We started out with one acre.

DePue: Was the seed corn business a pretty new, novel concept back in that time?

Thorp: Yeah, they were just developing in the '30s. Lester Pfister was a big pioneer on that sort of a thing, and E.D. Funk, Sr. They developed corn that they could sell to the farmers that were hybrid corns and much better than open pollinated corn, so everybody wanted in on it. My dad got in on it because he was a good friend of E.D. Funk, but E.D. Funk didn't have the seed corn, inbred seed, to give to my dad to plant in 1936 at first.

In the meantime he got enough seed for me from the University of Illinois that I could have an acre of seed corn and that helped start our seed corn business. Then my dad later got more seed from Funk's, and so he developed to forty acres, and we got up as high as seven thousand acres of seed corn before we sold out.

DePue: When did you sell out, then?

Thorp: Just 2004.

DePue: A lot of history between those two events, isn't there?

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: Well, you mentioned your fascination with Lindbergh as well. Did you have this notion that you also wanted to fly?

Thorp: Oh, yes, absolutely. Oh, you bet! Every airplane that flew over, I'd run out and wave at them and just cheer them on and think, If that airplane could just land on this farm once, just to see those tracks in the dirt in my farm—that would be the most wonderful thing in the world. Oh, yeah, I built models and played airplanes. In 1930, my dad took me to the city of Bloomington in McLean County, Illinois and paid five dollars for me to take a ride in a Trimotor Ford.[6]

DePue: Even at that age you were fascinated by those.

Thorp: Yes. And I talked about that and I talked about it, and my grandmother said, "Son, you had that ride in that airplane. We've heard it. It'll last you the rest of your life. Let's get to talking about something else." But I'd just rave and rave about that ride on that airplane. But my grandmother was for me flying—don't get me wrong on that—but she just thought I just talked too much about that one ride. Then in 1940 a biplane—one of these barnstormers would fly around from area to area. I can't think of the name properly—anyway, paid another five dollars for a ride in a biplane in 1940. Then when I was in college is when I got my license.

DePue: And we'll get to that story. But in high school, you have this fascination to flying and a dedication to become a farmer. Those two things don't necessarily fit.

Thorp: No. No, they didn't. What I wanted was the ability to fly but to be my own boss and not to be tied down to an airline where you fly the same route day after day. I just wanted that spirit of freedom, I guess—and I still have it. I was up yesterday, despite the cold.

DePue: Up flying yesterday.

Thorp: Yes. (laughs)

DePue: Still flying.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: We're ahead of the story again, but what kind of aircraft do you fly now?

Thorp: Cessnas. I got a Cessna 150 and I got a Cessna 182. And I'm still legal in all respects to fly both of them for another year. Who knows—at my age, who knows? So I'm doing what I've always dreamed I wanted to do.

[6] The Ford Trimotor, nicknamed "The Tin Goose" was produced from 1925 to 1933 by the companies of Henry Ford. Trimotor was a class of aircraft.

DePue: Both of the things.

Thorp: Right, agriculture and flying.

DePue: It sounds like you're your father's son.

Thorp: Well, I'd like to say yes, and I like to think that my son is my father's son, the one that you just saw a while ago. He's a pilot, good farmer, good man, good church man. And—well, getting ahead of the story—he's an ideal—he's a good son. I'm proud of him.

DePue: Who would you say was the strongest influence on you growing up?

Thorp: My dad. My mother was good, and she had a lot of good qualities, but my dad was my influence. The only argument I ever had with my dad was whether I could continue on to college. I failed chemistry, twice, in college. How you can be so stupid, don't ask me why, but anyway, I was. I could not get it through my head. And I said, "Father"—and Dad was paying the bill; I wasn't having to work—"you're wasting your money on me. Let me come home, and we can just farm" He said,. "No, sir. You're going to go back there, and you're going to show that dean that you can pass chemistry, and you can stay in college and you can get your degree." So I did. I passed the third time, went ahead, and every semester it got better and better as far as grades was concerned.

DePue: Okay, we've been talking about college already, (laughter) so you graduated high school in '39. Where did you go to college?

Thorp: Went two years at [Illinois] State Normal[7] at Normal, Illinois. DePue: But that was a teachers' school.

Thorp: A teachers' college. I listened to my dad. My dad said, "Go to a smaller college. I went to the University of Illinois, but the University of Illinois is too big for you. I think you should go to a smaller college and get adjusted."

DePue: Did you or he have any intentions of being a teacher?

Thorp: No, neither one of us.

DePue: What were you majoring in at Normal?

Thorp: All agriculture, (laughs)—but of course you had to take some courses that was required, just because it was a teachers' college.

DePue: And one of those was chemistry?

[7] At that time, "Normal" indicated a teachers' college. As ISNU expanded, the "Normal" was dropped and a full curriculum instituted for ISU.

Thorp: Well, chemistry happened to be one of the subjects that you had to have in agriculture. Oh, like psychology and sociology, some of those courses that—they were all right. I passed them okay. Contemporary civilization, some of those things. That was good.

DePue: Well, I think it's during this time that you achieved one of your other lifelong dreams at that time to get a chance to fly more.

Thorp: Right.

DePue: Tell us about that.

Thorp: Well, the government come out with a program in 1940–41, what they call a Civilian Pilot Training Program. The idea was to encourage people who were eligible, could pass a physical, and between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-eight, to learn to fly. But the idea ahead—they didn't really say that—was the possibility that if military duty is required, that you would qualify for a pilot. In other words, you have that aptitude to be flying.

So I signed up. I got in the second class at State Normal. At that time, they even required so many—ten students, and then maybe one or two of them was supposed to be a woman. I had a couple of women in the class. One of them washed out. But anyway, that's what I wanted to do. I talked to my dad about that and he said "No problem, you get your license. Fine, just go right ahead." So that I did. And he encouraged me. My mother wasn't too happy about it, but my dad—

DePue: It's dangerous.

Thorp: Yeah. My dad was the kind of a guy, anytime a barnstormer would come around anywhere locally, he was right there handing them the money to take a ride. I wish I had his ticket, but he had taken his first airplane ride in 1919. He always wanted to learn to fly, but he never took time to do it.

DePue: What were you training on?

Thorp: A Taylorcraft.

DePue: Was that a biplane?

Thorp: No, it was a one-wing airplane, upper wing. It's one of those on the line there. But anyway—

DePue: Looking at some—you've got a lot of looks like—

Thorp: (laughs) Most of them are World War II airplanes. But the one clear on the far end there is the first airplane that I flew, a Taylorcraft. So I got my license that way. And then, of course, my dad bought me a share.

DePue: A share?

Thorp: In a Taylorcraft, yeah. Ten people owned one little airplane. (DePue laughs) And where did they keep it? They kept it out here on the farm, on the clover field. Oh, boy. Talk about being in pig heaven.

DePue: On your farm, on your dad's farm?

Thorp: Right here, yeah, just down the road here a bit. So when that plane was sitting idle and I wasn't pulling weeds or (laughs) running the tractor or working, I could run down there and crank the thing up and go fly.

DePue: What, you didn't have to file a flight plan?

Thorp: No, no, you were on your own. (laughter) No, that was the most enjoyable summer I ever had in my life. (laughs)

DePue: You got to college in 1939. Just as college started is the beginning of the war in Europe with the German's invasion.

Thorp: Yeah. Being in Bloomington at a restaurant at the time and they come out that Hitler invaded Poland. I can remember one of the neighbors with my dad at the time saying that Hitler's a bad boy, a bad boy. And he was certainly bad, all right. But that was his comment. And, of course, we wasn't going to be involved, and that was going to be their fight over there.

DePue: What did you think when you were involved with the flight training?

Thorp: If it come up, I would enlist. I didn't feel like enlisting at that particular time, but I knew what I was going to do when the time come.

DePue: Were you following pretty closely with what was going on in Europe, then?

Thorp: You betcha. You bet. I read every article I could read on the RAF [British Royal Air Force] or flying or anything that would come up.

DePue: I would imagine you were really following, then, the Battle of Britain.

Thorp: You bet. Oh, you bet. Yeah. And of course, it was interesting to be in prison camp with some of those guys that flew at that time, you know. (laughs) But yes, I followed it and tried to keep up on the latest airplanes that the Army was flying. I was extremely interested. By that time I was on about college, I felt that maybe a degree was a good help and I should get it. So I thought, I'll stay in school as long as I can, but when they was going to start drafting me, when my draft number come pretty close in DeWitt County, I enlisted.

DePue: Okay. We're a little bit ahead of the story.

Thorp: Yes, we are.

DePue: But there was a draft even before—

Thorp: Yes, before the war.

DePue: —Pearl Harbor.

Thorp: Right. At State Normal they had the first draft call, and there was some of the kids that their draft numbers were up at that time even though they were in college.

DePue: So your last year at State College, were you thinking it's just a matter of time before we're into this thing?

Thorp: It was one of those things you followed. There was even an organization at the time in school, Future Veterans of Foreign Wars. Of course, most of them did turn out to be veterans. (laughs)

DePue: Future Veterans of Foreign Wars. Wow.

Thorp: And it had a pretty good following. But they weren't for it. They said, we shouldn't be that, but this is what's going to happen the way things are going. Of course it turned out they was right.

DePue: I don't want to overlook another aspect of your life. You're a young man. Was there some social life that you were pursuing as well?

Thorp: I was one of those guys that was scared of women, even though I had four sisters and everything.

DePue: (laughs) They scared you off, did they?

Thorp: I guess so. And this is kind of hard to believe, and I think back at why was I that way? But I didn't want to date a woman; I didn't have a date… In fact, the only reason I went to high school parties was when I was the senior president. They elected me class president, so when they had parties, I felt like I needed to go. I enjoyed myself, but I never did date any of the girls. Now if any good aviation movies come up, like *Dawn Patrol*, back in those early days before the war, I went there, but I went by myself. I heard later that there were people who would date me if I'd have asked them, but I never had the nerve to ask. So I never got serious until my future first wife started teaching at Thorp School.

DePue: Is that a bit farther down the line of the story here?

Thorp: Yeah, a little bit.

DePue: Okay. Let's get you to University of Illinois, because I know you only spent two years in Normal. Why the change to the University of Illinois?

Thorp: Because I did not plan to be a teacher, and everybody said, you're going to get the agronomy courses that you want, as far as your future is concerned in agriculture. By that time I was in the seed corn business. For me, that would be my best avenue rather than staying in State Normal. So I transferred in 1941.

DePue: Was that always the plan to begin with?

Thorp: Pretty well. In fact, I talked to my high school principal and he tried to outline the courses I could take the first two years that would transfer to University of Illinois, and he did a pretty good job for me. So that's my high school principal, and he was an influence, too. Because at the high school I caught pneumonia riding my bicycle to school and ended up losing too much of school. But my principal says, "You read this book this summer and you take a test on it, and I'll give you full credit for your junior year." And the teachers worked with me. I don't think they'd do it today, but they worked with me, catching up on two months of school so that I could stay in my class and graduate with my class. They really worked hard. Man, they wouldn't do that today. But that's how I got out of high school in 1939, otherwise I would have been another year.

DePue: There were lots of important influences on your life growing up.

Thorp: Yes, there was. You bet there was. I had some good, good people. They encouraged me and these things. But I just was not a woman man, and I just couldn't…

DePue: But you were a prospective farmer at the University of Illinois, which had one of the very best agricultural programs in the country at the time.

Thorp: Exactly. This was my goal. I was a little disappointed when I transferred; I had to take some freshman courses, and I lacked four hours of getting everything transferred by the fact that I flunked chemistry twice. (laughter) But I took all my chemistry—two courses in State Normal and another course in University of Illinois—and each course of chemistry I took, I got a better grade. Don't ask me how that come about, but anyway, when I got to college there and I took freshman courses—which was a good thing. And, of course, I met friends there. At University of Illinois, I got along just fine. As I said, every semester, I got better grades.

Of course the war started. I was going to get drafted, so I enlisted in May of '42 with the idea of a special program for college students: stay in school. The more training you get in college, the better pilot, better soldier you'll be. Stay in school. And here comes Jimmy Stewart taxiing up in his BT, basic trainer you know, with his gold bar on and made a special

presentation at the University of Illinois. And hey, old Jimmy, so I enlisted, signed up.

DePue: That was in May of '42?

Thorp: Right, May of '42.

DePue: Let's go back a little bit, because I would really be remiss if I didn't ask you about the end of that first semester—December seventh. How well do you remember that day?

Thorp: Oh, do I remember that day! I was home, flying. I'd come home about every two weeks. The day before, I had took the Thorp schoolteacher—who turned out to be my first wife later—up for her first airplane ride.

DePue: Mary Ellen.

Thorp: Mary Ellen Harris was her name.

DePue: Harris?

Thorp: Um-hm. My sisters had always pushed her to take a ride with their brother. He could take you up for an airplane ride. She wasn't too sure she wanted to do that, but she did, just so she could tell the kids. But anyway, we were flying. That was on December sixth when I took her up for her first airplane ride. On December seventh, I was flying off of our clover field, and I landed, and one of the fellows said, "Well, Japs just bombed Pearl Harbor." And I said, "Oh, gosh, I'm going to be twenty-one in February"—because that was the draft age at that time. See, I wasn't even thinking about enlisting at that time. And of course drove back to school, and boy, the atmosphere was just completely changed. There was a big program the next day with the president of the university, and special bands and all that. And of course heard Roosevelt's speech. My roommate's brother was a Marine over in the Pacific somewhere. So everybody was all in a turmoil, more or less.

In some classes the next day, the ones that couldn't go, that was crippled or old or whatever, they'd give the most patriotic speeches: get in there and fight; let's get this job done. The guys that was eligible (laughs) never said a word. They just went up and started teaching just like nothing had ever happened. I could see that distinction between the professors. But things change pretty quick. Several of my class were killed, and we went into all kinds of branches of service. By enlisting, they said at the time, we won't take you until you get your degree.

DePue: Why do you think they were saying that, because they needed you better trained?

Thorp: Well that's what they said, but the thing was they didn't have room for us. That was the problem. So that's when they started a lot of these college programs, you know, where they put these kids, these cadets, in the different colleges to get some basic training. By lacking four hours of being in junior standing, I had to take military training, ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. Oh, why hell, I don't want to march. I don't like to do that. But it was one of the best things that ever happened to me. My dad was just tickled to death and said, "Son, you'll learn some things out of that." Well, of course, my dad was never in the military. They put me in the infantry, (laughter) carrying a rifle and marching. And I'm a very poor marcher. I had such a time keeping in step. I was always out of step, but I learned the basics of fundamental military life.

DePue: What was your mom saying, though, about your being in ROTC, now that you're a trained pilot and all this stuff?

Thorp: Mother was not one that ever would say too much. She was always kind of quiet on things, and she didn't really give me that much advice or anything. She'd just kind of go along and be agreeable. If somebody said. "Ernest did a good job of speaking at something," she'd say, "Oh, well, he's just like his dad." I'd come home real proud when I got elected president of the class. "Mother. Mother, mother, guess who got elected to president of the class?" She'd say "Oh, I suppose you were," and, oh, that—(makes deflating noise) did that take me down. (laughter) I was built up, real happy, and she goes, "Oh, I suppose you were," (grumbles), just like taking the air out of a balloon. But that's my mother. Good mother. Took good care and good care of my sisters, but, you know, she just did not ever encourage me.

My dad did more encouraging of me, like to keep me in college and saying, Son, you're doing a good job or whatever. He would give me compliments if I was working machinery or what kind of a job I'd do. Not my brother. My brother was get that job done; you can do better than that! And, Where you been? Because I'd get away from my brother if I could. My dad—I didn't mind getting around him, because he gave me a job I always liked better, but not my brother. (laughs) Of course, twelve years older.

DePue: Well, it almost sounds like your brother kind of resented that you were getting this different treatment than he was.

Thorp: (Sighs)That could have been part of it. That could have been part of it. Yes, I think this was a problem. When his mother died he was actually raised by a niece, a cousin, in my Grandfather Thorp's house, and he had a different young life than I had. I try to keep remembering that, because it makes a difference on how he treated me. I was that young kid kind of like the prodigal son, you know. We just talked about that in my Sunday School class quite a bit just a month ago. But I could always think in terms of how my brother kind of resented just that, because, you know, I come home, shared the same

thing he did, he working ten years, twelve years, and here I was, just out of the service. Dad gives me as much of the company as my… I could feel that, and I always tried to remember that.

My brother was a good man and a good worker, and he was a good machine man. That's besides the story, but anyway, he had influence on me, too. He drove me to the point I tried to please him more so on what I was doing than I did my dad. My dad thought I was doing a good job, and my brother wasn't always too sure that I was. But there was that difference, and my dad only had the two sons.

DePue: You enlisted on May 25, 1942. Why at that time, and why enlist?

Thorp: Well, the program was opened up just at that time. In other words, this was the time to sign up. If you want to get into this program, get your John Henry [John Hancock[8]] on the line, and we'll make sure you get through college—in other words, you won't be inducted. Okay, if I get through college and I'm this close, I'll finish it up. So I went to summer school in 1942 to get more hours in. My brother was real upset about that—"Well, why didn't you come home and work?" But my dad says, "You stay in school."

DePue: An important part of the story, though, is what you enlisted for, I would think.

Thorp: I wanted to be a pilot, and I figured the only way I could get to do that would be to enlist and get my name on a cadet list, as far as getting training. I wasn't sure I'd make it, but that's what I was sure going to try to get.

DePue: By this far into the war—and it's early for the United States, but you already told me you watched very closely the Battle of Britain. You had a good sense of the casualty rates for pilots. Did that cross your mind?

Thorp: No, not a bit. No, sir. That's one of the things that's kind of strange in a sense, but you was always going to be the mother's son that never got hit. In other words, they would get the other guys—not you, . There was poems that—not me, no way. I'm not going to be shot down. Everybody else may, but not me. And actually, I felt that way. I didn't think it could happen to me or would happen to me. Friends I knew crashed and was killed before they even got in the service, just in training. A lot of them was killed. I think it was about thirty-five hundred cadets actually was killed in training, and we had one in my class that was killed. Yeah, it was there, but it wasn't going to happen to you (laughs)…or to me.

DePue: At the time—this is early '42—did you have the kind of aircraft you wanted to be flying?

[8] He means John Hancock, the first signer of the U.S. Constitution, who signed with a large flourish. Hence, to put one's John Hancock in writing means to sign one's own name.

Thorp: Yes. I wanted B-25s.

DePue: Why the B-25? It's a twin-engine bomber.

Thorp: Twin-engine bomber that Doolittle took over Japan. I liked that phase of it, but they also had a boy from Wapella who had become a lieutenant colonel, and he was flying B-25s in North Africa But he was killed by flying a German airplane that had been booby-trapped.

DePue: He flew a German airplane?

Thorp: Um-hm. They captured an airfield when they were in Sicily; they had a bunch of the German aircraft there, and they looked pretty good. Some other guys wanted to fly it, and he pulled his rank, said, "I'm in charge here"—the youngest lieutenant colonel at the time, and he was twenty-five—Gordon Hall. He got in this airplane and as he took off; when he retracted the gear, the thing blew up. There was a photographer right by the airfield that took a picture just at that instant, just before it blew up. I was able to get in touch with this guy so that the family could have that picture of Gordon Hall's last flight. In my mind, he was one of my heroes, because he was four years older than I was. I thought, Well, I want B-25s.

DePue: Okay, so right from the beginning, it was that specific bomber.

Thorp: Yeah, because I found out soon in flying cadets that I was not an acrobatic pilot.

DePue: Which is what the fighter pilots would need to be.

Thorp: Exactly. I mean, all upside—

DePue: We're going to get into that when we get to the part that you're (Thorp laughs) covering in your diary. What was going on in the relationship between yourself and Mary Ellen?

Thorp: Well, I was getting more interested. She was in charge of the church program down here at the church, Christmas program. I thought, Hey, that's a nice-looking girl. And then Christmas Eve—no, Christmas Day—I got up enough nerve to go down to the house—didn't call her or anything like that—knocked on the door, and I said, Would you care to go to a movie? She said, I think so. So I took her to the show. I thought, well, that's a kind of nice girl.

DePue: Remember the movie?

Thorp: Well, I can't remember the movie. (laughter) It may be in my diary. In fact, I kept one in college, too. I got a whole bunch of books on that. Then the next time I come home, one of the farm boys that was deferred was also dating her.

I'd come home every other weekend, so she'd date me on the weekend I'd come home and date this other boy on the other weekend.

Well, we got our dates mixed up and I got there one time, and wondered where Mary Ellen was. So the family all come out; I was wondering why they all congregated in the front room there. And here come the farm boy. "Well," I says, "are we going to have to go out in the alley and settle this?" And he says, "Well, hey, no, Ernest, I got this date ahead of you." So then Mary Ellen come out from the bedroom and said, "Well, I'm sorry, Ernest, but I had a date with Howard here." I said, "That's all right. I'm going to be back here tomorrow night" in front of her. So they went to the movie, and in fact, I ended up in the movie. She had a coat with some coattails sticking out in it, and somebody got in the back seat behind her and cut them off. They thought I had done it because I was mad because the farm boy…

He was a friend of mine, don't get me wrong, and he stayed a friend as long as he was alive. Then she had to make a decision whether it's the farm boy or me. So she did kind of decide that maybe I was it, and I gave her a ring before I went to service. But I didn't marry her until after I got back.

DePue: Okay. Well, she's going to factor into the story as we go into the training and….

Thorp: Oh, you bet. (laughs) Oh, yeah.

DePue: Did he end up getting drafted as well or joining up?

Thorp: No, he was deferred, the other boy.

DePue: Because it was important to keep some farmers on the…?

Thorp: Exactly, exactly, and he was a pretty good-sized farmer and a good farmer and a good man. And he was a good customer of our corn, (DePue laughs) and he stayed a good friend. And in fact, I still keep in touch with his wife that he did finally marry. So we had no animosity there

DePue: Well, let's get you into 1943. The war is not going well for the United States, especially in early '43. But you graduated in—what time?

Thorp: I was in my last semester of 1943, the end of March, that they give me the induction notice and told me to report to Decatur.

DePue: Does that mean you did not graduate?

Thorp: I was halfway through the semester. But the university had created a policy that said if you finish half of the semester, the university will give you full credit, and if you're a senior, you will have earned the degree of a B.S. [Bachelor of Science] So I went through all the channels and everything, and I

think everybody gave me an A in the course because you've graduated, you're entitled, you have earned your diploma. I wasn't there when the class graduated because March 24th, I was inducted and went to San Antonio.

DePue: And right before you went there, according to your diary, you went to Uncle George's funeral. Remember that?

Thorp: You bet I do.

DePue: Uncle George was which side of the family?

Thorp: Well, he was on my father's side. I didn't know whether that was a very good sendoff or not, going into the service. He owned the farm right south of me. In fact, his grandson George owns the place now. You just look out there, and there's his place. At one time, all this land through here was owned by Thorps or Thorp relations.

DePue: We're going to get into the part now where occasionally I'm going to read passages out of your diary. Occasionally I'm going to ask you to read passages out of your diary, but I think it's appropriate (Thorp laughs) that you read the first entry in the diary. Now, you said already you had been a diary guy before this.

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: Why?

Thorp: People ask me that. I was totally despondent my first year in college, and I had to unburden myself onto somebody, and nobody wanted to listen to me, so I'd write it in a book.

DePue: What were you despondent about?

Thorp: Well, I wanted to be home. I didn't want to be in school. I wanted to be on the farm. I wanted to do something worthwhile—I wasn't getting anything out of school, my first semesters particularly. So I started writing my sorrows to myself, and I always hated it when somebody would pick it up and start reading it. They thought it was kind of funny, but I didn't allow it if I could help it. In other words, that was my **refuge**—in fact, I still got the books from my college life.

DePue: Okay. Let's read then. I'll have you read Monday, March 22, 1943.

Thorp: "Well, today was the day I formally entered active service in the U.S. Army. It was a good day, too, and marred only by a lump in my throat and Uncle George's funeral just before I left for Decatur with the folks. Therefore I had a farewell to be long remembered and not to my liking. There were around 250 of us guys who reported at the Decatur Armory at 5:00 PM. I saw Switzer

among them, and he was the only one I knew personally. We were grouped alphabetically and then marched to the Wabash station, where we got on a train of four chair cars and a caboose. Pulled out at 6:45 and made all night on the blasted hard seats, and me having no supper or anything with me to eat."

DePue: What were you writing this diary in?

Thorp: A book. I can show you the book.

DePue: A hard-covered book, then?

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: We'll have to take a look at that later on.

Thorp: I bought it specially, and it said, *My Stretch in the Service*—all blank pages, but it was a hardbound book.

DePue: *My Stretch in Service* was the title that was on the book?

Thorp: On the book.

DePue: So that's not an invention of yours.

Thorp: No. I was going to try something else but somebody said, "Well, what's wrong with that?" And I never seen anybody else use it or whatever, not that I did copyright it.

DePue: What was the trip to Texas like?

Thorp: (laughs) Well, the first stop, of course, we finally end up in Kansas City, and of course we was hungry and tired and just on old train cars.

DePue: And after all, "me, having no supper or anything to eat."

Thorp: One kid did did give me a cookie, so I didn't starve. They put us on Pullman cars then at Kansas City, and that's when we got a speck of service. To me, it was the forever trip; it seemed like it took forever to get to San Antonio. And I was getting acquainted with people and it was Michigan and Wisconsin colleges. All of them practically were in college. And this was a little strange. Many of the kids were put in individual colleges around the country for training to start out with, the basic training.

DePue: Everybody on this train going to Texas?

Thorp: Going to San Antonio. We were all future cadets.

DePue: And all going to the United States Air Forces.

Thorp: Right.

DePue: Now, did you call it Air Corps or Air Forces at the time?

Thorp: Well, we called it the Army Air Corps.

DePue: Well, it's interesting, because officially the name had been changed to the Army Air Forces by that time.

Thorp: Well, that's funny. Anyway, the song that we had, we sang "We're all the Army Air Corps," And of course you've read that you'll be sorry when you were pulled into this. (laughs) You'll be sorry.

DePue: What did you do in San Antonio?

Thorp: Well, that was where we was classified. First we had to get assigned a number and all this sort of stuff. Going to school was the main thing. Well, basic training. It was marching, saluting, and all that. Then one of the members of the group got meningitis, so they quarantined a whole bunch of us, and all we could do for a whole week, two weeks, was lay around. They wouldn't let us march, they wouldn't let us drill, they wouldn't anything. And we had to hang all our sheets and bedding out the windows because we might be—

DePue: Contaminating somebody else?

Thorp: Contaminating somebody, you know. (laughs) It was kind of easy, so it was a good chance to write letters. So, I wrote to about everybody. And then, of course, you get through all kinds of tests, physical and mental, and that was kind of interesting. And the idea of determining whether you would be a pilot, a bombardier, a navigator, or GDO, which is ground duty only. So there was four classifications that they could put you in.

DePue: How much were you sweating that process?

Thorp: Oh, I sweat that. I had to go back and check the eyes, the eye test. It wasn't quite right, and I didn't pass. But I went back the second time, so I passed it the next time and that was the only thing that was holding me back physically at that time.

DePue: If you had something less than 20-20 vision, did that mean you were more likely to be a bombardier or a navigator?

Thorp: For the most part, that meant ground duty only at that time. Now, they actually got not too particular as the war went on, but at that time, if you had any little thing at all… Oh, one fellow stuttered a little bit; that eliminated him right off the bat.

DePue: Were there lots of young men there who wanted to be navigators or who wanted to be bombardiers?

Thorp: Not to hear them tell it.

DePue: Everybody wanted to be a pilot.

Thorp: Everybody wanted to be a pilot. But if you got classified as a navigator—now, that's where the smarter ones come in and they did math. And the bombardiers was ambidextrous—being able to use either hand and able to twist this, turn this. They had all kinds of little machines, and I know I failed miserably with them. But keeping something was spinning, and you try to get that thing in the right place, and then he turns the knob and do this. It got beyond me in a hurry, and I think I mentioned that—it drove me nuts. But when it comes to getting handed a pilot stick I had no problem. Of course, I'd had pilot training. (laughs)

DePue: And you were using the stick obviously in your own training.

Thorp: Right.

DePue: Did that factor into the process, though? Here, you're already trained as a pilot, so it's more natural to become a pilot?

Thorp: I thought so, though I didn't blow it up too much—and in fact, my instructor found out about it when I started flying.

DePue: But basic training, though, was essentially training like you'd get in any other branches, was it not?

Thorp: Exactly. In other words, anybody military. It was to march, drill, salute, all the procedures that any military person is supposed to do.

DePue: Lots of calisthenics?

Thorp: Lots of calisthenics. Oh, you betcha. Oh, you betcha. And a lot of running. We'd have a five-mile course or something like that that you'd try to run. I didn't do too bad. I could keep up with the best. I couldn't beat them, but I could keep up with them.

DePue: How about weapons training? Go to the rifle range?

Thorp: Very little. They gave us a .45 to shoot and a submachine gun, Thompson. You know, (makes roaring, shooting noise), it goes up like that. That was a little hard to catch onto at first. But that was the only two. I thought they'd give us a rifle, but they never did—not me. So a lot of people talk about basic training and that sort of thing military-wise. We didn't get that much.

DePue: Would it be fair to say that your basic training maybe was not quite as tough as somebody going to the infantry basic training?

Thorp: Exactly. It wasn't. It wasn't as tough. No way. No. When I read and hear and see pictures of what the infantrymen had to go through in their training, we didn't do nothing, or very little. I admired an infantryman; I thought they went through more hell than we did, as far as their training was concerned.

DePue: But apparently you did occasionally have things like inspections.

Thorp: Oh, definitely. White-glove inspection—you better believe it. Yeah, they could give you demerits real quick, and if you had so many demerits, you walked the ramp with full equipment, with a rifle.

DePue: What's the ramp?

Thorp: Beg your pardon?

DePue: What does that mean?

Thorp: Well, there was ramps in front of hangars, a lot of concrete. But with full equipment or whatever it was, you had to march so far up, pivot about, and march back, so many hours. I come close a couple times, but I never had to do that. And you did it with military precision. You couldn't slouch around and you couldn't stop.

DePue: Did you understand at the time the rationale for inspections and demerits and walking the ramp and all of that?

Thorp: To me, I thought it was crazy in some respects. And I was just saying, why would that make you any better a soldier? I didn't think it did, but I guess they thought otherwise. (laughter)

DePue: Have you had cause to rethink your feelings on it?

Thorp: The thing of it was, don't get yourself in that position. Don't screw up, because you're going to pay for it, and there's no sense in that. Sometimes you may get put out of training—**completely** washed out, even though you had all the other qualifications. If you screwed up in some of those discipline areas, then you was out of it.

DePue: Do you remember the time when you found out that you were going to be a pilot, or accepted to the pilot training, I should say?

Thorp: I was elated and I think I mentioned that in the diary. Yes, I was very elated at that. It was just a big relief, because that was what I wanted and that was what I was at least getting a start on it. But of course, as you read the diary, you see

that there were times I wasn't too sure I was going to make it. It wasn't as simple as eating a piece of a pie.

DePue: Well, the next step—we're into April twenty-fourth through June twenty-sixth—not a real long time. You've got headings in the diary, and this one is "Pre-flight Training." What is pre-flight training?

Thorp: Well, that was training that they gave you prior to pilot training. In other words, we was in the classification center. There is where you were classified as a bombardier, pilot or navigator. Then you'd be going in the pre-flight school, and then that's where you really got into your basic drilling as far as cross-countries and military discipline. I'd have to read some of that myself to know for sure what we did, but anyway, it was rather a strict, organized schooling course. Most of it was military discipline. I'd have to look at the diary to be sure, because we took engineering and engines and meteorology in the school—primary, basic and advanced.

DePue: So this sounds more like a continuation of basic training than anything else.

Thorp: As I remember it. I'll admit, I'll have to read the diary just to be sure, because it's amazing how I've forgotten just exactly what did we do? (laughs)

DePue: Well, we're only talking what, sixty-five, seventy years?

Thorp: (laughs) Yeah, that's all.

DePue: I mean, there's a few years between then and now. I was impressed reading through this how many stages of the flight training you had. So the next step is primary flight training, which is in Chickasha, Oklahoma. Is that Tinker Air Field?

Thorp: No, it was Chickasha Airfield.

DePue: CHICK-a-shay, is that how they said it?

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: Is that when you finally got to get in an airplane and learned to fly?

Thorp: That's where we actually started flying.

DePue: Any memories especially strong about that whole experience?

Thorp: Well, yeah, my first ride and just the fact that we had come from a big place like San Antonio and all the barracks and one thing and another, and come out to this little country airport and we got the special nice barracks, and the food was good, and discipline wasn't as strict. You got assigned to an instructor and I remember they started with four or five of us and took each one up for a

short ride. How I was anticipating that first ride in that primary trainer, because I'd never been in that big an airplane before.

DePue: What was the trainer?

Thorp: A Fairchild PT-19. There's a picture of it there with a couple other cadets in the back. I'm in the cockpit, and those two were washed out. Yeah, towards the front there, you'll see it.

DePue: What happens to the guys who wash out?

Thorp: They were primary, those two. They were assigned to be gunners. If they wanted to still fly, they could be gunners.

DePue: Not navigators or bombardiers?

Thorp: Not navigators or bombardiers. Well, depending on what the test was. If their test was good enough and they could have qualified as a navigator, otherwise, they'd just be a gunner. They was always short on navigators in service. But to me, that took more brainpower than it would for the pilot, as far as I was concerned.

DePue: Do you recall being struck by any differences between, okay, now I'm in the Army and I'm flying; this is different from when I was flying a civilian…?

Thorp: Yes. More discipline. You had your hard and fast rules you had to go by, and if you deviated in that too far, you'd be washed out. In other words, you did what they told you to do and trained the way they trained you. Any deviation thereof would be elimination.

DePue: In primary flight training, was it focused on takeoffs, landings, and—

Thorp: And they also got into acrobatics, to a certain extent, and this is where—I flew real well, up until we got to acrobatics. Now, I'm talking about the airplane upside down, barrel rolls, spins, different acrobatic maneuvers which was unusual. I could do them, but I didn't feel at home upside down or in violent turns or in spins. I could do them and had to do them, but I decided, hey, I don't think that I'm going to be a very good fighter pilot. So at that time I thought I'd take it in terms of piloting bombers.

DePue: Okay. And you'd already suggested that people were washing out. What kind of things did people wash out for?

Thorp: Making poor landings, getting sick constantly. Some could get over—a lot of them did'nt—I mean, in the air. Violating the rules—landing in front of somebody or cracking an airplane up. And you always went through a board of review, and maybe you could explain why that happened, and if you could explain it and talk well enough, you could talk yourself out of it. There was

guys who actually was going to get washed out, yet talked themselves back into the program. But they'd have so many officers listening to you, and they would make a decision, whether to let you continue training or not continue training.

DePue: Okay. I'm going to read a couple passages here which illustrate some of the things you've been talking about very well, I think. This is from Monday, July 19th: "Monday was the first time I flew unsupervised off of the home field, and it was plenty all right. My twenty-hour check will come up next week, and then I'll know how good I can do under pressure, because those check pilots are hard boys to please." Twenty-hour check—was that you had twenty hours…?

Thorp: Twenty hours of flying.

DePue: Okay. And who are the training pilots?

Thorp: Those usually for the most part were civilian pilots. They were experienced pilots, and they had a lot of hours and a lot of experience behind them, and they were usually the check pilots.

DePue: They weren't people who had been over in combat and come back?

Thorp: No, not these. Not I knew of. Now, a civilian pilot was going to eliminate me—he said, "He's out." They looked in my record and they said I'm not out, that we'll give you another chance. So the next day they brought out a military pilot, and I flunked with him. And they still looked at my record and said, well, you've been good up until now. What's been the problem? So you'll have another ride in the morning.

So I went out there with the idea I'm going to get washed out. I'm eliminated. Okay. So the guy and I got in the plane that was military, and it was a first lieutenant. Went up, come down and land. He said, "What in the hell was the matter with you yesterday?"—because everything I did just perfect. "No excuse, sir." He said, "Well, you're all right. Go on." But that's how close I come to getting washed out. I did everything wrong for two pilots in a row, the civilian pilot and the military pilot, and if I hadn't had the good record up until that time they would have washed me out. And here I was a pilot—I mean, I had a license as a pilot.

DePue: Were you saying a few prayers to help you through that process?

Thorp: I bet a guy—this shows you how I was—I bet a guy a milkshake that probably I'd get washed out. "Oh," he said, "heck, you're not going to get washed out; you're going to do it." I paid him the milkshake.

DePue: You were happy to pay him a milkshake.

Thorp: You bet I was. (laughter) Not drinks, just milkshakes. Yeah. I was not very, what you say, self-confident of my ability to do what needed to be done. That's not a good record or what to say, but I wanted to do it, I tried to be the best I could, but I wasn't always sure I was going to do it.

DePue: Did you ever have any problems with airsickness?

Thorp: No, never.

DePue: Even when they had the acrobatics?

Thorp: No, no.

DePue: It's obvious in reading your diary that this washing out business was on your mind, but it had to be on everybody's mind.

Thorp: Yeah. It was, it was.

DePue: I think this might also be July 19th or somewhere around that same timeframe: "Well, the washing machine worked over time this past week." What washing machine were you talking about here?

Thorp: All the cadets getting washed out.

DePue: "Well, the washing machine worked overtime this past week, and it really hit my friends hard. H.B. Thompson, a good guy if ever there was one, and Tavazes left. T.J. Thompson, my bunkie, and R.C. Thompson, my buddy, got eliminated through their check and Army "E" rides. They left Saturday. Tichy got his also, but he hasn't left yet. Adds up to a grand total of ten out of eighteen, and a twenty-hour check ride ahead of us yet." Well. The survivor, is a pretty elite group, then.

Thorp: Exactly. Yeah.

DePue: The other thing that struck me—they're all T's. They all were in the same part of the alphabet.

Thorp: Yeah. My best friends were either T's or W's or S's. (DePue laughs) Almost all the way through my training was alphabetically. Yeah, you're right.

DePue: That's the Army way, huh?

Thorp: Yeah, that was the Army way

DePue: The next question I've got on my list here, and I think we've already answered it: What kind of a wash-out rate did you have at the end of this whole process?

Thorp: Well, actually, I think the way it turned out, at least about 50 percent. In some schools, it was even as high as 75 percent. It varied. It seemed to vary with schools, with instructors, and also how bad they needed the pilots. Now, when you got into basic training, they lifted the hood. A guy that got by flying there I wouldn't trust, through basic training.

DePue: Well, that was in the latter part of 1943, when if you were flying a B-17 in Europe at that time—

Thorp: And you were losing.

DePue: —the survival rate was horrendous.

Thorp: You bet. Whether it was official or not, they seemed to change the policy, because there were guys there that were terrible, I thought. I don't know how they got though primary. That was in basic. And they even had a special Bumblebee squadron for some of these guys that screwed up. I had a hell of a time screwing up in basic. I could have been washed out in basic. My whole class of cadets with this one instructor and none of us could satisfy him. I had an argument with him and told him, I'm not going to quit. You can wash me out, but I'm not going to quit. If I'm such a poor pilot. He said, "Well, my grandmother can fly better than you can." You know, they got their head up their ass—I mean, I was the lowest creature that crawled on earth, but I wasn't going to quit. But he washed a lot of them out. We were going to, we really thought, but those guys, even despite the flying they did with this instructor, when they got another instructor and when I got another instructor, (makes whooshing noise). I could not figure that out.

DePue: What was the Bumblebee squadron?

Thorp: That was the guys who were supposed to be dumber than the dumbest, and this instructor put all his students in that Bumblebee squadron. It was supposed to give them special attention to try to get them through; otherwise we'd have been washed out, because they were needing pilots that bad.

DePue: Well, after being at Chickasha for a couple months, you guys headed over to Enid, Oklahoma, and for basic. Now, this is basic pilot's training?

Thorp: Yes. That's when you get in a heavier airplane and a little more rigid training.

DePue: But you still haven't been designated either a bomber or a cargo or…

Thorp: You're designated as a pilot, period, but then—

DePue: Pilot trainer or…?

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: But you don't have your wings yet.

Thorp: No, no.

DePue: And something else that I might have overlooked up to this point—are you an enlisted man?

Thorp: You are a cadet.

DePue: A cadet.

Thorp: Before I was in the cadets, I was a private. At nine months they had me listed as a private, and as I come into training, I was listed as an aviation cadet. So that put your pay at fifty dollars.

DePue: Still not a whole lot.

Thorp: Or twenty-five dollars raise, so we got seventy-five dollars a month instead of fifty. (laughs)

DePue: And I think I've got another entry here as you head over to Enid, if I can find it quickly. (pause) Well, I'm not sure I have this one tracked down very well. What was the difference in the training you got at Enid versus what you'd gotten in Chickasha?

Thorp: A heavier aircraft, much heavier.

DePue: Is this when you got to the BT-15?

Thorp: Yeah, that was the BT-15..

DePue: Tell us about that aircraft, because in the diary, you didn't seem to like it much.

Thorp: No. First got into that thing, and of course it had a shell over the top of it. It was open cockpit—the primary—but in this, you have an enclosed cockpit. Put me in that canopy, like in a greenhouse, and a big roar of that big engine, and all those instruments in front of you, and the great big stick, and the noise it made, and how it rattled and banged, and how I think it's going to fall apart. I was not very happy with my introduction to a basic trainer. But it was heavier, no question about it. It wasn't any harder to fly, but you'd get yourself into trouble quicker with it than you could the primary. And so you had to fly it, and you tried to fly it well. In fact, the only cadets that we lost when I was in there was in the basic trainers.

DePue: Okay. How many flight hours is it going to take before you finally get your wings? Was there some prescription on that?

Thorp: I think I ended up with about 250 or 270 total training hours, and I guess fifty or seventy-five the first time and fifty to seventy-five the second time; you kind of accumulated as you went along. They kept records for you. And I had a log book that I had to put it in, and I still got it. (laughs)

DePue: I'm sure this whole process starts with takeoffs and landings. Did they emphasize that a lot?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. And, of course, the biggest problem for most people was with landings. In other words, to flare out at the proper altitude to where you'd land correctly without nose down or tail up or doing this or that. The big thing is keep it under control. As I say it was big, it was heavier than what we'd been flying. There was some guys that just could not get themselves orientated to that type of aircraft.

DePue: Did you have to learn how to take off and land in various weather and wind conditions?

Thorp: This was kind of interesting: in weather, we did not fly too much. Very little. We had instrument training—in fact, we got an instrument reading training. This is another thing we did in that airplane. But as far as actually flying in weather as a cadet, no. If it was very bad, a low ceiling, a rain or whatever, you did not fly.

DePue: I don't know if this is the right term or not—touch-and-gos. Did you do quite a bit of that?

Thorp: Yeah. That would be coming in to land, and then take off, come around, land again—in other words, practice your landing and takeoff at the same time.

DePue: You've mentioned acrobatics before, and there were several terms I saw in here. I want you to describe what these are: chandelle.

Thorp: Oh. Come up like this, and then…

DePue: Okay, so you come up and you kind of tail off to the—

Thorp: Off to one side and down.

DePue: Drift down?

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: Okay. We're going through the motions here, and people can't see that too well. How about a slow roll?

Thorp: Well, a slow roll, you're flying along, and then you turn upside down and come back on right side up. And the idea was to stay on course, not deviate

one way or the other, but to do a complete turnover. And well, I could get an airplane model and show you, but—

DePue: Well, I think you're describing this pretty well. If you don't maintain the same trajectory, you end up doing a chandelle, it sounds to me like.

Thorp: Well, the idea was precision. If you go into this and they stay on the same course, same altitude, don't drop off… and then come on around and still go on the same course you took off. The chandelle, the big thing is to have control of the plane as it'd come around. That was the first thing they had me do when I got in as a copilot on a B-17, was do a chandelle. And like, good gravy, this thing…

DePue: (laughs) A little bit harder beast to manage, I would think.

Thorp: Yeah, right.

DePue: How about a snap roll—what was that?

Thorp: A snap roll, turn real quick, and a slow roll, we went slow. A snap roll, (he demonstrates) you'd go up right fast. In other words, you got to do everything right fast and quick and in coordination.

DePue: Which one was harder?

Thorp: I'd say a slow roll, doing it correctly.

DePue: Because it has to be a nice, slow motion to it?

Thorp: Yeah, a slow motion, and keeping it on course, and keeping it at the right altitude, but a snap roll is right quick; you either did it good or you didn't do it good.

DePue: How about the lazy eights?

Thorp: Oh, let's see. That's—like we'd have something on the ground, say a tower or whatever. We'd fly around, and then make a figure eight over the ground. And the idea is to stay at the same altitude, and keep everything coordinated and keep everything on the ball, you might say.

DePue: So that was the challenge, keeping it at the same altitude and maintaining precise control over it?

Thorp: That's right. In other words, you don't go way off here and back. You stay right in that area, very close. And that took you turning, and then back, making sure you're the same altitude all the time.

DePue: Now, during all of this stuff, were your instructor pilots making calculations, This guy's got a good feel for this acrobatics; this guy doesn't have a good feel for these acrobatics; this guy seems to be a pretty steady hand when it comes to landings and take-offs?

Thorp: They'd always write you up. You never knew what they wrote down, but they'd always write up a report on what your performance was the time he was flying with you. And this was the sheets they were going by to save me from elimination.

DePue: By this time, a lot of people have been washed out, and I'm sure you guys were talking constantly about—well, I want to do this, well, I want to do that. What were the options? What kind of people were tending one direction or another?

Thorp: For most of them the biggest concern really was to get those wings. Can we earn those wings? And everything else seemed to be kind of off to one side, even the birth of babies—some of them had some babies coming on. And of course it bothered the instructors because some of those guys got to worrying about that to where they'd forget about their flying, and they got washed out. But the big concern was getting those wings: I'm going to have them tattooed on my chest. Those wings, that was the drive. We don't screw up and get washed out.

DePue: So there wasn't much discussion beyond that?

Thorp: We talked a little bit about the war, as far as fighting is concerned, but it seemed like it was just fore and aft, getting those wings. And, of course, they also wanted to be an officer, and that comes with the wings for most cases—not every case, but…

DePue: Okay. Another kind of training, and I hadn't even thought about this until I read it in the diary here: formation flying. You started to learn how to do that.

Thorp: Oh, right. That's the idea where you have a lead, and you fly—this is you—you're flying right here. You stay on that guy. Whenever he turns you're always right there. You see the formation pilot, and that takes time. And you got to be watching that plane. You don't, (in a distracted voice) Well, yeah, how's everything around here? All you can do is watch that lead airplane.

DePue: The lead airplane, are they talking over the radio to you?

Thorp: They could talk to you.

DePue: But how much of it was just intuitive, knowing when he was going to do something and you had to replicate it?

Thorp: The idea was, regardless of where he turned or where he went, you followed him. In fact, not too long ago, the Air Force Thunderbirds—they were so trained when the main pilot actually flew into the ground, everybody flew in with him, too. They were just following the leader. That was your thing in service, was to follow that leader. And the biggest problem is bring the thing in, to stay in formation, and you had to come in and land all at the same… That—

DePue: While still in formation?

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: Wingtip-to-wingtip, how far away are we supposed to be?

Thorp: (laughs) Maybe it's ten feet, something like that.

DePue: Ten feet?

Thorp: Ten, fifteen.

DePue: And you know, I might have been watching too many war movies, I guess. You're flying flat and steady in formation—that sounds pretty easy. But the way you're describing it, this wasn't an easy thing to do.

Thorp: No. You stayed right on it. I learned pretty quick on a B-17, a real heavy load, was something to keep—fifteen minutes was about as much as you could fly because it's such work; you're sweating all the time and working those throttles all the time. But I got where I really had no problem with formation. I didn't mind the formation flying. I liked it. In fact, I used to do it when I come home from the service. I'd catch a guy flying around here, and I'd go over there (DePue laughs) and I'd get right next to him, and he'd jump and get away. But I wouldn't want to do that with everybody, and I also wouldn't want somebody to do it to me unless I knew he was trained.

DePue: I would assume part of your training had a lot to do with classroom activities, too.

Thorp: Yes, it did.

DePue: Navigation training and map training.

Thorp: Map training, meteorology, engines. Oh, military things, of course. Yeah, they kind of covered the waterfront pretty well, or at least I thought they did.

DePue: Okay, and you still had some PT occasionally?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. A lot of PT, you bet. Yeah, that was always important, and basketball and sports of that type was always encouraged. We didn't do as much running as we did at classification.

DePue: How much spare time did you end up having?

Thorp: Bedtime. Well, here again, depended on—lights was out at ten o'clock or somewhere in that vicinity, and, of course, they had you up at five o'clock. It depends on where you was at. At basic, I know they had a big clacking, loud-sounding horn that always blew in the morning. That was the most ungodly sound in the world. The first time I heard it, I thought I'd go nuts, but you got used to it. (laughs)

DePue: When were you writing your diary entries, then?

Thorp: In the evening.

DePue: Before lights-out?

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: And this is an open bay kind of living?

Thorp: Yeah. People could see me doing it, but the only ones that ever questioned on the diaries was in college.

DePue: I want to read a couple more entries out of here. You describe the BT-15—this is very brief—"What a pile of junk one of those things is!"

Thorp: (laughs) Yeah. Oh, it's a wonder I got through that basic training, because I hated that airplane. It was so junky, and everything… I'm flying one night, and oil was all over the windshield, and there was sparks flying in some of the wiring they had at night. I was thinking it would catch on fire, and I thought, well, if I get out here and bail out, I'm going to junk it. To me, it was an airplane, but it wasn't the kind of airplane I liked.

DePue: Now, you mentioned it was a BT, though. What does BT stand for, do you know?

Thorp: Basic trainer.

DePue: You mentioned it was a BT that Jimmy Stewart flew in back at Champaign.

Thorp: Yeah, yeah. (laughs)

DePue: At that time it looked rather sexy, did it?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. That time. With him flying it, why, of course.

DePue: And he moved up pretty quickly.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: Okay, here's a couple more entries: "Saturday, October 23rd. Seems like the plane production is really going up, which probably indicates why they are cutting down on the washings. Plants near output rate of one plane every five minutes, and we sure aren't training pilots that fast." So something you had alluded to before.

Thorp: All the sudden, they seemed to change their mind.

DePue: And just a couple days later: "Monday, October 25th: I got to fly for one hour. It was supposed to be acrobatics, but I took off for Perry and flew around. One of our underclassmen was killed when he failed to jump after a tail had come off of the BT after doing a spin. His instructor jumped and was okay. Makes two deaths of cadets here in the past nine weeks—sure a high price to pay."

Thorp: Oh, I'd forgot about that. I remember the other one, yeah. As I said, they was young airplanes. That's what happens.

DePue: Not supposed to happen when the tail flies off.

Thorp: Pop and creak, and was in the spin, you know. I thought the thing had fallen apart, but it was just pop and creak, just like an old house, as you're spinning. And so I was waiting for the guy to tell me to pull it out. "Hey, you going to pull this damn thing out?" I said, "Well, yeah, but I was waiting for you to tell me." He said, "Well, thank God, get it out." (laughter) I was afraid that it was going to fall apart, but that was part of the training.

DePue: It's one thing for people washing out because of demerits or because they can't seem to keep their lunch down when they're doing the rolls and things like that; it's another thing when you're seeing that kind of stuff happen. Did that sober everybody up?

Thorp: Yeah. You don't talk too much about it. They were both good guys. You know, I felt like training with these people, I was training with the best possible humans that the United States has as far as clean-cut, physically fit, at least brain-wise. I felt like I was really in a special group of people, and I was striving to stay with them, but I wasn't sure that I could stay with them or they'd let me stay with them. I didn't feel like I wasn't any superman, but I just felt extra-special to be associated with that group of people, and I still feel the same way with pilots today.

DePue: But you said you didn't dwell on it too much?

Thorp: No.

DePue: Why not?

Thorp: Oh, hell, I don't know, really, exactly. Of course, I kept myself busy, besides writing in the diary, reading. I liked to read, and I'd read all the newspapers I could get a hold of. I'd read books.

DePue: Well, I suspect nobody else was dwelling on it much either, would that be right?

Thorp: Most of them, if they had a chance to leave, they went to the tavern, they went to the shows. I did go to a lot of shows, but I didn't drink and I didn't gamble.

DePue: For this incident or others where people were dying, did they have any special ceremonies or funerals you were expected to go to?

Thorp: Not while I was a cadet. I had some good friends out of Wapella, classmates, that was killed. The plane took off, cut the tail off, and they were killed. And of course I was a pallbearer for Gordon Hall, who was my hero. They shipped his body back from Sicily after the war was over.

DePue: Do you think that was part of just the toughening up?

Thorp: I would say so. And that was true in combat. You didn't talk about the guy that was just shot down, maybe one of the best friends you had; you just went ahead and flew. And it would hit me, some of the guys especially that I liked real well. But we had a mission the next day. We went. We didn't gripe or complain or quit.

DePue: Well, another aspect of what's going on while you're going through all these series of training schools is you still are trying to maintain a relationship back home.

Thorp: Yeah. (laughs)

DePue: In your diary you always refer to "M.E."

Thorp: That's Mary Ellen.

DePue: Mary Ellen. And (laughs) one of the things that caught me here is, apparently you had sent something to Mary Ellen; she had the habit of passing these letters around, which you had not intended for her to do, and it caused some consternation back home. So I'm going to read Wednesday, October 27th and let you reflect on what you're talking about here. "M.E. in her letter was asking if I was all right, as she was worrying that something was going to happen. Rather made me PO'd—"

Thorp: Pissed off.

DePue: "—because there was no need of it, and sounded awful childish to me. I always gave Mary Ellen credit for more sense. Afraid my letter was a little strong, but I think she needed to be put straight."

Thorp: I don't know what I exactly wrote. I had a secretary that I was in school with at the office there, and I never even thought about her as far as all that, but she was kind of jealous of Mary Ellen. At least that was the impression I got. Also, I corresponded with other girls. They would write and I always wrote back. Anybody that wrote me a letter, I answered it. I think one time that she wished I would quit writing to Iris, and—

DePue: Iris?

Thorp: Yeah. I had one or two dates with Iris, I remember, after I got out of high school, but that was all it amounted to. I thought some of those things was kind of childish, but here again, not knowing it from a woman's standpoint. She was thinking I was fudging on her a bit, which I wasn't.

DePue: Well, I'm going to jump ahead because we're in this theme here. This is going to happen in advance flight training, but I'll let you read an entry from Wednesday, November 17th, just this paragraph right here, Ernest.

Thorp: "I got that expected letter from M.E. on that letter deal, and it sure was full of fire and brimstone. (laughs) She was really mad over the deal and I don't know if I blame her. However, I didn't like some of the remarks she made, so I made it pretty plain to her in another letter how I felt about it. Link [flying in a cockpit simulator] in the evening, and what a deal that radio beam work is. Really gets me down." Yeah, that was another thing, this radio stuff. You was put in a box and you was supposed to fly it as if you was actually in an airplane.

Well, that almost dissolved the relationship, but as we read on, it got better and she got better. She was having troubles in school because I had told her to leave Thorp School and go to Clinton. That was a mistake. So she got in a big class with ornery kids. She was feeling despondent and all. So she was having a hard time in Clinton teaching school. And then get these letters from me and oh boy. (laughs)

DePue: You know, it's hard enough, I would think, having a normal relationship where you're able to go out on dates and experience the ups and downs that everybody has in person. You guys seem to be able to do that through letters.

Thorp: We did that through letters, right. It did work out, and as I said, she was a wonderful woman, mother of my five kids. In other words, she was a beautiful woman.

DePue: But that's not say you guys didn't have your (laughter) <u>disagreements.</u>

Thorp: No, that's right. We had some disagreements a little bit here.

DePue: Okay. November 1, 1943. By this time in the war, I think the Americans are over there flying B-17s, and…

Thorp: Oh, yeah. And it was about that time that they went to Schweinfurt [Germany] and they lost about sixty aircraft in one mission.

DePue: So all of that has to be very sobering for you, too, and it's November 1st when you got to Altus, Oklahoma for advanced flight training. What was different there?

Thorp: Training was relaxed. We was put in an airplane that flew as much like a civilian airplane as any plane I flew in the military. It was easy to fly and you always had a copilot with you. At that time, unless you screwed up bad, you were almost assured of winning your wings and getting a commission.

DePue: A little bit more relaxed, then.

Thorp: Exactly.

DePue: What was the aircraft?

Thorp: A Cessna AT-17, a twin-engine airplane—two engines.

DePue: But again, you still don't know if you're going to be a bomber pilot or a fighter pilot or…?

Thorp: Well, actually, by going to this twin-engine training at Altus that certified the fact that I was probably going to be a bomber pilot. They had us schooling on either twin-engine planes or single-engine planes, and they were what they call AT-6s, but I was an AT-17, which is a twin-engine plane. AT-6 is a single. So that was the difference. And since I asked for bomber training—

DePue: At that time you'd already asked for it?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: Okay. How about the ones who were interested in going to cargo training?

Thorp: As far as I was concerned, they were actually either twin or single engines.

DePue: Okay, so that was the distinction.

Thorp: They didn't make a distinction. I know that most people wanted a transport, but (laughs) some got it, some didn't.

DePue: Most people wanted the transport job?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. That was the safest.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Thorp: (laughs) They thought. But they didn't fly these gliders over Normandy and Germany in some of those times. It wasn't a piece of cake.

DePue: Did the Army look at personality and sort people out that way as well, for a fighter pilot, a bomber pilot, or a cargo or transport pilot?

Thorp: They said they did. Of course, there would be different periods of time they'd call you in and talk to you. Like whether you trim your fingernails and whether you chewed your fingernails and things of that type. Well, why would they be interested in that? And they even told me to keep my fingernails cut short because otherwise they'd say I was chewing them off—or no, let them grow. I thought that was kind of strange—let your fingernails grow, because otherwise they would know that you weren't chewing your fingernails. So they had, I guess, psychiatry tests or just face-to-face.

DePue: Can you describe the different kinds of personalities they were looking for and the different kind of pilots they wanted?

Thorp: I think they wanted somebody that wasn't reckless, somebody kind of level-headed, kind of a steady old guy who'd fly the airplane but not want to buzz a town or chew up somebody's trees or be, oh, a daring, idiotic type of pilot. And, of course, that's what made the best fighter pilots in a sense. I mean, talking to some of them, you know—I was just a kid. I didn't care. Nothing could happen to me. Wasn't going to kill me. What if I got shot at, or what if I seen my buddy go down? So what, that's part of life.

DePue: Do you think your own personality fit the bomber pilot profile?

Thorp: I think it did, yes. I think it did. As far as the personality was concerned, I was doing what I wanted to do. I was a little upset being a copilot, but you had to be a copilot as well as a pilot and since I wasn't acrobatic inclined, I knew that took me out of the fighter end of it. No, I was doing what I thought I could do best.

DePue: A couple more things on the training side. One of the things I saw in there: aircraft identification. Well, yeah, I guess that would be important.

Thorp: Oh, yeah, that was very, very important, I mean, to be able to see a plane flying and identify it as enemy or foe or whatever.

DePue: And I saw that you had one-fiftieth of a second to be able to identify something? That doesn't seem even possible.

Thorp: But that meant sometimes the difference between life and death, whether that plane was enemy or… No, we didn't have that problem so much because we was flying a plane—that was our business. Now, if we was a fighter pilot or a gunner, that's where that identification could come in real well.

DePue: And instrument flying?

Thorp: (laughs) That was another piece of cake. Well, it wasn't a piece of cake, but it was another experience that when you wasn't used to it, how could you do it? But you learned to do it, just by the instruments on that panel.

DePue: Now, before, you had talked about not flying in bad weather. Once you got to advanced flight training, were you flying in worse weather conditions?

Thorp: Not intentionally. No—and this was even true in combat—we did not fly intentionally in rainstorms, clouds, or bad weather. We were trained if we were caught in it what to do, but we didn't deliberately take a whole group of bombers out and fly in clouds or in rain or bad weather.

DePue: Is that because of the incredible challenges that would cause for formation flying?

Thorp: Exactly. Formation flying would be a real factor, and there's been cases—they get over to Germany and places like that and they get in a cloud, and then what happens? Well, first thing you know, a guy says, I can't fly too low, so I'll spread over, and I'll spread over, and the first thing, they're getting together and crashing. And the whole bomb group formation is just all over the whole sky.

DePue: Did you train in any night flying?

Thorp: Yes, they did train, but not in formation. They thought they'd try formation flying at night, and they had special lights on these B-17s and all that. Never did fly formation at night, but we did fly cross-countries at night for training to fly overseas. But we were by ourselves. So this is where we tested the navigators.

DePue: Was it challenging mentally to trust those instruments instead of watching what's going on outside?

Thorp: Yes, and sometimes they fail, and you tried to train what you would do if they fail. And of course it's much better now today than it was then. But say your needle and ball would go out or your gyro would go out. Of course, if your gyro went out, you'd depend on your regular compass, which would be up here, and that's a little harder to look at compared to the gyro compass. We were trained to try to take care of any eventuality that would happen, but not too well—not like they can do it today.

DePue: Okay. We're getting to the point now—you already had alluded to this—you're getting close to actually earning those wings and getting that bar. I think that must have happened Friday, January 7th.

Thorp: Right.

DePue: And about this time, you had some visitors from home, right?

Thorp: That's right. My folks got their gas rationing cards together, and my brother come along. He did the driving. My mother and dad and Mary Ellen, and brother, drove down to Altus, Oklahoma.

DePue: Okay. I'm going to read that entry and then let you kind of reminisce on that a little bit, too. "Friday and the day we have been sweating out for nine months. The sergeant woke us up and said we should all get leaves. At 9:30 we filed out and the major read us our orders. I got the 18th Replacement Wing, Army Air Base, Salt Lake City, Utah. Gunner got troop carrier, as he wanted. So did F.C. Thompson, Thomas, and Thompson. (laughter) C.E. got B-24 transition. Pappy got instructor here at Altus. Me? I'm the only copilot of Pulhemus's group. That settled, we slipped over to the post theater. It felt pretty good to hear my name called, to stride across the stage, to receive a hearty handshake and congratulations, and to get handed those coveted wings. For some reason, I didn't feel half as exalted as I thought I would be. I tried to picture my training as it had come through all of it; instead, I could only see the ones who didn't make it. The wings represented thirty thousand dollars' worth of training. After the wings were given out we all took the officer's oath and then were dismissed. Mary Ellen pinned on my wings and Mother helped with the gold bars." A pretty special day after nine months, huh?

Thorp: Yeah, it was. And the first time that a fellow saluted you, you gave him a dollar. There was a whole bunch of them by the doorway, and I missed and the fellows. Here come another sergeant walking down by himself, and he gave me a salute, a sign of respect. He was so surprised when I pulled out a dollar to give it to him. "What's this for, sir?" I told him, "Well, that's for being the first one to salute me as an officer." (laughs) Yeah, yeah. That was quite a day.

DePue: Pay. Apparently you earned $320 dollars—I don't know over how many months that would have been, or if that was this month—and then you said, "But I walked out with a hundred dollars." So the government was taking most of it.

Thorp: Yeah, lodging and whatever. I don't know what all was taken out, but they did pay for your uniform. I think it was two hundred dollars. My dad said, "Now, they don't get you a good uniform. You buy the best uniform you can get." That's what my dad told me. So I ordered it, and he said, "If the government don't pay for it, I'll pay for it." I'm still wearing that uniform today.

DePue: Wow.

Thorp: I had to let it out a little bit, but I still got it, and that's it on the wall there.

DePue: Yeah. You got a portrait that you've taken. What year was that?

Thorp: 1996. I was seventy-five. My second wife had to have that picture.

DePue: Did you take leave after this?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: How long a leave, and where did you go?

Thorp: Ten days, home.

DePue: No choice but home, huh?

Thorp: That's right, home. And we started driving in the snowstorm in Oklahoma. They didn't have anything but road graders to clean the snow off, and we finally got to drive. We had to stay over one night and got home.

DePue: Were you doing most the traveling at that time by train?

Thorp: Well, this time, the folks coming down, they come down in a car. But the Salt Lake City was by train.

DePue: Well, that's the next step in this process: January twenty-second, you were back in Salt Lake City Replacement Wing. What happened there? Because you weren't there that long—about a month.

Thorp: That's right. They put us out in the fairgrounds, great big old barns (laughs) to stay in. Weren't too warm or too hot, but anyway, there again, went through a lot of tests and checks with the idea of assigning you to a crew. The people were friendly out in Salt Lake City. The Mormons were real friendly and I went to dinner with some of them. I didn't mind standing a lot of snow. That was where we met the crew. I was assigned to a pilot and my crew was assigned.

DePue: Okay. I think I've got a passage here where you're assigned that, but before you're assigned to a crew, you already knew you're a copilot. Did you already know you were going to end up with a B-17?

Thorp: Not for sure. No, not knowing what kind of plane, but…

DePue: So you still were holding out hope that you'd get a B-25?

Thorp: Well, I'd given that up when I was going to be a copilot. I don't recall just exactly, but I think I had to give up the 25s. But B-17s were my second choice, so I wasn't too far off.

DePue: Why B-17 versus the B-24?

Thorp: I like the looks of it. And I'd also read some books, *God is My Co*—no, *B-17: Queen of the Skies*, and I'd read enough about it from what they had done during the Philippines and down in Australia and Java, the Indonesian islands. In other words, they could take a lot of punishment and they could get back when other planes would be shot down or go down. No, that was just what I wanted.

DePue: Had the movie *Memphis Belle*[9] come out by that time? That might have been later. Thorp: Not right at that time, but it did later. And my dad even got a copy of it to show to our sales group when I come home from service. (laughs)

DePue: But by this time, I'm sure everybody knew that if you're in the 8th Air Force flying out of England on a B-17, you get to twenty-five missions, you rotate home, because that was something close to miraculous, to get to twenty-five missions. Was that something you and your fellow pilots were talking about?

Thorp: Oh, well, yeah. We could do it, no problem. (laughs) Then it raised to thirty while I was still flying, and before I got shot down, they raised it to thirty-one. There were some guys that got done at thirty, and they had to go fly one more mission. But anyway, they just figured out, well, let's see, if they kept flying the missions, they'd be home by Christmas and things of that type. We was always optimistic. Nobody was going to get shot down.

DePue: I'm going to ask you to read the next entry here. This is Tuesday, February 22nd, and this is the entry where you actually find out that you're going to B-17s. You already knew you were a copilot, but you got assigned to a crew, and apparently this was crew number 3354. The pilot was M. "Cotton" Anderson, twenty-two, from Montana. Now, is this the crew that you're going to end up going to Europe with as well?

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. So it's right on the top there.

Thorp: "Tuesday we were supposed to leave Salt Lake City by 11:30 AM. Didn't materialize until after 7:30 PM when we finally got over to the main air base to

[9] Memphis Belle is the nickname of a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress that during World War II was one of the first heavy bombers to complete 25 combat missions with her crew intact. The aircraft inspired two motion pictures.

board the train. Our crew was also there, so Andy and I got to meet most of them: Corporal Thurston, thirty-two, radio gunner, married with three kids, youngest seven; Corporal Doan, thirty-five, mechanic gunner, looks fifty as he's very wrinkled; Sergeant Markland, twenty, gunner; PFC Woodwick, nineteen, gunner; and Private Byers, thirty-four, gunner, married with two kids. Quite a bunch, who look to have great promise. Soon we loaded into Pullman troop coaches with triple decks of bunks, and I got a topmost one. As they were crossover in this car, it was like riding a boat. I kept sliding back and forth. I never knew the Army had such things."

And, of course, another thing I thought about that, too, I think was the classic, Gad, am I getting a bunch of old men? Thirties were old, and here we had two on the crew that was over thirty years old.

DePue: As you read that, could you picture each one of these guys?

Thorp: Each one of them, and as far as I know, they're all gone. I never got to fly with any of them on combat.

DePue: Oh, you didn't?

Thorp: No.

DePue: Okay, so somewhere in the process, you're going to get a new crew to join. It was right about this same time that you guys shipped to Sioux City, Iowa. Why Iowa?

Thorp: Well, that's a good question. I thought, good, that's close to Illinois and maybe I'd get home. But that's where they had the transition training for B-17 crews. It was a good base and Sioux City was a good city for service people, at least I thought so. I enjoyed it, as far as movies and people was concerned, though other people enjoyed it for things other than what I took part in, but (laughs) anyway. Of course we had some classes there. In fact, we thought at that time that the training was worse than combat or as bad as combat because people were getting killed in training accidents.

DePue: Mechanical failures?

Thorp: No, not necessarily. One of them, we was getting ready to take off, and we was on the ramp, and one plane crossed the runway, and another plane was taking off, and the two of them crashed just about as far as here to those trees out there.

DePue: Just ran into each other on the runway.

Thorp: Um-hm, on the runway. So there was about five killed there, and…

DePue: O.T.U.C.C.T.S.—what does all that…? That's quite an acronym, even for the military.

Thorp: Oh, geez. Oh…

DePue: I know the "Combat Crew Training"; that's the C.C.T.S.

Thorp: Combat—see, I got to look at that again myself to see what I highlighted. Where are we? Oh, yeah. Occupational Training… You got me now.

DePue: Okay. Well, again, we're close to seventy years beyond that point.

Thorp: Yeah. Persons have asked me in the past what all those abbreviations means, and gosh I don't know. I never even thought about you not knowing what they were.

DePue: I apologize for trying to stump you there. Before we go any farther—we might have about fifteen more minutes, because I had intended when we started here to get you over to England, but this might also be a good place to end for today. We've already got two and a half hours, so I'll leave it up to you.

Thorp: Gosh, have we really? I wasn't paying attention.

DePue: We've been having fun here. So you got another fifteen minutes in you?

Thorp: Okay, sure.

DePue: Okay. While you're at Sioux City, one of the things you were writing about here—you know, my own military training, I found this humorous—VD lectures, court martial lectures—

Thorp: (laughs) Oh, God.

DePue: —and warnings about the, as you quoted here, "numerous bad women in town," on and on." (laughs)

Thorp: Oh, yeah. They stressed it in cadets, and each place we went, they'd tell about how bad the VD disease was and to use condoms and all that. I didn't even know what a condom was until I got to the service. And they made sure when you went out on leave that you had a condom kit with you. And I was always afraid. Oh, if I get killed and they send my uniform home and that condom kit's in there, what are my folks going to think of me? (DePue laughs) I had a bombardier—oh, man, was he a womanizer. And some of the crew members were that way. But it was a friendly town, and I liked it, and the others liked it for many other things.

DePue: Well, I'll read what you said in one day. "Wednesday was a free day, so Stiles and I got into Sioux City. Better than I thought it would be. Women are plenty

eager here, too, by the way—quite surprising, and the number of them, and good-looking, too."

Thorp: Yeah, I was surprised. It caught me, the old farm boy, seeing those girls coming and approaching you. Yeah, you bet.

DePue: But you're taken.

Thorp: I'm taken, right. You bet. You bet.

DePue: Now, before this thing, a pilot is kind of a solitary kind of a business. Now you're a member of a ten-man team. Was that difficult to change your mindset to?

Thorp: Not exactly. You had your responsibility—get the plane ready, making sure everything was set, the engines and all that, and you had the equipment and all. To me, make sure that each got into their position. That was kind of the copilot's job, and the pilot was—the first pilot, who was the commander. I got along with them good. They were real friendly, every one of them. In fact, I tried to keep in touch with all of them afterward. So I had no problem; in fact, I kind of enjoyed it.

DePue: So a pretty powerful bond between most of those people?

Thorp: Yes, I think there was. They'd come and talk to me about some of their family problems or whatever they had and all that. Well, I wasn't the oldest member by no means, when you seen how old they were. I mean, they could tell me things that I wouldn't be… (laughs) But I did. I had a good relationship with each one of them.

DePue: Was there anything else that was especially different now that you were flying a B-17, a heavy bomber, in the training aspects?

Thorp: Well everything was coordinated or supposed to be coordinated through the phase when you got over to England or wherever you was going. They didn't tell you if you were going to Europe or to the Philippines or Hawaii, but you had a pretty good idea.

DePue: The vast majority were heading to Europe, I would think.

Thorp: Exactly. In other words, you were preparing yourself for it.

DePue: One of the things I'm curious about—how do you manage to do gunnery training in the first place?

Thorp: The gunners were all supposed to be trained as gunners before they come to this crew training. So they had targets along some vacant spots in South Dakota to make sure you don't shoot anybody's cows. Then you'd fly low,

and then they'd be shooting the targets on the ground. Now, B-17s were never built to do ground strafing, but we did. And they enjoyed that because you fly down treetop level, you see, and you brush along.

But also they had aerial training. They pulled sleeves of targets.[10] Usually women pilots[11] were flying the planes that were pulling these targets, and, boy, they'd be very careful and say, now, you guys shoot straight; don't shoot at us. (laughs)

DePue: How far behind was the sleeve from the aircraft?

Thorp: I don't know. They'd be several hundred feet, but I don't know just how far it was. I never did see one close up. But it was far enough back that the idea was that they certainly were never to ever want to shoot at the plane that was pulling it. And then, of course, they had the hole in the tile that was supposed to indicate whether you hit it or not.

DePue: And I would imagine that depending on how far away the target was, the sleeve was from the ship, you've got to lead that sleeve to hit it.

Thorp: You bet.

DePue: I can see where the women might be a little nervous.

Thorp: They were. I can remember (laughs) talking real strong. (laughter) Of course, these were the WASPs [Women Airforce Service Pilots] — the women pilots that they trained. I just sent them some money. They're starting a museum for the women, because they weren't given proper credit as being in service. They was just a group that was trained to fly military airplanes, but they weren't military.

DePue: Well, I know there was another group of women who were shuttling aircraft back and forth across the ocean, too, quite a bit.

Thorp: They could have been some of them.

DePue: Okay. So we're finally now at the point of getting you overseas. When did you find out, then, that it was Europe that you were heading to?

Thorp: They brought us together and briefed us as to when we were going to take off and that our destination was going to be Valley, Wales.

DePue: So it was just a couple days later you were off, huh?

Thorp: Yeah.

[10] Large sleeve-shaped fabric targets which would fill out in flight.
[11] During WWII women, many of whom were trained pilots before the war, were not allowed in combat. They served as target-pullers, they ferried planes from the manufacturers to England, and they served as pilot trainers.

DePue: That was Sunday, May twenty-first. You departed Sioux City for Gander Field, Newfoundland. I assume you flew there in a B-17? At the time did you think—you're with your crew—this is the crew I'm going to be fighting in combat with, and this is the aircraft I'm going to be fighting in combat with?

Thorp: We thought so. We found out that they took the plane away from us when it got to England, but yeah, we thought we had that airplane; that was ours.

DePue: Did you already have a name for the aircraft?

Thorp: We were talking about it, but we didn't make a decision officially. A lot of them did and actually even painted the name on the plane, thinking they'd keep it when they got over there, but they found out they didn't.

DePue: What was holding you back from naming it?

Thorp: Well, nothing, I guess, maybe making the decision. Usually the first pilot had first choice.

DePue: So May 22nd, it was from Newfoundland to Valley, Wales, so across the ocean. Well, tell us about that that flight.

Thorp: We landed at Newfoundland and we stayed overnight there—one of the biggest runways and concrete slabs I ever seen in my life. But we took off in a snowstorm.

DePue: Just the kind of weather you said you never were supposed to be flying in.

Thorp: Yeah, but we were flying by ourselves.We had to get on the instruments as soon as we took off and climbed up to the level they told us to be at—I forget now what it was, but it was above the clouds. They told us there was certain areas we'd reach another storm, and there were. It was the most correct weather report I think I ever got, because they told us exactly where we'd run into weather, and the idea was to keep flying at that altitude and keep going east. It got a little bothersome. I don't know how far—I think I said in the diary, maybe not. The navigator got a little bit concerned and wanted to know if we was getting any radio signals from England because he wasn't quite sure that he was tracking right, though he was celestial navigation.

It was a long pull—it was about ten hours—but I remember everybody else having to go to the bathroom, but I was the only one that didn't that whole trip. Now, I wouldn't do it today. (laughter) It was really calm, and as I say, when we ran into a cloud, we knew we was going to run into it, and we just stayed on the instruments. I flew half the time and he flew half the time; we could use the automatic pilot.

DePue: Were you flying at an elevation which required you to be on oxygen?

Thorp: No, not going overseas, but in combat, of course, we did.

DePue: Okay. Wednesday, May 24th, you're in Valley, Wales, where you land. Any impressions of Wales?

Thorp: Yeah, we broke out of some clouds and come down over that area, and looking out and seeing England and seeing those beautiful hedgerows, the green grass, the pastures—it looked so serene, and, hey, can this be war? Of course, coming around and landing on that airport and then to see the people—the Englishmen—I guess they were English. We couldn't hardly understand what they were saying and they never moved very fast, always very slow, though they was supposed to be working. And I thought, well, golly, here the country's at war, and yet they don't seem to be any more concerned about whether they get anything done today or not. And that kind of bothered me a little bit.

And of course you parked your airplane and said, well, I'm going to get to keep it. Nope, take all your stuff out; this is a plane depot here, and somebody else gets it. We didn't like that very well. But then, of course, the water was cold, and, let's see, that was the first time, I think, I'd had to shave with a razor. I had an electric razor, but that don't work over there. (laughs) So my first impressions weren't exactly the best, and I kind of described it I think fairly well in the diary. I think some of them even went to a dance that night, and of course the girls were real eager there, all English girls in uniform and all friendly. You just kind of wondered what's going to happen next. They put us on a train—this is another thing that got me: the trains over in England run on time. When they say they leave at 7:15, they left at 7:15.

DePue: And the destination was…?

Thorp: Stone, England.

DePue: Stone, England. I know that your final destination was Deopham [DEE-fum] Green. What was the impression of the passing countryside?

Thorp: I was impressed with everything, how green and how well-trimmed and how neat everything looked. Once in a while we'd find a big pile of bombs on the road, or munitions—that's before D-Day, of course. But I couldn't get over the bombs being just parked right alongside of the road. Another thing I noticed as we were coming in to land, there was a barbed wire along the beaches. Well, why would they invade England from the west side? Well, they could have. (laughs) You know, it's things like that that you notice. You could see there was a change, a different kind of a life coming up real quick.

DePue: Did it look like that good, rich farmland that you grew up with?

Thorp: No, it didn't to me. The countryside we went through is evidently all sheep pasture or cattle pasture, in other words, livestock—very little farm ground where I was.

DePue: You got there late May of 1944. Was there talk among the troops about the impending invasion? Was it just that everybody understood it was going to happen?

Thorp: I think we was preparing for it, but actually we weren't involved with it to be frontline troops or anything like that. There wasn't that much conversation on it. They just knew it was going to come, but they didn't know when or where. The guys that was the infantrymen, they knew pretty well because they were getting moved up to the boats and stuff like that to go over there. But we didn't.

DePue: By May 28th, you go to the replacement center. Is that where you're now going to find out exactly where you're going to end up? And where did you end up?

Thorp: Let's see. We were still in that replacement base on D-Day, because the planes flew over.

DePue: Okay. Tell me your impressions of D-Day, June sixth.

Thorp: They landed on the coast of France, and initially success was good so far. Casualties weren't as high as expected. And then, of course, went into the map room, and the guys was trying to rig a map up showing where the invasion was—of Normandy. But they wasn't too sure just where to put the line. (laughs) And then, of course, the night before, they had a so-called gas attack raid. So they'd go around with the sensors on the end of sticks, I guess to detect whether there was gas or not. Of course it was practice, but that was in case the Germans dropped gas bombs on top of us, so we could be prepared for that. We had our gas masks and all that sort of stuff.

DePue: Was there a change in the mood among your group?

Thorp: I didn't particularly notice it myself other than we knew we were really in it when we was invading France.

DePue: Of course, from the Air Force perspective you'd been it for a couple years already.

Thorp: Exactly, so it really wasn't that excitable, because that's what we knew we were getting into, and whether they had an invasion or not, we were still going to be flying over Europe.

DePue: One of the other things—I don't want to get too far into this—you did mention, on the train ride and just seeing the countryside of England, were the kids.

Thorp: Yes, yes. "Any gum, chum?" They were there every time we stopped, and just crowded around us and wanting gum or candy.

DePue: "Any gum, chum?"

Thorp: Yeah, "Any gum, chum?" (DePue laughs) And later on was a story about that on how the Englishmen hated gum chewing in prison, and I was a gum-chewer. And fifty years later, I read the diary of one of the Englishmen, and that's one of the things he said: "He chews gum. The other American does not chew gum, thank God."

DePue: What was their problem with chewing gum?

Thorp: Well, one of the problems was my fault. They gave us a ration of chewing gum when I got put in the prison camp. I knew that it wasn't going to last forever, and I didn't know how long I was going to be in prison. I'd take a stick of gum and I'd chew it all day, and then I'd get through with it at the end of the day.

DePue: Stick it up on the wall?

Thorp: And then the next morning, I'd…

DePue: You'd stick it on the wall and then chew it again the next day?

Thorp: Now, I wouldn't do that today for love nor money, but I did it then, because that was the only way that it seems they could keep me from—not starving to death—but hunger pang. When I was chewing gum, I didn't feel as hungry as I did when I wasn't chewing gum.

DePue: Were you a smoker?

Thorp: No.

DePue: That was quite unusual, wasn't it?

Thorp: Yes, it was. Very unusual. No, I wasn't a smoker.

DePue: Well, that probably gives you some good trading material down the road someplace.

Thorp: It did. It sure did. You bet it did. You could buy anything with cigarettes or soap. Oh, heavens, yes. I got stuff that I wouldn't have got otherwise if I had been a smoker.

DePue: When did you get assigned to a base and a unit?

Thorp: It was somewhere there at Stone. I don't recall whether I was there or not, but anyway, that's when they assigned us to Deopham Green.

DePue: Okay. Deopham Green.

Thorp: 452nd Bomber Group.

DePue: What part of England is that?

Thorp: That's about twenty miles from Norwich in East Anglia.

DePue: I know it's the 729th Squadron, and the 452nd Bomb Group. Let's finish with this then. Just give us a description then of what's a squadron, what's a bomb group?

Thorp: Well, let's see. It was 728th, 729th, 730th, and 731st. They had four squadrons, and I think each squadron had about twelve airplanes. They were dispersed all over the area in case we was bombed. They had their own individual mechanics and what you'd call a special. You lived in separate barracks and you had your commanding officer that was more or less in charge of the ground crew and the ground people. You had officers' huts and of course the bomb group that contained all four squadrons put together. And you flew together as a bomb group.

DePue: That's sixty aircraft in the formation, then? Fifty—

Thorp: Well, about forty, forty-eight. Usually so many from each squadron, because there was always planes that were down, got shot up or whatever. And also, the crew availability was one thing, too. You were always short on navigators. It even got to the point where they couldn't use enlisted men as navigators, but they could sure use enlisted men as bombardiers.

DePue: I'm looking at a map here which we're going to scan into the interview, so anybody who's finding this interview later on can see the map of England and 8th Air Force. It looks like each one of these bomb groups has its own air base, if you will, and they're just scattered all over this area of England.

Thorp: Yeah, as I said, you could fly over that part of England and just pull the throttle and just pick your spot to land, almost. They were supposed to be, I think, five, ten mile apart, something like that, but the big problem is not to interfere with the takeoff pattern. Now, we had a problem with 450… They're in here, you see. They was taking off this way, and we was taking off this way. And of course, they were twenty-fours, and that's where Jimmy Stewart was at, was this bomb group right here.

DePue: 453rd.

Thorp: Um-hm. So in other words, you had to watch on takeoff, and we had to talk to them about it. They had to change their pattern, or at least they talked about it, because they would be coming up and we would be taking off and—

DePue: Now, let's make sure we've got this right as we're talking about this. Four 452nd, their takeoff was generally to the east, and the 453rd was generally to the north?

Thorp: Apparently at that time they were doing that. They had runways the same as we did. In other words, there was a pattern of planes, the way they were built—I mean, the patterns of the air field was pretty much the same. Let's see, you wouldn't know where that map is at, do you, Helen? Oh she's gone. Well, it doesn't make any difference. But yeah, that was a problem, and of course when you get all these groups, what we do is take off in what they call a buncher, and they'd circle over that, and each buncher was supposed to be over their respective air base. So you get all those planes circling. And guys would get off course, and the first thing you know, they'd be running into one another. They lost about, they said, over 350 airplanes just trying to get—

DePue: Just trying to get the formations established—taking off. Wow. That's probably a good place to end for today, because I want to save the discussion about the war and about your POW experiences for next time. And we're at two hours and fifty minutes anyway, Ernest.

Thorp: I sure didn't realize time went by—I wasn't looking at the clock.

DePue: I would think it was three hours very well spent, so thank you very much.

Thorp: Well, I trust that you… Oh, no, this…yeah.

DePue: Okay. We're looking at a map here of Germany, but we'll probably pick that up next time.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: We'll have that handy next time.

Thorp: But I thought I'd just show you the layout of the air field.

DePue: Okay. We can start with that next time, how does that sound, Ernest?

Thorp: Okay. I'll get that together.

DePue: Okay. Thank you very much.

(end of interview #1 - interview #2 continues)

Interview with Ernest Thorp

VR2-A-L-2009-042.2

Interview # 2: December 23, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Wednesday, December 23, 2009. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today I'm very privileged to be with Ernest Thorp. Good afternoon, Ernest.

Thorp: Yes, sir. Glad you made it in the weather.

DePue: Yeah. It's a couple days before Christmas, and it's raining outside, and it's snowing farther north, and I'm hoping to get out of here before it freezes. I shouldn't have any problem with that at all. We are in your home in rural Clinton, Illinois. And this is our second session. The first time we talked about your experiences, Ernest, growing up on the farm during the Depression, the early years of the Second World War, going to college, following your dream of getting your pilot's license before the war even started, before you were ever in the military, then all the way through your military training. And we took a lot of time to be pretty thorough in you talking about that, because that was quite an involved process. And I'm sure you remember, the last time we left off, we had gotten you to England and specifically to Deopham Green, England. And where was Deopham Green?

Thorp: Deopham Green was about eighteen miles from Norwich, in what they call East Anglia, England, which is the eastern part of England.

DePue: Is that south of London itself, then?

Thorp: No, it would be northeast.

DePue: And in that area of England, were there other air bases?

Thorp: Altogether, I think about 130 bases in that area, and about forty of them bombers and the rest of them fighters or Royal Air Force. In other words, you could pull your throttle back almost anywhere over that part of England and find a space to land.

DePue: It was convenient then, I'm sure, in a few cases.

Thorp: It was, really. There was times that anything you could get your plane down on, you took it.

DePue: Last time you talked very briefly about the 452nd, and that was the bomber group that you belonged to. And what was the squadron, again?

Thorp: Squadron was 729th.

DePue: And tell us again—I know you went over this last time, but let's start with how many in a squadron, how many in bomb group?

Thorp: Well, they usually figure about twelve airplanes to a squadron, and that was four squadrons, so that put about forty-eight to fifty planes per group. Usually they put up about thirty-five or forty, hardly ever fifty group.

DePue: I know you came over with a B-17 crew, but from my understanding, that crew kind of got broken up.

Thorp: We trained and flew together as a crew in England, but when it come to flying combat, they put the first pilot with an experienced crew as a copilot, and then you had a copilot fly with an experienced crew. So in other words, we didn't fly together when combat started.

DePue: Why did they break the crew up?

Thorp: The idea was that the copilot should get the experience with an experienced crew. The first pilot would have one mission with an experienced crew, but then thereafter, he would be on his own with an experienced copilot. The idea was that the copilot would fly five missions with an experienced crew. Well, an experienced copilot was flying with my crew. On one trip to Berlin, my crew that I trained with got shot up badly enough that they took off and went to Sweden. And I was in another airplane and seen them take off for Sweden with an engine on fire and wondered whether they would make it or not. I was a copilot without an original crew because I had no original crew to fly with. So thereafter, I just flew with whoever needed a copilot.

DePue: Well, we have to finish the story. What happened to the crew that flew to Sweden?

Thorp: Well, they got shot up in one engine, and they debated what to do, but they decided that they couldn't get back to England, that they'd better go for Sweden and still be free men in a sense rather than being prisoners of war. And they made it, and they were treated very well. They had quite an experience. (laughs)

DePue: They stayed the rest of the war in Sweden?

Thorp: They stayed until February or March, and through secrecy the United States with Sweden were able to fly them out of Sweden in the middle of the night in B-24s over Norway and back to England. And they packed them in there like hogs to get back to England. And then as soon as they got to England, they immediately shipped them back to the United States.

DePue: They never flew any combat missions after that?

Thorp: No, that's right.

DePue: Why did they ship them back to the States?

Thorp: Because they figured that if they would get shot down again in German hands and find out that Sweden had taken care of them, had interned them and let them go, that might get repercussions from Germany to Sweden.

DePue: Well, Sweden, as I recall, was a neutral country at the time, but it was selling lots of iron ore and lots of other things to Germany throughout the war, so maybe they weren't really so neutral after all.

Thorp: Not as neutral as we thought, and the same way with Switzerland. But they also had German pilots there that were interned, according to my crew. So they didn't just specialize on the Allies, but if a German landed there, he got interned as well. And the Swedes were very curious and very respectful. They stayed in civilian homes. They had free access. They wore civilian clothes. And they had, according to my navigator and bombardier, who wrote quite a story about it, they had a good time. (laughs)

DePue: So what was supposed to happen is after a few missions for you, you were supposed to return to that aircraft and that crew?

Thorp: Exactly. If we'd had normal operations and hadn't either one got shot down or shot up, I would have flown with my original crew, but I never did.

DePue: Did you guys ever name the aircraft?

Thorp: The aircraft that we was flying in?

DePue: That one that ended up in Sweden?

Thorp: Not to my knowledge. I don't recall what plane it was. I do remember the number as they peeled off to go to Sweden and looked it up later when they had news about planes that landed in Sweden, that number showed up, and I would know then that was my original crew.

DePue: One of the things your story illustrates, though, is that this was supposed to happen under normal circumstances. There were a lot of times where there weren't normal circumstances.

Thorp: Exactly, exactly. You couldn't say that things would go "as planned." No. You were just lucky you'd still be able to fly.

DePue: What was the official number of missions when you were there that an individual would be allowed to fly before rotating back home or be taken out of combat?

Thorp: Well, when we first got there, it was twenty-five but they soon changed it to thirty. And then before I was done, before I got my eighteen, they got it up to thirty-one. And then thereafter, it was supposed to be thirty-five.

DePue: Was there any expectation as far as the aircraft themselves were concerned, or did they stay in as long as the war lasted?

Thorp: Well, as long as they could keep them together, and usually it's pretty hard on engines flying combat. So they had to change engines quite often. And also, there was always repair work on flak damage and things of that type.

DePue: Well, as last time, there are going to be incidents here as we go through this discussion where I'll be reading out of your diary, which is outstanding, I think, and then I'm going to ask you a few times to read out of your diary as well. So we're going to start with this very short quote right out of your diary talking about a B-17. "Average life of a B-17: 231 days or twenty-one missions."

Thorp: Yes. A lot of times, it was even shorter than that. I flew on one B-17 on its fiftieth mission without an abortion, and that was news. This is one of the pictures you see in that book of that whole crew coming back from a mission, and we just completed fifty missions on this airplane without being aborted or having to turn around and come back.

DePue: Now, what does "aborted" mean?

Thorp: That means starting on a mission and then turning around and coming back without going on with the rest of the combat group.

DePue: So that did happen on occasion?

Thorp: Yes, it did, very often. And they always had the spares come along behind. In other words, if somebody fell out and went back, you flew up and took his place, and if nobody aborted, then you went around and landed; you didn't go on a mission that day.

DePue: What were the reasons that aircraft might abort?

Thorp: We had a muffler, an exhaust pipe, blow out on one engine, and that made us on three engines right at the very start, so we aborted on that mission. Other missions, somebody got sick, or the compass or the radios weren't working, or obvious reasons. But they always had to have a good explanation, and if any engine work had to be done, as soon as they got that fixed, that pilot was called out of bed to come back and fly that airplane and see if it's correct for the next mission. Sometimes people would jimmy the engine up to the point that they would malfunction and they'd say, "Well, my engine's not running right." They wouldn't feel very happy about the mission so they wanted to get out, so they'd do something. But they made sure that those guys flew that airplane again—that day if possible.

DePue: How about combat damage, either flak or fighter damage?

Thorp: That would be normally or should be at the completion of your mission, or at last you dropped your bombs and done what you was supposed to be doing. Once we dropped our bombs, we were on our own. We said, in other words, get yourself back in one piece. Going to the mission and to bomb the target, everybody is staying together and staying in formation and doing what is supposed to be done at the time it's supposed to be done. (laughs)

DePue: In other words, once you're in the thick of it, if something happens, you generally want to stay with the formation.

Thorp: Exactly. Exactly.

DePue: It seems that even in the best of circumstances, there are going to be injuries. Were there some crews that came over and just kind of cannibalized because they were fillers; they were meant to be fillers from the beginning?

Thorp: In a sense, that's what happened to me and my crew, because not every member of the crew I trained with was on this mission to Berlin. They had a couple, three guys on this particular mission with my original crew that were flying their last mission. They were going to complete their tour, and they ended up in Sweden. Now, these three guys that was left, including myself and my crew, but I only flew with one of them, and he was the radio operator on one mission. So I didn't see anything of my original crew to speak of after that mission to Berlin.

DePue: The thing that struck me, going through your missions: you flew with several different pilots on several different aircraft, which is kind of contrary to my notion of the importance of the crew training as a crew.

Thorp: Exactly. In other words, I was that spare copilot. If they needed a copilot and the original copilot was sick or whatever the problem was, why, I was the one that they used.

DePue: Okay. What'd you think about filling that role?

Thorp: I didn't particularly like it, because every pilot was a little bit different, I mean, as far as what they expected out of you, the way they flew, and the way they talk and everything like that. And there was one fellow that I ended up with by the name of Smith. Nice guy, but he was rather a poor pilot. (DePue laughs) But we got along fine, I liked him and everything. And had others that did all the flying. They hardly let you touch the controls, even in formation. And I was always ready to go, but no, they did it. They'd tell you to do this, in a way that I didn't appreciate; in other words, I was always prepared to do what needed to be done as a copilot, but there were some pilots you just did not get along with.

DePue: What was the norm, if there was such a thing? How much of the actual flying might the copilot do versus the pilot?

Thorp: Once you took off and got into formation, which, sometimes took a while, every fifteen minutes.

DePue: Switch off every fifteen?

Thorp: In tight formation.

DePue: Was it a lot of manual work to maintain that?

Thorp: Yes. Swallowbacks, you're doing this all the time. Depending on where you was at in a formation. If you was right close to the lead, that wasn't too bad, because the lead just flew usually on automatic pilot, straight and level and very little turning. But if you was back down the line there, you had more work to do.

DePue: I was going to ask about this later, but this is probably a good time to bring it up. Tell me more about formation flying. Because you talk in your diary about high squadrons, low squadrons, location in the squadrons, et cetera. What does all of that mean, to the layman?

Thorp: Okay. You had what you call a high squadron would be up here, and you have a middle squadron here and a lower squadron down here. In other words, they're all flying—

DePue: Are they right above each other or are they staggered off to the side?

Thorp: They was kind of staggered off to where they would fly off of one another. High was usually the lead, then the second and then the third. This one down in here was considered Purple Heart Corner because they could be shooting at the front ones up here, but the lag enough in timing that it'd always (laughs) hit the ones behind.

DePue: So the lower squadron was the Purple Heart squadron?

Thorp: Well, that's what they called it, and that was the squadron I got shot down in.

DePue: Okay. And in each one of these squadrons, you'd have somewhere between eight and twelve aircraft in the squadron?

Thorp: It'd usually be about twelve.

DePue: Very good. I'm going to start with the first reading for you. And when we left last time, we had just started talking about D-Day, so you got there at a pretty momentous time, although you weren't directly involved in the D-Day operation.

Thorp: Not that day, no.

DePue: This first reading, I think, is from June fifth, and I want you to start at the bottom here, and then it goes over to the next page, if you would.

Thorp: "Monday the air was full of bombers and fighters winging their way to the French coast. They must be blowing the Hades out of it. Every lecture gives us more valuable information on what we can expect in combat. Some of it you kind of gulp at because it sure isn't what you like to hear. Our favorite lecturer is kind of flak-happy, and he admits he wouldn't go on another raid into Germany for all the generals in the United Kingdom. According to him, things are rough all the time—on the base, passes, getting up real early, taxiing on narrow strips with other ships everywhere, taking off in bad weather, finding a position in a new formation. All in all, you sweat to death before the raid ever begins. Those Hun fighters are far from bad and ineffective. Flak isn't so bad, but that combination isn't good. Eight letters from Mary Ellen. Air raid practice."

DePue: Okay, there you go. And this is before you've seen your first combat mission, so…

Thorp: Exactly. (laughs) Oh, this guy, I tell you—whew. Yeah, he was out of it.

DePue: You're nervous enough without hearing that, huh?

Thorp: Yeah. You know, you always wonder.

DePue: Well, when was your first mission? June eighteenth. I'm going to read part of your entry for Wednesday the fourteenth, and this is—obviously you're getting closer to things. "Wednesday we flew as a crew in one of the retired battlewagons on a practice formation mission, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, around a certain route over this part of England. The vets don't appreciate that, either. They say we fly too close a formation for safety. We didn't think so, but they should know. Back in Sioux City, the closer it was, the better. Watched a British Lancaster circle the field, stall out, and crash about half a mile from where I was at. Exploded and burned. I don't know how many escaped. Combat is getting closer every hour. Seeing these planes land with their wounded and battle-damaged gave me a funny feeling deep inside that you just can't laugh off all that well." (pause) So would it be fair to say that the impending combat is weighing on you a little bit here?

Thorp: Yeah, it's shaping up. You bet, you bet.

DePue: Was the wait as bad as the combat, sometimes?

Thorp: Really, I guess it could be. Always apprehension… once you got into it, it wasn't that bad. In other words, you had a job to do, so you did it. But you could anticipate some of those things that actually never happened. But you do wonder. (laughs)

DePue: Well, you've got lots of times to think, and I think that's one of the problems, isn't it?

Thorp: Yeah, it was. But I can say this: it never bothered me sleeping. I mean, I never had any problems as far as I remember worrying about getting shot down. Some guys would come in and say, "If I get shot down…" or "If I make it…" and I don't recall saying that. I don't think I was optimistic, but I thought this mother's son was going to get through.

DePue: (laughs) Okay. Well, you're only a few days away from your first mission, which happened, as you just mentioned, Sunday, June eighteenth. The target was Bremen, which is in northern Germany, in the harbor area. I've got the map right here for you, and you've got a map, too. Right in here, and here's the coastline.

Thorp: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: And in this particular case, you were flying with Stubbs. Thorp: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Can you describe a little bit the circumstances for that first mission?

Thorp: Okay. Now, Stubbs was on not quite his last mission. He had about thirty or something like that, or real close to it. And he was one of the original 452nd bomb groups that had come over in January of '44. So I was kind of apprehensive flying with an old, experienced combat pilot, but he was as

nervous as a March hare, and I was a little bit concerned about flying with him, but he wasn't too bad a guy to fly with, and we made the mission—it was rather strange—flying over Germany to start and then looking out and all of the sudden seeing those black puffs of smoke, which was anti-aircraft fire, but they was off to the right. Well heavens, if they're that far away, if they can't get any closer than that, no problem. He changed off with me, in other words, we exchanged turns at flying. And to me, he wasn't a bad guy to fly with. But he was nervous. He had to go to the bathroom about every twenty minutes.

DePue: How do you do that in the aircraft?

Thorp: Well, this particular guy, (laughs) carried a gallon can with him.

DePue: A gallon can?

Thorp: Yeah. One of these little square cans, you know. I had to laugh to watch him. (laughs) But anyway, he was nervous.

DePue: So you unzip all your flight gear and just…?

Thorp: Yeah. Of course, the pilot didn't wear as much gear as the guys in the back—at least we didn't. Because we had a heater, and as the heater worked, we were fairly comfortable. And also flying that B-17 in tight formation was work. I mean, you sweated. And heavy underwear and heavy coat just about like this is just about all I wore.

DePue: I'm going to have you read an entry here, and it's quite long. I've cut out just a little bit, and I'll let you figure that out. But start right at the top, and then you can see where it skips down there.

Thorp: Okay. "Sunday, June eighteenth. At twelve o'clock midnight, we were all roused out of a comfortable sack to get ready for a mission, which to us was our first one. Breakfast and then briefing at 1:00 am. Naturally we were all curious and debating where we were going. It was Bremen, Germany, which had plenty of anti-aircraft guns. Nice beginning, I thought. No milk run of the French coast nature. I was to ride as copilot with First Lieutenant Stubbs, a veteran of twenty-five missions. A good boy he was, too. Kind of nervous, but really on the ball, a dauntless chap who was not to be bluffed into doing anything he didn't want to do. So we took off in our own sweet time, getting into formation, flying a very loose formation until we pulled in over Germany. We flew about four hours, getting formed and to altitude. What a deal that was to fly formation. I had a very rugged time, and I bet he thought he drew a real lemon for a copilot. We were number two on Cotton in the bucket of the low squadron: Purple Heart Corner. We had such a time, and even he finally gave her all she had, and he pulled up number two into the lead element. Flak all around. There was a heavy cloud of smoke already over the target, so we bombed P.IF.F."— In other words, that would be instruments—"over the city. Then the flak began to pop, some of it in front of us, and mostly in the back.

Seemed so much like the movie scenes I didn't think much of it—too busy, for one thing. No fighters. The crew was a veteran one—worked together pretty good. Once our bombs were gone, formation flying was easy, and no trouble home. Up to twenty-five thousand feet, and highest yet for me in an airplane. No ill effects. No comfort or heat problems. Flak suits over the target. I'll never need an electric suit. Long johns were too much extra. Seven hours in all, and me with a tired rear end. Interrogation with sandwiches and hot coffee—really tasted good. Also shots of whiskey if you so desired. So completed my first combat mission. The good Lord was really with me today."

DePue: Okay. You do a wonderful job of explaining this. Does that pretty much capture the mood that you recall?

Thorp: Yeah. I think it did. I think of that and Stubbs, of course. And as I said, that was my first time flying in formation with a full bomb load, full gas load, and in such tight formation, and in combat, you see, so it was a little bit… and, of course, I was trying to prove to this guy I could fly. (laughter) But I didn't think I did a very good job that first time, but he said he wished he had me for a copilot on all his missions, later on.

DePue: That's quite a compliment.

Thorp: Well, I thought so.

DePue: Was the aircraft a lot easier, once the bombs were gone, to control?

Thorp: Oh, yes, yes. With that load off, it did make it easier to fly.

DePue: And why did the folks in combat think that you guys were trying to fly too close to formation before?

Thorp: Well, the thing that happened, flying real close, and let's say you got hit and you lost control, you could pull up into this one and take two down, or vice versa. When you were that close, if you got hit, you was not always able to keep it under control. So they didn't like being too close together because if anything happened, it could take two down instead of one. And you could be the innocent party, you might say (laughter); you weren't the ones hit, but you was the one that got knocked down. The old-timers were real stiffy on too tight a formation.

DePue: What I'm going to do here now is go through this mission by mission—and quite a few of these, we're not going to spend much time unless you want to reflect. I suspect that like most things and most of us, you know, after sixty-some years, (Thorp laughs) these things just kind of flow together. Some probably stand out better than others. And then there will be some times where we kind of take a diversion and talk about some other things. The second mission, Wednesday, June twenty-first, against Berlin, with First

Lieutenant Hanson. "Four fifty-second participates in a two-thousand-ship mission against Berlin." And Lieutenant Hanson, you spend a little bit of time talking about, "a nineteen-year-old veteran." And how old were you at the time?

Thorp: Twenty-three.

DePue: So you're the twenty-three-year-old copilot newbie and he's the vet.

Thorp: He's the veteran, right. Yeah, it's kind of strange.

DePue: You remember much about that mission?

Thorp: Yes, I do. Right from the very start, I felt at ease with Hanson. You know, he was a kid to me but he was a veteran as far as the flying was concerned, and he knew just what to do and how to do it. Well, Stubbs did, too. But that mission, of course, was the mission over Berlin. And as I said, with two thousand planes supposed to be flying over Berlin—all in sequence, of course—you had plenty of traffic. But the thing that got me was the fact that I could see Cotton or my crew up ahead, and when they got hit and how they peeled off and headed north to Sweden. So the flight was normal other than that, as far as getting back, but the fact that seeing my crew go to Sweden—or go someplace—I didn't know they made it. But as soon as I landed, they called me into the office and wanted to know what my crew was like. In other words, had they talked going to Sweden, had they even talked about wanting not to fly or be in combat, and all that.

Because three of them on this crew were Norwegians or Swedish descent, and they had a suspicion right off the bat that they kind of did that on purpose. Because there were some that could malfunction their engine to the point that blowing out a piston or something, and then they'd have an excuse to land in Sweden. And it got to the point so bad on some of them that they had a special officer in Sweden, an Air Force officer, to inspect that plane and make sure that they was crippled by flak rather than caused by engineering or piloting or they'd blown a gasket or—they could do with manipulating the controls and then gas. There was ways you can do things to an engine that can destroy it or make it not operate, and some of them were doing that, and so they was trying to stop it. So I said I had no idea, no reason to think that they had any reason to abort or to take off and be in Sweden.

DePue: Did you see the damage when the <u>when it</u> occurred?

Thorp: All I could see was when they took off that one of the engines was smoking. And I've got a whole little book in here that the bombardier wrote, a description of that thing, of that trip. (laughs)

DePue: Going to Berlin—that's got to be a much more dangerous mission than a lot that you went on, but just knowing that you're going to Berlin has a distinction as well. What were your feelings about that?

Thorp: Well, that was the target of the target, and of course the briefing officer said, "You're going to obliterate Berlin! You're going to destroy it, and this will shorten the war, this mission today." Well, wonderful, good. We'll get the war over quicker. Fine, all for that. But (laughs) it did not work out that way, as we found out. No way. A lot of guns. They had guns within twenty miles of Berlin. They started shooting at you long before you ever got to the target.

DePue: So it's not a half a minute of flak you're flying through.

Thorp: No, no, a lot of it.

DePue: Before we go into the rest here—and you went on, as I can calculate, sixteen missions before you were shot down. I wonder if you can take us through, if there is such an animal, a typical mission day—how did it start, step by step.

Thorp: Well, it usually started out the day before. You'd see a red ball hung up on the office of the squadron. That would show that you were alerted for a mission. Of course, you were on flying status, so you would know that that meant you. It depended on the mission that you were going to go on, whether it was a long one or what, but they'd get you up at, say, two o'clock in the morning. You'd go down for breakfast. You'd be briefing at 3:30, and after you was briefed, you got into your uniform and your clothes and all that you wanted to wear on the mission—make sure you took nothing personal with you. And then you'd get on a truck and they'd haul you out to your airplane, and then you'd sit around for an hour or two waiting to see whether it'd be a red flare to go up or a green flare—this would still be in the dark. And if a green flare would go up, that meant your mission was on.

You had this time schedule where certain planes would start at certain times, and you start your engine and be ready to taxi out to take off. And then, when you take off and you fly to maybe fourteen thousand feet and circle over your air base, in the meantime getting all your planes together before you joined the other bomb groups to take off. It'd take you three to four hours briefing at altitude in formation before you even started to Germany or a target. This is what got me. It took four hours at least sometimes to get ready to go to bomb a target. The longest missions were usually seven to nine hours. The bomb group missions that were short were the ones that you're trying to bomb these V-1 and V-2 sites along the French coast. They was only about five hours.

DePue: Since you've kind of touched on that, what's the difference between a milk run and a regular run?

Thorp: (laughs) Well, bombing those V-1 sites or V-2s were considered "milk runs," because they usually didn't have too much flak around them. And of course they were just a small target, a ramp and some buildings, but that's where they launched the V-1s. And it was pretty hard to hit, and it was well camouflaged. So normally you could fly over there and drop your bombs and come back to England in less than five hours. That was considered a milk run, but they got more guns, and there were times that we lost planes over these V-1 sites as we did over Berlin or Hamburg or Bremen.

DePue: At the beginning, when you first started to bomb, the beachhead was still pretty narrow; the Allies hadn't pushed into France that far.

Thorp: That's right. And that was a good place to get into France, because it would be flak-free right there at the coast. Otherwise, they'd be shooting at you the minute you approached the coast.

DePue: Well, you've talked about flak already, but I want you to go into a little bit more, and in discussing that, also discuss about enemy fighters and the combination of the two. What worried you more?

Thorp: Well, we thought—I thought—it'd be more problem with fighters than with flak, but actually it turned out that flak took down more airplanes than fighters. You could see fighters as they approached, and you'd shoot at them; flak, (laughs) you just stood there and took it. So the loss ratio, as it turned out as the war went on, was more and more flak damage than it was fighter damages. But the fighters you feared because they could have you in their sights, and they could be dead on, whereas they'd shoot flak from a mile wide to the sides. All five hundred guns or whatever would be shooting up in given areas, because they knew where your target was going to be, or at least they had a pretty good idea, because you was flying straight and level to bomb that target—so you were targets. In other words, you was in a shooting gallery, and this is what always got you.

DePue: Well, explain to somebody who wasn't there why, then, the Air Force was so adamant about flying these tight formations. It seems to me that you're bunching up your target, making it easier for the flak and the fighters.

Thorp: Well, this was always a point. The idea originally was, of course, tight formation, was to get that bomb load down in a pattern instead of over here and over there.

DePue: To hit the target.

Thorp: To hit the target. And also, in a tight formation, if you was flying it right, with your machine guns in position it would create more opposition to fighters as they would be coming in. That was the theory. And it didn't always work that way, but that was the idea. The closer you stayed together, the better chance you had of getting through.

DePue: Runs back home were a little bit easier, generally?

Thorp: Yeah. You could kind of relax, but you'd better not. Some of the guys, even on the landing pad, who took their guns out, and here come the German fighters and shoot them down in a pattern over the base. Never happened at our base, but it did happen to other bases, where they actually got shot down on the approach to land at their own base in England because, well, they thought they were safe, no problem. But you did loosen up. You didn't fly as tight a formation on the way home. And it was always a joy; you always had a special candy that they would issue each crew member, but you weren't to eat it until you was on the way home, because then you could take that oxygen mask off and eat the candy and enjoy it. I always looked forward to that treat. (laughs)

DePue: What was the candy?

Thorp: Oh, it was chocolate and special sweet candy that you normally couldn't get otherwise. It was rationed.

DePue: This was your reward for…?

Thorp: Yeah, it's supposed to be a reward. (laughs)

DePue: How would anybody know if you were eating your candy on the way there?

Thorp: Well, you could. The thing of it is, these oxygen masks weren't the easiest to take off and fly with as far as we were concerned.

DePue: What was the elevation before you had to go on oxygen?

Thorp: Normally ten thousand feet.

DePue: What was the normal elevation that you did your bombing from?

Thorp: Twenty-five thousand.

DePue: Now, I've watched too many war movies. Were there occasions where you were a lot lower than that?

Thorp: We were lower on the Saint-Lô missions, down to twelve, fourteen thousand, and we thought we was scraping the trees at that altitude, because we wanted to be high. We thought we were safer. But no, that was about the only time we got lower than twenty thousand.

DePue: And once you landed, what happened after that?

Thorp: Once you landed the mechanics were right there with a clipboard. Did you get hit and, how was the mission? You did a report on the engines. They wanted a

critique of everything that went on as far as the mechanics of the plane was concerned. And then they'd load you up on a truck and take you into an interrogation. An officer would be there, and they'd interrogate the whole crew grouped around this guy: What did you see? It was canals. Was there barges on the canals? Did you see any fighters? Or if a plane went down, how many guys got out, and how many chutes did you see? And did you think the bomb damage was deficient, or was it good? Then after that, you was entitled to a shot of whisky—I didn't drink, so I always had somebody on the crew who took my whiskey. I didn't think I needed it, and I didn't.

But then we could go back to the barracks and go to sleep unless we had a problem with the engines or had an abortion; then that's when the pilot had to go back and fly that afternoon, even though he'd been up since one o'clock that morning. But that was the penalty to being the first pilot. A copilot didn't have to worry about that because the mechanic usually went along as copilot when they checked engines.

DePue: How about the ground crew? You mentioned the mechanics were there waiting for you. Was there a maintenance crew assigned to each aircraft?

Thorp: Yes, there was usually two to three men assigned to each airplane.

DePue: Were they just doing maintenance, or were they also the armament side as well?

Thorp: Well, they was kind of divided up. They was the armors and as I understand, they just armored the airplanes, the bombs and load.. The mechanics did the mechanical work. And then the radio people had their specialty. I'm sure they was assigned to more than just one airplane, that was usually squadron work. The mechanic on the plane that had fifty missions without an abortion got a bronze medal as head mechanic of that airplane. And he asked me, "What kind of a pilot are you flying with? Is he good? I want him to take good care of this airplane." (laughs) And we made it. I didn't know the guy that well, but anyway, as far as I was concerned, he was a good pilot.

DePue: I would think it would be important for the pilot, if he's got this aircraft and with this ground crew, that they have a good relationship.

Thorp: You betcha, because we were warned in training ahead of time—so many times maybe it wasn't always flak or fighters that knocked that airplane down—it could have been insufficient maintenance. So trust your mechanic and talk to him, check with him, make sure. He can trust you; you can trust him not to overlook something.

DePue: Well, let's go back to going through the missions here. Your third mission, June twenty-second—and this is all 1944, obviously, so—"The front lines are moving"—but during this timeframe, they're moving pretty slow.

Thorp: You bet they are.

DePue: The Germans are putting up a stiff resistance. "June twenty-second. Against Paris with Hanson," that same Lieutenant Hanson you'd struck up a rapport with before. Anything about that one you remember?

Thorp: Let me see, Paris. Not just offhand. I'd have to look at what I said, but I think it was a bomb group or something that day, and we did see the Eiffel Tower, I believe, on that mission, but other than that, it was rather a normal mission other than the idea of Paris. You know, when the lights come on in Paris, you know, the old song that they had then. And there it was, but it was still in German hands.

DePue: Do you recall, was it industrial targets or transportation nodes that you were bombing?

Thorp: I think it was ammunition or bombs.

DePue: What did you think about, okay, Paris, France—these weren't German targets you were dropping bombs on.

Thorp: Yeah, we were warned that unless you had the target in your bomb site, you did not drop your bombs. You were to carry them back with you to England. But I remember one mission we went on over France, and they couldn't get a hold of the target, so one group lined up on a railroad track and dropped the bombs then, which probably they could repair in a day with the slave labor, but we didn't take the bombs back on that mission.

DePue: Was that just the case, that provision, or just the case when you were bombing in France versus Germany?

Thorp: In Germany, anything went.

DePue: Did it bother you, though? It's kind of an impersonal kind of way of fighting a war.

Thorp: Yes, it was. Bert Stiles, who wrote *The Serenade to the Big Bird* and was later killed, he philosophized that thing. I just read that book and my wife just read it. In other words, they're humans down there and we're humans up here. What I couldn't get over was the beauty of Germany and France from the air. I really can't say I felt sure I didn't like it. Kids would ask me, Well, did you kill anybody? I says, not intentionally, but if there was a target and they was in the target, then they suffered accordingly. But no, I was concerned, but I don't know as I expressed it, in the diary, anyway.

DePue: Fourth mission, June twenty-fourth, against Bremen with Stubbs. I think this was the guy you went with the first time around.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: And I'm going to read some of the excerpts here because I think again you do such a wonderful job of illustrating things. "They waited till 5:15 AM to call me for a mission, which was more like it. To heck with this 11:30 PM stuff." (Thorp laughs) Didn't like to get woken up in the middle of the night?

Thorp: No, no, no.

DePue: And you were copilot again with Stubbs on "Frivolous Sal"—well, there's a colorful name for an aircraft—"that day on her fiftieth mission."

Thorp: Frivolous Sal. Right.

DePue: So that was pretty special?

Thorp: Yes, it was. Yes, it was.

DePue: Did they take Frivolous Sal off the line after that fiftieth—

Thorp: No, they still used it, and I think eventually it got shot down, after I was shot down.

DePue: We kind of were just touching on this: "Boy. On the bomb run, you get a funny feeling seeing all those bomb bay doors open, knowing soon death and destruction will fall from the insides. It's just like watching a long fly ball hit way out, and you hold your breath until you see the results: a hit, an error, foul-out, et cetera." Were you watching the bombs? Were you able to watch them all the way down?

Thorp: We could see them drop, but you could not see the results. The tail gunner could, but you couldn't up where you was, because you still had better be flying that airplane.

DePue: How did you know for sure if you had any effect? Was there a trail aircraft that was taking photos or something?

Thorp: Well, they'd usually try to take photos. They had cameras in some of the planes, and they were supposed to be taking pictures as they dropped and take them back to the bomb group Then they usually send out a reconnaissance plane to take pictures and see how far off you were. (laughs) But usually the tail gunners would say if they hit the target square or they didn't. They didn't usually want to admit that they didn't get it on the target, and some of the biggest arguments I heard at critiques—because we'd critique a mission after it was all done and tell them what the pilots thought and what the bombardiers and navigators thought. And the bombardier would blame the pilot and the pilot would blame the bombardier.

DePue: Again, watching too many war movies here—recall the point in time when the pilot hands over control of the ship to the bombardier. Regardless of where you are in the formation, does the bombardier take it in to the end?

Thorp: Well, he's supposed to, but that's usually the lead plane. Everybody else is still flying on that lead airplane, so the pilots are still flying. So it was very few times, as I remember, there were two times that was straight and level and the bombardier had control.

DePue: When does the bombardier push the button, then? Is it the time when he sees that lead aircraft jettison?

Thorp: The ones that follow, yes. In other words, the first two bombs that dropped out were smoke bombs.

DePue: Smoke bombs?

Thorp: Um-hm. A big trail of smoke when they went out, and you were supposed to drop your bombs too at the same time.

DePue: So the first bombardier might be where he thinks he's just a little over center of mass.

Thorp: Well, he was supposed to be having it right on the target, but the smoke bombs, and of course the other bombs would follow on the target. We hoped. (laughs)

DePue: What was the bomb load that you'd typically have?

Thorp: Oh, usually about six thousand, eight thousand pounds.

DePue: How many bombs would that be?

Thorp: That would be five hundred–pound bombs, would be eight of them, eight to ten.

DePue: Was it hard to control the aircraft when those bombs went out?

Thorp: Oh, the plane just felt like it almost automatically went up because of the weight drop loss.

DePue: And is that one point in time when the pilot was usually the guy?

Thorp: It depended on the bomb run. Usually the first pilot flew the bomb run, but with Stubbs, I flew the bomb run-in fact, did all the flying because he was so nervous. (laughs)

DePue: Well, after that particular mission, on the fiftieth mission for Frivolous Sal, you come back, and this is your reaction once you guys got on the ground

here, I guess: "Quite a delegation to see us, as there was on takeoff. Pictures were taken and an examination of a little damage—four good holes too close to the fuselage to suit me. The C.C. [co-captain] was sure happy and really beaming."

Thorp: Oh, yeah, the chief mechanic.

DePue: Okay. So a big fuss made over the fiftieth mission.

Thorp: Yeah, it was.

DePue: Was it that rare?

Thorp: Yes, it was, at that time. Very few planes flew fifty missions without an abortion, because somehow or another, somebody would screw up and turn around and fly it back.

DePue: Would it be a possibility that Frivolous Sal had seen a few engines in the time, though?

Thorp: Yes, yes.

DePue: Replaced a few engines in the process?

Thorp: Yes. And they was always real proud of how quick they could change those engines. I heard some mechanics brag about how they changed four engines in twelve hours or twenty-four, and that would be no small job when you're thinking of taking them off and putting them back on.

DePue: Here's the part that really surprised me. (laughs) You had flown a mission on the twenty-second; you'd flown a mission on the twenty-first; this was the twenty-fourth. So here's three missions at least, maybe four, even. And then this is the last statement you had for that entry: "Got a bath today and did it feel good. First in a week and a half." You must have been one ripe copilot on that mission.

Thorp: Yeah, I'm sure I was. I was even worse in prison, (laughs) but then it was a lot longer. But no, it was not very convenient, the way they kept you moving, to take a shower or get really cleaned up good, and cold water on top of it, most of them.

DePue: Oh, I thought you guys had the life of luxury back there.

Thorp: Not hardly. Some bases, you might have, but we didn't have on ours.

DePue: By this time, did you consider yourself a veteran?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: How long did it take to be a veteran? That first mission?

Thorp: Usually about five missions you're considered to be a veteran, and a new group would come in and look at you—Oh, you got five missions. Oh boy.

DePue: Well, you aren't quite there yet, but on July fourth—so you had a little bit of a break here—July fourth. Independence Day. Against Tours, France with Stubbs. Anything you remember about that one?

Thorp: We thought we was trying to celebrate the Fourth. It was a late start. As I remember we didn't take off until the middle of the morning. It was just a short target, and I think that's the target that he was so nervous that as soon as he took off, I had to take over the controls and did all the flying, getting into formation, did all the flying even on the bomb run.

DePue: Well, I think that's the next mission.

Thorp: Maybe it is. Stubbs and I got along pretty good, though. I liked him.

DePue: Well, the sixth mission, just a couple days later on July sixth against Pas-de-Calais, France.

Thorp: Yeah, that would be one of those V-1 or milk runs.

DePue: Yeah, with Stubbs, and this is his thirtieth mission, and you made the comment, "I flew on the bomb run for the first time," and I assume that's what you meant.

Thorp: Yeah, that's what I meant. Yeah, okay. I was on the wrong mission. He was one nervous kid, but…

DePue: Was that common, that the pilots, as they got closer to the time when they could legitimately say "this is my last mission," did they get more uptight?

Thorp: It varied with people. Any crew members, as they got closer and closer to getting a complete tour, whatever the number was—it got to be thirty, thirty-one, and thirty-five, and so forth—yeah, you build up a little. Me, after I got fifteen or so, I thought, well, hey, they're not going to shoot this mother's son down. I've got it made. (laughter) Oh, how little did I know.

DePue: Okay. Seventh mission: July seventh. So these are coming pretty close back-to-back here now.

Thorp: Yeah. The weather was good for flying.

DePue: "July seventh, against Leipzig, Germany." A little bit deeper mission. "With Marcus." Here's a new guy. And you'd mentioned that Lieutenant Marcus

was a veteran of seventeen raids and that you had five and a half hours on oxygen. "Number four in the high squadron." Now, what does that mean?

Thorp: Okay, you had—

DePue: I know what the high squadron means, now.

Thorp: Four is usually flying the bucket, as far as I remember now. Because it was number one, number two, number three, and then there's number four under the lead.

DePue: So you're behind and under the lead?

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: Okay. Is that a good place or a bad place to be?

Thorp: It wasn't too bad until we went on that D-Day when the bomb door opened up and the bombs started falling in front and went right past the nose.

DePue: That would get your attention, I'd think.

Thorp: It sure did. You'd bet you didn't increase your speed, and you stayed in formation, because we were spaced just right that the bombs cleared us as they went down.

DePue: Now, here was the interesting comment, I thought, in this mission. You mentioned that the prop ran away so you made two runs. (pause) And here's how you finish it off; I'll quote you here: "As a result, we flew all alone after the group, trailing with flak everywhere, but nary a hole did we pick up." When a prop runs away, what does that mean?

Thorp: Well, that means you have prop control, but in other words, your engine, your governor went haywire and doesn't control your engine, so it gets high speed where you don't want high speed, and your throttles don't work. And it does happen once in a while. And what you try to do then if you possibly can, at least feather it, kill the engine if you can—shutting the gas off from it and feathering it. It's very destructive to an engine when it runs full speed that long up in the air.

DePue: My impression—and you can tell me if you recall this—because you had that problem with the engine, you didn't have a good run, so you circled on around and dropped engines again, and thus you came back kind of on your own.

Thorp: Yes. We got behind there, as I remember. I know usually it's kind of suicide in a sense, but I've been on it a couple times, where they couldn't get lined up on the target right the first time so you had to go out and around and come in again.

DePue: That was standard procedure?

Thorp: Well, that was…

DePue: Accepted?

Thorp: Accepted, right. The idea was to try to get on there the first time. (laughs) Because they had a second chance to shoot at you.

DePue: Kind of a lonely feeling up there all by yourself, wasn't it?

Thorp: Yes, it is, you bet, you bet. Yeah, you kind of get a little tight. But here again, even then it's just by ourselves, we had engine control and things to be watching at least; that's where the pilot and copilot is always busy.

DePue: Now, through almost all of these, you've mentioned flak, and a lot of times I was reading there were holes in the aircraft. Did you come home with some casualties occasionally?

Thorp: Well, a bombardier on one of those missions got hit by flak, but he had a flak suit on, and all it did was bruise him. It didn't open a wound, so he didn't get a Purple Heart. I was lucky on any mission I was on that nobody got hurt seriously.

DePue: But you're always out there counting the holes after the mission?

Thorp: You bet, you bet. Yeah, it was something that you could brag on—well, I had fifteen holes, or something like that. And, of course, there was another mission coming up that we even got shot at by our own aircraft. A guy leaned on a trigger and shot holes through us and one guys' jacket that was laying on the floor. When he wore that jacket thereafter, it was very proudly, because he got those fifty-caliber holes in it, but he wasn't in the jacket. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Eighth mission. July twelfth, against Munich. And the pilot you're with is Parmelly.

Thorp: Yeah. I think that was the only one I flew with him.

DePue: Yeah, I think you're right. Munich would be another, I think, special place to go, kind of like flying against Berlin.

Thorp: Yeah, it was a big target. It would have been a long mission, long mission.

DePue: When you hear that word, everybody kind of swallow hard or get quiet in the briefing room?

Thorp: You'll hear groans or moans when they pull that sheet back and they show that target there. "Ohhh, nooo," and stuff like that. They was a little verbal,

but then they shut up pretty quick, because usually a colonel was in charge. (laughter)

DePue: Okay. I wanted to take another aside here and talk a little bit more about some other issues that you dealt with. We'd already talked about going from one air crew to another air crew. Anything else you wanted to say about that, perhaps?

Thorp: My main concern was the other pilot. The rest of the crew, you just met them or talked to them, but as far as really getting very personal with them, you didn't—at least I didn't. Because as a copilot, you inspected the aircraft and type of bomb and so forth. And the first pilot would just come out and climb in and expects everything to be ready. So that was my responsibility, to see that everything was prepared. In other words, that the crew had their escape kits, that the guns were all in there, they had the ammunition, they had everything they needed for a mission. And some crews were not too hard to work with, and others were a little difficult. Like the escape parcels were worth fifty dollars apiece, and the copilot was responsible for each one of them. If you didn't get back and check them back in, you paid for them. (laughter)

DePue: Okay. Wondered if you can comment a little bit on the contrast that you experienced when you went into aerial combat and then you come back home where you're pretty darn safe and relatively comfortable, at least as far as if you're to compare your fate against what an infantryman who's stuck out on the front lines for long periods of time. And combat to begin with is rather a surreal kind of a business. What was it like going back and forth, turning that light switch on and then turning it off constantly?

Thorp: You mean getting back to the base after a mission?

DePue: Um-hm.

Thorp: Well, it was always a feeling of relief once that plane landed. Some of the colonels were not safe because they were a half a mile away from the airplane because it could blow up sitting on the ramp. [not sure what this means] But there was always that relief, and of course you went through the interrogation, and usually you went to bed after that. And you never knew whether you were going to be flying the next day or not. There was a feeling of relief, but at least I wasn't on the ground fighting like those infantrymen were. We were lucky, and maybe I never expressed that, but that was the way I felt, that we were lucky. If we died, we died suddenly usually, and it was over with. The infantry had to lay there in the mud and be wounded and not be always taken care of immediately. No, I felt for the infantrymen. And also, I didn't realize tank driving was so dangerous. To read stories of these tank people, gosh—an iron coffin, as far as I was concerned.

DePue: Did that play on your mind, though, while you're waiting on the ground for a few days, knowing that you got to go up again, knowing that, okay, they figure I'm lucky if I last twenty-five missions?

Thorp: Well, yes, in a way, but I remember we played ball. We had a little recreation and there was always something to read, and you could talk, and the food was good. What I wanted to do was get a bicycle and ride in the countryside, but it didn't seem like you ever had time to do that. And then I got several leaves to London, and that took up three days if you had a space in there that they thought you could go. As I remember, it was just a matter of you living a day at a time, and you didn't dwell on what was coming up next, because you weren't going to get shot down anyway; you were going to make it.

DePue: That's the way everybody approached it?

Thorp: For the most part. Now, there were some that didn't and some of them who went too far with it and actually got eliminated as far as combat was concerned; they gave them another job.

DePue: A lot of drinking going on, hard liquor?

Thorp: Not too much. The most I seen, they had a hundred-mission party, and it was a stand-down. Nobody flew missions that day, and they had a big party in the hanger, and Doolittle flew in and gave us a big speech, told us Germany was on the ropes but they weren't beaten yet. And that was in July. But I didn't drink.

DePue: But were some of the guys, they kind of headed over to the bar and put down a few?

Thorp: Oh, yeah. And of course they brought in a lot of women. And I went back to the barracks, and there was (laughs) guys in there with a woman, so I went over to the enlisted men's barracks and just visited with them.

DePue: Now, my imagination's racing. It doesn't have to race too far to figure out what's going on in the barracks?

Thorp: No, (laughs) no. But that wasn't my policy at that time, and I was glad I was able to say that, but then of course it could have been pretty tempting, but I was engaged to Mary Ellen, and she was my woman.

DePue: Okay. Casualties—and we've kind of been flirting around this anyway—but, you know, casualties and what you were doing was inevitable. And I want to read one entry from July eighth. "At noon, the early raid news came in." I think you had not gone out that day.

Thorp: No.

DePue: Hanson and Hale.

Thorp: Oh, yeah.

DePue: And this is the Hanson that'd you'd flown with a couple times that you liked so much.

Thorp: Yeah, yeah. I liked him.

DePue: "Hanson and Hale were missing. All kinds of conflicting reports on Hanson, but he doesn't show up. I couldn't hardly believe it. He was so sure and confident he would see it through okay, as he had that kind of luck. His twentieth birthday, too—what a present. Also his twenty-seventh mission. Last night he was put out because I wasn't slated to go with him, and I, in a way, was too. Doggone, those were good guys. I just pray they are all okay in France, either as escapees or POWs."

Thorp: They were all killed.

DePue: How long after did you find that out?

Thorp: Well, it was some time. I didn't really know for sure until maybe, I think, after the war. But he was such a outgoing kid, you know. I liked him. He might have been younger than I was, but he was a good pilot. And I went on leave with him to London one time, and he said, "I'm glad you come along with me, Ernie. That way I stayed away from the women." (laughs) But anyway, he was a good guy. I liked him. And his crew. In fact, I visited with them as much as I did anybody else because I didn't really have a crew of my own, and all the gunners. Well, they wanted Ernie Thorp and I wanted them. That shows you how close it came.

DePue: Did the squadron or the group have any special ceremonies when somebody was lost in combat?

Thorp: No, things went just right on. On one of the missions—I don't know whether I described it to you or not—the lead and the number-two lead crashed together.

DePue: Yeah, we're going to get that in a little bit.

Thorp: Well, anyway, I thought there'd be something special on that because the colonel was in that group and was killed. They said: well he should have pulled ahead and they should have dropped down and went ahead and flew their mission. In other words, they said they made a mistake.

DePue: So very matter-of-fact approach?

Thorp: Matter-of-fact, just like you and I talking. No sympathy, no expression of sorrow, no great loss, just two planes crashed.

DePue: Why do you think they approached it that way?

Thorp: Well, I think if it had got sentimental, broke down or whatever, the morale would have been down. This is war; we got to keep fighting. I assume that. I was surprised. I thought there'd be a little bit. Basically it was one of the full colonels. And of course I saw him later in prison camp. (laughs) He didn't know—well, they put him separately. I got to see him, but I didn't get to speak to him.

DePue: It almost sounds like the powers that be were kind of afraid to show that emotion.

Thorp: That could well be. I think they had emotion, but they sure didn't express it. And you got to that point. I only heard one guy talk about, if we get through, and he ended up later in the prison camp, and I recognized him. He didn't recognize me at first until I mentioned where I was at and the barracks I was in. He says, "Oh, you was the guy who was reading the Bible." And the next day I was shot down, and this guy flew some missions, and he ended up getting shot down, and we ended up in the same prison camp. But I kept in touch with him as long as he was alive.

DePue: But he's the only one who ever expressed doubt?

Thorp: Yeah, he was the only one verbally in presence expressed doubt that he was going to make it. So he ended up a POW too. But I never heard anybody else say that.

DePue: Well, that's amazing. (pause) What was the opinion that you had about the enemy that you faced?

Thorp: Well, really not too much until I come face-to-face with them. (laughs)

DePue: Well, we're going to get to that when we're in the prison camp.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: But did you have any close encounters with fighter pilots?

Thorp: No. In my eighteen missions, I was over Berlin, and I seen fighters in the distance, and our fighters were taking care of them. I didn't see a single fighter ever come through any formation I was flying in.

DePue: Well, it might be worth mentioning here, then. By the time you'd got there, did you have fighter escorts from...

Thorp: You bet. All the way to Berlin and back. You betcha.

DePue: What kind of aircraft were those?

Thorp: P-51s.

DePue: And how nice was it to see those guys?

Thorp: Oh, beautiful. The most beautiful airplane in the world, especially if you had an engine shot out and you was coming back on three engines, to see them sitting out there. You know, pilot is calm, would be smoking a cigarette, kind of waving you down, looking your damage over, and then he'd peel away and get up around. No, talk about being little friends—they were friends, and we loved to have them around. You bet.

DePue: Well, you described them a little bit on the cocky side, too.

Thorp: Yeah, they were. I mean, it was something special.

DePue: How about letters? Were you by this time getting letters on pretty frequent a basis from home?

Thorp: Yes. Mary Ellen was a good writer, and I wrote to everybody that wrote me a letter, so I had a lot of mail.

DePue: How important was the mail to you?

Thorp: Very important. You bet. I loved to write and I loved to get them. That's where a lot of my spare time came in, too. When I wasn't flying, I was writing letters.

DePue: What else did you do in your spare time?

Thorp: Well, played a little ball, and read if I didn't have letters to write. And I went on leave a couple times to London, but the last time I went to London, there was so much V-1s I decided I'd never go back to London again. But I didn't have a chance. (laughs) No, it just seemed like the days that you didn't fly, and they would have some planes they wanted to test run or to check out, they'd call you as a copilot to fly with them. So in other words, even if you weren't flying combat, you were flying somewhere. So it just didn't seem like you had a lot of what you considered idle time, which was good, and the idle time that we did have was playing ball if you'd get a bunch together to play.

DePue: What kind of ball were you playing?

Thorp: Softball.

DePue: Did the Brits have you playing some cricket?

Thorp: In prison camps, yes, but (laughs) not on the base.

DePue: Okay. You didn't have to stoop that low on the base, huh?

Thorp: (laughs) It was funny to watch them play cricket. I tell you, I couldn't figure that out for a while.

DePue: I watch and I still can't figure it out. Were you able to get off base occasionally, or just the trips to London?

Thorp: Really no. No, I never got off the base other than trips to London.

DePue: Well, tell me a little bit more about the trips to London, then. Where did you go? What did you see?

Thorp: Well, we went through, of course, Piccadilly Circus—gad. What a… Anyway, the London Tower, the Tussaud Museum—that's where the wax museum is—and trying to find a good place to eat that had some meat. Well, the London Bridge and just kind of a general tour of London. We usually stayed in the area around Piccadilly Circus. And of course, that was… I'd heard of the Piccadilly Commandos, but I tell you, for a little farm boy, I was shocked …

DePue: I'm not going to let you off easy here. (Thorp laughs) What's a Piccadilly Commando? What was Piccadilly Circus?

Thorp: Well, they were prostitutes that worked the streets, and, of course, the lights-out in London and all at night, they would proposition you—well, and even in the daytime, as far as that goes—to go to bed with them. But the English—ones—they always took it standing up so they wouldn't get pregnant that way. But just the fact that they was coming and propositioning, approaching, seeing you was an American officer. And they tapped me on the shoulder—and I was with Hanson on that mission—and she said, "Don't you want to go to bed with me?" I said, "No, I don't." And she said, "Well, he's kind of green, isn't he?" And I said, "Yeah, I am, and I'm going to stay that way." And they'd say, sleep with me for five pounds, or three pounds. Most of them, as near as you could tell about them—of course, this is in the dark—wasn't the kind of woman you'd like to associate with anyway. But what got me was in the hotel lobby—and by that time I got a reputation I guess—there were two nice-looking girls, and one of them was red-headed. She'd come over and kind of lean on in and say, "Would you like to sleep with us tonight?" I said, no, I don't think I would. "Well, what's wrong with you?" I said, "Well, nothing, I'm just not in that mood." (laughs) But the guys, a bunch of them was off to one side laughing because they'd sicced these girls onto me. No, I'm glad I didn't succumb to their affections they was always telling you about all theVD happening, and I sure didn't want any of that.

DePue: Did they have condoms available on the way off post?

Thorp: One of the things the MPs checked was if you had a condom package that you had to carry in your pocket, or you wouldn't have left the base. And I was scared to death when I was shot down that my folks would get my blouse and

they'd open this up and (DePue laughs) a condom set would be in it. But they did take it out.

DePue: Now, you don't smoke, you don't drink, but for a guy who was interested in finding some female companionship when he went to London and places like that, what was good trading material? What else would you want to have with you?

Thorp: Well, I would really like to have somebody, another pilot with you. I mean, talking about like the…?

DePue: Well, I'm wondering if smokes always helped out, or chocolate, or…

Thorp: Oh, I liked chocolate. I like chocolate and everything. But no, as I said, I never acquired a habit of drinking, and I was scared to death of women, only I was engaged to Mary Ellen.

DePue: Now, you mentioned already that you didn't drink, so that whiskey ration that you got, normally that was traded off.

Thorp: I had a bombardier or some of my crew members would always take the ration—and more than that—of whiskey. I never even tasted it. I don't know what it tastes like.

DePue: How about the cigarettes? Who got those? What did you do with those?

Thorp: Well, in prison camp, they were a good barter. They were money. You had cigarettes, and you could buy anything with cigarettes from the Germans. I mean, a woman, soap, hot water or bread or whatever. No, it was money. And I had it. Red Cross parcels always had four packets of cigarettes—good ones, like Lucky Strikes, Chesterfields—good cigarettes. Man, the Germans would almost murder to get one of those.

DePue: Well, we're going to talk a lot more about your prison camp time. Anything else that you recall about the times that you spent in London?

Thorp: I was only there twice, and—

DePue: What was your impression of the English people?

Thorp: The first impression was I thought they was kind of slow and didn't seem to be too concerned about what went on. But I don't know whether I was judging them right, because that was the first place I landed, was in Valley, Wales, and I don't know whether they were Irishmen or whether they were Welshmen or what they were. I could hardly understand them. But in London itself, I thought the people were friendly. In other words, a lot of soldiers and a lot of Americans, and of course, there was always that old expression, you know, over here, oversexed, and overpaid. But I didn't get that impression from any

of the Englishmen that I talked to or women that I have to talk to—I didn't talk to too many. And then to be bombed regularly, as they were, with the V-1s. I was in one place, and a woman came in all excited and said, "Just got hit with V—blew up the taxicab I was riding in, but I wasn't hurt, so I'm kind of getting myself together here to go to work." But she went to work. So I had a good impression, and I kept in touch with some English women, a woman that lived on the base, up until she just passed away last fall.

DePue: You think most of the Englishmen appreciated the Americans being there?

Thorp: I think for the most part, they did. There were some Americans expressed themselves in a way that wasn't exactly the way you'd like to have it, but I think as a whole, they did appreciate us, and we should have appreciated them more. A lot of them thought that the English were kind of doddery, they didn't do their part, but not very many said that, and they didn't have any support from me when I heard that.

DePue: Well, they'd been in the war since 1939.

Thorp: Exactly, exactly.

DePue: You guys show up (laughs) five years later.

Thorp: Yeah, that's right.

DePue: Okay. Were you promoted during this time?

Thorp: No.

DePue: So you were still a second lieutenant?

Thorp: I was still a second lieutenant and people said, what'd you screw up? How come you weren't first lieutenant? I said, all I know is I was shot down.

DePue: Well, that comes in a little bit later here, and we're getting close to that. Did you guys track what was going on with the ground war?

Thorp: Yes. Between the Germans' radio and the BBC, which was secret radios in the camp, they would give us a briefing every day—secretly—in other words, the Germans weren't supposed to know it—on tissue paper so if the Germans showed up, they could put it in their mouth and chew it up. You'd get half of what they said and half of what the Germans said, and you about knew where the lines were.

DePue: Let's go back to picking up where we left off in the missions, and I think the last mission we talked about was your eighth mission. Here's a comment that I got out of one of the entries that you had: "It's always a good feeling to wake up in the morning and see daylight."

Thorp: Yes, it was. (laughs)

DePue: "Then you know there is no early mission."

Thorp: Yeah, right.

DePue: And probably not a mission at all that day, huh?

Thorp: Usually not a mission, though there was a time or two in the middle of the morning, they called you. And that would be on a short run over to France.

DePue: Okay. Ninth mission. July sixteenth, against Stuttgart—and again, another one of those tougher missions, I would think—with Marcus. And this is one of those where I'm going to ask you to read the entry again, if you could. Find that real quick.

Thorp: You must have been a fast reader.

DePue: This one right here.

Thorp: Okay. "A last-minute change put me with Marcus again rather than Smith with the original long-haul target again: Munich. However, weather interfered, and the above got it, high squadron lead, so I also rode. He had to do all of the work again. We lost a supercharger, then three fifty-caliber slugs knocked out four instruments, so we had to feather number four. All this after dropping our bombs. Flak could have been worse. Anyway, we dropped behind with only two and a half engines. Call for fighters, P-51 heard us back over the North Sea. Did they ever look good. Flew right on our wingtips. At that, we beat the formation home, 9:10, six and one-half hours on oxygen." Yeah. In the position we was flying, he had to do all the flying.

DePue: Now, it sounds like—you said fifty-caliber slugs that you took?

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: So from one of your own aircraft?

Thorp: Yeah. Guy leaned on the trigger and shot our own. And it turned out, all it did was knock out the instruments, they didn't knock out the engine, but we didn't know that because all the instruments on that engine went down to zero, so we didn't know anything else but to feather it, so we feathered it. And when everybody else had dropped their bombs, we couldn't keep up with them on three engines, so we fell behind. We could still fly all right, but we couldn't keep up with them.

DePue: When you guys were coming in in formation, then, did you have to kind of loiter in the area while plane after plane out of the formation peeled off and landed?

Thorp: We were ahead of them by the fact that we come right straight through. But usually the formation stayed together, and then they would peel off, one after the other, every ten seconds or something like that, and they'd follow one another into the pattern.

DePue: Generally, then, you could land the formation quicker than you could establish it?

Thorp: Right. It was a set pattern that you did, and if everybody reformed and did it right, everybody got in in good time.

DePue: Your tenth mission was against Pas-de-Calais again. July seventeenth, with Smith. And I don't know that we've mentioned Smith before. You had just mentioned him in the reading there.

Thorp: Smith was a former copilot and got promoted to first pilot. They put me with him, and he said, "You know more about these planes than I do, but I want you on my copilot." And he was a good guy, but (laughs) his piloting skill was not very good. He got bawled out a few times on his landings, and we were always concerned. And one time he tried to land without getting the wheels down. I didn't even know he was going to make the approach and all the sudden, he pulled the throttle, and I didn't even have the gear down because he didn't tell me what he was going to do. But he was all right. I still keep in touch with him. He's ninety- two or three years old, and finally after he went so far, he didn't ever complete his tour; they decided to give him another job. But a nice guy. I liked him. He was a good guy.

DePue: Was that common that a copilot got promoted to pilot?

Thorp: That was kind of the way it was. I said after my last mission when I had so much trouble, I was going to be the first pilot. I wanted to be able to be the boss.

DePue: Maybe a couple more missions, you would have been, huh?

Thorp: Yeah, I think I could have been. Not too far down the line they gave me a chance to check out. But I kind of liked Smith, I felt sorry for him, and he said, "We're depending on you." So I didn't check out. They'd said, if you want a chance, you can check out and be eligible to be first pilot.

DePue: "Checking out" means that you were testing to be a pilot?

Thorp: Testing, that's right.

DePue: That was I think the tenth mission. The eleventh mission, July twenty-first, against Regensburg, Germany, with Smith again. And you'd already alluded to that one. That was the one with the hundredth mission party. What did that mean?

Thorp: Well, the group had been on a hundred missions as far as combat was concerned. So they had a stand-down that day and had a party, and that's was where I told you Doolittle had come in and in the hanger there was a band and a big dance, and everybody got drunk, it seemed like to me. That's when I went back to the barracks and found the women in there with the men, so I decided to go back and talk to my old crew members.

DePue: Was it a big thing to see Doolittle?

Thorp: Yes, it was. He seemed to be as calm as anybody, and I was impressed. I'm still reading a book on Doolittle—I think I showed you that.

DePue: Um-hm.

Thorp: I was impressed with Doolittle.

DePue: Was there anybody at that time who had more name recognition in the Air Corps, the Air Force, than Doolittle?

Thorp: Not as far as I was concerned or as far as the Eighth Air Force was concerned.

DePue: Of course, he was the commander of the raid over Japan.

Thorp: Oh, yeah, in Japan, and he was a good stunt pilot and a good race pilot before that. He had a reputation. Of course, in his book, he said, "I was ever so lucky." And he had a lot of accidents, but he come out of them okay. But he calculated everything he did—tried to.

DePue: So another typical pilot: it's always going to be somebody else who's going down or gets shot.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: Here's one of the things you mentioned (laughs) about that—you've already alluded to some of this stuff—but I think you went over to the club and said it was only a "mass brawl." They were duking it out over there?

Thorp: Well, I mean drinking, arguing. There wasn't really any fighting, you know, just the idea. Everybody was drinking pretty heavy liquor, and they had women there that I wouldn't take to a barn. (DePue laughs) They brought in truckloads of women from all the different towns around, you see, for the party.

DePue: So you go back and read a letter from Mary Ellen for the fifth or sixth time, huh?

Thorp: (laughs) Yeah. My enlisted men thought it was real funny that I got so disgusted I left the party when they didn't even get a chance to be in it. It wasn't for me at that time.

DePue: Twelfth mission, July twenty-fourth, against Saint-Lô. How would they say it, "San Low"?

Thorp: Yeah, Saint-Lô.

DePue: France. And you said beachhead. Okay, but July twenty-fourth, the Allies had moved quite a way in from the D-Day landing beachheads. This one's also with Smith. Do you remember anything about that, or the thirteenth mission also against Saint-Lô.

Thorp: We flew two days in a row on Saint-Lô. The first mission, we went in and kept dropping down. I believe it was on that mission, instead of twenty thousand or twenty-five feet, it was down to twelve, fourteen thousand.

DePue: That was the thirteenth mission.

Thorp: Yeah, in Saint-Lô. Planes everywhere, it seemed like. But we didn't drop. We finally peeled off and went over to France and up over the Atlantic Ocean, and finally come back through the bomb group with our bombs And we didn't drop. We were shot at, but nobody was hit in our group at that time. We were supposed to be breaking the German lines so that the Patton's Army could break through, but they didn't sat Patton. Nothing more was said about it, that bomb groups ahead bombed short. And of course Ernie Pyle wrote quite a description of that.

So the next day, we briefed again—back to Saint-Lô. Didn't get the job done the first time. And that time, I think we dropped down about twelve thousand feet. When you got out over the Channel, I think it was the second mission to Saint-Lô, they opened the bomb bay door over the Channel. We was in this bucket position right under this plane, and the bombs started dropping—one, two, three, like that, instead of all going at once. Right in front of our nose. There was a malfunction somewhere or another, but he dropped all his bombs in the Channel and probably on the Allies. We kept getting lower, and I think it's twelve thousand feet. And finally we dropped and then come back. And that was supposed to have been the effective mission that broke the line so the Army got through.

DePue: Now, you said that sometime before that Saint-Lô mission, that the bombs were dropped on Allied forces—not yours, but others?

Thorp: First Saint-Lô mission, the lead group got confused and dropped their bombs. The ones that followed—the first was dropped, and then they got confused with the smoke and they kept dropping our bombs. They evidently had radio

communication to finally get them to stop, because when my bomb group come along, we didn't drop.

DePue: Well, there's nothing like a commander that has to write that letter home, "Your son has been killed by friendly fire." And I recall, wasn't that the incident where Eisenhower went ballistic?

Thorp: It could have been, yeah, because I think about 150 soldiers was killed, including the general. Yeah, it was really screwed up.

DePue: Okay. That was the twelfth mission. The thirteenth mission, you've talked a little bit about already. The thirteenth mission.

Thorp: Yeah. (laughs) The groups I was flying with was more concerned about it than I was. They worried me all the way through.

DePue: Was there pre-mission rituals that people go through, that you personally went through? Little things?

Thorp: I used to have some kind of a keychain or something I always carried with me and I thought it was kind of special, but I don't recall in combat that I did have… No, just making sure that everything I thought was as right as possibly could be right. I don't recall any special ritual.

DePue: Do you recall anyone else having any superstitions or rituals?

Thorp: Oh, some of them would always wear the same shirt, you know, or some special trinket that they had with them on every mission or went through a little CSA, but I didn't myself, and I didn't remember seeing anybody else that way.

DePue: Here's what you wrote for this particular mission. "Weather made us have to go in at twelve thousand feet, but little flak, so we were okay. Almost got a load dumped on us as the ship we had been flying under prematurely dropped her bombs accidentally." I imagine that's quite a feeling, watching that.

Thorp: Oh, it was. (laughs) You see those five hundred–pound bombs dropped right out in front of your nose there. I mean, maybe as close from here to that garage or whatever—too close.

DePue: "Very rough flying. Seemingly never got back to complete my thirteenth mission." And that's how you finished for that day. Well, it's not too much longer after that, a couple days later—July twenty-eighth, against Meersburg, Germany, with Smith again. And this was a memorable one for you, and you'd already mentioned this a little bit, but I'm going to let you read your entry for that particular mission, on page 124 here. Okay, this is July twenty-eighth. I didn't mark it, but it's this one right here.

Thorp: "Today made my third attempt for my fourteenth mission, and it went through an early start, flying and assembling as briefed, but none of the usual close calls, or more the usual, I should say. The primary target was 1010 covered"—in other words, cloud-covered. "The leader's "mickey" [should we explain "mickey"] went out when number two went to take the lead. They crashed together. Such an awful sight, and only one parachute was seen. A commanding officer, Colonel Smith, and a 729th boy, Captain Slusser"—I liked him—"was on them as well as seventeen other good men. Very pathetic. So we had to bomb the secondary after a long haul from the primary. Never saw so much flak as there was. On the second day, it was meager but accurate. Kedo"—the bombardier—"got hit and bruised. Three holes in the ship." Yeah, that was something to see. In other words, [the planes] just disintegrated when they got together. Here come the tail and parts and bodies down through the formation, because he was up ahead of us when it happened, because I could see it plainly. And when they went together, why, they just broke apart.

DePue: So most of these guys never even had a chance to get out of the ship?

Thorp: No. The colonel did, I found out later. Two weeks later, after I got out of interrogation, he just got out of interrogation. Colonel Smith was supposed to be the oldest active flying colonel in the Air Force—that's what they said at the time. He was just riding. He wasn't piloting; he was just as an extra passenger. So he was just along for the ride. So he got out, but not too many others did, as far as I remember. It was real tragic.

DePue: And again, got back and nothing was done really other than—

Thorp: No, they just—

DePue: —Learn the lessons about how to avoid this in the future.

Thorp: Yeah, exactly. In other words, you should have done this and done that, and one should have pulled ahead, the other should of slowed up. And they was supposed to be leading the group; that's where the problem comes in.

DePue: Okay. Fifteenth mission, August second, against Paris again, with Smith. Anything you remember about that one?

Thorp: I was trying to think whether that was the mission that Smith kind of got lost and didn't stay in the formation. I don't remember just exactly on that.

DePue: Well, I don't know too much because I focused on the sixteenth mission, and I'm sure that's why you don't recall the fifteenth; it was the sixteenth that stuck with you.

Thorp: It seems like we was trying to bomb a bomb section or ammunition dump. But I don't know whether that's when we dropped the bombs on the railroad track or the other Paris mission.

DePue: "Deputy lead"—I'm just reading what you have here—"Lead ship aborted. First looked like it was on fire. Deputy lead plane had two engines feathered. He left, and in the meantime, the formation scattered to the four winds. Finally got formed on Marcus, high squadron leader, and after much flubbing, got our bombs on the secondary and came home.

Thorp: Yeah, that was the mission I think that we got on and no bombs, no nothing, no flak—in other words, you knew it was coming—and you just kept flying on the bomb run, and nothing was happening, and all of a sudden, (claps) flak everywhere, and that's when the first two planes dropped right out, and we was flying off the third one. The two went down, and we were still flying. But that's the only time I think—I don't know whether I mentioned it in the diary, but I began to feel it building up in my stomach: it's going to happen, something's going to happen and when is it going to happen? And then, wow, and then after it did hit, you was so busy trying to keep the airplane straight (laughs) and watching the instruments that you never even thought any more about it.

DePue: Well, you know what's interesting about this? This is not one of them that I decided to highlight, and yet you remember some of these things so well, and it kind of highlights that there is no such thing as a typical mission for you.

Thorp: No, each one of them was different in a different way.

DePue: Well, let's move on to your sixteenth mission. Do you earn an air medal for a certain number of missions?

Thorp: Five missions.

DePue: So you've already now earned three air medals, and that's quite a distinction. Thorp: Well, yes, but then it got so commonplace, so many of us won it, that they didn't have any special ceremony. Used to be they had quite a ceremony just on an air medal, and the only time you had a special ceremony is if you won the Distinguished Flying Cross.

DePue: Sixteenth mission, August fourth, against Bremen—again—with Arey. And I'll read what you've got here: "This day began as a snafu right from the beginning."

Thorp: Yeah, 'situation normal, all…"

DePue: Fouled up.

Thorp: Screwed up.

DePue: Yeah. Others would say it a little differently. "Everything seemed to be against us. First, Smith's crew was due a pass, but because of a new assistant operations officer's mistake, we had to fly. He told me I was to fly with Ed Arey, a new crew. Naturally, that didn't seem too good to me, but what could I say about it? The entire crew seemed very nervous, and when I made that remark to the checker, he very correctly and prophetically stated, "Brother, you have had it." You remember that to this day?

Thorp: You bet I do, every minute of it almost.

DePue: Well, this is kind of a natural one, but why so much apprehension on everybody's part with this mission?

Thorp: New crew. I was supposed to go on leave to London, and by a mistake of the assistant operations officer, they put me on flying duty, and then not to fly with Smith but to fly with this new crew. And always knowing how new crews were, always apprehensive, I just—I don't know, I was bothered. I was upset.

DePue: What can you tell me today about Arey?

Thorp: Um-hm, Arey [AIR-ee]. Well, he seemed to be a good pilot, I found out. I wasn't too sure at the time because I'd never met him, didn't know him, until I went down to briefing and they said, you're to fly with Arey, and I met him. I didn't know the rest of the crew. So I was a little concerned, and he forgot some things, which is normal as far as that part of it goes, because he was nervous too. And then we couldn't find the plane. It was in a different bomb group. It was a real foggy morning. So when we finally found the plane in another bomb group, I looked the thing over, and it had a couple of holes in the fuselage and the tail, and I jumped onto the mechanic about it. "Oh," he says, "that plane will fly all right. No problem." (laughs) Well, I said, I don't like those holes back there, but he was right, it flew okay. And then a gunner couldn't find the escape kits. And I was mad about that.

DePue: He lost the escape kits?

Thorp: He misplaced them. We finally found them, but in the meantime I was worried because I was going to have to pay for them if he couldn't find them. And so then we finally got into the plane and Arey read the wrong figures as far as takeoff was concerned, the time, so he started the engines up, started taxiing in the fog, and I advised him he was supposed to stay until we was told to get ready to go. Well, he went ahead anyway, got lost on the base, finally ended up in an empty corner space to stop—fortunately. Then we had to wait till it got cleared before we could take off. And I was worried about that, but we finally got in position and got cleared to take off and got into formation, and he did a pretty good job of flying. So, well, that's not too bad, and we'll

get along all right. So it started out not-good and got to the point where, well, maybe this is going to work out. But the crew was awful nervous.

DePue: When did it start really turning bad for you?

Thorp: We flew over what was supposed to be a flak-free area along the coast. And what the Germans did, apparently moving a bunch of railroad guns in that area, because you could see where the different flak areas are. They usually try to route us between those areas, not fly over them to get shot at. And they got to shooting at us and getting pretty close, and the crew started screaming, "Evasive action, do evasive action. They're getting too close to us." I said, "Tough crap, we're in formation, we can't do evasive action." And all the sudden, *wham*, there went number four engine.

DePue: Took the piece of flak shrapnel?

Thorp: Yeah. So that knocked that engine out real quick. So we feathered it and dropped out of formation.

DePue: Is that what you're supposed to do, or could you continue on in formation?

Thorp: Well, we couldn't continue on because we still had a full bomb load, and with three engines, it won't maintain altitude with a full bomb load. And when that happened, I guess I automatically took over the controls. I said, drop the bombs, just let them go." And then I full throttle on the other three engines to pull back into formation to continue on with the bomb group. Because we hadn't even gotten to the target yet.

DePue: You're flying the aircraft now.

Thorp: I was flying the aircraft.

DePue: Did he tell you to fly the aircraft?

Thorp: No, I took it.

DePue: Did you even think about it, or just take it?

Thorp: No, I just automatically took it, because we was slipping away from the formation, and it was on my side, and so I automatically took it to get back up in the formation. So he said, "Well, let's go home. Let's go home." I said, "no, let's stay in the group." And there's where the discussion started at twenty-five thousand feet as to what to do. I wanted to stay with the bomb group. He wanted to go back. And this is discrediting him—and I've had other pilots who read my diary and said I wasn't very kind to the other pilot. I wasn't, because I was mad.

But anyway, I tried to pull back and almost got into formation with the other group, because I could fly formation with them on three engines, but they had the full bomb load. And now I finally asked the nav, "Can you find us a route back where we can't get shot up like we got shot up coming in?" Because we weren't supposed to have any flak there. "Oh, yeah, yeah, no problem. I know what I can do." I was still flying, we turned back and he took us right over Ipswich and all they had to shoot at was us. I did evasive action as much as I could with three engines, got another engine knocked out.

Oh, I got ahead of the story. When we first got hit, the other pilot said, let's prepare to bail out. All I heard him say was bail out, So I threw on my flak suit, my helmet, and I got ready to bail out, too, and the navigator says, "What are we bailing out for?" And I said, "Yeah, what are we bailing out for?" And in the meantime, we got the engine feathered. And what we didn't know, was the crew in the back bailed out.

DePue: The entire crew?

Thorp: In the back.

DePue: So it was just pilot, copilot, bombardier, and the navigator?

Thorp: I didn't know that. And that's when we had the argument on whether to stay in the group or not. In the meantime that other group had already bailed out. So we tried to get back and got over this town and got the poop shot out of us. And of course I could do evasive action but we still got another engine shot out. We feathered number three.

DePue: So are number three and four on the same side of the aircraft?

Thorp: Um-hm. Number four was knocked out. He feathered number three, which was a good engine, so we were flying on one engine, dropping like a rock. In the meantime, we lost all the oil out of the number-four engine, so we couldn't feather it. Number one was feathered. So we was flying on two engines. I told everybody to drop the ball turret and throw everything out, and we'll get back to England on two engines." And I said, call the aircraft control—in other words, air-sea rescue. The other pilot's sitting there arguing, he saying let's go to Denmark. I says we don't want to go to Denmark and the navigator agreed with me, and headed for England out over the ocean. And as we got about twenty miles out, after getting clear of the flak, the engine number four broke out in fire, and the whole wing was in one sheet of flame. And that's when we bailed.

DePue: So there's four of you on the aircraft at that time?

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: Okay. I'm going to let you read part of August fourth excerpt. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to find this at the right point now because I didn't have the page number marked. So let me just pause here real quick.

Thorp: Okay.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay, we're back here after a very brief break.

Thorp: "Number four began windmilling and vibrating quite excessively. The plane jumped up and down, and I felt like a pair of dice when the engineer screamed fire! I looked very quickly to see a sheet of blue flame break out over the left wing and out by the aileron (a moveable surface usually near the trailing edge of the wing that controls maneuvers). That did it. This time, no order was given. My bailout practice came in handy. Also the wisdom of having one shroud line always hooked to my chute. I was out of my seat, clicked on the automatic pilot, down the catwalk before the engineer had (laughs) the escape hatch open. Me with my chute attached, raring to go. Too many stories that I read of a B-17 blowing up in little bits in less than fifteen seconds of visual fire. I never even thought of my individual dinghy. I wanted to get and get fast. I followed the engineer and didn't tarry very long before I pulled the ripcord.

DePue: Okay. What are you thinking at that moment, or are you even thinking at that moment?

Thorp: Thinking to get out, because I was thinking of how that thing could blow up.

DePue: And the dinghy—you're going to be landing in the drink. The dinghy is a very small life raft, a one-man life raft?

Thorp: I will give the pilot and the navigator credit. They hooked theirs on. But when the chute opened, the strap broke on the dinghy, and the dinghy went one way and they went another. So in other words, it was defective to start out with. But that was the only way to find out. And I didn't even take one. I wanted to get out of there.

DePue: Was life moving in fast motion or slow motion as you're drifting down towards the sea?

Thorp: Well, as I said, I pulled the ripcord, and then the chute opened, and I couldn't get over how far it is above you. I twisted around to see the plane, and this is what got me—the B-17 was still flying, burning. The left wing was on fire. I expected to see it blow up. And if it blew up, I didn't hear it. As I said, fifteen seconds behind the firewall is when they said it would blow up, but near as I could tell, it didn't at that time. When it went down, I don't know.

The chute opened up. I looked and seen the plane going. I looked around and I seen a chute way below me, which was the engineer. He didn't pull his chute—he was a Jewish boy—he waited until he almost hit the water before he pulled his chute because he didn't want the Germans to see him. I wanted the Germans. If they didn't see me coming down in the chute, I would not be rescued. And I could see off in the distance the island of Helgoland, and it didn't look too far away, actually. It was ten miles away from us. And I could see boats turning in my direction. Okay, well, I'll get picked up in about five minutes. (laughs)

DePue: Was there any expectation that the Allies would pick you up?

Thorp: I was hoping we'd be far enough away that the air-sea rescue could have, but not where we was at that time, no. Anybody was going to be good.

DePue: I'm going to read a fairly lengthy amount here about actually when you got into the water. Now you're in the drink, if you will. You're in the ocean. I assume you're thinking, Thank God it's August and not November or December.

Thorp: The water was the warmest at that time of the year than it would be any other time. And normally in any other time, you got fifteen minutes to exist in that water.

DePue: Okay. So that kind of sets the stage for us here. "With one finger hooked over the Mae West to keep my head up as high as possible, I faced the next forty-five minutes or so. I prayed, and I prayed hard. Those prayers were answered, and I can't be too thankful for our Father in heaven. Overhead, I could see and hear our bombers headed for home, fine food, and a clean bunk." And thinking of the irony of your existence now, I suspect. "Finally a mast appeared to my right. I thought it was going to pass me up, but it eventually turned and headed my way. I shouted and tried to wave, and lo, the mast changed course and headed for me. It was a fishing boat, and never a more welcome sight for a guy in my situation, though I knew the occupants would be Germans. I watched them pick up Danner, the navigator, then both of us were shown the forecastle [a superstructure the bow of a vessel, used as storage of machinery, etc., or as quarters for sailors]. Down there, someone who spoke very clear English gave me a shot of rum, which warmed me up aplenty. Blankets to keep us warm were thrown over our shoulders. We were now prisoners of war—no more missions for us." (pause) You took that rum?

Thorp: I did. It went all the way down to my toes and all the way back. I never drunk anything that hit me like that. Yeah, it revived me. I'll give them credit for that. It got my blood going again. Because I was to the point where I was going to quit trying to save myself. The Mae West was helping, but it wouldn't keep me from drowning if I relaxed.

DePue: What do you think about the German fishermen that saved you?

Thorp: That was interesting. He talked to us and everything. We offered him some money—I had some little silver coin, and Danner had some monies—for picking us up, and all he would take was one little silver coin, English coin, and a stick of chewing gum. And I've told kids that I talked to after that this life is worth one stick of chewing gum, because that's what the German fisherman took to save my life. He hid it just as soon as he got it. He said, "I can't get caught with this; I'm going to get shot." But he said, "You're in good positions as you'll be treated okay in prison camp, so you can relax and enjoy yourself, and the war is over for you. I was an English prisoner in World War I. The English treated me all right; I'll treat you all right." Saved my life. So I tell the kids, too, remember the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you'd have them do unto you. Because all he had to do was leave me in that water another ten minutes and I'd have been dead, because I was ready to give up. I could not keep treading water and keep my head above water, and with all my clothes on, even though I got rid of my shoes, it was dragging me down. Yeah. Yeah, that was a traumatic memory.

And another thing I didn't put in the book either. When they pulled me on the boat, I was prostrate. I just laid there on the deck. One of the men had a big, long knife, sharp as a razor. He come at me, and I thought, Well, he's going to stick it into me. And he slit that Mae West off of me just like hot butter. But I thought he was going to kill me, and I couldn't resist. I would have just taken it, because I was pooped.

DePue: Forty-five minutes in the water not knowing if you're going to survive. What happened after that?

Thorp: Well, of course, we went down to the boat's forecastle. We end up landing at the dock at Helgoland Island, and on the dock was six big Germans, full military equipment. Just the minute I got up on the dock, they grabbed me. Of course, searched me for weapons. I was barefooted, or in my stocking feet.

DePue: You had to get rid of your boots in the water?

Thorp: Yeah, because they were dragging me down. And the others had to do the same thing. So they put us in a room in kind of an office thing, and I looked at the clock, and it said five o'clock. I looked at my watch coming down in the parachute: twenty after one. But I wasn't in the water that long. Anyway, it was interesting to see these Germans, and a lot of them are submarine people—we could tell by the caps—they would come and look at us, you know, and some would try to talk to us, but the guard shooed them away. And then walked us up through tunnels in this island. It had been bombed, but they had the biggest radar screen I'd ever seen which could detect our bombers taking off from England. And that's where we spent my first night in Germany. And had the best supper that I had in Germany, and I eat the least of

it, because I couldn't eat the bread. I wasn't hungry. I was still nervous. I wasn't relaxed, and I couldn't eat it.

DePue: Yeah, you describe that very well in your diary later on. Were you the only one? You mentioned that there was somebody else that was pulled in with you on this boat.

Thorp: Yeah, Danner, the navigator.

DePue: Was it just the two of you?

Thorp: There was four of us—the pilot and I and the navigator and the engineer.

DePue: So they rescued all four of you.

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: What was the rest of their attitude about being captured?

Thorp: Oh, that's what made me so mad. I shouldn't say this, perhaps, but anyway, whatever. They seemed to be quite happy. I wasn't. And the Germans made fun of me—"Well, what's the matter with him? What's the matter with him?" Because I wouldn't talk. I was mad because I thought they was being too friendly. (laughs)

DePue: The Americans were being too friendly? Is that what you were mad about, or were you mad about the general circumstances?

Thorp: What bothered me—now, this is something that I hate to talk about, or even to say it, but it's the truth, and this is what happened as far as I was concerned. We got in the boat with Danner, the navigator. He's gone now. As far as I know, I don't know any of his family. He said, "Well, I'm glad the war's over and oh, by the way, so-and-so's still in the airplane." I says, "What?" I could have killed him. If I'd have had a gun, I'd have shot him, because I did not know that we left one up in the airplane. (pause)

And the way that happened, and the navigator told me, when we cleared the flak, we called to the gunners in the back as to what the situation was. Nobody answered. And we were flying out over the ocean. Well, Danner sent the bombardier back to check on the crew in the back, the radio operator and the gunners and all them back in the back end of the plane. They'd all dropped out over land when we first was hit and the pilot said, "Prepare to bail out." All they heard was "Bail out."

DePue: Who was it that you left on the plane?

Thorp: The bombardier.

DePue: He didn't get out.

Thorp: Uh-uh.

DePue: Is the engineer then also one of the machine gunners?

Thorp: He was a Jewish boy, and yeah. On the island when they were trying to interrogate us a little bit about what that *H* stood for on his dog tag. I said, "That's blood type." "Oh, *ja*, *ja*." And I didn't say he was Hebrew.

Now that is one of the most tragic things of the whole event as far as I was concerned, and this is what made me unhappy. I mean, I did not know, I don't think the other pilot knew that, but anyway, we didn't know that he was still on that airplane when we left, and as far as I could tell, it was still flying the last I seen it. So he's officially considered missing in action.

DePue: You know that he was never discovered again?

Thorp: Never discovered.

DePue: Was he injured? Was that the reason he didn't get out?

Thorp: We don't know. Can you imagine—you've seen these shows, *The Twilight Zone*? What can you really imagine. Okay, say the plane kept flying regardless of it was burning, that it didn't blow up. He's in the back of the airplane. He comes to the front, and there's nobody there. What would you do? I thought about that many, many, many times, and it's bothered me considerable. It bothers me today. I was mad because they should have said, somebody's in the back. I created a feeling there that I never lost. It was sad. Because, here again, if you see something burning and you're ready to bail out, you get out. But he in the back would not be in communication with the rest of the crew; he would not know we were gone until he got back up to the cockpit. That's one of the really sad things I think back at on this mission. And what could I have done, or what should I have done?

DePue: Well, I think if there is a good point, this is probably a good point to stop, because I want to spend our last session and give you plenty of time to talk about your experiences as a prisoner of war, because there's still another few chapters to go on this story, and perhaps some of the most interesting parts of the story as well. And to you it's not a story, it's your life.

Thorp: It is a life, and as I say, what I've expressed and what I just said, is what I regret the most that happened, to even say it. It's an unfortunate part of war, friendly fire whatever you want to call it. But it was so unintentional as far as I was concerned, and I think it was to the rest of the crew, but it happened. They never found him. And a year later, I had to write a report, missing in action, officially dead.

DePue: That had to be a pretty tough report to write.

Thorp: Yeah, yeah. And I was upset with the pilot, I was upset with the navigator. The engineer, poor boy, he had nothing to do with it, but I was upset with those two guys, rightfully or wrongfully. Now, I've got to go to the bathroom.

DePue: Well, we're going to stop. Thank you very much, Ernest.

(end of interview #2 Interview #3 follows)

Interview with Ernest Thorp

VR2-A-L-2009-042.3

Interview # 3: December 31, 2009

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Today is Thursday, December 31, 2009. In other words, it's the last day of the year; we're going into a new decade. I'm here with Ernest Thorp. This is our third session, and today we're going to be talking about Ernest's experiences as a prisoner of war in Germany during 1944 and '45. In the first two sessions, we got up to that point, and you talked about being captured. Good morning.

Thorp: Good morning. It is a good morning.

DePue: And we're here in Wapella, Illinois. Did I get it right, finally?

Thorp: Right, right.

DePue: We're at your farmhouse, actually, in rural Clinton, Illinois. It's a gorgeous cold day outside with a snow cover, so it's a little bit unusual for this time of year. You mentioned before we started that you read someplace that somebody had said that 2009 was one of the worst years ever. Remember any other bad years?

Thorp: Well, I thought '44 wasn't so good, and of course '45 was bad, and then it also was good. So we got to put the two together.

DePue: And that's exactly what we're going to be talking about today. So, last time we had you just captured, and you had talked about your experiences of being captured and actually being rescued by a German fisherman in the North Sea. You were probably lucky you ditched in August instead of November. You found out that this guy was a veteran of the First World War and a prisoner of

war in England. Let's pick it up from there and talk about arriving in Helgoland, which is a small island in the North Sea.

Thorp: After we was in the boat itself, they give us blankets, and since this fisherman could talk English, he said we would have a good experience in prison camp and we'd be treated well. And the navigator was saying, well, the war was over and everything. So we were just talking. We tried to offer him some money. I had a few silver coins with me and some chewing gum. I give him a choice of coins, and he took a little tiny silver English coin, and one stick of chewing gum. And I was so surprised. He hid that chewing gum in a book just as soon as he got it. He said, "If I'm caught with this, I'd be shot." So we talked about other things from then on. But he was real friendly, and I always wished I'd had his name and could… but I didn't. I was just stupefied, I guess, at the time, because I was still recovering from the cold sea.

DePue: What happened once you actually got to land, then?

Thorp: We come up to the dock. There was six fully armed, fully equipped German soldiers on the dock. Just the minute I stepped off the boat they grabbed me and searched me. And did the same thing to the navigator. Takes us out and then marches us up through some tunnels in Helgoland. I was barefooted because I left my shoes in the North Sea. We ended up in a little building, which I suppose was an office. It had big windows. They put us in this room, and I could see how the Germans looked at us like we were animals. Most of them looked like they were submarine boys that were looking, just observing us. They finally marched us through the town—which I could see was bomb-damaged—to a jail and made us strip off all our clothes.

DePue: How long were you in Helgoland?

Thorp: Overnight.

DePue: I think you already talked about the meal that you got while you were there.

Thorp: Yeah. One of the best meals I was served in Germany by the Germans. This is strictly all German. Seven little potatoes, a couple slices of bread, some jelly, and I don't know what else, but anyway, whatever, it was the best meal, and I wasn't the least hungry. I think back to that meal that I was offered and couldn't eat that first night as a prisoner.

Thorp: Oh, I ate some of it. I couldn't stand the bread. It was German bread; it smelt. But I ate some of the potatoes. I'd have to look at my diary to see how much I did eat, but I didn't eat very much of it. I sure wished later I'd have had it.

DePue: Where did you head, then, after Helgoland?

Thorp: Well, they put us on a ferry boat under escort of two German guards. By that time, there was four of us; they had picked up the pilot and the engineer. They

gave us a choice of shoes that next morning, German shoes, of course we had none, so we was able to get a pair of shoes. But under escort of two—one, I thought was an officer, but he was a sergeant—and a private. And they said, "Well, we got luggage here; you can help us carry the luggage," which I refused to do, but the rest did. So they carried his luggage, and they marched us down to a ferry boat and gave us new life preservers that were German made, he and put us in a corner of the boat. The other German could speak English, wanted to talk to us, but the guard wouldn't let him. I was very unhappy and very sullen and I wasn't very cooperative with anything. And I got by with it, which surprised me. I was a little bit upset at the cooperation my fellow officers (laughs) did at that time.

DePue: Now, why did you refuse to even carry your own luggage?

Thorp: Well, of course, I had none, but they did; the Germans did. I didn't feel it was our purpose to carry the luggage. You know, I looked at it from a standpoint of I guess I shouldn't, maybe, but as an officer, I didn't have to. (laughs) And, of course, some people carried that to the extreme, but I was upset.

DePue: How much training had you received during your military tour about how to conduct yourself as a prisoner of war? What was expected of you as a prisoner of war?

Thorp: Originally just to give your name and serial number, period; don't tell them anything else. And also, as far as I can guess maybe doing what they tell you to do, they didn't say refuse to do it or anything like that. That was the main thing. In other words, they were supposed to follow the Geneva rule conduct as far as being a prisoner of war is concerned. They gave us lectures on that, and also they even showed us a movie how we would be treated when we was interrogated, which absolutely wasn't the case at all. I mean, it was clearly exaggerated. In other words, the main thing is, don't cross them, don't deliberately cause any problem, but don't come forth with talking and giving them information and acting like you're having a good time.

DePue: Of course, being a copilot on a B-17 and living on Deopham Green, I suspect you heard lots of stories from other people and had your own expectations about what you could find once you were a prisoner of war.

Thorp: Yes, I did. You know, I was looking in terms of the German population and being emaciated, looked poorly dressed, not being able to travel anywhere because the railroads were being bombed, and that they were ready to give up. The war was going to be over real quick anyway, see, but (laughs) I really was astonished when we landed on Wilhelmshaven, seeing the streetcars run, buildings bombed, leveled off on the streets nearby, but the women were there, dressed up, looking nice, well-fed, and seeing trainloads of new equipment, seeing tanks that rolled by. "Good gravy," I says, "if they can do

that and we're doing all the bombing that we're doing, how are we ever going to defeat them?" I was really shocked.

DePue: You ended up in Dulag Luft, and that was the name of the particular prison camp. I guess "*Luft*" is German for camp?

Thorp: Yeah. Dulag is a prison; *luft*, l-u-f-t, is German "air," airmen. So they had a special interrogation center there at Wetzer, near Frankfurt. That's where they took us.

DePue: And you weren't there very long.

Thorp: Five, six days.

DePue: Was that the place that they took recent captives and they decided what to do after that?

Thorp: Right. There they took the enlisted men and the officers, but they put the officers off to one side as far as special interrogation was concerned, at least it seemed that way. Because after I was shot down I had no contact, only with one sergeant on the crew, and of course the officers were put together.

DePue: Tell us about your interrogation, then.

Thorp: (laughs) Well, looking back it, now maybe isn't so bad, but at the time, I thought the interrogation was one of the worst parts of my life, as far as being a prisoner of war was concerned. I mean, from the standpoint of treatment, food, solitary confinement, the questions they ask, the things they accuse you of, of being a spy, and the spies were shot, and if you didn't answer certain questions if you was a Japanese prisoner they cut your fingers off, and stuff of that nature.

The interrogator, I thought was real clever. Sometimes he could be like a lion, and another time he could be like a lamb, and the idea, of course, was to get you to talk, just talk. And of course when you're in (laughs) solitary confinement like I was, where you can talk to no other American or anybody that speaks English, you looked forward to talk to somebody. And then at night you'd hear people screaming. Now, whether that was on purpose or not or whether they was actually screaming to get out, be away from that camp, do anything to get out. You wondered, What in the world is going on? So when the German interrogator would get you to talking, in other words, he'd get you talking about your family. And of course you aren't supposed to do that. You aren't supposed to say nothing but your name, rank, and serial number.

One thing that kind of got me was we got to talking about religion. (laughs) And I thought, well, why would we get to talking about religion, and here I am a POW? But I mentioned some church, and said, "I'm a

Methodist." And he pointed his finger right in my face and says, "That's military information." I said, "Well, why is that military information? It's on my dog tag, or the *P* that says Protestant." And then he got off onto another subject.

But he wanted to know how I got there, what crew I was with, what kind of plane I flew, what was the bomb load, who was the other crew members. And I cannot tell him because I did not know the other crew members, only the other pilot. And he said, "Well, how do we know you were shot down and picked up out of the North Sea? Maybe you could be a spy, and we shoot spies." And all this ring around the rosie. Then there'd be days he'd come by that he wouldn't take me in at all. And I was looking forward to just getting out of that cell.

DePue: Was this a dark cell?

Thorp: It wasn't dark, but nothing to read, nothing to do, just an eight-by-ten room, you know, enough to lay down in, and they'd give you bread and water—bread and hot water in the morning, a slice of bread at noon with jelly on it, and maybe another slice of bread or some soup with greasy water, and that's all. No shaving. And they was very slow about letting you go to the bathroom. You was in misery and agony and nothing to think about but that. The thing I thought was my salvation as far as a minor concern was a church bell and a clock that would ring the hours and the half-hours. I knew what the time was. I'll have to admit, people who can stay in solitary confinement and exist and keep their mind has to have a real strong ability and personality and mindset, because I personally don't think I could have stood thirty days of solitary confinement. Maybe I could have, but a week was all I wanted, and I thought that was more than enough. (laughs)

DePue: So seven days?

Thorp: I think it was about—yeah.

DePue: Roughly?

Thorp: Roughly, yeah.

DePue: Was there any torture involved?

Thorp: No. There was no torture. Nothing physically was laid on me at all, just threats. "We don't do that, but…"—you know, like cut the finger—"We don't do that, but…" Well, what will he do? (laughs) You know, what can he do? But what got me, though, was going through all that, and all I had to do was confirm that I was on Arey's crew.

DePue: On what crew now?

Thorp: On Arey—he was the first pilot. I was on that crew. "Oh," he says, "that's fine. We'll let you out." And he stood up, come around, shook my hand, and he says, "Thorp, you're a good soldier. Would you like to have a book to read? We'll go back to your cell, we'll open up the windows, and we'll let you some hot water so you can shave, and would you like to have a book to read?" And I said yes. "What will it be? I'd like to have a Bible." He said, "*Ja, ja*," he says, "a good choice." Well when he said I was a good soldier, I could not believe it, because to me, he was anything but a gentleman. But he was a true German officer, he was doing his job, but all I had to do was confirm that I was on Arey's crew.

DePue: Was that the extent of what you told him during all of this?

Thorp: It was. I said, "Well, hey, I don't lie." In fact, he finally got a big book out, a big catalog, like a Sears & Roebuck Catalog, and he flipped it open and says, "You're from the 452nd bomb group; you was on certain crew; you carried this bomb load; your bombing officers was this, this, this." I didn't know any of that. He was telling me more than I knew. So that astonished me, too, to have where I was born and where my family was—had that information on me ahead of time. They had all that.

DePue: I want to have you read the passage—and we're going to do what we've done in the past, I'm going to read some things and you're going to read some things—but I'd like to have you read the passage that you've got right here. And you're talking about Dulag Luft.

Thorp: Yeah, this is Dulag Luft. "I had had my doubts and misgivings about the place, and it turned out to be even worse than that. Right off, we were segregated as to where we were captured. An arrogant, I thought, another first lieutenant, asked me a question. I wasn't responsive, nor did I come to attention as I was supposed to. **Boy**, did he hit the ceiling. He jumped down my throat in no uncertain terms: 'Don't you come to attention when an officer speaks to you?' he snapped. 'I too am an officer,' (laughs) I replied. 'You are a prisoner of war, and all German officers are your superiors. Don't forget that. We'll teach you manners before you leave this place.' 'I'm sorry,' I meekly (laughs) replied. 'You are sorry? He is sorry,' he sneered, and he pointed me out as the I-am-sorry prisoner. The other Germans enjoyed my predicament very much and took no pains to conceal it, but it brought to mind every time they passed me. All I could do was take it and wonder to myself what was ahead of me. If this was the start, heaven help me." Now, I'd almost forgot that. (laughs) Yeah, I got off to a good start. (laughs)

DePue: Well, reading a passage from your diary here leads to an obvious question: how were you able to write this down? I would assume not while you're in solitary.

Thorp: No, this was all written after I got into Stalag Luft III and I got that book.

DePue: And why don't you tell us about that now, and then we'll pick up the story with Dulag Luft.

Thorp: You mean the book, the diary?

DePue: Yeah, yeah.

Thorp: The diary that I have and still have was given to me by an Englishman. It was given by the British YMCA for war prisoners of World War II, and they had an extra one. As soon as I got into camp at Stalag Luft III and got a pencil and got that book, I wrote because I was so mad under the circumstances I had to put it down. And then that's why I went into detail as I did on the day I was shot down and also vividly remembered what happened there at Dulag Luft.

DePue: Was it something of cathartic exercise, then, to get all this written down?

Thorp: Yes, it was to me. I got it off my chest. I think that was the big thing, yeah. And I was glad to get that. Not everybody did that, but I'd been in the habit of writing a diary in college, so it was nothing new for me to do. That's why I went into detail on such recordings as what I just read. (laughs)

DePue: How did you end up in Stalag Luft III, then?

Thorp: That's a good question. See, there was two Stalags for airmen officers. They separated the airmen, of course, from the Army and the Navy. After I was out of Dulag Luft, they put us on a train with a bunch of other POWs, enlisted men as well as officers, and sent us up to Wetzer, which was another kind of a midway camp where they separated the officers from the sergeants and they also made the assignment to different camps. That was a beautiful country on that train trip. That base or prison camp was on top of a hill looking down over the camera works of Leica, which is a good target. On the way, we could see the anti-aircraft guns, and all run by young boys.

DePue: What'd you think of the German countryside as you were driving through?

Thorp: Oh, beautiful, beautiful. This is what I couldn't get over, either. Anything of any permanent structure always had a date on it, and that was impressive to me, because I'm a date-minded person. Once you got out of the city, or the junction of the railroads where they bombed, beautiful country, beautiful country—even from the air.

DePue: Hadn't expected that?

Thorp: No, I didn't.

DePue: Well, you're in the middle of Illinois, some of the richest farmland in the world. What'd you think of the farmland?

Thorp: It was better than I thought, and also I was impressed the way they farmed. I mean, despite the fact that most of them seemed to be elderly women, they were out there working in the fields, had kids running the tractors, which surprised me no end. To me, it was a marvel. Of course I enjoyed the farmland because that was my life, and to see how they did it. But I wanted to walk out in it, but I had no choice. (laughs)

DePue: Did the train go through any cities?

Thorp: Oh, yes. According to the map, as we come down from Helgoland, we went over the Oldenburg and down to Frankfurt. I'd have to look at the map to be sure, but we went through some big cities. In one of them we parked and they had a bombing raid. The sirens started going. And we thought, oh, boy, we're going to get it. The train got its steam up and started moving and got out of town before they started dropping the bombs. But we were scared, (laughs) thinking, you know, what was going to… Also, what we didn't like either, was they put the POW's cars right behind the engines, and of course the engines were always the targets for strafers. We were always scared to death of our forces coming over and strafing the train that we was on. It had happened at different times. It didn't happen to me, but a fear we had was our American strafers, American fighter pilots.

DePue: Did you see anything that would resemble what you would think is slave labor while you were moving through the countryside?

Thorp: Very little, other than this: one of the junctions, we seen a whole trainload of women, and of course some of them were relieving themselves along the railroad. The German guards was around, but I didn't see too many of them at that… And they looked emancipated, but as far as anything out of the way, I didn't see that.

DePue: You then arrived—I don't know if it was Stalag Luft III or if this was a different one, and I'll just read this passage on page 96. "This camp is reputed to be the best in Germany. If so, I can't imagine how the others are, but I will say that things were very well organized and as complete as possible."

Thorp: That was Stalag Luft III, north compound.

DePue: And that was your home for the next few months.

Thorp: That's right.

DePue: Can you describe the camp for us, then?

Thorp: Well, it was laid out, not necessarily in a desolate area, but in an area of pine trees, a wooded area; the soil was sandy, so it wasn't good farm ground. But seeing the barbed wire and the towers and the huts, you could see that they were not going to be, it looked like, a very pleasant place to stay, but that was

where you were going to be, like it or not. They fingerprinted you again and they took your picture again and they went through all kinds of processes, and searched your clothes. I can remember carrying some extra toilet paper with me, and they took that away from me. I said, "Well, I might need that." He said, "That's one thing Germany's got plenty of, is toilet paper." (laughter) I thought that was a smart—I mean, that was a remark from a German… But no, I, here again, wasn't mistreated, but just had to strip down, and they looked through everything, your pockets and your lining of your pants and all that.

At Wetzler, we did get a good POW package from the Red Cross, which was material that we would need in camp, which I was surprised at. And not everybody got one. I don't know how we were fortunate enough to get those packages—which include chewing gum—which is in the book.

DePue: Well, go ahead and tell us what you found in a typical Red Cross packet.

Thorp: Well, I'd have to kind of look at the…

DePue: There is a page in here; we can find that later on. Would it have things like razor blades or…?

Thorp: Yes, razor blades, an extra pair of underwear, extra shirts, chewing gum. You know, I had to stop and really think. But it was such a variety that I was surprised that we were able to get in Germany. It was shipped by the International Red Cross.

DePue: How did it go through? Did it go passage through Switzerland and then into Germany from there?

Thorp: Evidently, either Switzerland or Sweden. I think most of the stuff came in from Switzerland, because we was near Munich. I had no idea, but I know the avenue was open because there was POWs when I come into camp that were getting ready to be shipped out to go to Sweden, take on the neutral boats there that would take them home to the United States in exchange for the German prisoners.

DePue: Was there a certain policy that you got a packet every couple weeks or every month or so or what?

Thorp: Well, this package I'm speaking of, the clothes, was just a parcel.

DePue: The initial…

Thorp: The initial one. Now, we were supposed to get a Red Cross parcel once a week, but we seldom ever did. All the time I was in prison camp, I never got a full parcel a week. Usually a half a parcel, and sometimes only a third. But

whatever it was, it was a lifesaver. I have it described in the book as to what the contents were.

DePue: Is the camp you're in divided up into subcamps?

Thorp: Yeah. They called them compounds. They had North, South, East, West, and then Belaria was all considered part of the Stalag Luft III.

DePue: And this is rather a famous prison camp, isn't it?

Thorp: It turned out to be. (laughs) It was one of the camps that the Germans established, figuring it was escape-proof; in other words, there wasn't anybody who could escape out of this particular camp. So they moved in a bunch of real smart RAF boys, back in '42, I think. And, of course, they had some real smart fellows, and they soon found out the weaknesses of the camp, and this is when they started digging these tunnels.

DePue: Is this the camp, then, that the story *The Great Escape* is based on?

Thorp: Yeah. I was in the very compound, right next to the barracks where they actually started the tunnel.

DePue: Did you know about that at the time?

Thorp: Not at the time. That was one that you were forbidden to talk about, the word "tunnel" or "escape" or "breaking out." I was on surveillance for Germans coming in. We had the German ferrets whose job was to come into camp, wander around, looking to see any suspicious activity, such as digging a tunnel or forging papers or making maps or things like that.

DePue: I want to read a passage here that you've got from your diary that describes your hut, I guess, or your particular roommates, let's put it that way. "About my roommates. They are about my age. Four of them are married. Each had a different job in the air, which offers variety, at least. One is from Alabama. Four of the boys are English, two of them twin brothers. Came down a year apart, yet go together in this camp. Last two are Aussies. In this place, all nationalities, about which makes it interesting for conversation. There are several I knew back in the States." Any particular characters you especially remember?

Thorp: Well, one in particular from the very first, when he come into this room—they assigned me to this room—and the others were all gone for some reason or other. Of course there wasn't any activity they could be involved in. But they weren't in this room. This Leslie Ford was an Englishman, and he was a Spitfire pilot. He was shot down on reconnaissance, and he'd been a prisoner about a year or two years at that time. On the table he had a chocolate bar laid out, and he said, "Well," he said, "you're probably a bit fagged from your trip," you know, and said, "have some chocolate." Well, good. So I get up and

ate the whole thing. Didn't realize that was a whole month's ration of chocolate for him. But he come flashed in?? and he had a big flowing beard, out like this, you know.

DePue: Handlebar mustaches?

Thorp: Yeah. (laughs) He turned out to be my best friend, and I kept in touch with him as long as he was alive. In fact, I still write to his widow. And fifty years later did I repay him the chocolate. (laughter) Well, I didn't realize at the time. There was the chocolate and I was hungry and I ate that whole thing.

DePue: What was his name?

Thorp: Leslie Ford.

DePue: How did you notify your family? How did they find out?

Thorp: They got a telegram, oh, within a week or something like that, that I was missing in action. And as I understand it, it wasn't until at least six weeks or two months before they knew I was a POW. In the meantime it was, you know, "missing in action" can mean anything, dead or—in other words, you're just missing;. They had no record. So they knew pretty quick, I found out later, that I was a POW, because the Red Cross did report that to the Air Force. Then, some people considered me dead. In fact, I showed you one letter where the Red Cross in Clinton understood the fact that I was gone, was killed. I was concerned, naturally, and hoping they would soon know that I was a prisoner of war. You get a postcard and you've seen samples of that one that I had that I wrote.

DePue: Well, let's go ahead and have you read that. This is written August nineteenth.

Thorp: Nineteenth, yeah. "Dear Folks, By now you know I'm safe and well." Well, they didn't. "I have been very lucky and grateful to God, and on the other side is my address. Don't forget to cover all the past home news. (laughs) Please send me double-edged razor blades, shorts, wool socks, toothpaste, and pajamas, and the rest with chocolate." Rest with chocolate—boy, that's a… "Red Cross will help you out on details. Help all you can. Rush please. Lots of love, Ernest." That was the first letter I could write home.

DePue: You mentioned that there was a message that got to your relatives back in Clinton that you had actually died. Did Mary Ellen believe that or was she holding out hope?

Thorp: She must have held out hope because I never heard her indicate that. And of course this one letter from the Red Cross to my folks, my future wife didn't know anything about at that time.

DePue: They didn't tell her?

Thorp: No. But what disturbed my dad was even our minister saying, "Well, Ernest will never come home alive; he's gone." And that really upset my dad because he had hoped that the Red Cross was wrong—the local Red Cross. It was the local Red Cross that was wrong; it wasn't the national.

DePue: It must have been an incredible elation when they found out that you were actually a prisoner of war.

Thorp: Well, I like to think so. They never did tell me they had any big, wild celebration, but… (laughter) But my folks were not demonstrative or outgoing on emotion.

DePue: Typical northern Europeans, a little bit on the stoic side, then.

Thorp: Yeah, they were, though my dad was worried more than he ever let on.

DePue: I'm going to ask a series of questions about your life in Stalag Luft III, then, and you were there for many, many months. Can you describe your treatment by the guards and the guards themselves?

Thorp: As long as you stayed in line—in other words, when they called for an *Appell*, which is twice a day, you'd come out in a—

DePue: An *Appell*?

Thorp: That was the German for being counted. That was a ritual every morning and at night. You come out and got in line and stood in line and stand at attention so they would make sure they had the count on each barracks and each compound and nothing had happened. Now, if you got too slow or you didn't want to be counted—which we did at one time because the latrine ran over—that was another camp—did they ever get rough. That time, they brought the dogs. But normally—okay, I'm getting ahead of my story—you get counted, and then you were free to do what you wanted to do the rest of the day. And of course Stalag Luft III, I was in the North Compound with guys that had been there two to three years. It was extremely well-organized, sportwise, libraries, classes, dramatics, art, theater. I **could not get over** how many things you could do in that particular compound. The other compounds, I found out, didn't have that fortune. But gosh, this is prison camp? Other than being confined by the wire, maybe not too bad. And especially with my friends, they've all of them been in there one or two years, and they were well-organized.

We got counted in the afternoon, and then at night there was a deadline—I don't know what time—eight or nine o'clock—they would come and bolt the doors so you couldn't go out. And if you was caught outside the barracks at night, why, you could be shot. And of course they had police dogs running around at night too. Then you had to close the shutters; even in the

summertime, they had to be shut at night. Oh, other than that, why, things got fairly routine.

DePue: Did the guards impress you as being a certain type of people?

Thorp: Most of them seem to be older people or had been shot up to the point they couldn't actually serve on the front line. The younger ones, they had a lot of their German Purple Heart (laughs) or medal for being wounded, and some of them kind of crippled. Now, the ferrets, they would get real friendly with you. Those were the guys that would go around probing, seeing whether any fresh dirt was there or not that had been dug out of a tunnel. And some of the older POWs got real acquainted with them, and, of course, by bribing them, they could get stuff through them that they wouldn't get otherwise, like radio equipment and certain things of that type that they couldn't get in camp.

DePue: Were you able to keep up with the news?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: How did you do that?

Thorp: That was interesting. The BBC, British Broadcasting system, little secret radios, crystal radios, that they'd built out of stuff that the Germans had smuggled in to them or got to them by other methods, whatever way it was. And at midnight, they would listen to BBC.

DePue: This isn't supposed to be going on, right?

Thorp: That's right. This is all secret, and this is what the Germans always was looking for when they come in and say, "*Raus*, everybody out." And then they start tearing up your bed and looking in your books and looking through for some forgery work or secret work or radios. That was forbidden. In fact, they tear your barracks up looking for it. But as far as I know, if they found any, there was always one or two that escaped it. I lost my train of thought there. What was I saying?

DePue: Well, we were talking about war news.

Thorp: Oh yeah, war news. We got the British side, and the Germans had an antenna over the kitchen, and they would broadcast the news in German. We always had about three or four fellows that could speak and write German there, and they'd write down the German news. So we heard the German version, then we heard the British version, then we split it about half and half and we had about the correct news. It was so funny. We always lost seventy or eighty airplanes, bombing was terrific, terrific loss of life, and civilians were all killed, hospitals were bombed, and then we'd hear the British say we advanced and we bombed such-and-such a target completely, it's just completely destroyed.

It was a joke sometimes, they would even joke at BBC, "Well, we got the British news, but we don't believe it." And if the Germans actually when would admit they lost a town, or like when they're advancing through France, Nancy was lost, or there's severe strong fighting in certain areas, you knew that the Germans had retreated and were fighting in another area than they had been the day before.[12] They had a war map that was drawn up in a special room that was supposed to be kind of a library, and they would have where the fronts was at. And the Germans would come in and look at it. They liked to look at that, too. But it was always where the Germans said they were at, not where the British or the Americans said they were at.

DePue: But the Germans were okay with you guys maintaining that map as long as it was based on German news?

Thorp: Exactly, So we weren't lacking news or information as far as that part of it goes. It was always slanted, both ways.

DePue: But I'm sure your life depends on those lines moving—

Thorp: Oh, yes.

DePue: I guess it was everything.

Thorp: When I was shot down, you see, we was coming up through France like and Churchill said the war will be over by the time "the autumn leaves fall." They were prepared—the war was practically over. They said, you guys, you're lucky, because you're not going to be in here very long.

DePue: Were you believing it at the time, then, that it was going to be over that quickly?

Thorp: Well, it looked like it, with Patton coming up through France the way he did and everything. You know, maybe this war **will** be over by fall.

DePue: But that was why it was so disturbing to you to see all the activities once you'd get to Germany?

Thorp: Exactly, to see all that stuff being built, and all brand-new. And you see these young Germans march by the camp singing. Boy, did they have voices. And step and march and singing their victory songs.

DePue: They didn't look like a defeated nation, huh?

Thorp: It didn't look like a defeated nation to me.

[12] The Battle of Nancy, France, a 10-day battle in September 1944, resulted in the U.S. Third Army defeating German forces defending approaches to the city and crossings over the Moselle River.

DePue: You talked a little bit about a typical day; I want you to read your letter on August twenty-eighth. So you'd only been there for a couple weeks when you wrote this particular letter. We should note that a portion of this is blacked out, and then you can explain why after you read the letter.

Thorp: (laughs) This must have been to Mary Ellen. "Dearest Darling, Life has gotten to be a routine now, having become very well acquainted with the confines of the camp and what is expected of a Kriegie. This is a German term for prisoner of war. We sleep till 9:00 AM, eat two slices of bread and spread and coffee. Roll call at 9:30. Lunch at 12:00, bread and spread." That's some kinds of jelly. "Tea at 4:00 PM." The English had to have their tea. Oh, that was something else. (laughs) "Roll call at 5:00, supper at 7:00. The last is a big meal, and the cooks do quite well." I must have expounded on cooking at home and all the food we had, because it's certainly blacked out for quite a few sentences here. Then I go down where it's blacked out, and then I say, "We have plenty of time to sunbathe, read, shoot the bull, play, and so forth. Surprisingly, there is always something to do. The English have things very well organized, and I feel quite fortunate to be with them. It is quite educational to talk with them and to observe their reactions as compared to us Americans. With all my love, Ernest." Yeah, it was different than I expected.

DePue: It strikes me, Ernest, if Mary Ellen's reading this—

Thorp: Hey, they're having…

DePue: This is an idyllic life you're having in the prison camp.

Thorp: Exactly. We're just having joy and fun and, you know, sunbathing; it's no problem at all.

DePue: But having read a lot of your letters and especially your diary, what especially impressed me is how much your life was focused on food.

Thorp: Exactly. You see, we had to be very careful because we knew these letters were going to be censored, so what I wrote there, and I'm not sure, but I'm sure was about food.

DePue: Okay. I want to read or have you read something from November eleventh as well—and I've highlighted this portion so you know what I'm talking about here—because this is also about what a typical day would be.

Thorp: Okay, this is November eleventh in '44, and I wrote again to Mary Ellen. "One of those typical rainy, chilly autumn days with everyone confined to their rooms and occupied with various little tasks. Tom"—this is the Australian—"is working on the evening meal. The brothers are studying French and management, respectively. Les Ford is busy with the math. Gary Coleman, our new boy, English, who took Keith's place, is copying navigation notes. Hank is reading up on television and Ken is asleep. Me, I

have just completed a series of lectures and will continue on another next week. This time, forestry and animal breeding will be the main topic. Every Thursday lectures are given on various post-war problems, which are quite good." And they were. We had Canadians talk about the future of Canadian mining and forestry. We had an American major and a lieutenant colonel in the barracks, and they spoke on machinery and their lives as far as civilian life was concerned and what they expected to do after the war. So it wasn't dull—to me, anyway.

DePue: Were you ever a teacher, or were you always just a student in these things?

Thorp: Well, I was just a student. I went to all the agriculture classes I could go to. I did start German, but that's when we got marched out, so I never got to complete it. But I was questioned in respect to equipment costs and things of that type. Of course, when they found out I had a college degree, well, they thought I could speak a little, so I was kind of not a lecturer, but I was an aide in respect to teaching some agriculture courses, which I didn't mind.

DePue: Well, we'd mentioned it before and mentioned that you seem to be preoccupied with food a lot of times, (Thorp laughs) so tell us what your diet was like.

Thorp: Well, here again, you mentioned what I read about the bread, and I'll have to admit, it took me ten days, two weeks, before I could even eat the German bread. It smelled and tasted so horrible.

DePue: What did it smell and taste like? Can you describe it?

Thorp: Well there was supposed to be wood shavings or sawdust in it and potatoes, and kind of a mixture, so I never knew exactly what it was. They brought it to us in an old wagon, just like cords of wood, and they'd dispense it, just hand it out to you. One loaf a week is what you were supposed to get. But anyway, I don't know if I can describe the taste of it. To me, it was horrible. But I tell you, I got to where I liked it, and then I got to the point where I'd almost fight for it. (laughs)

And the Germans had a little jelly once in a while they could put out, which wasn't too bad, and once in a while, a little cheese, which wasn't too bad. But very little. Our main diet had to consist of what we could put together with potatoes, and I think I described that in detail in the diary. It was enough to keep you alive, but if you was doing any physical work or athletic activities to the extreme, you found out you were a little short of energy. This is one of the problems we had on the march.

DePue: We'll get to that later here, because that's a very harrowing discussion. Did they allow you to do gardening?

Thorp: Yes, that was (laughs) interesting. They had little garden patches right outside the barracks. The Red Cross or the YMCA would send in seed. And, of course, the time I come in there, they was having tomatoes, and they were betting on when the first tomato would be ripe. They tried turnips and they tried some other stuff, but tomatoes seemed to be the only thing that would really make any crop. They tried planting potato peelings. That didn't work too good. The first time I was there, I saw two lanky lieutenant colonels of the RAF run out with a little scoop shovel because the horses just went through and pooped, and they was fighting over who was going to get the poop because they wanted to put that on their garden. And I laughed; I thought it was the funniest thing in the world—I mean, high officers (laughs) doing that trick. But that was the only fertilizer they could get for this little garden, maybe four or five foot wide or something like that. It wasn't a very big garden, but they had fun trying.

DePue: How did they cook the meal? Were the Germans cooking for you?

Thorp: We had one stove in the barracks, and we was allocated so much, maybe a brick or two bricks of coal per room. And then you was on rotation as far as when your turn was to cook. Each room had to have a cook, and then this cook had to have this coal that he could put on the fire to cook the food. The first guy had the biggest disadvantage, because by the time he got a good fire going, his time was up. And the guy who was the last had the most advantage, because in the meantime he had a pretty good hot fire, and he could do a good job of cooking. So you always wanted to be last if you could be, but they drew cards, and you took your turn.

I had just been there two weeks and I was in there watching one guy making some soup and he said, "Boy you getting bored of prison life already, are you, that you got to watch a man just stir soup?" Well, I don't know why I was watching him, but I happened to be looking to see what he was doing. But he was an Australian. And, of course, in their brogue, you never always understood just exactly what they were saying, (DePue laughs) and sometimes we were reminded of that.

DePue: Well, I'm surprised. I guess I didn't know that the prisoners themselves were doing the cooking, in part because if you've got potatoes, if you've got turnips, if you've got things like that, you need to have knives and other utensils to work with.

Thorp: Yes, we did have, and I brought home mine.

DePue: But sharp enough knives to be peeling the potatoes and things like that. I wouldn't think they'd allow you to have it.

Thorp: Well, they did. I was able to get a good German knife for a packet of cigarettes, but that was on the march. But we was able to get equipment, at

least to do that. I know one Australian said he had never knew what raw potato tasted like, but I took a little piece off and ate it, and man, it sure tasted different than what I thought it would, because we always cooked it. But we always assigned a cook for each room, and we would take turns on cooking. Fortunately, I never drew that duty, because I'm not a cook. With the Red Cross supplement, and some Norwegians shipped down a bunch of fish all salted up, and they shared that with us. And that wasn't bad. Of course, it didn't last too long. They said they had more than they could use. Well, nobody had more food. But the Germans were strict. If you stored up any extra food for any length of time, they would confiscate it, because they was afraid of, what you save you was getting ready for an escape, and you had that extra food to take with you.

DePue: The Red Cross parcels that you were getting—and you say you didn't get nearly as many as you were supposed to be getting—but again, I'm thinking the things you're getting in your Red Cross parcels were things that were not available in the German economy.

Thorp: Right.

DePue: As far as you understood, were the Germans pulling some of those themselves for their own use?

Thorp: As near as I could tell, they didn't. Now, at some camps, they said they did. But every box that came in, and they were usually on a boxcar at Stalag Luft III, especially up at Sagan where we was at the first six months. And they would take POWs, under guard, to unload those boxcars. And then as they got back to camp, they opened every box, looked at every can, and they punched a hole in the peanut butter or whatever was canned food—spam—was in these Red Cross packages they would always poke a hole in them, because there was evidently some evidence of, even in the Red Cross parcels, escape equipment that could be used, like knives, maps, saw blades, stuff of that type. So they was very careful on that. And of course, chocolate bars, and that was the prize. Four packages of cigarettes, which I didn't use, but it was good barter. So with that stuff and what the Germans had and what the Red Cross parcels had, and putting all the men's rations in one room together, you could make what you could consider a reasonable meal at suppertime. But you were always hungry; there was never enough; always hungry, never enough.

DePue: Were the guards eating much better than you were?

Thorp: No. Not as near as we could tell. And of course, the complaints came up at different times on this, and they said, you're getting as much food as our nonproductive German people are getting—which was supposed to be eight hundred calories a day or something like that. You're getting as much as they are. They're not producing anything for the war effort, and they're German, but they're not getting rations, and you aren't either, because you're not

productive to our war effort. So that was extra. What sustained us, actually, was what we got through the Red Cross.

DePue: Otherwise you were getting eight hundred calories a day?

Thorp: That was what they told me, anyway. (laughs) And I could feel it. (laughs)

DePue: Feel it in the pit of your stomach?

Thorp: Yeah. That's why I liked to chew gum—that's why I chewed gum—because I didn't feel so hungry. And the English thought that was the most horrible habit, chewing gum. I told you the story about when I'd get through at the end of the night, I'd stick it up on the wall, and then I'd get it the next morning and just keep chewing it. It had to last, because that was all I had.

DePue: How about the British tea? Where were they getting their tea?

Thorp: Through the English Red Cross parcels. They would save that and use the teabags or whatever they had it in for almost a week, and the week was pretty thin. But (laughs) it was still hot. The thing that we did get from the kitchen was, of course—on occasion we would get soup—but they would furnish us hot water, a big pitcher. This was the enlisted men's job. We had so many enlisted men per camp, and originally they were batmen for the English; they were supposed to take care of all their needs. (laughs) I could not get over that. One day, an American sergeant said to one, "Hi. How'd you get this job?" He said, "I volunteered." I said, "Why?" He said, "I figured when the war was over that the officers were going to get out first, and when the officers went out, I was going to be right with them." So he wasn't so dumb. But that was the main job, was to sweep the floors of the hall, carry hot water from the kitchen to each individual room, and that was what we'd make our tea or our instant coffee out of. It was kind of funny.

DePue: Did you personally have any thoughts about escape, or were there escape attempts that you knew were going on?

Thorp: Well, the Americans had their own kind of get-togethers on things. There was about four hundred of us in that camp. They didn't really encourage us, and neither did the British. But they did have an escape committee that if you was even thinking about trying to escape, you went and talked to them as to how you was going to escape, where you were going to go, how you were going to handle it, because every escape effort that was made, then the Germans would clamp down harder and take away whatever little privileges you might have had. They didn't encourage it. The British were a little upset that the Americans aren't escape-conscious, because we thought the war was going to be over pretty quickly, so why worry? (laughs)

DePue: Well, it might be worth mentioning, since we're talking about escape, where the camp was. You've got your map down here in the floor. I would think it wouldn't necessarily be an easy thing to get to Allied lines.

Thorp: No. This was one of the reasons they picked this place for a prison camp, because you were so far from the lines to the south, and also to the east, at that time, in Russia, and to the north is the sea. So it was one of the reasons that they picked this spot rather than anyplace closer to Holland or France.

DePue: What was the closest town?

Thorp: The closest big town was Dresden.

DePue: Didn't you mention Sagan or something like that?

Thorp: Sagan. Yeah, that's the name of the town.

DePue: How do you spell that?

Thorp: S-a-g-a-n. And the Poles call it Żagań, and they spell it with a *Z*.

DePue: So this town you're talking about, Sagan, is today in Poland?

Thorp: Yeah, it's in Poland. It's a small town, probably not much bigger than Clinton or Lincoln.

DePue: In other words, you're southeast quite a ways from Berlin, you're northeast quite a ways from Dresden, you're pretty close to the eastern border of Germany… (laughs) It would be tough to get anywhere that was worth getting to.

Thorp: Yeah. On that great escape, only three actually made it, and they were all foreign people; they knew the language, knew the country. One of them was from Holland; I think two was Norwegian. But yeah, they were pretty clever. Some guys even got to the Spanish border, and they got turned in by underground.

DePue: Okay. So did you ever participate or think seriously about escaping yourself?

Thorp: No, I didn't, because I figured, what would I do if I went out? I could not speak German or a foreign language. I figured that the best way to get back alive was to stay together and do what they said to do and cooperate the best that you possibly could at that time.

DePue: Okay. I want to get to about the wintertime here and ask you to read… Well, what I want to ask you about before I ask you to read this passage, is news from home. You remember when you received that first letter from home?

Thorp: You bet I did. Just at the time before we went on the march. I got thirteen letters, and that was January the twenty-sixth, I think, or something of that type.

DePue: Well, I've got a passage here from December thirty-first that I'm going to ask you to read.

Thorp: Or maybe it was that time. What I should have done is read that diary again. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you probably got the thirteen letters when you mentioned, but you got your first one right here, in this December, and right down at the bottom, it says Thorp, Lieutenant Ernest POW 7288.

Thorp: Oh, yeah. "On the 21st, our room drew six Christmas food parcels, a real parcel, and boy, did we bash the candy, sweets, and nuts. The twenty-third was a big day, too. Thorp got a letter tossed on the table by the mail officer—my first one." Oh, I'd forgotten that. Here again, see, "My first one. It was from Mary Ellen, dated November fifth. All kinds of mixed reactions run through me as I sat down to read it. It was typed on a regular PW form. I read it fifty times and each time (laughs) got a different meaning from it. It contained all the news I was most anxious to hear." Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it just goes to show you how your memory can slip you.

DePue: Well, you're only sixty-some years beyond the event, so (Thorp laughs) Ernest, you're allowed to forget a thing or two.

Thorp: Well, I hope so, because it's a little embarrassing.

DePue: I wanted to also ask you to read a passage from a letter you wrote to Mary Ellen dated November twenty-eighth.

Thorp: Okay. "Dearest darling, I remembered your birthday and thought of you, dear, but I'm afraid that that was as far as I could go. I hope I can celebrate mine elsewhere. Thanksgiving. Well, even if I'm a POW, I have much to be thankful for, and how well I know it. Another month to Christmas. Sure makes one wish he was home, but as I said before, I could be much worse off. I'm eagerly awaiting my first mail to find out how you are and how teaching in town is." Oh yeah, then another sentence down, "It is marvelous how good every bit of food tastes. No waste here." And boy, there wasn't. (laughs)

DePue: Well, you mention in here Christmas, and so I thought I'd read a passage from Christmas, and we'll see if that jogs any memory for you as well. "Come Christmas Day, we had the room decorated up from odds and ends. For breakfast, we were treated to toasted sandwiches, then at 1:15, we began our feast and had an eight-course bash. It was a masterpiece of cooking, and I was filled till I was miserable. Finally at 3:05, with pant flaps open, we finished. Soon there was a parade to the aborts, and I was one." I think I know what

you meant. (laughs) Then at seven o'clock, we had cake, pastries and mince pies, and I was completely filled up, so up and into my hoard it went. Finished the day in room three eating some more and singing songs and playing poker. I forget to mention I had attended *The Messiah* earlier, carol-singing on Christmas Eve and services in the morning. That was Christmas 1944 in a PW camp in Germany." So sounds like you ate okay on that day.

Thorp: You bet. That was one of the days that I was full to the gills, but I was absolutely miserable, and so was everybody else.

DePue: Did the camp have to organize hoarding for a long period of time to have enough food on Christmas Day?

Thorp: Yes. That stuff was saved back, and the Germans was told that's what it was for, so they didn't get too upset about it apparently. Yeah, they had to make earlier sacrifices to have that kind of a meal.

DePue: December period of 1944 is significant in another respect, because the Battle of the Bulge was raging full force by that time.

Thorp: Yes. The German newspapers, that was coming into the camp, and guys that could read German—the big headline was, "German Offensive in the West," and it went on how they were going to split the army by the front.

DePue: Were you hearing the same news on the English reports?

Thorp: They were very negative. They were talking about hard fighting going on and didn't really admit how much advances they were making. Because Montgomery was supposed to be in charge, you see. You can give him credit for stopping the whole thing, which of course the Americans said they didn't, and they didn't take the abuse and the fighting that the Americans had to fight. So see, we didn't hear the American version too well through the British.

DePue: Well, you're stuck in prison camp, and you're hearing different reports, but what's going on in your mind hearing that the Germans have this major offensive going?

Thorp: Everybody says, Good Lord. And the English said the same thing: We'll be here another year. That was their first reaction. We'll be here another year.

DePue: Well, that would suggest, though, that you all were still thinking that the war was going to end up in your favor.

Thorp: Yes. It was always interesting discussions, and Canadians were involved, too, and usually on the American side, as to who was really doing the most fighting and who was making the most sacrifices, the British or the Americans. And that always got to be kind of a thorny subject. And one of my roommates was kind of a history major and a teacher, and he was very verbal,

and then there was another Englishman in there that was very anti-American. I got along with him, but oh boy. (laughs)

DePue: Did you ever have any doubts that the Allies were going to be successful?

Thorp: No, I never did.

DePue: Why not?

Thorp: Well, I had faith in what we were trying to do and what we stood for, and I thought right will come out right. I was hoping it would end quicker than it did, actually. I had no reason to think that we wouldn't win eventually.

DePue: I want to have you read on what's going on January twenty-seventh, and read that passage yourself, because you had just alluded to it earlier. That's right down at the bottom there.

Thorp: "The twenty-seventh was a day the hammer fell, and it was rumor no more. We were on the move, and the war wasn't over by no means. It was a normal Kriegy evening when at 9:00 PM, a shout in the hall of the block"—that's in the barracks—"gave us word to evacuate camp in fifteen minutes. Boy, speak of living in panic. What a flap!" That's the English term for confusion. "Everybody was in everybody else's way getting ready. I had just made my pack the night before, and I had it ready, the last one in the room to do so, as it turned out, though we had until 2:30 AM before we left. A lot of the fellows took advantage of the extra time to build sleds. At that, we could only take what we could carry on our backs. Leaving the Vorlager, we passed by the parcel store and drew as many as we wanted or what we could pack. It was cold, windy, and snowy. Even early as it was, there were German frauleins picking up what the guys had discarded already. We marched for twenty-five kilos, then stopped in Halbow for lunch and a two-hour rest." Yeah, what a flap that was. Oh, boy. (laughs) Gad. Yeah.

DePue: So why was the camp all moving?

Thorp: Because Russians within twenty miles of the camp.

DePue: So you were marching west?

Thorp: We were marching west.

DePue: And if you'd been listening to the German news, would you have known this was coming?

Thorp: Not exactly—only there was hard fighting to the east, but some interpretations had Russians. You could hear the Russian guns and all, and I never did. But what we was hoping would happen was the Russians would liberate us; the Germans would let the Russians… But Hitler had given an order out that no

American POWs or any POW could be liberated by the Russians; move them out.

DePue: Did you have any reservations about the notion that maybe the Russians would liberate the camp?

Thorp: Well, this is what got me a little bit. The English said, hey, we don't want the Russians to liberate us. All of those son-of-a-beaches will give you a gun and go out and have you shoot Germans, and I don't want to be a part of that. So in other words, they didn't—and of course, they were anti-Russian even in prison camp, before this. They said they hope the next war we have, we fight with the Germans against the Russians. **What?** How hypocritical can you be? How can you say such a thing? Well, that's the way it'll be. And, as it turned out history-wise, they were almost right.

DePue: Now, these are the British who are talking about it?

Thorp: These are British, Englishmen, you bet.

DePue: Well, tell us about being on the road.

Thorp: (laughs) Oh, yeah, well. Of course, I had a pair of shoes that didn't fit very good because I lost my good ones and I wore out my German shoes that they'd given me at Helgoland, so the Red Cross never did give me a pair of shoes; they did, but they didn't fit. But I wore them anyway in the snow and all, so I developed blisters. But the march on the roads weren't too bad. I tried to stay at the head of the column as best I could, but as I got a little weaker, I gradually kept kind of falling back. But keeping together. One of the Englishmen had fatigue, and he passed out. I helped him along, and he said I saved his life. I don't think I did, but at least I helped him keep marching. And it's cold weather. As I said, I don't know how cold it really was, but twenty below zero and snowing, and that made it worse. They kept us on the country roads. We passed over some autobahns, but we didn't march on them.

We went through small towns, past farmhouses, and then as we'd go through these small towns, there'd be German frauleins with German pots of hot water or coffee—or whatever they had which they called coffee—that they'd give to the German guards,. If the German guards weren't looking, they'd give us some. That's kind of interesting. And they had their little kids out there too, all dressed in their—to me, they looked like dolls. They were that cute. On the march, here we were struggling through. They were going to have to move eventually or be taken by the Russians. But that was the best side of the march, was seeing those kids, and what the German women were trying to do, even to help us as prisoners and as enemies, was fascinating to me. As time went on, my shoes got to hurting and the blisters got worse. One guy had an extra pair of shoes, and he offered to trade shoes, let me try them. That helped, but the meantime, it got worse.

The first night, they got us into a barn. That was something else, and I remember burrowing down in the hay, and another guy burrowed down beside me, and all he could do was just shiver. And he practically laid on top of me, but I didn't mind it because he kept me warm. (laughs) And the rations that we had was what we'd carried with us.

Then they moved us out, and it was interesting how the German guards got tired, too, and some of the guys that had the sleds, they'd take the guns off and lay them down on the sled so they wouldn't have to carry them. And then some of them, the POWs would end up carrying their guns for them. They were older men, and they were tired, too. They didn't like all this marching. If you wanted to escape, you could have, but where was you going to go, what was you going to do? So then we finally end up—let's see, around the third—I have to look at the diary to remember how many days we was on that march, but finally they put us in a French prison camp. It was a bunch of Frenchmen, and they put us in there, which wasn't too bad. They even had some wine or something liquid or alcohol or drink.

DePue: Was this Muskau, Germany?

Thorp: Yeah. So we stayed there, and then they said they had a French doctor, and if guys got some problems, you could go see the French doctor. Okay, well, these blisters were beginning to hurt. I thought I'll go see him. So I took my shoes off, and I had blisters about the size of an egg on my feet. And, oh, the French doctor shook his head and said, "Sad case, sad case, sad case." So he broke those blisters, and then he put iodine on it, and I like to passed out. I could walk before, but when he got done with me, I couldn't walk. Some others in the lineup had the same problem I had, and after they seen what they did to me, they said, no way. We're going to march with blisters to not to have him touch them. It ended up that I was a casualty then, according to the Germans, so when they moved everybody else, they left me behind. But they put me in a wagon and took me to a barn with other guys who couldn't walk, and there was about twenty-five of us or something like that in a nice barn. It had running water, had hay, wasn't too bad a place to stay. And well, okay, the Russians will liberate me. In the meantime, everybody else moved out.

But Germans come along with a trailer pulled by a tractor, and it was covered with people. Get on. How were you going to get on? Well, somehow or another, I can't figure out how, but we got on that trailer just jam-packed, laying on top of one another, and this tractor took off and overtook everybody else who was on the march until we ended up in Spremberg, and that's where the railhead.

DePue: This probably sounds like a real silly question: What was your morale like? What did you think was going to be happening to you?

Thorp: (sighs) You know what? At the time we was thinking in terms I guess of survival. Can we still keep alive? The Russians are coming behind us; the Germans aren't going to let us go. And what if the Russians do catch up and they have a good old fight? Well, what are we going to do? But as far as I was feeling, it was a day-by-day existence that I had at that time, and I think about everybody else did too.

DePue: But you were a pilot; you figured, somebody else is going to get shot down; it's not going to be me.

Thorp: Exactly. (laughs)

DePue: What were you thinking now, that you're going to survive or that you might not make this?

Thorp: Might not make it, because the way things were. Germany was falling apart, I mean, that part of the country, and the Russians were getting close, and they were not showing any mercy to anybody. It was amazing, even the American prisoners. And we was in a situation where we had very little control. The idea was to try to keep moving and do what they were trying to do for you as far as getting you moved out of the Russians' sight or control.

DePue: You finally ended up at, you mentioned, Spremberg. Were you put into some kind of a hospital there?

Thorp: At Spremberg, they put us on an Army base, and there we got our first good hot food, barley soup. And that wasn't too bad. In fact, by being on the tractor and gotten there first, we got a better part of the place to stay. But then the next night they moved us out down to the railhead and put us into boxcars. And I think it was forty to sixty or something like that they put in boxcars, and a German guard. And what we could take on that boxcar is just what we could carry. And so we was in that boxcar for about three days and three nights, something like that. They let us out once.

DePue: How many in the boxcar, do you recall?

Thorp: I think I said around sixty; I'm not sure again.

DePue: That sounds about right from reading your diary. Were you standing most the time? Were you allowed to sit down in the boxcar?

Thorp: Here again, I was the lucky one. They would get in, and I was able to get in, and I got into a corner. I could get up and stand once in a while, but I also could kind of get down on my knees. We were just almost like fish in a sardine can. What I felt sorry for, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it, was the guys by the door. If guys got sick or had to poop, they had a box or a can at the door; it's what you got to. But they couldn't move. They was right there by it, and I was back in the corner. I survived a little better than they did.

DePue: Well, you mentioned before, you talked about the severe blisters you had, and in the diary, you also mentioned that by this time, you had dysentery.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: And I suspect you weren't alone in having dysentery.

Thorp: Oh, no, no, no. And in this barn, there was something that I drank or ate, or had to—I passed out, and I went outside to throw up, and the German guard was out there. He didn't say anything to me. And I remember looking up to the sky and seeing the stars. I just passed out completely—well, I'm done for. But whatever happened, anyway, a miracle, I got up and went back into the barn and was able to survive the rest of the march.

DePue: So with dysentery, you're close to starvation and you're also close to dehydration.

Thorp: Yes. I look back at that, and I'm amazed—and here again, you had to be in good condition to get in the Air Corps, (laughs) you're supposed to be in good condition while you're flying. Then to be in prison camp six months on a restricted diet and then to go through that march, really, I considered it a miracle that anybody survived. But we did, most of us.

DePue: One of the things that especially struck me in this portion of your survival—and we'll call it survival—in Germany: you ran across a group of young German soldiers and you guys were arguing politics. You remember that?

Thorp: Yes. Oh, yes. That was at Spremberg. These young SS boys—and Hitler, they're still going to win. There was miracle machines that Hitler has invented but hasn't used yet, and it's going to turn this whole thing clear around. And some got just a little bit hot. In fact, I could see that they were getting a little bit hot; I moved away from that group because I figured there might be a fight. Of course, they had the weapons, we didn't. But one of the German young men did give me a knife that I gave him a package of cigarettes for, that I still got. So I was glad I had it, because we needed it at Moosburg to split wood for our little wood-burners.

DePue: But it surprised you that they were still that adamant about their victory?

Thorp: Yes. I mean, it looks like you'd see how things were going, but no sir, they were still going to win the war. They were retreating on the Russians and fighting a hard battle in the Battle of the Bulge. Of course, by January things had reversed itself.

DePue: Well, you already mentioned Moosburg; is that where you ended up after this?

Thorp: After the train trip.

DePue: And Moosburg, you're quite a way farther to the west but also farther to the south. I'm looking at the map here; it's maybe fifty miles or so from Czechoslovakia and Austria.

Thorp: Not too far. Munich was the nearest big city. Yeah. We landed there, got out of the boxcar, and they put us in what we called the hog pen. There was an open compound—well, it had a shed that you could lay down in or under, to keep out of the weather—but one water faucet for two hundred men or a thousand, something like that. Open trench for a latrine. Give us silage—it looked like silage; boiled cabbage of some sort was our food. We didn't have no Red Cross food at that time there, and we'd eaten everything that we could with us. There was a lot of dysentery, lacking water, lacking food. It was just a horrible condition. The friends that I had on the march were able to leave, so here again, you were on your own; you didn't have a buddy to buddy up with, which normally was a big help.

DePue: When you say your friends left, where did they leave to?

Thorp: Well, that's on the march. At Spremburg they separated Americans from the English, and some of my best friends were English. I remember the Canadian, before he left brought me a bowl of soup. I kept in touch with him as long as he was alive. He was French-Canadian. And the Americans, yeah, they went one way—let's see, how was it—they got separated because they were able to march, and so I was alone by myself and not alone with other people. (laughs)

DePue: Did you all get back together, though, at Moosburg when you arrived there?

Thorp: I was with a different group altogether and I didn't see them until actually they moved in from Neuenburg—or, let's see—from another camp. They marched them into Moosburg at the very end of the war, and I got to see some of my roommates again then.

DePue: Okay. I want to read a passage that you had. And you're now in Stalag VII A. This one struck me. It was a passage that the Germans were putting out about escape attempts, and you're probably thinking, boy, I'm in no condition to be escaping anywhere.

Thorp: Yeah.

DePue: This is the Germans' message to you: "England has, besides fighting in the front in an honest manner, instituted an illegal warfare in noncombatant zones in the forms of gangster commands, terror bandits, and sabotage troops, even up to the frontiers of Germany. England has opened up a non-military form of gangster war. Germany is determined to safeguard her homeland and especially her war industry and provisional centers for the fighting fronts; therefore, it has become necessary to create strictly forbidden zones called death zones in which all unauthorized trespassers will be immediately shot on site. You remember that?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: What was the reaction of the prisoners to that?

Thorp: They kind of laughed at this part on England and all that, but they didn't question being shot on sight. But there were still guys, even Americans, that tried to do that; they got by, and they were captured, but they didn't shoot them.

DePue: So even in these desperate conditions, people were trying to escape.

Thorp: There was several I talked to that tried it. They thought they could get away with it. What they wanted to do, they thought, by being at Moosburg, they could keep going. They wasn't too far to Switzerland. They could get down to Switzerland and get into there. It didn't work.

DePue: Well, this is your February eleventh passage, and just a very short excerpt from there: "Sagan was never like this. Never thought I could or would look back at Sagan and wish I was there instead of where I was."

Thorp: Yeah. Sagan was well-organized, we had regular treatment, food, and all that, but we sure didn't in Stalag VII A.

DePue: So while you're at Stalag VII A, just kind of run through a litany of the things that people need for survival. How about food?

Thorp: Very short. The Germans' rations were cut down, and actually we would have been really up the crick,[13] but the Germans did consent to let the Swiss use United States military trucks, painted white—they called them the White Angels—loaded with Red Cross parcels in Switzerland and bring them to the German POW camps. That actually saved a lot of lives.

DePue: Do you think you're here today because of that?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: How about water?

Thorp: Actually, we finally got moved out of the hog pen into better water conditions, but I hadn't—and I dared to take one cold bath once.. (laughs) I couldn't stand myself anymore. A lot of them didn't take a bath or shower for three months. But you got to the point where you didn't… Here was officers, supposed to be officers, living like hogs in a sense, fighting over who can scrape the honey bucket—the food—they'd bring soup in big buckets, and they'd fight over who could scrape out the buckets.

[13] In Illinois creek is often pronounced crick.

DePue: Fuel? I mean, it's the middle of February.

Thorp: Well, no fuel that was issued to us in Stalag VII A, so what you tried to do and these little burners that we had to heat our food with—otherwise you ate it cold, and that was, yeah… But rubber heels, soap, what you could actually steal or tear off of the barracks. The Germans got very upset about that. I almost got shot myself because I was trying to slice a piece off a board to burn, and here come a general with a tommy gun and I ducked around a corner. He didn't chase me, fortunately, but I could have been shot for doing that because I was destroying Germany's property.

DePue: What was the worst of it, then? Was it the cold, was it the hunger?

Thorp: Well, you slept with your clothes on. The worst thing as far as I was concerned was the fleas and the bedbugs. You were scratching all the time.

DePue: So your bedding was just infested with it.

Thorp: Yeah. They were supposed to fumigate it, but they never got around to it.

DePue: And how much medical attention were you getting?

Thorp: Very little. They had a German doctor come in one time—they lined up the casualties more or less and I was in the lineup. And he kind of looked at my feet and just walked on. I mean, there wasn't anything they could do about it. I could hardly walk. And any bandages they had was paper; there weren't any cloth… So I had nothing. Really, I can't get over—the good Lord was with me because both my feet were infected, I could hardly walk, and yet I've still got them, and I haven't had any problem since.

DePue: Well, the infection especially would be dangerous, I would think.

Thorp: Yeah, I was scared to death of that, but whatever. I tried to wash them with what water I could get and try to keep them halfway clean in my socks. But then there wasn't anything you could do—there was no entertainment, no books to read, nothing. You could just sit there and feel sorry for yourself—and a lot of them did, and some of them just went crazy. And some even tried to escape regardless, climbing the wire, and of course they got shot. But they were getting desperate. But anyway, I didn't try to do that.

DePue: What kept you going, then?

Thorp: Faith.

DePue: Faith in?

Thorp: Just trying to stay alive?

DePue: Was it faith that you would be liberated or faith in God or…?

Thorp: Faith in God, faith that someday, the way the war was going, we'd certainly… Hitler had given the orders that all prisoners of war were going to be shot if Germany lost the war. And they fixed up the barracks around it with machine gun pits that was pointed in; all they had to do was just start shooting, because those barracks were just thin wood. They could have slaughtered us.

DePue: Well, this question would apply, both to Stalag III and Stalag VII A, but were you allowed to have any kind of church services.

Thorp: Yes, yes.

DePue: And did you?

Thorp: Yes, yes, yes. At Sagan, we had a regular chapel and we had a regular layman preacher, a British paratrooper. He would come to our reunions after the war. He was good. But at Stalag VII A, we didn't have him because he went with the British. But an American chaplain that was captured in North Africa was finally assigned to our camp. He wrote a book on his experience, but anyway, he was in charge, and so we had services outside. There were no facilities for it, church facilities, but we had that. I didn't have the Bible at that time, at Stalag VII A. I don't know why—and this is one of the things I always regretted—I didn't take that Bible with me. But I thought everything I had to carry was on my back, and it was a fairly good-sized Bible. I wished that I had a smaller one, but I didn't.

DePue: You read that Bible through a couple times?

Thorp: I read not all of it at that time, but I have read it a couple times, yes.

DePue: Well, I'm going to read a couple more passages from this time period. And you're still maintaining a diary entry as you're going through all of this?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: This is sometime in the middle of February. "Bartering brought me an egg for twelve fags." Cigarettes.

Thorp: That was cigarettes.

DePue: "A can of sardines for fifteen. So on the 22nd, my twenty-fourth month of service, I got up early and fried it for breakfast, brewed tea, and fixed some toast. Sure good. Bashed a week's ration of sugar, two tins of a soup, a D bar, opened up my klim, K-2 biscuits, and cocoa, as well as two days' ration of bread."

Thorp: Um hm. Now, that was a feast, real feast. Don't ask me how I was able to wait that long.

DePue: Well, the other thing that impresses me about this passage is by this time, you guys had a language of your own, didn't you?

Thorp: Yes. In the book, there was a whole page of expressions, bashing and bartering and…

DePue: What does "bashing" mean?

Thorp: A lot of food. "We had a good bash"—I mean, a lot of food on the table.

DePue: What's a K-2 biscuit?

Thorp: Oh…

DePue: Something you got in the Red Cross parcel?

Thorp: Yeah, all right. I guess that's right. I had to stop and think about that; I've heard it. I know it's an issue in the service.

DePue: And the other thing you've mentioned quite a few times in the diary, a klim—"I opened up my klim."

Thorp: It was a can of powdered milk.

DePue: Then I can understand why that was so (laughs) so important, too. Here's another passage, and it's shortly thereafter. I would imagine this is going to jog a memory for you as well. "Signs of impending victory: P-51s with red tails manned by Negroes strafing the railroad that ran by our camp. We could see them circling our position, dive down, and see the flash of fire from their machine guns." (DePue laughs) And you just grabbed your book, *The Red Tails*.

Thorp: It was a colored fighter group.

DePue: Oh, and the tails are painted bright red?

Thorp: Yeah. I just got this. See, the Tuskegee colored groups was just now getting their recognition for what they did in World War II.

DePue: Did you know they were colored at the time? Obviously you did.

Thorp: I didn't, only somebody else said, "Oh, that was a nigger bunch from Italy." See, they were from the 15th Air Force, I was in the 8th, so I never even heard of them. I didn't know anything about them. I knew they were trying to train colored pilots. They thought they couldn't ever learn, but they did.

DePue: How good a feeling was it to see that happen?

Thorp: Oh, hey. We cheered them and cheered them some more. (laughs) They come right over the camp. They were shooting at a railroad yard or someplace in there, but they never hit any of us.

DePue: Once you heard that it was a black unit, what was your reaction then?

Thorp: How different it was. There was two colored POWs come into the camp at Stalag Luft III, back at Sagan, the Australians said, "Oh, good, we got somebody to polish our shoes." That was their reaction. Of course, Australians were very racial-minded. The English weren't. And the Americans weren't too sure they were very happy either because they didn't want them for roommates, but they finally accepted them and got along fine. A couple of them come back to our reunions—nice and real gentlemen.

DePue: (pause) I'm looking for a passage here. This is page 104 of your diary, and start right here with Springer.

Thorp: Oh, yeah. (laughs) Good old Springer. "With Springer doing most of my cooking, I don't pile up any surplus."

DePue: Now, we should mention we're reading a passage talking about Easter.

Thorp: "He was a wizard cook"— one in civilian life. He was shot down on his second mission. We went together on an Easter bash, which was really a feast, considering the conditions. We started on oatmeal I had carried and kept all the way from Sagan, cooked with raisins. I also contributed the Spam for supper. Grilled, oh, it was good. A cake for a teaser, then for the dessert, a klim tin full of thick, solid, delicious chocolate pudding with whipped cream. Boy, rich as radium and twice as good. So rich and so filling mine had to lay over until the next day." Yeah, (laughs) that was really hogging it, I mean, or whatever you want to call it. (laughs)

DePue: More than eight hundred calories that day.

Thorp: Oh, that really was. Oh, gosh, gee whiz, yes. Yes. Yeah.

DePue: April 12th, not too far after this, or about the same timeframe, is the day Roosevelt died. Did the Germans let you know about that?

Thorp: Yes, they did. They let us hold a special ceremony the next day.

DePue: Oh, they did?

Thorp: Yeah, it come through pretty quick. So they had to line up in formation the best we could on the lot, and what was kind of disturbing. I don't know whether I mentioned it or not, but they were trying to clean out the abort

[latrine] at the same time they were giving all the talks and recognitions of Roosevelt. Yeah, we knew about it. At that time, we could see the way the war was going, it couldn't last much longer, but…

DePue: Your spirits are on the upswing at this time?

Thorp: Yes, because we could see the fighters and see the bombers flying over. They used to make you always go into the barracks every time a group would fly over, but they got to the point where they didn't seem to care anymore, and we could watch them fly over. When they could do that, why, certainly they couldn't be lasting much longer.

DePue: Well, and as far as you personally were concerned, I think April 29th has got to be an important date for you.

Thorp: That's one of the biggest days of my life.

DePue: Because that's the day that your camp at least was liberated. Tell us about that.

Thorp: Well, that started out to be a very calm Sunday morning. The thing we were trying to bring up at that time, the Americans were real close, and others said they could hear gunfire. I can remember walking the street the night before and not hearing anything, but in the meantime the Germans were supposed to give us up and let the Americans take over. In other words, they were getting to the point where they weren't putting up a battle everyplace where the POWs were. Okay, that's fine, but being down the ranks, I wasn't up on some of this stuff that the others were. Sunday morning—it was time for chapel so we're going to have a service outside the barracks. We gathered together around ten o'clock for the service and everything seemed to be really calm. I didn't hear any gunfire or anything like that. Everything was just kind of peaceful. Nobody said anything about Americans being close or not. A P-51 come over and did a barrel roll right over the top of the barracks in the camp. And of course we cheered and hollered and everything like that. And then all of the sudden, gunfire started. What in the world? Well, evidently that was the signal, but the minute he did the barrel roll, then they started shooting. I guess the SS said, we're not going to liberate these guys without a fight, so they fired at the Americans; the Americans of course started firing back, and we were in the middle.

Well, the thing to do is try to get out of gunfire if you could, so everybody went into the barracks. And I thought, well hey, if we're going to die—because we had no idea how it was going to end up—I thought I can't die on an empty stomach, so I went in the kitchen with a bunch of others. We all got crowded in the kitchen, started cooking our food on the burners we had and thought, well, we're going to die with a full stomach. So we was just a bashing away and a bashing away. In the meantime, the shooting was going

on. Nobody in the barracks was hit. Suddenly silence, so, okay, what's happened?

So we went outside, and that's when we seen the American flag go up over the little town down in the valley, and that's when you seen a hundred thousand men cry, cheer, pray—bedlam. Then the tanks come in, knocked down the gate and come parading down the corridor, covered with humanity. Everybody crawled on these tanks, POWs, just for the ride. And then we knew we were free men. Boy, I tell you, that was the day. I created an ode to the flag, and I brought that out. A person didn't appreciate their lives under another flag, but if you was living under another flag, and then you could see that American flag go up, that's when you seen men cry and cheer and pray and thank the Lord and knew that they were free men again. Then we know that the Germans were gone or at least given up.

DePue: I'm going to read your passage. (laughs) You've done a remarkable job of explaining it after all these years, but I'd like to read your passage as well. "Eleven thirty German war time, the American flag went up over the town of Moosburg. The sound of a retreating army came to us. The P-51s spotted a target, and down they went after it, strafing part of the town. Tanks began to roll over the hills and through the fields, firing as they came. The noise of battle ranged from planes to rifle fire, .75s on the tanks, to machine guns clattering. Some stray bullets entered the camp, and everyone hit the dirt. Then with the battle still going on, the major gave us a gin…"

Thorp: Yeah, that's news. That was the English word, gin, news.

DePue: "He gave us the gin on what would happen to other liberated RAMPs, recaptured Allied Military Personnel, how they were treated, and how soon we would be getting to go home. Certainly sounded too good to be true. This couldn't happen to us; we were dreaming, every one of us."

Thorp: Yeah, I mentioned about knowing things—see, the major knew more stuff about what was coming up, because there were dealings being made, prior to this liberation day, with the Germans and what would happen. Of course, we knew nothing about it, but… Yeah. (laughs) That was surprising to me. There he was, the shooting going on outside of here, and he was giving us this announcement.

DePue: This is what you're talking about with the flag here, and I'll let you read right from your passage.

Thorp: "By the time our lookout shouted 'They are coming in,' the flag went up by the main gate, then Jeeps and a tank rolled down the street. The tank was so covered with human beings that I didn't know it was a tank till I saw the cannon. Everybody cheered and yelled themselves hoarse. We shook hands with all the GIs we could get a hold of, telling how glad we were to see them,

and they replying they were glad they got to us in time, surprised to find us still here. My feeling of elation gave me a funny feeling in the stomach and throat as well as tears in my eyes, but was I ever happy. Man, just so I could not wake up. And naturally the rest of the day was one big flap. Everybody bashed, and the entire tier six had one big meal together, Springer the chef." Yeah, yeah. We was real thankful and real grateful.

DePue: Now, what amazes me out of this is how well you remember the details of that day after all these years.

Thorp: Yeah. I did slip on that major thing, but no, but that was thing about it. If I was going to die, I was going to die with a full stomach. (laughs) See, still food. As we go through the whole thing, it's food.

DePue: But you didn't really think at that moment in time you were going to die, that you were going to make it, then, I would think.

Thorp: Yeah, So make the best of it as long as you could.

DePue: Do you remember the few days after that? One of the things you mentioned was that Patton came to visit the camp.

Thorp: Yeah, and unfortunately, I was with another guy bartering with the rations. The rations had a lot of jewelry and stuff like that, and I got a good wristwatch. Then he said, "Patton was in here," and he said to kill the so-and-sos and keep going, and they'd be liberated soon. He didn't say a whole lot, but he come in with an escort and sirens blowing. I regret very much that I wasn't in the camp. We had a chance to get out, you see, and go to these other places. And he said, "If you want to get some good bartering, come with me, I'll show you." One of the guys was pretty sharp, and he could speak Russian. Well, I went with him. But no, Patton was our man, (laughs) in more ways than one.

DePue: Were the Allies then able to keep you all fed?

Thorp: It was a little bit of a struggle. I think when we got white bread, I thought that was angel food cake. When they moved in, they had the K rations that they carried in a can, and everybody would meet them, and they'd give all they had on their Jeeps or trucks to us. That's what we had right at first. And then they kind of got it established a little bit, then got the American bread. But it was kind of slow there at first, but we didn't starve. I forget just how it was, but anyway, it was a little bit confused, but everybody was so elated. As I said, we had one big bash, so we couldn't have had a whole lot left from our regular rations. (laughs)

DePue: One of the other things you mention was sneaking into Moosburg itself. Were you not supposed to be going into town?

Thorp: Yes. This was another strange thing that happened. Just as soon as we was liberated everybody's confined to the camp; nobody is to leave. Well, why not? Well, we're going to make sure. So they put American guards in place of the German guards in the guard towers and around the camp. Then to make sure, they put officers—and I was one of them—with the American guards to keep the guys in the camp. (laughs) Well, can you imagine, here you are liberated and they was trying to keep those guys in. (laughs)

I had one American, he was really gung-ho, and there was a couple that sneaked out under the fence and started off, and he started shouting and told the guard, "Don't shoot, don't shoot.," "You guys come back here, come back here." They paid no more attention to him than nothing. I thought, well, if they want to go, let them go. They're taking their own chances. The Russians broke out and got into the wineries and some of the distilleries, and they got drunk. There was almost a riot in town, and they didn't want the Americans involved. In fact, when I went out, I seen a bunch of them around the distilleries they had, and they were all drunk. I decided I wasn't going to get close to that bunch; I'd get in trouble. But after I saw everybody else leaving, despite the American guards, and the American guard said, "What do I do, sir?" I says, "Let them go. Don't worry about it."

DePue: Did you encounter any German civilians?

Thorp: No, I didn't. I walked downtown, and they had their names on the door, apparently, of who was the occupant; I didn't see another German. I walked though the town, and I walked by the headquarters where the Army officers were. I was so tempted, went by and seen the garbage cans full of pancakes and I almost—**almost**—went into that garbage can to get those pancakes. There were other people, civilians or, well, they were POWs, that were doing it. And I remember the officer come out, "Where in the Hades is the guard? They're supposed to keep these SOBs out of here." (laughs) It was interesting, because you're on the farms and then they had these small planes, reconnaissance planes, land nearby, and I was talking to them. You know, I enjoyed that visit outside of the camp.

DePue: I would think this is a very chaotic time for Germany, especially for all of these displaced persons that were all over the country at the time. You mentioned there was a lot of Russians in the camp. Did you see any of that while you were there?

Thorp: Just one place. I don't know what kind of a guard he was, but anyway, he had two German boys, I suppose they was about seventeen or eighteen years old, and he was accusing them of being SS. And these guys kept saying, "Nein, nein, SS. Nein, SS." He was almost going to shoot them, I guess, and an American officer came out and told him to go peddle your own papers and leave them alone. Those kids were scared, they looked kind of ragged, but anyway they were about the age they could have been German troops.

DePue: I'm going to ask some more general questions about your entire time that you were in captivity and kind of prod your memory here a little bit more. Was there anything that really struck you as especially humorous that sticks with you these many years?

Thorp: (laughs) There had to be some funny things, but no, just offhand, I can't think of anything. The minute you leave, I could probably think of several, but right now I can't. I can think about it, but I might think a little later on. Right now, I can't, though there were some funny instances, but not very many.

DePue: What was the darkest time for you while you were a prisoner?

Thorp: Well, one of them I think was interrogation. That was one of my darkest, of course, and yeah, I told you how that ended up not so bad, but at the time, I thought it was horrible. And also the snake pit. That was the first days in camp at Moosburg. And it wasn't too good on the boxcar, but I can't think of how I really survived three days and three nights in that boxcar and only got out once—and I don't even remember pooping my pants or anything like that. But that was what I consider my horrible background as far as thinking is concerned.

DePue: When did you hear about the Nazi concentration camps and the death camps?

Thorp: There was a little bit of a problem before it got in the British papers and even about the guys getting shot at Stalag Luft III, so I knew about it, you see, before I ended up in the camp. Because news was out that the British knew about it and even had it in the newspaper. But there wasn't too much as far as the concentration camps that I read or knew about. Of course, Dachau was not too far from where we were, and some of the Americans that liberated us said they liberated it that morning before they got up to our camp. And they said the stink and the smell of the human bodies decaying was very strong.

DePue: At that point in time, could you comprehend…?

Thorp: No, not what they actually seen, no. Well, we had a little idea—I take that back—because it was about a hundred or so that actually got picked up trying to escape, and of course they were in civilian clothes; they were treated as spies or civilians, so they put them in a concentration camp. And they finally made contact or whatever. The Luftwaffe officers found out about it, and they identified them as American officers and took them out of that concentration camp and brought them to Stalag Luft VII A. They were shaved and they were like animals, even the short time they'd been in the concentration camp. They were telling about how horrible and how things were at that camp. But they were just almost out of it. If a crumb of bread would be on the floor, they'd fight for it, just all that quick, you know. We were bad enough, we thought, but not like they were. I don't know how long they were in the concentration

camp. That was the first inkling that I had any idea of what a concentration camp was like.

DePue: What did you think about Germans, then, after you heard about that and saw that?

Thorp: It was just real hard to visualize how what we would consider a human race, which a lot of us had the same bloodstream in us as they did.

DePue: Yeah, this whole area is populated by Germans.

Thorp: Yes. Now, we're English myself, but like my brother married a German girl, good German family, just down the road over here. I just couldn't visualize how they could be hoodwinked into doing what they did and Hitler doing what he did. It was hard to believe.

DePue: This is jumping ahead a little bit, but it's kind of along the same thing. When you heard about the atomic bomb, what did you think about using that?

Thorp: Good. The war will be over quicker, we pray. But it's horrible it had to be such a sacrifice of life, but as we look at it and hear people talk about it, what could have happened if they hadn't? How many more millions of people would have been killed, both Japanese and American—and Allies; it wasn't just the Americans. No, I thought it was a good decision.

DePue: Okay. Well, we still have you in—is it Moosburg or Mossburg?

Thorp: Moosburg.

DePue: Moosburg. So let's get you back to the United States. I think the first place you stopped after you finally got out of Moosburg—and I assume it was on trucks—was Ingolstadt?

Thorp: Um-hm.

DePue: Ingolstadt is still in Germany?

Thorp: Yes.

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about Ingolstadt.

Thorp: Well, Ingolstadt was a big air base town. They took us to this air base—in fact, it was one of the last targets our bomb group bombed. But talk about a base. It was quite an establishment. It had permanent barracks and all that. Of course, a lot of it had been bombed. They said they'd pick us up in a DC-3 maybe tomorrow or whenever. So that was fine. They dumped us off and said we can go into town, and so we went into town. Well, no rations or one thing or another so another guy said, "Well, just as well go back out to the airfield."

So we went out to the airfield, and I was talking to one of the sergeants that liberated us. He was a quartermaster, and he said, "If you want food, just come over to our tent." So we ate there, but we slept overnight in a building. We didn't know about it. It was open, and we could get into it. It was full of hand grenades and ammunition shells. It got off to one side of the air base, but that had all ammunition in that building. Naturally we didn't stay there very long. (laughter) But I couldn't get over the airplanes, wrecked and otherwise, that was on that base. The runway's grass; the barracks were permanent. The next time, we found a room in one of the barracks and I brought back magazines and stuff like that that was laying in there. In fact, it's upstairs. So we had to just wander around waiting for the DC-3s or C-47s to come in and pick us up. I actually seen some of our German guards; they had them out picking up trash.

I even picked up pieces of shrapnel and propaganda sheets that was laying on the ground that we had dropped. In the meantime, when I was in town and one of these storehouses, I found an abandoned German pack, a wonderful pack; it'd just carry about anything you want. And I took that so I could carry a lot of stuff in it. In fact, I gave the German pack to the Museum of Heyworth.[14] A beautiful pack, but it had been abandoned. There was a guy's name in it and everything. I don't know what happened to the guy, but I got the pack and brought it home, and a lot of stuff that I picked up on the base afterwards.

DePue: We've been at this right at two hours? Do you need to take a break? Because I think we've probably got about a half an hour more to go.

Thorp: I'm okay if you are. (laughs)

DePue: Well, let's drive on, then. You already mentioned you're basically there waiting for C-47 flights. So I'm going to read a passage from May 9th. This is your description of that C-47 flight to Rheims.

Thorp: Yeah, to—

DePue: France.

Thorp: It was France, yeah. Oh, gosh, what was…?

DePue: It's R-h-e-i-m-s, enroute to Le Havre.

Thorp: Yeah, Le Havre. Le Havre was the closest town, right. Um-hm, important.

DePue: "Taken for hot showers, when all of a sudden, while standing in line, I passed out." Now, this is actually after the flight itself. "Stars, gongs, and cannons were going off when the guys revived me. They helped me to my truck, and a

[14] Heyworth is a small farm town near Bloomington, Illinois.

colored boy took me to the dispensary. From the dispensary, I was sent to the hospital and eventually the 306th rest area. Back to the hospital for delousing and a complete issue of new clothing, down to combat field jacket and combat boots. The MDs and orderlies fall all over themselves to get me some tomato soup, a sandwich, my stuff moved around, bags, et cetera. I was put down as a malnutrition case, and the 306 was the deal for me—special diet and care. Good deal. A good GI cot with mattress, sheets, and a pillow case."

Thorp: Yeah, (laughs) that was heaven. (laughs) Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Were you worse off than most of the people?

Thorp: Well, I didn't think I was. I had passed out once in the barn back in Moscow on the march, but I didn't—no. Of course, then again, I lost all contact with some more friends, so there I was alone again, but I guess that hurt as much as anything. The nurses washed my head and hair and said, boy, you was living lousy. Well, I was. (laughs) But I really got good treatment at that hospital. The nurses had just come over from the States so they weren't battle-hardened or anything like that. (laughs)

DePue: What, you mean the nurses were looking pretty good to you?

Thorp: They did. You bet they did, yeah.

DePue: (laughs) Well, I'm going to let you read the passage you wrote for May 10th, the very next day here.

Thorp: "May tenth. Roused out at 6:30, washed in hot water—yeah, hot water—and then had my first GI meal in ten months. Man, what tasty grub." Oh yeah, oh gosh. "Two soft-boiled eggs, bacon, cooked Ralston type cereal, big dip of milk and sugar, two thick slices of bread—white, butter, jam—plus two canteen cups of coffee. I was so hungry and so eager to eat I could hardly restrain myself to normal dining. I wanted to eat everything at once. I was so nervous I shook all over. I may eat king's banquets in the future, but no food will taste any better than what I had today. The nurses we had were fresh from the States, new in the Army, and they couldn't do enough for us. One good-looker washed our heads—mine certainly needed it—and it was a marvelous sensation." (laughter)

DePue: Just listening to you read that, I've got this image of this woman sudsing up your head and just scrubbing away.

Thorp: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I said, "This could be a heaven in a Kriegy camp." Yeah. "Chicken for dinner dished out to us by the most beautiful nurses. Just ravenous for grub, so they serve it. Eggnog at ten o'clock, then at three o'clock, and later in the evening, eggnog plus a big cheese sandwich. All of it really hit the spot." Yeah, that was heaven.

DePue: Well, it's not too much longer after this—about twelve days afterwards—that you cross the English Channel on a ship to Southampton, and then a couple days later, you are formed up in a convoy of twenty-five ships and headed to the United States. What was the feeling about then?

Thorp: A feeling of elation. In other words, to think that you survived the war and you're headed home. And I could always remember that passage in *Gone with the Wind* when a Confederate who had been in a prison camp in Illinois had to get his way home, Carolina, wherever that… But "Going Home," that was a chapter I read and cried about in prison camp, was "Going Home." And here I was, I was actually on a ship going home. We didn't get thousands of soldiers on that, so some of the officers were complaining because unless you was a first lieutenant you didn't get a stateroom. And I was a second lieutenant, so I was with a group, but it didn't make any difference to me; I was just glad to be on that ship. (laughter) It didn't make any difference what the rank was or what kind of quarters we had. And the food was also delicious. Good food.

DePue: I've talked to a lot of soldiers about passage across the Atlantic, and none of them had a very pleasant experience that they described crossing Atlantic, and especially in some of these troop ships. Sounds like you had a different perspective on things.

Thorp: I did. Now, this was supposed to have been a passenger ship, so it wasn't… But the food was good. I never got sick. There was one day it was a little rough and everybody else got sick, but I didn't. I enjoyed watching the other ships. No, I had a pleasant experience. In fact, I was kind of glad I flew over but I could also come back on a ship, and I could always say I traveled the ocean in a ship.

DePue: Describe the experience of coming in to New York City.

Thorp: (laughs) Well, we docked, and of course it seemed like it took forever to dock and get the ship lined up and get unloaded, but the biggest impression I had was after we unloaded and got on a ferry boat, and when we passed by the Statue of Liberty. Now, I don't know how many hundreds or thousands there was on this ferry boat, and most of them were soldiers, but there wasn't one word. It was strictly silent as we passed by that Statue of Liberty. I could not get over that. There wasn't anything I could say or feel. In other words, that was what we were fighting for, was that statue—what it stood for, not the statue itself. But everybody was just silent while we passed the Statue of Liberty. That was really a moment of feeling that I didn't think would happen, but it did. We were home.

DePue: Okay. The passage that you used to describe it in the diary: "A green-looking appearance, but the best-looking girl I ever hope to see."

Thorp: Yeah. I was surprised how that looked. I don't know, for some reason I thought it'd be brightly colored or bronze or whatever, but that greenish—yeah.

DePue: Well, you're pretty close to home now. (Thorp laughs) You take a train to the Chicago area?

Thorp: Yes. They took us over to Fort Dix or whatever the name was, in New Jersey, and give us a good big steak dinner and I think ice cream and give us passage to a train to Chicago and, of course, to get over to Fort Sheridan. "Anybody going to get married on this trip?" "No, I'm not going to get married." "Okay, well, if you do, let us know so we can give you special passage as far as having your married wife with you." But I wasn't going to get married. I didn't call home when I got to Chicago. I wanted to buy a new uniform. Couldn't find one.

DePue: Why didn't you call home?

Thorp: I wanted to surprise her.

DePue: How did that work out?

Thorp: It didn't.

DePue: Well, tell us about the reunion, then.

Thorp: I get a little emotional about this, so (clears throat)—but no, I thought I'd get a new uniform, and then I'd come home and, you know, be all decked out. So I stayed overnight in Chicago when I could have come home to buy the uniform; somebody befriended me and said, "Well, you can stay with us," and that was a surprise. I didn't know this fellow at all, but I stayed all night at his house, went down to the store and tried to buy, and couldn't find a uniform. So I took the Green Diamond[15] from Chicago, which used to run through to Springfield and St. Louis. They had a seat for me, reservations, and I got on okay, sat next to a guy. He said, "Well, they know you're coming home?" I said, "No," I said, "I'm going to surprise them." "You mean you didn't tell your family?" I said, "No, I didn't. I thought…" you know, whatever. The train pulled up and I looked out the window (chokes up)—I'm sorry. (pause, choked up) There was Mary Ellen. (pause)

DePue: Would you mind if I read the passage?

Thorp: No, go ahead. I'm sorry.

DePue: Oh, that's all right. "People were awful anxious to talk to me. They thought it awful because I didn't telephone or telegram when I would be in. I wanted it

[15] The Green Diamond was a passenger train on the Illinois Central Railroad line.

that way, but that wasn't the way I got it. As I got up out of my seat, I saw Mary Ellen standing patiently, watching the passengers get off. As she saw me, I gave her a weak salute with a drum in my throat. She hardly gave me time to get off the train. Then Eileen and Mary Alice joined the reception, and I had all I could, put my arms around them. Home at last, after eighteen months' absence. Many a time it seemed a dream unlikely to come through or true. Home in my home."

Thorp: Yeah, and talk about trust and faith and… She had it. She was a good woman. I got a good woman here, too.

DePue: Had she been waiting several times, gone out to the train station?

Thorp: Yeah, she met every train as soon as she found out I was in the States, I think. Just sent a telegram that I was back in the States, and of course she knew it would take a couple days to go through procedure. She met every train that came in from Chicago. And here I thought I was going to surprise them, but I didn't.

DePue: She surprised you.

Thorp: Um-hm. Yeah, as I've expressed before, I was just a guy that wanted to be home, and here I am, and had a good life. But that was special—extra, extra special.

DePue: Well, it sounds like you had a long stretch at home. I mean, the Army owed you that much, didn't they?

Thorp: Well, they said ex-POWs, sixty days, and then they sent me a telegram. So I picked out a date to get married and picked the last day of what I thought was going to be my sixty days, because I was going to get married and leave her and go back to the service. Give me another thirty days, so I was ninety days home. Of course my brother needed detasselers,[16] so I went and got married, started detasseling corn the next day. (laughter) Was I going to take a honeymoon? No, I wanted to be home. So.

DePue: I love this line. This is July 29th. That happens to be what day for you?

Thorp: The anniversary for liberation.

DePue: Yeah, the anniversary for your wedding, too.

Thorp: And also when I got married.

[16] The top tassels on corn are the male element producing pollen. To create hybrid corn at that time, the tassels on the variety that was to be the female element had to be removed by hand in order to achieve a pure cross-bred hybrid. It was great summer work for young people in Central Illinois where hybrid corn was developed.

DePue: Okay. "Mary Ellen and I got married after three years, seven months, and four days of sparring. (laughter) Quite an affair."

Thorp: Yeah, so it wasn't any sudden decision. But I really wasn't planning on getting married when I got home; I was going to wait till I got out of service. But the first thing almost she asked when I got home, she said, "Mother is wanting to know when we're going to get married." I said, "What? Hm, I don't know. Well…" (DePue laughing) See, I was still debating in my mind whether I wanted to get married or not.

DePue: Well, here's a question, Ernest, for you. Were you smart enough to let the ladies take care of the details of the wedding?

Thorp: Yes, (laughter) you bet I was. You bet, you bet. Yeah.

DePue: Okay. August thirtieth, you head down to AAF—Army Air Force—Redistribution Center in Florida. And what were you going down there for?

Thorp: Well, this is for RAMPs or recovered military personnel, in other words, to make the decision whether you would stay in service or get discharged or whether you'd be reassigned or whatever, and also check you out health-wise and go through all the procedures that you're supposed to if you stay in the service or not stay.

DePue: What was your intention at that time?

Thorp: Go down there by myself, and my dad said, "You mean you're not taking Mary Ellen with you?" I said, "No, I think maybe"—some of these guys in cadets, they had wives with them, all the problems they had, no, I didn't want to be dragging a wife around down there. My dad said, "You take her." So then I had to get another ticket for her, and it was the best thing I did. (laughter)

DePue: She was okay with that?

Thorp: She was okay, you betcha. And there's why I debated to stay in service or to come home.

DePue: So you actually did give it some thought.

Thorp: Yeah, I did.

DePue: Why?

Thorp: I felt as a prisoner of war I didn't really fulfill my obligation to the country in respect to service. In other words, I didn't feel like I had contributed what I was trained to do.

DePue: Did you express that to Mary Ellen?

Thorp: She said, "That's up to you, Ernest. You make the decision. If you want to stay in service, I'm with you, but you make the decision. You make up your mind. I'm not going to tell you one way or the other."

DePue: Well, we know that you decided not to stay in. What eventually swayed your opinion toward resigning?

Thorp: Well, I was thinking in terms… My brother expressed when I was home, "We need you." My dad said, "I want you. I'm counting on you coming home to be part of the business." After all, I only had one brother and had five sisters. But my brother and my dad was running the company, and my dad was getting older—he was no young man. I thought, Well, okay, for my dad, because he said, "I want to put an *S* on that 'Son.' Instead of Claude W. Thorp & Son, and I want it Claude W. Thorp and Sons." Okay. I thought of that, and I'll go back home, and I'll see if I can get along with my brother. (laughter) And Mary Ellen said, well, whatever I wanted to say, so she was very cooperative on that. But I resigned—well, I asked for a discharge, but I also joined the Reserve, so I was involved in that respect.

DePue: So you come home. We've been doing this quite a bit. I think it's appropriate that you read your last entry on September 24th, and then we've got some wrap-up questions for you.

Thorp: "September 24, 1945. Forty months of enlisted service, thirty months of active duty, and twelve months overseas. That was 'my stretch in the service.' Here I was, homeward bound to a wife, home, and a job, alive and in one piece, not only physically but mentally. Maybe I didn't count for very much as an individual in the Army by doing very much toward winning the war, but I do believe I can say, I also served. Nine months in a POW camp wasn't anything to be proud of, but I know that fate was kind to me nevertheless. I wished I could have done more, maybe such as checking out as a first pilot on a B-17; winning the DFC, Distinguished Flying Cross; get promoted; and so forth. However, I didn't, and the war is past history, but not in my mind or anyone who went through it. It will always crop up in one form or the other in our lives, no matter what we do. Tales will get bigger as they age—just human, I reckon. Feelings will either be sharpened or will dull with time on many wartime topics. The future is ahead of me, and it is up to me to make the most of it. I learned a lot of all kinds of life during my stretch, and I will profit from it. I have a lot more to learn from civilian life. I have written a rather complete story of my Army career, but mere words cannot express the complete feelings that a man goes through when running the gauntlet of training, combat, and prison life, as I did. Whoever reads this will see that I never thought myself no hero or with the intentions of wanting to be one. I was just a boy who wanted to be home." Yeah. (laughs) That sums it up. That's what I wrote that time.

DePue: Well, I don't know if I can improve on that last paragraph there, because you've expressed almost everything that I typically ask people at the end of an interview. You went through a lot of hell, a lot of experiences. Was it worth it?

Thorp: I would do it again if I had to. I mean, I would volunteer to be in service. I wouldn't necessarily trust the feeling I'd wanted to go through some of the things in camp and in combat that I did, but it was an experience.

DePue: You believed in the cause, then.

Thorp: I certainly did. I certainly did, you bet, and I still do.

DePue: Korea didn't happen too many years after that, and Vietnam came along later on. What did you think about those?

Thorp: Well, I was in the Reserve in Korea. Some of my unit was called up. I thought I would be, and I was prepared. I had two kids at that time, but I was prepared to go back in, but they didn't call me, I think because of my POW time and the fact that I wasn't a first pilot. And Vietnam—by that time, my oldest son was of age, and he went. He was an infantryman in Vietnam. I felt bad about it, but I encouraged him to enlist.

DePue: You felt bad about him going or about the war?

Thorp: I felt bad about the war. I also didn't feel good about him even going, but I also felt that he was serving the country and doing the right thing.

DePue: So your thoughts about Vietnam were a lot different than they were about World War II?

Thorp: I thought we was fighting for a cause there, but as time went on, I was kind of wondering, Why were we there? Why were we there? And finally it just involved a lot more politics than I ever thought, the more I read and hear about it. And then I wonder what we're getting into today. It makes me wonder.

DePue: How do you think this whole experience changed you, or did it?

Thorp: Well, I thought I had appreciation of man; I had, I thought, appreciation of faith and other people, but I think it solidified or made it stronger than it would have otherwise, the fact that having friends who got killed or seeing them crash, things of that nature. Friends today, coffin tomorrow, stuff like, you know… That kind of got me, but for some reason or another, it didn't seem to distract me like I know it did some people. Yes, it happened. He was my friend, I'm going to miss him, but we have to go on. Everybody else seemed to have that attitude. In other words, you couldn't stop and grieve; you had to still keep moving forward. And certain missions, so-and-so was shot

down—good guy, you know. There was a replacement in the next day. War goes on.

DePue: Do you have any impressions coming home about some of the Americans back in the States, that they didn't quite understand what you had gone through?

Thorp: No, I was surprised. In fact, I was very sympathetic with some of the fellows who were deferred. In other words, I could have been deferred as a farm employee and in the seed business. In fact, we had some help that was deferred. Somebody said, "Well, why don't you get them to serve and you go home?" No, I didn't want it that way. I tried to stress the fact that when I'm talking to these kids or whatever, that the people who stayed home and farmed, didn't wear a uniform, still were part of the service, that if they hadn't been doing what they were doing, we couldn't have done what we were doing. So it took everybody together, working together, regardless of whether they were deferred or in a uniform. Some of the guys took a lot of abuse by not being in service, just because they were home farming.

DePue: You've spent a lot of your time since you've come back talking to various groups about your experiences. From your diary, you did that right as soon as you got back, but obviously you've kept that up over the years. So what is it about your experiences that you feel compelled to tell people, that Americans today need to know?

Thorp: Strong in my faith, even with the loss of freedom is, for example, one thing. Also the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do to yourself. That's where the German fisherman came in, I felt. Also, of course, liberation day, and to keep your faith. And the fact that impressed me was the German, when I wanted a Bible, says, "*Ja, ja*, that's a good choice." I even stress that to these school kids, even though you're maybe not supposed to talk about religion, but I try to bring those facts out. In other words, keep your faith and stay strong, whatever you're trying to do. You may not always be right, but at least keep your faith.

DePue: I know that you continue to fly. (Thorp laughs) It amazes me that you're still flying today. Did you choose the right path in coming back to the farm?

Thorp: Did I do the right thing? Yes, I think I did, I mean, as far as I was able to raise a family of five kids, and to fly, so in other words, I wasn't deprived of that. My dad loved to fly, my brother flew, and I had nephews that learned to fly, so it's in the family, so I didn't lose that privilege and opportunities of it and still got it, still flying, which not everybody would agree on.

DePue: Well, I think you put up with about six hours of me asking the questions, so here's my last question: What else do you want to say? What do you want to mention in closing here?

Thorp: Well, I'm thankful that people are interested in what I went through, not that it was anything special or anything different, but just the fact that I hope whatever I said or whatever I done in this life is something that has contributed to somebody else's a little bit. I think in terms of some of the men in my community, in church, in service, that I felt like were kind of extra-special, that maybe someday or whatever they think that maybe at least Ernest Thorp lived a life that was worthwhile; at least I like to think that. I appreciate the plaque that they made in the Legion post. They dedicated a room to me, and they said, "A man of faith, a man of honor." And that really pleased me and touched me. I like to feel that's what I am, you know, try to be.

DePue: Well, it's been my honor to have the opportunity to interview you, so thank you very much, and (Thorp laughs) we'll help preserve this piece of history.

Thorp: Well, yeah, because I like history. I like to read what other people went through, as a prisoner or whatever it is. I like biographies. And I'm reading one right now on Jimmy Doolittle, one of my heroes.

DePue: A guy you met over in England, did you not?

Thorp: I didn't meet him personally. He was the general, and he spoke to our group.

DePue: There you go. We'll finish with that. Thank you very much, Ernest.

DePue: (end of interview #3)