Transcription: Puett Willcox

Today is Tuesday, April 20th, 2010. My name is James Crabtree, and I'll be interviewing Mr. Puett Willcox. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office Building in Austin, Texas, and Mr. Willcox is at his home in Longview, Texas. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board, Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to us today. It is an honor for us. The first question I always ask is please tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life was like before you went in the military.

Puett Willcox: All right, well I was born in Amarillo in 1924, May 27th, and my family, we moved – well, I had an older sister and a brother born there, and they moved to Big Springs, back to Big Springs, their home, mom and dad. Their family was ranchers there. They settled Big Springs. And my mother and dad had a business there and repaired batteries, and that burned down in '30, and we moved to Longview, and my dad went in business with another man and built a gas station. I went to school in Longview, went to about four or five grade schools they were building schools so fast because of the oil boom, and the war came along and they wouldn't let me in because I was too young. I went to NYA school to learn how to be a machinist and went to Fort Worth in consolidated aircraft. I was a machinist until December and I got my draft notice. I was a 1A and I hitchhiked back to Longview and told my dad I wanted to get in the Army Aircorps because I didn't want any part of the walking army.

Was that December of 1942?

Puett Willcox: Right, December '42.

To go back a little bit, sir, do you remember where you were when you learned that Pearl Harbor had been bombed in December?

Puett Willcox: Oh yeah, we were listening to the radio when it happened, and the family was devastated, and my dad was really upset and he wanted to get back in the Army. He was in the Army in World War I and he had too many children and they wouldn't let him back in. So I went up the next day and went to all my schoolmates and we surrounded the recruiters at Longview and they didn't believe us. I was lying about my age. I was 16 and they didn't believe me, so I went back and my dad wouldn't sign the papers and my mom wouldn't sign the papers, so I went to NYA school in Gladwater. They had a machinist school.

What does NYA stand for? National Youth Administration?

Puett Willcox: Yeah, National Youth. They needed workers everywhere, you know, for all the war plats, so they was training machinists and welders over there. I went to machinist school and I was there for about 6 or 8 weeks and I went to another job in Fort Worth, consolidated aircraft making parts for B-24's. The other, they had a secret airplane they was making and I made parts for it and I later found out it was what they called a B-32 but they never made but one or two of 'em. Anyway, when I got my draft notice in December, I came back and joined the Air Corps and went through boot camp at Wichita Falls and went to aircraft mechanic school there, and went to gunnery school in Panama City, Florida, and I went from there to Hill Field, Utah, where I was assigned to a B-24 crew, and we went from there, there was a crew on a troop train to Boise, Idaho. Went through training there as a replacement crew, and our crew and another

crew was always beating each other out for first place best gunners, the best bombardier, the best navigator, the best everything, and there was a fellow on there, William S. Strange from Marshall that was my real good friend.

So you guys were from nearby towns.

Puett Willcox: Yeah, right, and William S. Strange, he was a real farm boy and quiet kind of guy, but very dedicated. Everybody was dedicated. We were all full of patriotism, bulletproof, indestructible and the Lord had us all in the palm of his hand, and we wound up in an outfit that they got all their airplanes, they was training in Mountain Home, Idaho. So they got all their new planes and they'd lost two crews, so being top crew, we were assigned to that outfit. They had to go through a face checkout in Topeka, Kansas, and so we went there and didn't get any new airplanes. They wouldn't get a new airplane to replace those that crashed until they got overseas, and we went there and they checked us all out. The commander and everybody was upset with us because we was better than any of 'em. We had the top gunners, top bombardiers, and top navigator and everything.

What was it you think made your crew so good?

Puett Willcox: Our commander, our pilot, he said we're gonna be the best crew in the United States Army Air Corps, and we was like brothers. We would practice, practice, practice all the time. Everything we did in Boise was together. We was together on everything, and we didn't fight amongst ourselves. We helped each other in our jobs, and the pilot, he trained all of us to fly the airplane in case something happened to him.

And that was pretty unusual, wasn't it?

Puett Willcox: Yeah, it was, and I think we was the only crew doing that, and we kind of did it in secret and we really got a lot of feel for the airplanes. Everybody helped each other do it, you know. When our turn came to be pilot, everybody rooted for you, you know. It was just a together crew.

How many men were in your crew?

Puett Willcox: 10, and we was from everywhere, like I was from Texas and had a fellow from Kansas, one from Detroit, one from California, and one from Pennsylvania, and one from Connecticut, one from New Hampshire, one from Wyoming. Anyway, we was all together.

What were the age ranges?

Puett Willcox: I was the youngest at 19. I was 18 when I got on the crew. Then the oldest was a guy named Sharpnick from Pennsylvania, William Sharpnick, and he was 28. And the pilot was 22, 24. And the rest of the officers, well there was one that was 26, and he was a German, and Munsen was his name. He was a great guy, too. Well, they all was great guys.

And you trained together for quite some time then.

Puett Willcox: Oh yeah, from oh, it was about August of '43 until January or February when we went to Topeka, Kansas. We finished training and went overseas. Because we didn't have an airplane, all the enlisted guys went over on a boat and the officers flew over because they had

to fly the honchos – the commanders and adjutants and all the big wheels of the group – and there was 100 planes in the group.

When you left to finally head off to war, I guess you were pretty eager at that point to go.

Puett Willcox: Oh yeah, everybody was eager to get there, afraid we were gonna miss it, you know. Everybody was so patriotic is the word. Everybody wanted to free the world. We didn't want to be fighting on our shores, and we talked like that, you know. We didn't talk about hating the Japs or the Germans. We talked about their leaders. Anyway, when we got aboard ship, the first night, like I said, I was the youngest in the group and there was 13, and this was a whole ground troop, about 1,700 troops I guess, all the ground personnel, all the mechanics and whatever, cooks, bakers and candlestick makers aboard this ship, and we got aboard ship up in New Jersey, Camp ____ in New Jersey, and we went south that night and joined a convoy off the coast of Florida and went to Italy. It took 26 days to get there.

That was a long time on a boat.

Puett Willcox: Yeah it was. Well that first night, they put us in bunks about 18 inches apart, 6 high, with canvas stretched between pipes, and so I was up roaming around the ship someplace where I shouldn't in the hallways trying to find a better place, and heard around the corner a couple of voices and I stepped up to the corner and saw these two officers, a Navy and a Air Corps guy, and so I listened, and the Navy guy says, do you have any people in your hold that knows anything about guns? Machine guns, canons or anything? We're short Navy gun crew. And I listened, and he said well, I don't know but I'll check. So I stepped around the corner, now I'm a sergeant, see, I stepped around the corner and I gave these guys the sharpest salute I could and I said sir, Sergeant Willcox reporting. I am a ball turret gunner on a B-24 and I can take a 50 caliber machine gun apart and put it back together in 58 seconds blindfolded, and I know 12 more people in the hold that can do the same thing. There was 13 of us gunners and crew members aboard. So he says, well can you report – see, what really got me is this Navy guys says, now when you find somebody that gonna sleep with the Navy, eat with the Navy, and they're gonna pull watch with the Navy 4 hours on and 8 hours off, 24/7. And the eatin' and the sleepin' is what sharpened my salute up, see. And so I went down to the hold and I told these guys, gather up your stuff, we're movin'. I told all of 'em, see, and I'm the youngest one. And there was one guy or two guys that had less rank than I did, but about two of 'em, or four of 'em had one stripe more than I did. Anyway so these guys say what is it? I said we'll, we're going to the Navy and we're going to be gunners and we're gonna sleep and eat with the Navy. And they said all right! See, all the guys around us well they would like that, too, because we made more room for them. Anyway, so I was in the Navy 26 days on a gun crew, and when we got to Italy, we came off the boat and they put us all in trucks, and had this convoy of trucks. I don't know how many trucks it was. It was about 45, 30 of us on each truck, maybe more. Anyway we were on trucks and sometime in the middle of the night, that was in the morning, sometime in the middle of the night we heard small arms fire, and these trucks started making 180 in the road or whatever they was on, and they done got to the front lines. We was lost.

Wow, that is a little scary.

Puett Willcox: So we finally got to where we were supposed to be at about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, and it was a lieutenant colonel and a sergeant there, and some more people, and they had piles of cots in an open, well it wasn't an open field, it was in an olive orchard and they had hard tack and water to eat. Oh boy, so we had K-rations on the truck, though, and we was

always moving and there would be a truck come along and pass out a bunch of K-rations to each truck while we was still moving, and they would fuel the trucks up while we were still moving. Anyway, later, oh, in April – that was February – in April, March, our field wasn't finished. We put up cots and all that and tents -

So this was April of '44?

Puett Willcox: Yeah, and in April in snow and that Mt. Vesuvius over there, it had erupted and it snowed, but it was red snow, and if you went outside and got snow on you, you got dirty. It was dust from that volcano in the snow. So that was a strange happening for a Texas fellow, although I've been in Boise, Idaho we had white snow. Anyway, so I'm gonna advance to May 10th of 1944.

OK.

Puett Willcox: We weren't operating from our home base. All our airplanes was down in Africa with the crews that was training down there. So when they came up on another field and crowded, crowded, lots of airplanes, so on May 10th, 1944, they woke us for a mission at 3:30. We got dressed, went to the mess hall, and some guys played with their food, some guys gobbled it down, and most of the guys was prayin', and it was kind of a somber atmosphere.

Was this going to be your first mission?

Puett Willcox: No, it was later. We went to briefing and they briefed us on what our mission was, Wiener Neustadt, Austria, a ball bearing factory and marshaling yards or big railroad yards they had near there and still is I guess this mountain of iron. They'd been taking iron out of there since it was discovered in the Iron Age, iron ore, that mountain is a mountain of iron I guess. It was a 1,000-plane raid, and like I said, our commander and everybody they would lock us so we was tailing Charlie all the time on a mission, and the last plane. But it was kind of a good place because we didn't have to really stay in formation. We were back there kind of roaming. Everybody else was in formation until time.

Why was it you think the commander didn't like your plane?

Puett Willcox: Because we were so much better than the rest of the group. We had a big percentage of hits on the machine gun, all the turrets. They put plane on our shelves in training and so everybody's plane had a different color, so when you would shoot at the windsock, the airplane was towing a sock we called it, it was about 25-foot long and it was basically a sock and the air flowing through it, a round cloth, and when the bullets go through it, it leaves the paint, so that's how they counted your scores. They thought 10 percent on hits was great. Well we had 30 to 50 something percent.

That's quite a bit higher.

Puett Willcox: Oh yeah, and then the bombs, if you hit so close, and our bombardier, he was super. He was from California, too, he's from Los Angeles. Old Mars was his name. Anyway, we were at briefing and went out to the planes and got on, and we'd always take off in a crash position because some planes crashed on takeoff because we were so loaded with fuel and bombs and the ammunition stuff. So four of us in the back, of course I was in ball turret, but we set against the bulkhead with our backs to the forward, and our hands clasped behind our heads, and

I'm setting there between two guys on one side and one on the other, and about halfway down the runway, I usually put this part later but I'm putting it in the beginning where it's supposed to be, we was rolling down the runway and back between the two windows, waist windows where the waist gunner stood, stood our Lord Jesus, and it was quite a sight and it seemed at the time it seemed like it was taking oh, 5 or 10 minutes, but it was just seconds, and He let me know and told me something bad was going to happen, but He was going to take care of me. And He's gone. But it seemed like I was watching him for 5 or 10 minutes. So I punched him, and these guys on the side of me, I said did you see that? And they said see what? Well, at that time the pilot rang the bell for us to do our jobs, we was off the ground, and we had stuff to do. And everybody had something to do to get ready, and look out for other planes and all kind of things to do. I had to get my turret ready and the tailgunner, he had to get his turret ready. Anyway so we got busy, and I didn't even get to tell 'em what I saw.

Wow, and you'd never seen anything like that before?

Puett Willcox: No, that was the first time. And I found out later after I got home, well my mom always prayed for me, always. My brother says she was always praying for her sons in the service, and I had a brother in combat engineers, too. And so we got to the target and we had this Tuskegee or I can't never say the right name, Black fighters -

Tuskegee Airmen?

Puett Willcox: Yeah, they was our escorts, always, and German fighters was really scared of these guys, and when you'd hear them on the radio, it was really something to hear them talking in combat. Anyway, we got to the target and remember there's 999 planes in front of us, and it was the sky, we were at about 25,000 feet or so, and the sky in front of us was black with anti-aircraft fire, and the black puff made big clouds. So we dropped our bombs, and part of my job was to watch our bombs fall and see where they hit, so I watched them all the way down and we hit that round table, they had a mammoth round table, that railroad yard, and we hit that right across the middle of it, our bombs did. They had 500-pounders, destruct bombs, had 10 of 'em or 12 of 'em, and they just made it right down the middle of it. The last burst of flack over the target went through the middle of our airplane and burst about 10 feet above us the top gunner told me the next day. We started burning and smoke was coming in my turret. I didn't know we was on fire. I didn't know we was hit. So my receiving part of my communications was out, but my transmitting part was working. I found that out later. So I thought my heated suit was burning and I unplugged it, and to do that I had to take my hands off of the controls of the turret, and when I put my hands back, I saw these holes in my turret that caused flack and smoke coming in. So I'm pulling the gun straight down, opened the door and I saw these flames above my head, and I turned the turret so I could look back. I was looking forward. I saw these guys, the flames was running these guys out and they had the tailgunner, so I called the pilot and told him these guys are bailing out, and I'm gonna do the same. I stuck my hand on a piece of fire and waved it to the tailgunner as he was going out. He waved back, and I got out and I was mappin' on my parachute and I was looking forward, and our pilot, he had dodged these anti-aircraft fire after we dropped our bombs. He was moving up and across and we was telling him where the anti-aircraft was, where they was bursting, and they was getting closer and closer to us. So I got out and I was standing there, I had a chest pack and had my harness already on, so I was snapping this parachute on the harness, and the airplane blew up.

And what altitude were you at that time you think?

Puett Willcox: Well when we was hit, we were about 28,000 feet, and we had dropped because one engine had quit, and we dropped I figured maybe 3,000 feet or so, and so when it blew up, it blew in half and it broke right where that ball turret was because that was the weakest part of the airplane. And an oxygen bottle that was attached to the top of the airplane in the back came forward, and an explosion, it causes a vacuum, so it sucked all this stuff forward and it sucked me forward and then it blows it back out. I was in the air kind of bent over double, facing the rear, and this machine from the wafer, right waist gun hit my left knee and I saw that coming and couldn't do nothing about it, but then I saw this oxygen bottle coming, and all this seemed like slow motion. Everything was moving very slow, but of course it wasn't. I wasn't scared, I wasn't afraid, I wasn't nothing, just the Lord is taking care of me I guess. The oxygen bottle hit my right eyebrow and knocked me out, and I woke up hanging from the tail of the plane where the ball turret had been, and ammunition belts and control cables wrapped around my legs and I was upside down, and I looked around and saw my group backing away, going home. And I said out loud, I said this out loud, I had my oxygen mask on and everything, and I said out loud, you guys are running off and leaving me, and I waved at 'em. That was a realization, kind of woke me up more I guess. Anyway, I kicked loose and I started falling, and I was looking around. I started to open my parachute, and a small piece of the airplane hit me, and I said no, don't do that now, don't pull that rip cord because a piece might tear that parachute.

Yeah, that's right.

Puett Willcox: And see the Lord, he said he'd take care of me. He kept me at my wits. And I wasn't scared, really it was quite a feeling. If you kick, laid your board back, and the feet laying out there and you're laying back as far as you can, I was about this position I was falling, and you don't realize you are falling because there's no trees or telephone poles or nothing else there to -

Yeah, nothing to gauge it by.

Puett Willcox: Yeah, and you feel wind going by but you think somebody's got a big fan on. So I counted the parachutes and there were six of them, and they had trained us when you see the horizon, you're making a free fall like that and you see the horizon coming up around you, you always think about opening your parachute about this time because you're somewhere between 2,000 and 5,000 feet. So I saw this happening, so I opened my parachute and I counted parachutes again and there was five, and the other one was collapsed and there was a German fighter pulling up right above the parachute. He had strafed the guy, and what they would do they would strafe you with their machine guns and then they would pull up right over you and collapse your parachute. We figured later that was our nose gunner. But his name was Pinrod. And he was from California, too. I forgot where in California.

So how do you think you were able to avoid getting strafed?

Puett Willcox: Well, I was the last one out. See these guys was over the target. They went out first.

Did everybody get out?

Puett Willcox: No, the pilot, copilot, and the navigator didn't get out, and the bombardier, he didn't want to go out and him and the nose gunner was in the nose of the airplane, see, so he calls to the pilot, to the flight deck and the pilot told him to go. Well he started going, that's

when it blew up he said, and it blew gasoline over his helmet and it burned all his hair off. He was at the hospital when he hit the ground. Anyway, while I was falling, after that I started hearing a tick-tick-tick, and I looked up and holes was coming in my parachute, and I looked down and there was about 30 guys in uniform shooting at me with rifles, and so I pulled my '45 out of my shoulder holster, and I looked down again and I said no, there was too many of them. I dropped this clip out of it and took it apart and threw the bolt one way and the handle the other way, receiver the other way, and I prepared to hit the field, and it was a plowed field I was landing in. I was 35 miles from the target. The wind was blowing about 35mph and I was going sideways as much as I was going down in that parachute. So I hit this plowed field and my feet buried in a fresh plowed field almost up to my knees, and the parachute was dragging me and these guys are still shooting. I rolled over on my back and the parachute is dragging me, and I waved my arms and about that time, the parachute hit this row of trees and these guys jumped all over me.

They were Germans?

Puett Willcox: Yeah. And these guys was in uniform now, they were 13 to 15 years old. They was Austrians. One guy was about 70, he was in charge, and there was one about 20, and he was home on, he had been wounded and he was on leave I guess, convalescent leave, and so he was bad. But these other guys, all these guys, they were younger than me, they were kids, and they were kind of in awe of it all, and of course I was, too. I wasn't scared of them, I was just in awe, in wonderment of all these guys like my kid brothers. I was the oldest of five boys, so you know, I was in wonderment of everything.

Did any of them speak English or did you know any German?

Puett Willcox: No, I didn't know German or they didn't know English, but I could understand pistol and Chesterfield. I had five packs of Chesterfields and they took 'em all, and they says oh, Chesterfield. They wanted my pistol and I pointed up, it's up there. Then I got up, they stood me up and they had taken all the stuff off of me, the parachute, harness and everything, and they gathered up this parachute and put all this stuff in my arms while I'm standing there, see. And I hadn't made a step yet. And so they started taking me off and I fell on my face. I didn't know I was hurt. I didn't know I was looking out of one eye either. The other eye, my right eye was covered with congealed blood, and I didn't realize I was just seeing out of one eye, and so their guns came pointing on me. When I fell, they thought I was trying to run away I guess. Anyway, so they stood me back up and the bigger boys took all my stuff and they got two of the tallest ones around me on each side to help me or walk, and we walked out of this field and went up this trail. They took me to this town to a big old beer hall. I saw three or four houses and that's all I saw in this town. So I was in this beer hall. Well a fat lady came with big beer steins to pass them all around to these kids, and she came back with a fistful of beer steins again and she handed me the last one, and this 70-year-old guy, I figured he was a cavalry guy because he had a quirt and he had cavalry boots on. He hit me across the wrist with that quirt and he gave us, the fat lady, the devil for giving me the beer. My throat was dry like it is now. Anyway so they brought this little 7-year-old boy in and he was taking English in school I guess, so he was acting as interpreter. This was the way he would do it. He would point at himself and he says Fritz or whatever his name was, I forgot, and I says oh, this guy wants my name. So I says "Puett Lafayette Willcox Junior." He says Fritz, and I says Puett Lafayette Willcox Junior. And so they called me "Villcox" – he couldn't say the W. He says "Vill." So he points at himself and he says 7, I said oh, he must be age, he's 7. OK. Well before that, I gave him my rank and my serial number. Name, rank, and serial number is all we're supposed to give 'em. So I had to

write down the numbers because he couldn't understand the numbers. So then he says his age. I says 19. I said I don't guess that would hurt. And they couldn't understand 19 for nothin'. And I thought well, today's Kenneth Anderson the radio operator, today is his 21st birthday, and in 17 days I'll be twenty. So I says OK, I'm 20. And ah, ah so, zwanzee. I says no, 20. And he kept saying zwanzee. And I said no, 20. So anyway, that went on for a while.

At this time did you see any other prisoners? Did anybody else in your crew do you know if they survived at that point or were you just by yourself?

Puett Willcox: I was by myself. I knew there was five parachutes but I didn't know who they was. I knew that three guys in the back got out with me, and that was Donald Huron and Winford Wells, he was from Kansas, and Donald was from Detroit, and Kenneth Anderson, the radio operator was from Mountain View, California. So I knew them guys was out. So he says mutter and fatter – I says oh, he wants to know my mother and father's address. He wanted to know where they lived. I understood that part somehow. I says no mother, no father, no per diem. And they couldn't understand no per diem, they didn't understand per diem. And that's how I felt, I was humorous.

So you weren't afraid at that point.

Puett Willcox: Yeah, I wasn't afraid of nothing. I really wasn't. I said no per diem and that really got 'em. They was talking about it. I said no per diem, you know, I dipped my fingers like I was handling money, you know. No per diem, they're not paying me. They're paying me quarters and rations. They just couldn't understand that. This poor little 7-year-old boy, he was something else. But you know, they took me to a little room, they got all they could out of me and took me to this little room and I was setting there for about 5 minutes and this major walked in, and boy, what an English speaking guy he was now. He had been to Harvard and Yale and he didn't ask me one question except where's your dog tags? I told him, a 20-year-old guy, he jerked them off my neck and I showed him where they burned my neck when he broke it, he jerked it so hard he burned my neck. And so he says, oh, you need your dog tags so your folks will know that you are here and you are alive. But the first thing he said to me, he said Sergeant Willcox, the war is over for you. I says yes sir, I suppose so. And it was really something. He didn't ask me anything except that, how are you feeling? And then he started telling me about his experience in the United States, and now Austrian folks are a lot different than Germans. They was kinder, more polite, better educated. They were more like family I guess. Anyway, he said well, after a while he says there will be a truck come by here and pick you up in a little while, and take you to Wiener Neustadt. I said OK. And he hollered out when I told him about my dog tags, see. And he hollered out something and talked to somebody and so they found this guy and he had one of my dog tags and he had given the other one to his girlfriend who was on her way to Wiener Neustadt. So he told me about that. He said pretty fraulein has got your other dog tag, and I don't think we'll ever find that. I says all right, this will do. So in a little while a small truck came by and I got in the back of it and they put me in the back, and down the road apiece they stopped and picked up a copilot from another airplane in our group. I recognized his jacket. I didn't recognize him but I recognized his leather jacket. He had his plane painted on the back of it, name of it. And they stopped at a railroad crossing and they gave us some black bread and what they called coffee. We found out later that coffee was ground acorns, and bitter, bitter. But the black bread, we didn't understand that either, was very thin sliced and made out of sawdust. It had a lot of sawdust in it and bitter. Anyway, they got us to this jail and there was a woman standing at a dead end alley where the jail was and she was standing out there waving to us with a butcher knife, it looked like a sword, and hollering kill 'em, kill 'em.

In English?

Puett Willcox: Yeah. And so the guard kind of ran us into this jail and they had a lot of prisoners through there and they had these slabs of concrete with big, great big, giant paper bags for mattresses and they was full of straw or wood shavings. In the laundry room was a guy, they put a bunch of them in there at one time and it was a big room and they had taken stuff out of their escape kits and that kind of stuff, and put in the under the straw when they took 'em in to interview 'em.

When sir were you able to -

Puett Willcox: A major came in, another major, he came in there and he started telling us, he didn't ask us anything either except how are you doing, the war is over for you and this kind of thing, and then they started telling us about his experience in the United States. And he had gone to Harvard and some other college. He didn't go to Yale, he went to Harvard and something, and he was a very well educated person, and very polite. Hmm, is this the way it's gonna be? Well that was to fake you out I guess. Anyway, they took us to the dormitory, where this college is close, and it was a bunch of guys in double deck bunks, and this great big room at the end of the building, second floor, and so I was looking for my crew members and I found one of them and I shook him and the guard grabbed me and says Sloppin' Sloppin' and he showed me this big paper bag under these tables out in the middle of the floor, and so I laid down there and went to sleep, went to sleep prayin'. I said Lord, you said you'd take care of me, and you have, and so the next morning I woke up and these guys are talking about me and they were four of my crew members, and I crawled out from under that table and they was in a circle and grabbed a couple of them around the neck, I says I don't believe a word you guys are sayin'. And boy, they cleaned my eye out and the congealed blood had my eye, still had it closed. And they had bandaged my knee and they asked me, what was that you saw in the back of the plane? So I told them. They said boy, I'm sure glad I'm with you. And then Ken Anderson, he started complaining about his birthday. I said what do you have to complain about? All that fireworks them guys giving you? We kidded about that, you know, all the fireworks the Germans put up for him, and it was very -

Did you ever have any concern while you were a POW that you might be executed or mistreated?

Puett Willcox: I never was. I escaped later with, they sent us up to Poland, almost to Russia by the North Sea up there, close to East Prussia, and a brand new camp that wasn't finished when we got there. It was about two weeks, three weeks later. I was on a train. They put us in boxcars, about 80 of us in a boxcar and supposed to be 40, they called 'em 40 and 8 cars, 40 men or 8 horses. They were World War I boxcars and that's what they called these cars. They moved very slow, very seldom, and it took us I don't know how many days to get there and I don't remember eating all the time we was on that train, but on February the 2nd of 1945, we didn't get much food and we was losing a lot of weight.

OK, just to go back, you were shot down in May of '44, right? So this is February of '45 now.

Puett Willcox: OK, and we hadn't gotten much food and the commander up there, he asked us any ideas on how to get food, because his troops weren't getting food either, see. So we told him to weigh everybody and put down the weight before they got here and the weight now. So he

gathered up some scales and weighed everybody, and I had lost, this was 43 days after I was show down, I had lost from 160 down to 92 in 43 days.

That's pretty scary.

Puett Willcox: Yeah, and that was just me. And so we had dehydrated sauerkraut soup and a potato once in a while, but we'd have that once a day, soup.

Did you ever get any word to your family through the Red Cross as to how you were?

Puett Willcox: Well, they had some form letters and we could write two letters and four postcards a month, and I didn't get any letters, and our family could send us an 11-pound package once a month, and I didn't get any packages. But my family sent a lot of packages.

So the Germans just kept them for themselves.

Puett Willcox: And the Red Cross man came through around Christmas time or so and he told us if our family sent good packages that we wouldn't get 'em. My family must have sent great packages. And so -

Was the Red Cross man German?

Puett Willcox: Oh, he was from Copenhagen, Denmark, and he was a preacher, too, I think or a priest, because he had communion while he was there. He just came one time, and he brought some cards and some shoes, some British shoes that had hobnails in them. And he was there for a couple, three days I think. But that was in Stalag 4, the name of the camp.

Did you ever have any doubt, sir, that you were going to survive and eventually come home?

Puett Willcox: You know, I never did. Very few of the guys had doubts, but not many. There was like this William Strange, well he tried to kill himself because he was the only one that went out of his plane and his pilot, it was on flat spin and his pilot straightened it out. He came to camp before Christmas, and we saw him and he was in another compound. We saw him through the fences. They had barbed wire fences around them. The wires were about 2 inches, 4 inches apart, and the barbs were about 4 inches apart, and they had two rows of fences and there was about 25 feet apart between our compound and his compound. We saw him walking around, and I went on sick call and went over there and I saw him and he was in the hospital then. We'd talk to him through the fences, and I don't even remember why I went on sick call because I saw his name on the wall and I asked what that meant, and they said well he's in that room number. So I went to that room and he was just laying there. He had run up to the fence and they pulled him off before the guards could shoot him. He was trying to climb the barbed wire fence. And they had a rail about 20 feet from the fence that you weren't supposed to jump over this rail. It was about 2 foot high, just a board on a post all the way around the fences so you weren't supposed to get closer than that to the fence. Sometimes there would be a guard go bananas and start shooting into the compound. One guard was walking the fence and another guy and I, one of my buddies, we were walking down on the inside and we would walk around the compound, and we saw this guard pull up his rifle, stick it through the fence and we started running. He was aiming in front of us. He was about 25 yards in front of us and we saw him aiming toward the front of us, and we started hollering. We ran up there and he shot this troop through his shoulders and cut his heart. He died instantly. He was looking in a window of one of the barracks talking to

somebody inside. Well the commander sent him to the Russian front. The way that their policy was, the German Air Force guarded Air Force prisoners, and the Army guarded the Army prisoners, and the Navy guarded the Navy prisoners, so the prison camps was like that. This was all Air Force prisoners. It was over 10,000 of us in there before we evacuated, and I was going to say February the 2nd of 1945, the Russian front was getting too close. We could hear small arms fire and they had sent the guys that were wounded so bad out on trains about 3,000 of them, and we knew that something was going to happen. We started getting all our stuff together and everything. Starvation more Red Cross parcels. So the morning of February the 2nd, our group marched out, and they marched out in different groups, and it was about 3,800 to a group, and we left 6 o'clock in the morning and they marched us until 4 o'clock the next morning. The ice was about 2 to 3 feet on the road, snow was about 20 feet high on the sides of the road. And we marched continuously, and the Germans didn't want to get captured by the Russians. So if a guy fall out, and his buddies couldn't help him anymore, well a guard would fall out with him and they were still marching, and a little while later you would hear a rifle shot, and then a little while later the guard would catch up. So the next day they had these four or three huge, huge barns and the floors was all covered with straw, and so we all fell out on that straw, and they woke us up about 2 o'clock and counted us about 4 or 5, and there were 386 guys missing. So that many they had killed. This kind of march, we called it the death march. Nobody's heard about it. They didn't publicize that in the death march. And we marched for 92 days, went over 600 miles on country roads. There was another group going around the coast of Poland to the coast of Germany and then down south.

When was it that you were finally done with this march?

Puett Willcox: On May the 6th.

May of '45?

Puett Willcox: Yeah.

Did you have a pretty good feeling at that point that the Allies were going to win?

Puett Willcox: Yeah, well we had radios. We'd bribe the guards with cigarettes and blackmail them with stuff they would do, and we found out that our commander, the German commander, he didn't allow some stuff going on, but cigarettes was like gold.

How did you get cigarettes?

Puett Willcox: In the Red Cross parcels. We got the Red Cross parcels. One box was supposed to last one guy a week, and we got one, for four guys for a week, and they had four packs or five packs of cigarettes in each parcel, and they was like gold. And powdered coffee. On the march, powdered coffee was like gold. We got a little bit of powdered coffee in the Red Cross parcels, and see they didn't get any coffee, and the civilians had them ground acorns for coffee. And mint tea, like a level teaspoon of powdered coffee, and it was like powder. If I have to do something, I'll do it, I'll learn it, like I learned German. I don't know much of it now, hardly any of it, but I'll do enough to where I could wheel a deal, and I could get three big loaves of bread and a can of meat maybe and maybe two pounds of margarine and some jam sometimes. Not all of that at once, but three of 'em, for one teaspoon of coffee. That's how valuable that coffee was to them. And the guards, they weren't eating much better, see, so they would go with us and they would get something from the civilian population for getting us there to trade, to get that

coffee, or chocolate. We'd get a D bar which was one small bar of chocolate, but it's real concentrated chocolate bar.

Sir, when was it that you were finally liberated?

Puett Willcox: 6th of May, 1945, we was, but down between Hamburg and Hanover.

Did you know you were going to be liberated that day, did you have any idea?

Puett Willcox: Yeah, we was on country roads at an intersection and we stopped and we seen our commander, we one of our sergeants and a commander, and we had an interpreter guy, knew German, and they with our German commander interpreter went forward, and we stood there and they came back about an hour later. They came back in a jeep with the second lieutenant and a driver, a sergeant, British 2nd Army, or Armored Division. It was a recon outfit had half tracks, but he was just in the jeep by himself, and the half tracks was way behind. And he says you guys stay on this road and the guards will be in charge of you until you see the half tracks, and they'll protect you from the civilians. Then they'll go a different direction and you guys just stay on this road for 100 miles until you get to Brussels, Belgium. You know, we could dance 100 miles. We'd already been over 600 in that 92 days. And anyway we marched up that road and the guards, they turned their guns over to the guys in the half tracks and they went somewhere, and our guys just scattered off. But me and my buddy, I had this guy, his name was Gerald Ford and he was from Los Angeles, he was tail gunner on another airplane and he was shot down way after we was, but he had a bad thing. He was with a sick group. We had a sick group along this thing and these guys mostly had diarrhea and this guy couldn't stay away from the water in the holes along the road, and he would just drink the water and keep that diarrhea. And maybe horse pee or guys peeing along the road or whatever.

Yeah, that's horrible.

Puett Willcox: His tear ducts continually ran, so he was dehydrated and he was with that sick group and we passed him one time, every time we'd pass him or they would pass us, well I saw him and I asked the doctor, this doctor had got shot down on a mission and he was a supply surgeon, and he got shot down and he was with our camp. I says what's the matter with Gerald? He says, he told me about his diarrhea, and I said well I've got fresh water. I would boil water everywhere I can, and I've got plenty. I'll keep him out of them holes. He said he'd be all right if he stays out of them – I'll get him if you'll let him go. He says he can go. So I took him and anyway I kept him in boiled water. So we went and were going up this road, and on the second day, or on the eighth, we came to this armored battalion I guess or Army, and it was a general and a whole bunch of tanks and armored equipment, and they had a white flag and they were looking for somebody to surrender to. Now we didn't have any, me and Joe, we walked up to him, you know, and we says ah, they've got vehicles, see, so even had a staff car and they had this camouflage net all over it and this blond lady in the back, and this general's emblem on the front, and we says, raus, raus, raus, raus. And he said general, general. We said krieg's gefagene – prisoner of war. And he says general, I says krieg's gefagene, and raus, raus, and we kicked 'em out of the car and had 'em tear the netting off and we got in the staff car and drove off. That was dumb. You know, those guys still had their guns.

Sure.

Puett Willcox: Gerald and I, we was headed for Brussels, see.

And once you got there, how much longer was it before you were able to get back home?

Puett Willcox: A month.

About a month.

Puett Willcox: Yeah, you know the war was over, and I'd never came to the camp, well they took us from Brussels, they flew us to Le Havre, France, and there were all prisoners of war and they separated us into groups of where we was from because they had different staging areas in the stage for us. So anyway, I got in a tent with a guy from mother and family had moved to Memphis same day I was in the service, from Longview, and so we drove up there and this British guy at Brussels said where'd you get this staff car? We told him, and he said what was the general's name? We don't know. We don't care. So they brought this colonel to us that was in charge there, and he wanted to know what the general's name was. He showed us some pictures, and we said that one. He said oh, he's a bad guy. You guys are crazy. We said yeah, we know. We thought about it later. And we'd accept his surrender though.

Well sir, I tell you, I really appreciate you talking to us today. I know we've taken a lot of your time, probably longer than anticipated.

Puett Willcox: He came there, he says, you guys mind waiting? We've got a whole bunch of war equipment to send to the Pacific. Those guys need it over there and we're gonna use the ships. And yeah, that's all right, you know. Well most of these guys, they went to Paris and all different places was in that group when we was liberated. They went all over, you know.

Yes sir. Well your interview's been great, sir. It's an honor to talk to you and hear your accounts of your time in our service, and I know everybody here at the Land Office from Commissioner Patterson on down is very thankful for your service and sacrifice to our country. And what we'll do as I mentioned before, we'll make copies of this onto CD's and we'll get those to you as soon as those are done. Then if you have any -

Puett Willcox: This is a book, well I haven't published, hasn't been finished –

Well, and if you've got any pictures that you want us to put on our web site, you can send us either the originals we can scan and copy or just copies and we can put those on there, too.

Puett Willcox: All my family and I was in the service 25 years, so all my pictures got scattered.

OK sir.

Puett Willcox: And I got family pictures here, but none of the war.

OK, understood. Anything though that you think you'd want us to put on there, let us know.

Puett Willcox: OK, if I find any, I'll look it up.

All right sir, well it was great talking to you.

Puett Willcox: OK Jim.

Feel free to keep in touch. You've got my numbers. Thank you very much sir.

Puett Willcox: Thank you sir.

[End of recording]