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World War II: Border Homefront
Oral History Project

Reyes V. Torres
By Michelle L. Gomilla

October 19, 1994

This is an interview with Reyes Torres, former gunner with the United States Army Air Corps during World War II. The interview, by Michelle Gomilla, is part of the World War II: Border Homefront Oral History Project. We are located at Mr. Torres home at 1216 Wright Street, El Paso, Texas. Today's date is October 19, 1994.

G: Mr. Torres, before we begin discussing your recollections of World War II and your experiences as a POW, I'd like to begin the interview by asking you a bit of biographical information. Perhaps you can begin by telling us when and where you were born, please.

T: I was born here in El Paso in 1921. And I went to Beall School. It was an elementary school. From there I went to Bowie High School. And I graduated from Bowie High School in 1940 in May. In September I went to Texas College of Mines, which is now UTEP. And I attended UTEP, let's say, for one year. And then I had to drop out for the simple reason that my finances couldn't manage my education.

I had a what they call NYA job. It was National Youth

Administration. And they used to pay me eleven dollars a month and I used to clean the boiler room at Texas College of Mines. That was my job. But then, I didn't have transportation. I had to walk sometimes all the way from south El Paso - we used to call it east El Paso then - all the way to UTEP. And sometimes I just couldn't make it because of weather or lack of funds because we never had enough money for bus or for streetcar [fares]. And, as a matter of fact, there were no buses to UTEP. There were streetcars.

And after that I got a job in a grocery store. And then in March of 1942 we got married. I had met my wife. She was my neighbor. And we had gone together since high school. She was my high school sweetheart. And we married, so eventually I had to get a job, a better job. That's when I started working for the Southern Pacific Railroad. I worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad thirty-four years as a car man. And a car man is a mechanic of box cars and passenger cars. In my later years I was a shop car inspector. And that's a job inspecting cars, billing the owners.

And then in October of [19]42 I got drafted. The company wouldn't give me an exemption. And I didn't want any. I wanted to join the service because I didn't get married to keep away from the service. So I went into the service here at Fort Bliss. And from Fort Bliss I went to Kerns, Utah. And there I was classified. I was given a lot of tests. And, I guess, I passed all the tests because I never took basic

training at all right there in radio school.

In Sioux Falls, South Dakota, I graduated from radio school and then I went to gunner school in Las Vegas, Nevada. There I made an application to become a bombardier. And I passed the test and then they told me to wait for orders. That was in - I was waiting for orders in Boise, Idaho. I stayed there a month by myself in the barracks waiting for orders. At one time I got disgusted and I went and joined a bomber crew. That's a combat crew.

And from there I was sent to Fairmont, Nebraska for my training. There we flew, you can say, day and night. When you didn't fly you had to go to school. It was - you had to go through three phases of training for combat training. They told us not to bring our wives over to Fairmont, Nebraska during the training. You could bring your wife to Fairmont when you got through with the training.

What happened, I flew almost day and night so I could get through with my phases, three phases. I was the first one to get through with those three phases, so I sent for my wife. Nobody knew that my wife was in Fairmont. And in Fairmont, my wife, all she could rent was a, you can say, a walk-in closet because there was no place to rent there. It was a very, very small town in the middle of nowhere. It was about, oh, say, ten miles from the base.

I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning because I was through with my training. And everybody asked me, "Rey,

where you going? Where you been all morning, all the afternoon?" They didn't know that I got a man to give me a ride every morning to Fairmont, Nebraska and I'd go see my wife. And when they found out that I had my wife in there, everybody started flying and going to school so they could get through with their phases. (chuckles) So, suddenly, there were a lot of wives there. And we had get togethers. And we were so tired all the time of so much flying. And, of course, after my training I kept on flying because you have to keep on flying. And I was a radio operator and gunner, a waist gunner.

From there we went to Lincoln, Nebraska. And Lincoln, Nebraska was a staging area what they called. And then we had orders to go overseas. We went to Miami, Florida for an overnight stop and for shots. I guess I had about eleven shots at one time there because you have to have so many shots before you went overseas. From there we flew to Puerto Rico. And from Puerto Rico we flew to British New Guinea. And from there we flew to Recife, Brazil. We stayed there a couple of days and then we flew overseas.

We flew to French West Africa [to] a town by the name of Dakar. From Dakar we flew to Marrakesh. And [from] Marrakesh we were supposed to fly to Italy, but there was a snow storm. And I couldn't believe it [that] in North Africa there would be snow, but it was terrible. And the planes couldn't fly. We were completely inactive because of the mud. And the water

conditions there were terrible. So all I did there was, you can say, guard duty on the base and at the airplane.

Finally, we flew to Foggia, Italy. That was our destination, in Foggia. And if Marrakesh was bad, Foggia was worse. It was tense. We didn't have any latrines, no kitchen, and it was very cold, bitter cold. And so we started flying there. First of all, we flew what they called milk runs. We used to fly over the Baltic Sea, over the Mediterranean Sea, just to spot whatever we could see, you know, and report it.

And then I flew some combat missions. And on my tenth mission we were going to Regensburg, Germany. That was a very important and long trip. We never got to Regensburg. I was shot down. My plane was shot down in northern Italy on the border of Austria in what they called the Carnic Alps. And we were shot down by fighters and by flack. It was terrible. We lost about thirty-two planes on that mission.

When I landed I landed way up high in the Alps. And, of course, when I bailed out I bailed out with a broken leg. I was shot inside the plane. I put my leg over the window when I bailed out because I couldn't [hardly stand up]. I barely stood up, put my left leg over the window, and then I rolled over to bail out. And when I landed I saw my foot. The front of my foot was backwards. It was a compound fracture. And, I guess, I had some skin there holding the leg.

For awhile, I was surprised. I was shocked. I didn't know what was going on. That was about 12:20 in the afternoon, beautiful sun... (wife comments that he landed in the snow) Yeah, where I landed was just pure snow and rugged mountains. I think it was about 12,000 feet, from ten to 12,000 feet, really. I stood there trying to figure what to do. And I said, "Well, I better start yelling for help. And I better start going down to see if I can see any trees, anything there." When you see trees, for sure, there's going to be water or maybe something to eat because I thought, "I'm going to stay here for three or four days and I better hustle."

Going down I met the waist gunner in my same plane. And there's a little story about that man. When I flew that mission it was my day off. I had my dress clothes ready to go to town with a laundry bag. We used to go to a town and have our laundry laundered and they would give us a chicken dinner with what they called Red Devil wine. And I was ready to go to town. That was my first time on a pass when they came and said, "Sergeant Torres, you're flying replacement." Well, they got a jeep. We went over to the plane. I just got in and we were ready to take off when I asked, "Where are we going?" He said, "Regensburg." [I thought], "Oh, boy."

And the guy that I'm telling you about that I met there in the mountains, the waist gunner, I didn't know that crew. I just barely knew them. But it was not my own crew. That

guy was a Ku Klux [Klan] man. And when I got in the plane, boy, he gave me the dirtiest look you have ever seen in your life.

Well, when I got to him in the mountain I said, "Let's go down, [Sergeant Lloyd E.] Webb. We can't stay here." And this guy, he was so thirsty he kept eating snow with his hands. And that's the first thing they tell you in training, not to use your hands to eat snow. [They told us], "Get your helmet and get some snow. Let it melt." Because you get very dry, rather sick, when you're afraid or scared or when you're in shock. But, no, he kept on. And in about an hour, he got frostbitten so bad his skin opened on top of his fingers and I could see the bones, green, all awful.

Finally, we... . There was a little - what do you call - snowbank. And I said, "Let's get to the snowbank and with our parachutes, use it as blankets." So we huddled up. And we didn't sleep at all it was so cold. And, you know, I kept hearing noises. I thought it was a bear. (chuckles) And this guy, he was a holy roller, those guys that pray singing, you know. So he started singing and praying and I said, "I'll follow you. I'll sing with you." And then I started praying the rosary and he followed me.

Well in the morning - where we had been the snow melted, of course, and I was bleeding and he was bleeding because he had been shot in the leg, too, not in the bone. I was shot in the bone, but he was shot in the flesh. Evidently, I mean,

the whole thing was red. And he fainted when he saw the snow. He thought he was going to die right there. I said, "No, there's nothing wrong with us." He said, "Well, when you go back, if you go back, find out my address and tell my wife that I died very brave." And to myself I said, "No. You're chicken." So I said, "I'll see you. Bye-bye. I'm going down and I'm going to look for help or see what I can do."

It was a very steep hill. I was going with my legs up front and used them as brakes because [if I didn't], I would go rolling down the hill. So like they say here when the brakes don't work, something happened and I started rolling, rolling like a ball. It was a long, long road. And when I stopped, after I got my bearings, I said, "Where am I? What happened?" I was beat up. My leg was hurting very much. And then about five feet from there - I had stopped at the edge of a cliff, about a thousand-foot cliff. God was with me because about five more feet and I would have gone down that hill. So I started yelling for help.

Later in the day I heard a "hello" because the Germans use the word, "Hello!" "Hello!" So I started yelling, "Hello." (chuckles) Well, they came up to me eventually, three of them. And they took my escape kit. We always had an escape kit.

G: What was in the escape kit?

T: Escape kit...well, [in] it was German money and there was first aid. There was morphine in case we were injured, maps.

And they took my cigarettes. They took my - I didn't have a gun. You never have a gun because if you're with a gun - I had thrown my gun away, my forty-five - because if you're in enemy territory with a gun like that, well, you're in a fighting position. So I was disarmed. I didn't have any arms. And I told them about my buddy up there. And four hours later they came back with him.

That was a very, very serious experience [that] happened to me there and to Webb. See, three of them were Germans and the rest of them were Yugoslavians, what they call the Ski Patrol. They were always looking in the mountain for airmen that were shot down. First of all, I had my flight jacket. And they would tie - the shrouds of the parachute, they used them as ropes - they would tie the shrouds of my sleeves here, (points to sleeve), the flap, and they just pushed me. And I would go rolling down. I'd be hanging from my shoulders. And then they would tie me to my right foot. And they would cut the shreds over there and I'd be rolling. And that's the only way they could bring me down.

So we stayed in a [cabin]. They had a cabin there with nothing there. No stove. No nothing. We were hungry. That night they fed us a couple of slices of German bread. German bread is just like sawdust. They call it the black bread. There's no flour in it. I don't know what's in it, but once you start slicing it, it crumbles. And it was bitter cold. There was three Germans with us right there. And I don't know

where the Yugoslavians went to, but in the morning they built a sled out of tree logs, a man-made sled. So they pushed it that way.

Then we got to a place where they couldn't use the sled anymore. So the two Yugoslavians, two Serbs, went - it was a steep hill like this (demonstrates angle of hill) with about a forty-five degree angle. And we went through that, right in the middle. They would build a passageway. With the right foot they would kick the snow downwards and the second guy would trample on it so we could pass through that. And the way they carried me was piggyback. A very stout, young Serb carried me piggyback.

From there, later, we got to a horse-drawn buggy. And it was rough, very rough. Every time (claps hands) the buggy hit the rocks my leg was hurting. Finally it was a beat-up old truck. And they took us to a church, beautiful little church, just like you see in Christmas cards. And they took us there at the entrance of the church. At that time I had a crucifix. I always had it. My wife gave it to me so it could save my life. By the way, that crucifix, you know, every time I flew with my own crew I would hang it on top of the radio. And the rest of the guys would say, "Hey! Where's the cross?" And it was a Catholic church and the nuns were there. And when they saw my - I unbuttoned my A-2 jacket. And when they saw the cross, oh, they were so excited. And they gave us a hot cup of tea. And that's all they gave us. No food.

From there I went to a small town called Malta. And they gave me first aid there for the first time and some hot soup. And then from there I went to a British prisoner of war camp. It was a hospital. The British had been there five years. And they treated me very well. The British had all the comforts. They couldn't even go to town. They'd been there for five years so everybody knew them. There was no way to escape. And I was treated very nice there by the British and by - well, the British doctors, I mean, the German doctors, didn't show up for I don't know how long. That's why my - they put a cast on my leg. And then about two months later my leg swelled up. It was bursting up on top of my leg because the cast was so tight. And it was a terrible smell. Well, they brought another German doctor and he cut my cast off. It had infected because they never put an opening on my wound and they never treated it, so it got infected. And I was hurting so much because of that cast. And then the smell! (chuckles)

The Serbs used to give us morphine. I didn't know what it was until later. So sometimes we could sleep because they would give us a shot. They would tell us, "Shot in exchange for cigarette, American cigarettes." Because the British had cigarettes. Boy, they had everything. And the Serbs didn't get them, but they used to get cigarettes from us and we used to get them from the British.

From there I was transferred, first, to Frankfurt, Germany. That's the interrogation center. And there, I was

in isolation for a couple of days. And when you get out of isolation they start asking you a bunch of questions about your airplane, your group. And you're supposed to say your name, serial number, and rank. And the guy said, "Well, you don't have to tell me because I'm going to tell you." And, you know, he knew more about my outfit than I did. They had a beautiful setup for espionage. He told me the number of my plane. And I didn't know the number of my plane because it was not my own plane. And I didn't know how many planes had been shot down. And he told me everything. And he said, "Is that true?" I said, "I don't know." But it was true. He knew everything about my outfit and, in fact, he knew everything about me.

Well, in one of his interrogations the German said, "How come you are Mexican and you're fighting for the United States?" And I told him, "No. I'm an American of Mexican descent and I'm fighting for my country." And he said, "Well, I don't know how. The United States does not like Mexico." I said, "Well, that's beside the point." And all of a sudden, he started talking Spanish. And you know what? He had worked here in El Paso!

G: You're kidding!

T: He said, in Spanish, he said, "Yo vive en El Paso." He said, "*Sabes dónde trabaje yo?*" And I said, "No." [He said], "Chen Cigar Store." There used to be a cigar store right [near] the Popular on San Antonio and Stanton. And he had worked there.

(chuckles) He said, "*Qué estás haciendo aquí?*" In Spanish, "What are you doing here?" And I said, "Well, I'm fighting for my country." Well, I think I was lucky because some of the other guys were mistreated and they were kept in isolation for long, long periods of time. I was there two days, but it was awful in a dark place, you know. Even two days is too many days.

From there I went to Stalag Luft IV. Now in that - I don't want this recorded. In that book there...

G: Would you like me to turn it off?

T: Yes, please. (Taping stopped and started again) Well, in those books that I have it says Stalag Luft III, but I was in IV. Well, we stayed there. And in February - I got there in February. And we were the first people to get in there. We opened up a new camp in what they call Keyfeide, Germany, close to Stuttgart. That's on the border of Poland. There was sixty of us guys that opened up the camp.

And then we were assigned rooms. And the Germans assigned a room leader. When I entered the room there, my room there, the room leader said, "I'm not going to stay here with that black guy" - and that was me. He was from Kentucky... hillbilly. Big, tall blond guy, good-looking guy. And then those guys from New York - I had very good friends. I made good friends in the training with these guys. And they said, "If this guy's coming in, you're going out." So, finally, he stayed. And, you know, he made life miserable for

me for a few months. He always harassed me. I had a cast on my leg and I was using crutches. I couldn't say anything because the guy was mean.

To make it short, this guy became my best friend. As a matter of fact, he lived here in this house, he and his wife. Finally, he realized. He said, "I had read about Mexicans. I had read about you people being dirty and being lazy, but Rey," he said, "you're something different." [I said], "No. We're all the same. You just read too many newspapers," I said. And his wife...my brother-in-law saved her life here. She was going to have - (turns to wife) what was it, Grandma? A miscarriage? And my brother-in-law, he studied medicine. (Mrs. Torres remarks that he took her to the hospital) Actually, he took her to the hospital and gave her first aid. And they really love us. In fact, next week I'm going to Albuquerque for a convention of POWs and he's going to be there with his new wife. He married.

And, of course, in the army and in radio school I had a lot of remarks, you know, but my mother had told me before I went to the Army, she said, "Son, it's better one than two." I said, "What do you mean by that, Mother?" [She said], "It's better to have one crazy guy than two crazy guys because if you listen to a crazy guy, then you're crazy, too." So the remarks I used to get in radio school and gunnery school during my whole career, I ignored them. They used to call me everything. That's the best thing you can do, keep your mouth

shut. Because later they became friends of mine and I showed them that I was just as good as they were. In fact, I was telling this one guy from some small town in Texas, I said, "Let's see who's the better man...who gets better grades." And he said, "You're on." Well, I beat the guy. I said, "That's to show you that I'm a better man than you are."

And, you know, in the Army there's all kind of people there. People from the east coast are wonderful people. The Italian people, they're beautiful people. And even guys from the south. I made good friends with them, but, of course, at that time you know how it was in Texas. We had a lot of guys from east Texas that they just couldn't stand us. Well, like I said, you have to make the most of it. I'm not one of those guys that takes anything from anybody because I used to talk back to these guys once in a while, you know. And I used to tell them, "Why do you feel that way? You don't know us." Because when I went into the Army, it was a cultural shock. I lived in the *barrio* all the time. The farthest they used to go was to college. And, all of a sudden, you find yourself with a bunch of Anglos from different states [with] different customs, different ideas. And I wasn't used to those things. I just said, "Well, I better cope with it because some of them are friendly. Some of them are not friendly." And then you have to adjust to those things because, I don't know why, in this world there has to be discrimination or hatred, things like that. We were fighting for the same cause for the same

country. We should have been all the same. Like at that time, the blacks were not in combat units or in the air force. The only blacks I saw in the air force were truck drivers - and very few of them. I met some Jews in prison, but they were separated from us. They were in different barracks by themselves. They were fun people.

The Germans didn't mistreat us, but they have a certain way of mistreating you. You know, we were supposed to get what we called Red Cross parcels. It was a box. And [in] the box they had Spam or corned beef, powdered milk, concentrated chocolate, cigarettes...little things like that...shaving equipment. And we used to get it through Sweden, one of the neutral countries, or through Switzerland, the Geneva Convention. We were supposed to get them, but the Germans wouldn't give them to us. We were supposed to get one parcel a week for one man. So what the Germans used to do, they would feed us this dehydrated cabbage soup which was awful. It was just weeds. And they'd give us two potatoes at night time and one slice of bread. There was sixteen of us in the room the first time. Eventually, it got to thirty. And we had a guy that made a knife out of one of those cans. And he used to slice the bread. And, you know, we used to fight for the crumbs because that bread was so stale and so hard, that when you sliced it it almost broke down.

Well, it was a ritual every afternoon to slice that bread. We found...

End of Tape One

Side A

Beginning of Tape One

Side B

T: Okay. You know, we used to volunteer - well, I used to volunteer - to go peel potatoes. They had a big room there with a bunch of potatoes. So my buddy and I, Chuck Sierra from New York, he was a Spaniard, we always volunteered. And we always used to take our overcoats with us because, what we did, we used to steal as many potatoes as we could and take them back to our room. And then I used to make potato soup. I was the chef. We had an old beat-up can [we used to cook on] because we [didn't] have a stove there. And we only had twelve briquettes, twelve coal briquettes, and they gave away right away. They would burn fast so we had to hurry and make our soup. And we loved it. Everybody in that room used to love it because we were stealing potatoes. So at this time we were in a camp where there were officers. So the officers put a stop to it, stealing potatoes. So then I told Chuck, "Let's do something. Let's steal peelings." And, okay, so the whole

room would peel the potatoes deep, you know. And we knew that they threw the peelings close to the incinerator, so before lockup time, which was about four o'clock in the afternoon, we'd go and get all the peelings, wash them, and then make more potato soup. Finally, they put an officer, an American officer, as a guard with the potato peelings. (laughter) So they put a stop to that. So you know what they did, some of those enlisted men? They burned the mess hall because they always just had it made. They had waiters. They had everything. I'm ahead of my story right now, but before I forget it I'd thought I'd let you know.

As I was saying, the Germans would starve you to death and, all of a sudden, they'd feed you. So what happens? The guy would really eat fast and too much and they would get dysentery. At one time it got so bad we had.... The latrines were like out houses. No running water. Nothing like that. [They were located] inside the barracks. So they had a very bad case of dysentery that time because we hadn't eaten in two months. And all of a sudden they gave us a lot of food. And you know what? This is the dirty part. The thing started boiling over - the latrines - through the hallway of the barracks. And the guys were so sick. And then we were locked up. It was at nighttime. And we started yelling for help, you know, for the guard to come. And it was awful! We needed help in the morning. Well, we got out of there fast because roll call was there early in the morning. They used to take

us out at six o'clock in the morning, [regardless of whether there was] snow, cold, you know, stand us at attention for a couple of hours there. And we were glad to go out for roll call that morning because the barrack was full of excrement. Later that day they brought the Russian prisoners of war and they pumped the whole thing out. You should have seen. That was the [most] awful thing. Poor guys. Well, those things happen.

One time the water well got polluted. And we got sick, too, because of the water. We used to get a bucket of water, hot water, once a week. That was to wash our clothes. But, you know, regardless of lack of water, I mean, hot water, we used to take cold showers right in the winter. You had to. It was the policy among all men. Everybody takes a shower, regardless. Well, it was to be a - what do you call it - a sponge bath because the water was so cold. It was just a bucket. That's all you get. And then we washed our shorts and our socks there with another bucket. Because we used to call them combines. Combines was two buddies. He'd get a bucket and I'd get a bucket. And then in one bucket we'd bathe and with the other bucket we would wash our shorts and our socks.

G: Did they issue you any type of uniform to wear while you were in camp?

T: No. You had to use the same thing over and over again. And it ran out. See, the United States used to send us all these

things, but we never got them.

G: Did you receive letters from home while you were there?

T: Not much. My wife sent me a lot of parcels, a lot of packages with cookies and goodies. Never got one. Never.

After, in February, the Russians were pretty close to our camp so we had to evacuate. And I was still limping from my injury, so I was assigned a train. The rest of the guys went on a march right through the snow, poor fellows. But I don't know which was worse, the march or the train. It was one of those forty and eight cars, what they called during the Second World War. It was a French freight car. And it was forty men and eight horses. You read about that?

G: No, I haven't. Would you like to tell me about it or...

T: Well, I didn't know anything about it either, but in the First World War the French army used to have a car with forty men and eight horses. They were cavalry. In the same car. It was a small car. So there was sixty of us in that car and, I'm telling you, it was so crowded we were just like sardines. And we only had one bucket as a latrine. The bucket was on top of the box car. Well, that thing got filled right away, you know, so the guys started getting sick.

We were supposed to travel a hundred and fifty miles from that camp to the new camp. That was to Barth, Germany. That was Stalag I. It was an officer's camp. We were supposed to do it in one day. And we were inside that box car for nine days and nine nights. At one time, the Russians

(unintelligible) the train. He must have been a poor shooter, that Russian, because nothing happened. Another time, they took us out of the box car so we could stretch our legs and everybody was so weak, you know. They lined us up in front of a bunch of machine guns with a bunch of dogs. And I said, "This is it." So I started praying real hard. I said, "Well, this is it. There's nothing we can do about it." No, they just intimidate you, you know. Just like I was telling you - the Germans - about feeding you. They starve you, then they feed you. You get sick. You're always in the weak condition. They didn't mistreat us like the Japanese did to these other people, but there was enough mistreatment. It kept you in a very weak condition all the time.

It was an escape-proof prison anyway. You couldn't escape there. To the north was the Baltic Sea. To the south was the Black Forest. And that's awful there.

G: Did anyone ever plan an escape?

T: No, not there. In the officer's club, that's a different story. Because our barracks were elevated. You couldn't dig a tunnel there. If you escaped from there there was no place for you to go unless you could swim twenty-one miles to Sweden. In the cold water you're not going to do that. There's a lot of stories about escape, yes, but that was in the infantry camps.

Because I was in the Air Force. And [in] the Air Force we were treated as gangsters. According to the papers there

the prisons in the United States had been opened up and all the prisoners had been sent to bomb Germany because we were bombing churches and children and schools, so they treated us like criminals. The infantry, the guys used to go work out on the farms and the factories, they'd get paid and they'd get all kinds of food, but not the Air Force.

So we stayed there nine days in that train. And it was awful, awful. And when we got to Barth, I think, most of us ran when we got to the camp straight to the latrine. (chuckles) We had to. Well, I stayed there. That's when the story about the potatoes and burning the mess hall - I got ahead of my story. And then there was something else I was going to tell you. Oh, I forgot. Let me think. (Spouse suggests topic to speak about) I think I wrote it down there. I don't remember. Let me take a break. (Taping stopped and started again)

After that, every afternoon around three o'clock we used to have a lightening storm and thunder and rain. It was just like a clock. And one of the German guards was working on an electric pole and he got hit by lightning. It was the first time I've seen a man hit by lightning. I saw it because it happened next to my barracks. That guy was charcoal, I mean the whole thing, just like a piece of charcoal. And at the same time, another lightning bolt hit next to our barracks. Next to our barrack were huts, four men to each hut. And there were Canadians. And that lightning killed four

Canadians and burned thirty-two more. It was so dark and awful things happened like this. Next day, we had the same lightning. And a German plane flying over camp got hit by lightning. Now, those things don't [happen as often]... unbelievable. But instead of being sorry everybody would clap, (claps hands) you know. (chuckles)

The German guards were old men. They were alright. They were what they called the Home Guard, the Whermacht. They would tell us news once in a while. One of them would trade onions. We wanted onions so bad you hurt...for cigarettes, things like that. But if they were caught, watch out. They were sent to the Russian front. In fact, the guards, when the Gestapo would come into the camp, they would go hiding. They would go inside with us because they were afraid of the Gestapo themselves. And when the Gestapo was inside the camp, everybody stayed in his room because they were mean. The Gestapo and the (turns to wife) - what were the others, Grandmother - these tall, blond Germans that were Prussians. They were mean! Oh, boy! They were mean to everybody, even the Germans, so when those people came in for inspections everybody stayed in his room and didn't go out.

We - there was a couple of casualties there - we were not supposed to touch the warning fence. The warning fence was a small fence ten feet away from the barbed wire. And this guy just forgot about it and crossed the barbed wire and he was shot there. Things like that happened in the camps, you know,

bad things.

And then there was a lot of sickness [such as] colds and pneumonia because they didn't treat you well. I never went to the dispensary, but they just gave you an aspirin and that was it. Go back to camp and poor guys with pneumonia had to stand up for roll call with all that snow. We had searches at three o'clock in the morning with dogs. They'd come into the room yelling, "Rouse! Rouse!" And the dogs [were] barking. And then they'd stand you at attention because they always said somebody tried to escape. No, no way. And then sometimes they would take us out of the barracks at that time of the morning and stand us up there for roll call freezing to death up there. But the mistreatment Germans did, they didn't beat you with clubs or anything, but it was enough mistreatment, you know.

G: How did the day pass? Were you assigned duties during the daytime?

T: [During the] daytime [we had] nothing to do. Sometimes the Red Cross would send us books to read. And that's what we did, read.

G: What kind of books?

T: All kinds...western books. I read some classics. I read these books that I always wanted to read like Dumas and the other guy, the French author. Lugo? Hugo? What was his name? Anyway, we read a lot.

G: Did you ever lose faith in your country during that time?

T: No. I never did. You know what? I always said, "I'm going back to my wife and my mother." Never lost hope. Once in awhile I would get a little sad.

One time I got a magazine. This guy said, "Hey, Rey" - they used to call me Tex, Rey, Mex, all kinds of things- "I got a magazine here. I got it when I came into this camp." And it was a story about me and Webb. The headline read, "The Black Menace Against the White Death." The White Death was the mountain with snow. And we were the Black Menace. And then they described me there as a Negro, as an Arab. They didn't know what I was. They said he looked like a Negro. He looked like an Arab, (chuckles) like a South American. Now, what does a South American look like? Foolish.

G: And which magazine was this?

T: It was a German magazine.

G: And a German had written the story?

T: Yeah. And I brought it back here, but, you know, my kids were young then and they used to look through my souvenirs and that. They tore up everything. But that magazine, I wish I could have it. And it shows two guys there in the snow. It was a cartoon, you know. They didn't take any pictures of us, but it was quite a story about showing that these gangsters and all that from America, the way they looked. Of course, when they captured us we looked pretty bad, (chuckles) beat up. I don't know what they expected. And I really would have liked to have kept that magazine. It was very interesting.

Well, from there we went through a lot of experiences in Barth. There was an officer's camp. Then we got liberated from the Russians. The Russians came in and they [freed us] one of those days. The next day all the towers and the gates were [manned by] American officers as guards. Now, the first part of the army, (unintelligible) they were these displaced persons. The Russian army would send them up front. They were displaced persons from all over Europe.

And then, here comes the Russian army. Oh boy! With those big tanks. And General Sulkoff was the commander and he was there. I got to see him. We had a big gathering, you know. And he says, "The first thing" - to an interpreter. He was giving a speech. He says, "I'm the commanding officer, now" - of course, he was the General. Our commanding officer was a colonel. He says, "The first order is knock [down] all those towers and all those barbed wires. You're not prisoners of war anymore." So the Russians started tearing down everything.

G: And where was this?

T: In Barth.

G: And what month?

T: I think it was May 1, something like that. And a lot of the guys went to town, you know. They went hog wild. I said, "No. I'm going to keep it safe and stay home here because you never know what's happening over there." The Russians were wild. They were looting the homes and everything. I didn't

see them, but the stories were like that. So I stayed there a few more days and then we got evacuate to (unintelligible) Camp.

The reason I say that I was a prisoner of war [for] seventeen months, which was less, was because I stayed in France another month and a half. They were shipping the guys to the United States by alphabetical order. And when we got to the T's, all shipment stopped because all available ships, they needed them in southwest Pacific, so there was no transportation for me. I stayed there by myself in one camp for almost two months.

G: What did you do for two months waiting...

T: Nothing. Like I tell my wife - she says, "You should have gone to Paris." Because they would give us a hundred dollars and we could either pick London or Paris [and] have a good time. No, I didn't want to. I didn't want a good time. I wanted to come home. A lot of those guys that went to Paris and London got in trouble, you know. They were so weak. They started drinking. You can't do that. So I said, "I better stay by myself here." All by myself in one tent. (chuckles)

Then, before that, I met some of my buddies from Company E, my neighbors.

G: Tell me about Company E.

T: Company E is composed of Hispanics from the south side, from Bowie High School, really. There was a few, a couple, from El Paso High, a couple from Austin High, and one from Cathedral

High. But [the other members of Company E], they were all from Bowie High School.

G: And what branch of the service were they in?

T: I tell you what, they used to train out there on Bassett Street. Do you know where Bassett Street is?

G: Yes.

T: The armory was there. And when I was dating my wife we used to go there and watch them march back and forth because my mother would never give me permission to join the National Guard, never. And I discussed it. But all my buddies from school were in the National Guard. And they went through a lot of experiences. Not all of them went to war because they transferred out, but most of them did. And they had quite a story. I won't get ahead of the story because if you interview one of these guys it's better for him to tell you the story. But we have always admired these guys and their bravery, what they went through. It was a unique unit. Of course, the National Guard is a big thing, but this company was made up of our neighbors, guys that we played football with, basketball with. And they formed a club, Company E, a social club when they came back. And we used to go dancing. And they had beautiful dances. Finally, most of them got old, sick, and they stopped it, but they have a beautiful story. I'm going to show you a picture of them. And most of them are dead now, but my buddy gave me that picture of them. It's wonderful. What else do you want to know?

G: So you met the members of Company E, you said, in France or when you...

T: They were prisoners, too.

G: And what happened from there?

T: Well, some of them got shipped out. And I stayed there. And we came back we used to meet here and socialize. We used to visit each other and go to dances, have parties, and things like that. We were young then, but as we started getting older we kind of drifted apart.

G: So when you came back to El Paso, what was the reception like? How did people treat you?

T: Well, okay. (Mrs. Torres urges Mr. Torres to discuss the Stanton Club) Oh, yeah. That was a bar here downtown. They called it the Stanton Inn. And boy, it was fun! All the GIs, veterans, would get there, you know, and tell our stories.

G: And what was the name of the...

T: Stanton Inn.

G: Stanton Inn?

T: Yeah. And the more beer we drank the more we exaggerated our stories. (laughter) When I came back I started working right away in my job. And this is one of my regrets, you know. My wife kept saying, "Go to college. Go to college." But I had something in my mind that I had to work and - I already had a son - that I had to provide for my family, you know. The old Mexican feeling that I got to work to support my family. I didn't go to school. To tell you the truth, coming back was

another cultural shock because you've been a prisoner of war. You come back and it's hard to adjust. It should be very easy to adjust, but for some reason, most of us, we always thought about having a good time. And I'll admit it I was one of them, but I was working, working very hard on the railroad. And I never missed work or anything like that, but I didn't settle down, really, in my mind until years later. I said, "Hey, what's up?" But it was too late for me to go to college. I had a lot of opportunities for better jobs than at Southern Pacific. In fact, one time I applied for a job in Fort Bliss, civil service - good job - and I passed. And I didn't want it after all. I stayed with the railroad. My dad was a railroader. My uncle was a railroader. All the family were railroaders. And [this was] one of the reasons [why] I stayed there. But I should have - well, I don't know. The regret I have right now is that I didn't go to college, but I don't have any other regrets.

I have a beautiful family. Two of my kids graduated from UTEP. One's working at White Sands [Missile Range] with a very good job. And the other two are doing fine. So I have a wonderful wife and family. There's no regrets. The only regret that I should - I knew I could go to college because I was very strong in math and things like that. And it would have been easy for me except that, well, I don't know. I just couldn't adjust after [being] a prisoner of war. Some people do, some people don't. But we're doing fine. My wife and I

have wonderful times. We understand each other even if we argue. But that's part of the fun, to argue, you know, because you can't be lovey-dovey all the time. You have to disagree. But we're always together.

G: Did the government recognize the time spent...

T: As far as compensation, you mean?

G: Yeah, or...

T: Well, I'm a hundred percent disabled. In other words, I'm a hundred percent unemployable and I'm seventy percent disabled. I came back with ulcers and then a nervous condition and then my leg, so the three disabilities gave me a seventy percent disability rating. See, when I completed my thirty-four years in Southern Pacific I said, "It's time to retire." All I needed was to get from the VA my hundred percent. I know I could get it anytime, but I didn't want to get it because I wanted to have enough time with the Southern Pacific to get a full pension. So I retired at fifty-five on disability from the Southern Pacific because the VA, when they examined me and checked all my medical things, they gave me a hundred percent. So when I went to a hundred percent to the Southern Pacific, Southern Pacific had to retire me.

G: I think what I'm getting at is I want you to tell me about some of the awards you were decorated with. And don't be modest.

T: I'll tell you one thing about that. The Air Force usually doesn't get too many awards or anything. When I got shot

down, in my heart I knew that I shot down an ME-109.

G: What's an ME-109?

T: It's a German fighter plane. And who am I going to tell that to? I was shot down. My group back in the base, they didn't know those things. Nobody interrogated me. Nobody briefed me. So in your mind - it's just like my Purple Heart. I had a hard time getting my Purple Heart. I had to get a statement from my buddy that I was wounded and all that. I didn't - what I'm trying to tell you is I don't believe too much in awards because in my case there's no such thing in the Air Force. In the infantry you have a lot of witnesses and they can put you up for a Brown Star or something like that. In the Air Force very, very seldom do you get a Silver Star. A few pilots have the Congressional Medal of Honor because they flew their planes back to London under very bad conditions or some flight engineer put out a fire, things like that. But as [far as proving] bravery in the Air Force, how can you prove that you were brave?

G: But you did get a Purple Heart.

T: I got a Purple Heart and I got my Air Medal and - (turns to wife) what else do I have Chita? (Mrs. Torres tells him he received a Good Conduct Medal). Huh? Oh, well, I was always a good boy. Those things I don't even (chuckles) count. My POW medal and my Purple Heart and my Air Medal. That's about the only things that I appreciate really. I have a lot of campaign ribbons and awards [American Campaign Medal, European

Campaign Medal, European African Middle Eastern Campaign Medal, World War II Medal], but I don't pay attention to those things. And I'll tell you one thing, honest to God, I have lost all the value on awards and medals. I'll tell you why. You can buy them through a catalog. I've seen some of these veterans in these veterans' parades and veterans' occasions. I've seen guys with the Silver Star. Now, you can buy that any time and pin them on your shirt or whatever, on your cap. And I don't believe in that. The one I believe is the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Distinguished Cross. Those are the really good awards.

G: Did you receive any of those awards?

T: No, no. Like I tell you, how could I receive anything if I don't have any witnesses or anything? What I did was not heroic. It was endurance.

G: In your mind it was endurance.

T: I think I saved Webb's hands because when he got frostbitten I opened my A-2 jacket and my other shirt and I wrapped his hands around me. And he loved that because he kept warm. That, who am I going to tell what I did. It's very hard.

G: Where is Webb now?

T: He's in Florida. And he came to see me and he saw my family. He was really impressed with my family and my kids and - now, this guy was a Ku Klux man. Oh, boy! He used to tell me that "You know what I used to do for fun, Rey, on Sundays?" I said, "No." [He said], "Well, I used to get me a nigger from

Nigger Town and tell him to go ahead. I had a pickup truck," he said. "Now you run, you nigger, or I'm going to shoot you. And that nigger used to run and run and run until he passed out. Then we'd go kick his butt." That was the guy.

G: Has he mellowed out any?

T: Huh?

G: Has he mellowed out any?

T: He has, yeah. But he came back here. I know he really liked me because I showed him that he was not the man he said he was, you know, because he started crying like a baby. And he started crying, "I'm going to die. I'm going to die." I said, "No, you're not going to die." And like I said before - I didn't say it - the way it was because he said, "You tell my wife that I died a hero." "No," I said, "you're no hero." (laughter)

G: Do you keep in touch with any other...

End of Tape One

Side B

Beginning of Tape Two

Side A

T: Well, I kept contact with some of my buddies from POW. Robert Clemmon from Littlefield, Colorado... (Mrs. Torres corrects Mr. Torres on name of town) ...Littleton, Colorado. We've

been writing each other fifty years now. And we send Christmas cards and we correspond with each other. And like I said, Webb came over to my house.

And I'll tell you a little story about the pilot that I flew with when I was shot down. I didn't know who he was because, like I told you, it was a different crew. Reading the POW magazine he saw my name that I was one of the members of the POW organization. And he called me long distance right away. He said, "You're Rey Torres that flew with us that day?" [I said], "Yeah." Because I didn't know most of those guys in that crew. And we made arrangements to meet in Albuquerque. And we met for the first time. That was four years ago, (Mrs. Torres corrects date) about five years ago. And we keep in touch and we call each other. His wife died. We met her over there in Albuquerque. And he's a car salesman over there. But it's funny. When I went to Albuquerque he said, "I knew it was you because I knew you were Hispanic, but I didn't know how you looked or anything like that." And I didn't know how he looked either. So we met for the first time. And we've been corresponding with each other.

I went to a POW convention. No - my outfit, my 451st Bomb Group - we went to a convention and I met him there. And we went to Fairmont, Nebraska where we had our training. There's no town anymore. The airfield is deserted, but we had a nice ceremony there. And then after that we went to a luncheon. And can you imagine? Our commanding officer was

General Eaton. And that guy was a no-no. He was from West Point. You couldn't touch him. You couldn't talk to him. I think he liked my wife. We sat with him at the same table and, you know, he and my wife had a wonderful relationship there talking. And this guy wouldn't talk to anybody. And even my partner said, "How come you're sitting there with old so and so?" I said, "Well, he sat down here. We were already here, but he sat down with my wife and they had a good time talking." And he was a grouch, that guy. He recently died. General Eaton.

And we kept in touch with some of the guys. We used to keep in touch. Not anymore, like Chuck and all those guys. I know where they live. (Mrs. Torres reminds Mr. Torres about Chin) Oh, Chin. The one that I told you that didn't want to stay in the same room with me. I'm going to meet him in Albuquerque next week. We're going - my wife doesn't want to go, but I want her to go with me and my daughter - and we're going to meet each other over there.

G: And you're having a convention?

T: Uh-huh, in Albuquerque. We've been to several conventions, the VFW and the - I belong to VFW, DAV, Purple Heart, POW, Air Force Organization, and I'm a life member of all of them. I don't go to meetings. I don't go to meetings anymore because I don't drive at nighttime, but I go to meetings. I mean, I used to go to meetings and was very active for many years. Not anymore. I got sick and tired of all those meetings. But

I'm a life member and we have a lot of friends...veterans, like Company E, and... . But lately it's very hard to get together, but we do get together by phone. We call each other. My friends call me or I call them every ten days, whatever. So this is the way it is.

G: Okay. Would you like to talk about anything else, any other memories you may have?

T: Well, I don't know. Well, my family, like I already told you, that [they're] wonderful kids. They're all - I love them... the grandchildren. And I have twins for grandchildren and they play the guitar. They're married to - their father is an Anglo. Well, they're just as dark complexioned as I am. (laughter) No, everything has been very normal, nothing extra special or anything like that. I'm happy the way I am.

G: I'd like to thank you for the time that you spent with me.

T: Well, I want to thank you for spending time with us, too. I had never done anything like this before and I was kind of scared or leery. I told my wife, "Hey, stay close to me so you can help me." (laughter)

G: It wasn't so bad, was it?

T: No. Really, this is the first time that I should say I talked about my experiences this way. Not since 1945, [19]46 when we used to get together with the guys and drink beer. (laughter)

G: Well, I didn't bring any beers today.

T: Well I don't drink anymore. (laughter) I don't drink anymore.

T: Okay.

G: Thank you very much, Mr. Torres.

T: Thank you, Michelle.

T: And I want your address and phone number again so I can call this guy from Company E. Would you be interested?

G: Sure.

T: Okay. I have to call and find out who is not sick or who's available because they're all in pretty bad shape.

G: Okay. This is the end of the interview.

T: Okay.

End of Interview