

## STUDENT EXERCISE: ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

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In recent years, especially since the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of World War II in the 1990s, (U.S. participation in World War II was from 1941 to 1945) historians have been eager to preserve the memories of men and women who experienced the war, either as combatants or as civilians on the home front. Those who have adult memories of the war were nearing their 80s by the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and there was a necessity to record their firsthand accounts. The Missouri Ex-POW's Oral History Project at the Western Historical Manuscript Collection (WHMC) is an effort to remedy that by interviewing dozens of men who had been prisoners of war.

Wendell Fetters volunteered for the Air Corps in late 1942 after he turned eighteen. He became a tail gunner in a bomber and, after training at several bases, he and his crew flew to Great Britain in early 1944. He had several close calls before his plane was shot down over Germany on his 25<sup>th</sup> mission, on December 23, 1944. Read through the excerpts below and then answer the questions that follow, combining what you already know with what you learn from the interview. The numbers in parentheses designate the pages of the written transcription where you can find the excerpt. Three dots ( . . . ), called ellipses, indicate that something was omitted, usually for the purpose of shortening the reading from its original 45 pages to a more manageable length.

**[TM: Thomas H. Miller, interviewer; WF: Wendell Fetters, ex-POW]**

WF: (p. 12) I landed in a tree and broke my left ankle . . .

TM: At this point did you really have any idea where you were? Were you in Germany?

WF: (p. 13) I knew I was in Germany, and I didn't know how far into Germany I was, but I suspected that . . . we couldn't be too far from France. And I thought, "Gosh, maybe I can walk it," although it was hard to walk because I had a broken ankle . . .

WF: (p. 14) So on Christmas day I . . . came to a road on the other side and I looked both ways and didn't see anything. So I started to cross the road and I got right in the middle of the road where I was trying to get to the forest on the other side, and somebody yelled, "Halt!" I thought maybe in the German Army they holler "Halt!" three times like we did in our army before they shot you. So I was getting closer to the timber and I thought, "Well, we'll see." So he hollered "Halt!" the second time. Then he slammed the bolt home in his rifle. And he wasn't very far away; he couldn't have missed me. So I just stopped and turned around . . .

WF: (p. 15) So he took me over to a large house. By then it was getting kind of late . . . Well, I didn't know it but my feet were in awfully bad shape . . . I was past walking, actually . . . So they sent to town on the day after Christmas for an ambulance . . . (p. 16) I wasn't in very good shape. So they took me to a town that evening . . . Eisenschmitt. I have to believe that it was not too far behind the front lines because it was kind of like a command post. They had a lot of ammunition and things of that nature there. (p. 18) So from there they walked me through another town—actually three or four towns . . . and old ladies would kick you and spit on you and hit you with purses or anything. And some twelve-thirteen-year-old kid hit me with a two-by-four across the back of my neck and just decked me. And I got kicked a lot . . .

TM: And you were all alone?

WF: I was alone, yeah, at that point. Then the next day, they had a little gathering point I guess, of some of the guys that had been picked up. So there was about six of us, and we walked through, I don't know, three or four more towns. The same thing happened every town you'd go in.

WF: (p. 19) . . . Eventually, I got to Wittlich, which was a pretty good-size town. I spent that afternoon and night in a civilian prison. It had walls literally three or four feet thick. I was probably on the third floor of this prison, and by putting a chair up on a table I could look out into the compound below. I'll never forget, I saw this American G.I. six-by-six truck that the Germans were unloading, that they had captured, obviously. Out of this truck came Christmas packages that had been sent to our soldiers. They had cigarettes and chocolate and cake and everything . . . that you could imagine being sent to our G.I.'s. They were in the height of their glory. They were all smoking cigarettes, just as happy as could be. So I figured at that point that the Germans were winning the battle as far as I could tell . . .

WF: (p. 20) . . . they took us to Oberursel . . . a camp where they interrogated everybody.

WF: (p. 21) . . . [The interrogator] said, "We know more about you than you think we do." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. Nothing I can do about that. I can just give you my name, rank, and serial number." So he pulls out this huge book . . . and I noticed that they had pictures of airplanes and stuff, and the cooks' names, the engineers – had names of people all over the place . . . So he got all done and . . . I thought, gosh, they did know more about our Air Force than I did. So I told him that. I said, "You know, you know more about our Air Force than I do." He said, "Yeah, you're probably right," and told me to leave. So from there we went to Wetzlar. . .

WF: (p. 22) . . . and Wetzlar was a decent place. I had [what] turned out to be excellent food compared to what we ended up with. . . But I was still having trouble with my feet. Up to that point nobody had done anything about it, nor the wounds I had. So they took out some flak and sewed me up.

TM: That was in your arm?

WF: Arm and leg, and I had some fragments in my face. They took those out . . . I had some broken ribs, and I was kind of beat up a little . . . (p. 23) So I went on sick call. There was a German doctor there with a commando major from the English commando force, and he looked at my feet and went, "Tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk . . . Son, you're going to lose those feet." Because they were black and they would break open at night and ooze out stuff . . . He said, "You're going to get gangrene there. If we take them off now at the ankles, you'll still have your knees and you'll still be able to walk." I said, "Oh gosh." This is a terrible thing to put on a twenty-year-old kid.

WF: (p. 24) About that time a guy comes in from the . . . hospital . . . He said . . . I need some medicine . . . The doctor says, "We don't have any medicine." I said, "You got any anesthetic?" He said, "No." I said, "You're going to cut my feet off with no anesthetic?" He said, "Oh, you'd pass out." I said, "Forget it." He said, "Well, you get gangrene, they'll be taking them off at the knees." I said, "I'll take a chance. I'm not going to let you cut them off." So he said, "Okay . . . You come in here every day. I'll keep you here . . . an extra five days. I'm not supposed to, but I will." He gave this English doctor some clear liquid. I have no idea what it was. I, to this day, don't. But he had me come in every morning and afternoon and soak my feet for a long period of time. He said, "You do that and maybe we can save them." . . . one day . . . he pulled a picture out of his billfold of a young lady, nice-looking blonde gal, with two little blonde-headed kids. He said, "That's my daughter . . . She lives in Boston . . . She's married to a surgeon there . . . I hope sometime to see her." I said, "I hope you do, too."

TM: Again, where were you at this point?

WF: This is Wetzlar. It was a collecting point. They'd bring all the Air Corps guys in there and ship them out to different camps. (p. 25) . . . Well, my feet would quit breaking open at night,

and within two or three weeks I could put my shoes on . . . So I was awfully lucky. Anyway, they put us on a train from there and told us we were going to go to Barth, a town up on the Baltic where they had an Air Corps prisoner camp . . . I can't remember all the towns we went through, but I remember Halle. We got stuck there at night in the railroad yards and the English bombed us. We got shaken up pretty bad. They had given us one Red Cross parcel to two guys.

TM: About how many other prisoners were with you at this time?

WF: There was about 50. There may have been more, but there was about 50 of us in this one darn boxcar.

TM: One of those forty-and-eight boxcars?

WF: Forty-and-eight, and I'll guarantee you that we had three-fourths of it, and a fourth of it was three German guards. They kept us back so that we were just stuffed in there. If you went to sleep, which you finally had to do, you'd get so tired. You'd go to sleep and you'd end up on the bottom of a pile . . .

WF: (p. 26) We were on this train for four days and five nights. At Halle, we were bombed, and Paul and I decided we weren't going to die on an empty stomach, because we hadn't had much to eat. So we ate everything in our Red Cross kit, not knowing it was supposed to last us for five days. (chuckles) So we were hungry for the rest of the train trip. We would only go at night, because in the daytime the fighters would shoot up their train so bad that at daytime we'd go in the tunnels. Then at night the train would run . . .

TM: (p. 27) What time of year was this?

WF: Probably January at this point—still cold, colder than the dickens . . . they took us to the town of Luckenwalde and dumped us out in this miserable camp called Stalag III A. It was a mess. Very little food – we'd get one small potato and a tenth of a [loaf] of bread a day, and maybe once or twice a week rutabaga soup or pea soup or something – not much. And I had had lice since the first night in Eisenschmitt, sleeping on that straw I got lice. Everybody had lice, and gosh they're miserable. To this day, if anything crawls on me it drives me nuts. And we had bedbugs and sand fleas among all the rest of the critters running around.

We were the only Americans in the camp at that point and there was probably 40 or 50 of us. We had the Russians on our east and some English people on the west side of the compound. The Russians were treated miserably, miserably. We were bad enough but they just barely fed them, to the point where they would hold up – this is kind of a grisly story – but they would hold up people that were dead in their ranks for roll call so they could get that extra ration. It sounds awful, but they would hold them up 'til they were past holding-up . . .

WF: (p. 33) So then the Russians came and liberated us.

TM: This was in . . .

WF: This was in Luckenwalde.

TM: Yeah, in May, though, of '45?

WF: Yeah . . . A Russian come in, and he had red pants and a stripe down them. I know he was a high-ranking officer, I have no idea what the rank was. I couldn't understand Russian and he couldn't understand English, but he took me over to their barracks, which was a miserable place – dark and damp and bug-ridden and whatever – and in the north end of this barracks was a gorgeous, beautiful sight, like a little grotto where there was a statue of Jesus with the crown of thorns and the halo, and some angels, all painted and gilded in gold . . . Here in the midst of squalor and mess is this gorgeous grotto-type thing. And I've always said, "So much for the Godless Russians."

WF: (p. 35) . . . The Russians weren't feeding us. We weren't getting anything to eat, so we went out and killed a cow . . . It was a scruffy old cow, and gosh, it didn't take much to fill you up. Your stomach's not very big at that point . . . So we left camp, five of us . . .

WF: (p. 36) Six SS troopers come in with flashlights and machine guns . . . We had a guy with us . . . that spoke relatively good German. He says, [in German] "American prisoners of war." So they talked back and forth, and these SS guys were trying to get to the American lines. They didn't want to give up to the Russians. So Chief says, "You can go to the American lines with us, but you can't go dressed as German soldiers. You have to out and get some civilian clothes." So they left. Sure enough, the next morning they showed up in civilian clothes. But they couldn't find any shoes, so they were wearing their army boots under these civilian clothes. So we said, "You can walk with us but stay behind us." So we were walking along and sure enough, a Russian patrol comes over and starts shaking us down . . . we told them we were Americans . . . So they let us go and they collared these six SS guys behind us. I don't know what they said to them, but they pointed at their boots and said something like, "Deutcher" . . . shot them all. Shot them all [and] went right on down the road.

WF: (p. 45) [after returning to the U.S.] . . . They had been told not to keep asking the ex-prisoners about what went on, about their war experiences and stuff, because they might not want to relive them. So I got home, and I would start to talk about it, and my dad or somebody would change the subject. Finally after a couple of weeks of this, at the supper table one night, I said, "Now, I'm going to tell you about what went on, and then we're going to forget about it." And dad finally says, "Well, we're not supposed to ask you." I said, "I'm going to tell you." And I told them . . . pretty much I guess, what I've just told you. I said, "Now we're done . . ." It wasn't brought up again as far as I know. I don't remember. And I didn't talk about it – didn't want to talk about it, didn't want to relive it. Ever since then, and I think this is true with anybody who was a prisoner very long, you still have nightmares – my wife has to practically kick me out of bed sometimes – about those sort of things.

### Discussion Questions

1. What kind of information did the interviewer want to get from this interview?
2. What information did you learn about how prisoners of war were treated? Do you think Fetters' experience was typical?
3. Compare and contrast the way Fetters was treated by the German civilians he came across in the towns and the German doctor he met in Wetzlar. Why do you think there was such a difference in attitude?
4. How did Fetters talk about his injuries and treatment at the hands of the Germans? Did he seem bitter about his experiences?
5. How did the Germans treat the Russians in comparison to the way they treated the Americans and English? Why do you think they were treated differently? How did the Russians who liberated the Allies from the prison camp treat the Germans?
6. Why do you think Fetters told the story about the Russian shrine; and why did he make the comment about the "Godless Russians?"
7. List three questions you might ask Mr. Fetters about his experiences if you were the interviewer.