

RICHARD W. BLAKE

1010 Sullivan Drive
Belvidere, Illinois

Transcribed by Lorraine Lightcap
Published by Margaret Lofgren

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This oral history was recorded February 16, 1994. Charles Nelson interviewed Richard W. Blake of 1010 Sullivan, Belvidere, Illinois, at Midway Village and Museum Center in Rockford, Illinois. Richard W. Blake is an ex-prisoner of World War II.

NELSON: Dick, would you please start by introducing yourself to us with your full name, place and date of birth. We also would like the names of your parents and family.

BLAKE: My name is Richard W. Blake, 1010 Sullivan Drive, Belvidere, Illinois. I was born September 6, 1921. My father's name was William McKinley Blake and mother's name was Sylvia Ferguson Blake. I have an older sister and one younger brother ... one younger sister and myself in the family.

NELSON: Are there any details about your parents or your family that you would like to give?

BLAKE: We were always a very close family. My brother went into the service and my sisters were at home.

NELSON: What was your life like before the war? Where were you and what had you been doing at school or at work?

BLAKE: Life before the war ... I worked ... I went into the service right after high school graduation. Before that time, I just worked at ordinary jobs around home, doing favors and stuff like that. I went into the service in 1941 ... September 16th.

NELSON: What thoughts did you have about the war before the U. S. became involved in the conflict?

BLAKE: I don't remember my thoughts about those years, so I have no comment.

NELSON: How did you hear of the December 7, 1941, bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese?

If so, where were you or what were you doing at the time. What was your reaction to the response of those around you?

BLAKE: I remember very clearly I was stationed at Scott Air Force Base at that time. It was Saturday night, we were on a leave of absence and in a little town in St. Louis what was called tent city in downtown. Sunday morning we were in the latrines washing up, shaving and all the rest of the stuff when we heard the news. My first thought was "I guess we better get back to camp and see what's going on."

NELSON: Had you formed any prior opinions or developed any feelings or any misgivings about what had been taking place in Europe or Asia?

BLAKE: We did read the news in the States but I don't remember any prior thoughts I had about what we were doing.

NELSON: Do you recall reading any newspaper accounts, TV or news about German aggression in Europe?

BLAKE: Yes.

NELSON: Did you have any knowledge of Hitler's speeches, ideas or actions?

BLAKE: Yes

NELSON: What events lead up to your entry into military service?

BLAKE: I can't really say why I went into the service at this point. After school had let out in June (graduated in 1941) I entered the service in

September of 1941 and then I spent six years in the service before I got out.

NELSON: Was your response to enter military service influenced by family and friends attitude towards the war and the threat of national security or other considerations?

BLAKE: I think most of these probably most of those had to do to why I went into the service. Yes.

NELSON: Where and when were you inducted?

BLAKE: I was inducted ... I enlisted, I was not inducted, in September 16, 1941.

NELSON: Did you have any special memories of that event?

BLAKE: I can remember but very little of it. I went into Great Lakes where I enlisted.

NELSON: Where and when did you take the basic military training?

BLAKE: First went to Scott's Army Force Base to radio school. I stayed there. I can't say exactly how long but there was so many different things in phases of schooling that I did go through and finally ended up in the cadets.

NELSON: How did you react to this training?

BLAKE: I enjoyed it ... I enjoyed all my service.

NELSON: Do you have any special memories of this time?

BLAKE: Well I was ... first time I remember ... I do remember a couple of us had been to boxing at the time and I remember those times also going to the _____ (?) _____

NELSON: What was your military unit and what were your duties?

BLAKE: Well, when I first went into the service I went to a radio school to learn to be a radio operator but I didn't particularly like the ra-ta-ta stuff so I went into the Cadets and went into primary basic ... went out of cadets into Midland, Texas, as a radio maintenance man and then I volunteered and I'm in Cadets or into the glider pilot ...

NELSON: To which theater of war did you go and how did you get there?

BLAKE: We went to the European Theater and went by boat and into Scotland, then down to England and into France.

NELSON: Tell us about your first several days or week at your new overseas place.

BLAKE: We were in quonset huts in England in Utopia (?) I think it was ... I remember going out to a big party that night where somebody went to and brought back a plane load of champagne ... we had a big party ... I remember that one. Then we went over to France.

NELSON: What was your first combat action and what led up to it?

BLAKE: Or first combat action ... really we flew into Holland to bring out some gliders. I was a glider pilot. We flew into Holland to bring out some gliders. My next combat mission was into Bastogne ... battle of the Bulge where I was taken prisoner at.

NELSON: Do you recall what your emotions or thoughts were at the time about your involvement in the war?

BLAKE: I knew that when we were in there to do a job and I was doing as I was told.

NELSON: How do you think you and your group performed?

BLAKE: I think that the mission we went into part of the _____? _____ which was in December

(27th) we went into Bastogne. There were fifty gliders of guns. The first few gliders ... 29 gliders made it rather safely but from there on a lot of them were shot down. We lost quite a few planes ... some of us was killed and some were taken prisoners.

NELSON: When and where were you captured?

BLAKE: December 27, 1944.

NELSON: What were you doing at the time of your capture?

BLAKE: Flying into Bastogne in a glider carrying ammunition ... aboard ship we had a ton and a half of 155 howitzer shells.

NELSON: What were your first thoughts and reaction about your capture?

BLAKE: I made it to the ground! And after being ...hit my tote plane was shot down. I was heading to the ground. You had only one way to go and I was in the cross fire ... I did ... had a big hole and it went through the powder charges that ... Thank the Lord we didn't blow up. I landed in a big field and got out of the glider. I was pinned down by enemy fire and they captured me right there in the field.

NELSON: Was there interrogation or abuse of you by your captors?

BLAKE: There was no interrogation at the time of capture. I was taken later on along the line somewhere. I was interrogated ... there was no abuse that I can say of.

NELSON: What type of food and shelter was provided for you?

BLAKE: The first two weeks we were prisoners we just walked all the way through Belgium. We had very little to eat. When we started on the march I think we were given something like a half of loaf of bread or something. Along the way

different people would feed us ... the German people themselves would feed us.

NELSON: Did you have any companions captured with you?

BLAKE: Well, none that I knew of at the time, but there were about 50 of us that went down in one field but I didn't see anybody get out of those.

NELSON: What was your first POW camp?

BLAKE: I was only in one POW camp and that was a Stalag Lucien, Barf Germany right across from Norway in between time. There was two weeks, I think, that we would be in January sometime we got us as far as _____?_____. Otherwise we walked for two weeks. We took a train from Berlin up north and stopped at a lot of little barns and villages along with a lot of other prisoners of war and so forth.

NELSON: How was the food?

BLAKE: Lousy!

NELSON: Would you like to elaborate on that a little bit?

BLAKE: We really didn't get too much to eat and I don't remember exactly where we did eat and all that sort of stuff. But I ... a lot of places I can remember but I don't even know how we were fed now.

NELSON: But you said you were only at one camp.

BLAKE: One prisoner of war camp but I stopped at a lot of different barns, villages and stuff like that when we were walking but I was only in one prisoner of war camp and that was Stalag, Lucien Barf Germany. There was ten thousand of us there.

NELSON: Describe the layout of this prisoner of war camp.

BLAKE: Prisoner of war camps consisted of five different compounds, with about two thousand people to a compound. There was barracks right on the Baltic Sea. Each barrack held about 200 men and there was about _____? _____.

NELSON: How would you like to describe the living conditions, based solely on the camp in which you were held?

BLAKE: The camp at which I was at, Stalag Lucien ... there was 10,000 of us there with five different compounds of 200 each. Each compound had barracks in it which housed about 200 men. In our barrack we had about 16 to 20 people per room living in them and the compound was closed at night. We could not go out. Some of us had inside latrines which others did not have. We did most of our own cooking from each room. We did not have a mess hall to go to. Each room ... we had ... food parcels from the Red Cross that was furnished to us and it was mostly all canned goods and that type of stuff like that. It wasn't elaborate but we cooked together and ate together. There wasn't much to do. Our bed was just a wooden bunk bed, if you can call them that, some of us had mattresses, straw mattresses of some sort. We didn't have much to do during the day. We had roll call in the morning and roll call after we got back to the barracks at night. We had some meetings to do ... played cards. We did not have any work details or anything like that. We were just held in prisons with barb wire fences around us.

NELSON: What was the sanitation like in the field of your camp in which you lived? Did you have something _____? _____ latrines? What type of water supply did you have? Any provisions for washing yourself or doing laundry? What did you do for toilet paper?

BLAKE: That's a lot of questions and I know somebody should know. I don't remember too much about it but I know we did have an inside latrine for night use. We had a central latrine for the day time. We did not have showers. We took a shower once every two weeks or something like that ... I know when we first got to camp (which

we did not see inside facilities for two weeks or better when we walked) they deloused us and all that sort of stuff. The sanitary conditions that I can remember seemed to be all right but I can't remember the details of it.

NELSON: Were there any provisions for doing laundry?

BLAKE: I don't remember that there was. We didn't have any clothes to change anyway but the one set we had.

NELSON: Were hospital benefit facilities and/or doctors available? If so, how were the sick and wounded cared for?

BLAKE: I don't remember seeing any doctors or any hospital care of any of the people ... the prisoners of war camp. I had been to a couple of hospitals in between time marching there. I don't remember any medical facilities at the camp at all.

NELSON: Did the men who became sick or injured in the camp ... was there any dispensary?

BLAKE: Not that I know of ... not in our camp.

NELSON: Did many men die or get killed at camp?

BLAKE: I would say no.

NELSON: What did you do for clothing or blankets when those possessed at the time wore out?

BLAKE: The only thing that they would ... we did have blankets but I don't know where they came from but we did have blankets to sleep on but I can't think I was uncomfortable in there. It was cold and we did have heat with the little stove we had. We didn't have anything we could pick up or die of anything there.

NELSON: Were there any recreational facilities available for you ... books to read?

BLAKE: We had a central compound between all the barracks in the open areas but we did play volley ball, baseball, we did have some old books and stuff to read, we did have a secret paper that was out once in awhile. We called it the "pow wow" that was information taken by radio on some of the things that happened over there. We knew even before the allies knew what was gonna happen but that was a secret paper printed at night and destroyed before morning.

NELSON: Did you have religious services and if so how often? Who conducted them, how many attended? Were there any special services on religious holidays?

BLAKE: I don't remember going to any of that type of stuff at all ____? ____ basically there in the room and outside and that's about all ... didn't have much to do.

NELSON: What about organized control of the POW's?

BLAKE: The camp themselves in each compound was run by their own allied personnel. In our camp, if I can remember right, a Mr. Col. Zudke and s Col. Domburski in the camp were the leaders in our camp. Each compound had their own overseer.

NELSON: Do you think any American POW collaborated with the enemy guards to gain favor for themselves?

BLAKE: I can't say that I knew of one case.

NELSON: OK. Were there any compulsory exercise program? If so, how often and how controlled?

BLAKE: Well, more or less every morning we did go out to calisthenics. We went out there to do what you want to. We had a leader which was up in front ... maybe an hour or something in the morning just to be active.

NELSON: What were the guards like?

BLAKE: We could tell as the war progressed at the tail end and this would be January and on up to the end of May when the war was over, we could tell that the war was getting close to the end because the guards themselves kept getting older and older. Pretty they had just old men guarding the camps.

NELSON: Were they brutal?

BLAKE: No.

NELSON: Did you talk to the guards?

BLAKE: Yes.

NELSON: Did any of the men trade any objects with them?

BLAKE: Not that I know of.

NELSON: The POW from other nations ... were they in the same camp with you?

BLAKE: Yes, but it was basically an Air Force Camp. We did have one compound there at one time ... at one time there were a lot of English soldiers. They were from England but I don't remember any other nation there other than the Americans.

NELSON: Was it possible to make contact with them?

BLAKE: You could not make contact with any other compound.

NELSON: What was a typical day like at camp? What time did you get up ... what activities did you do all day ... what time did you go to bed?

BLAKE: Time didn't mean anything so we didn't watch the clock. You got up in the morning; you had something to eat. I don't remember even doing that. We went outside; we took roll call. We did

have some calisthenics ... we had probably a light lunch of some sort. I was used to having three meals a day. We had probably two meals a day. The afternoon consisted of just reading, playing cards or something like that.

NELSON: What affects were made by the POW's to stimulate, simulate, or change normal interpersonal conditions between the men? Were there, for example, games rituals, holiday celebrations and so forth?

BLAKE: Not that I can recall ... you were in a camp with nothing to do.

NELSON: How long did the POW's maintain their own military discipline and their outlook? Who were the leaders of your camp or in the camp. How did they enlist as leader? How were they chosen to assume leadership roles

BLAKE: We had two air force aces in charge of our camp once. One was Col. Dombroski. One ... he is still alive today because I see him up in Oshkosh every year.

NELSON: In Europe the first POW camp was usually the staging or processing camp where the soldiers stayed only for several days before being sent to the permanent camp. Officers were divided from the enlisted men and all air corps personnel separated from them and other branches of the service. Non-commissioned officers were sometimes sent to separate camps. Enlisted men were sent to camps, stalags, from which they would be sent out on all kinds of work detail. Almost all of the Pacific data says they were sent out on work details. But for interviews if any interviewee were sent to the work detail camp the following questions should be asked: 1) Did you go to any work camp?

BLAKE: We did not have any work camp?

NELSON: So we'll just skip that.

BLAKE: Yes, skip that. One final point along the line before we got to camp we did kind of repair railroads at night but that was only a few days.

NELSON: How were you liberated or released from you camp? Give out all the details that you can remember.

NELSON: How were you liberated or released from your camp? Give out all the details that you can remember.

BLAKE: OK. I think, in May or some sort there ... it seemed like it was Mother's Day or certainly before that the Russians liberated our camp. If they hadn't surrounded the camp ... opened up the gates ... we could pretty much do what we wanted to. Some of us did venture outside. I can remember seeing some of the civilians that were there were mother, father and baby laying on the shore and baby over there somewhere laying on the shore. For most of us it was safer in staying inside the camp than going out somewhere. We stayed there and then were evacuated by a B17 from the air base back in Germany airdrome or whatever they call it. They flew us out of there back into France ... flew over Cologne ... and all those areas when we went out. It was quite a ride. We did see a lot of devastation in Germany from the air. We ended up in the heart of France and stayed there in a camp. I did go from there back to my outfit in Shadowen (?) France. They came up and picked me up on the plane. I went back there for a week to visit everybody then they took me back to LeHavre and then came home by boat.

NELSON: How and when were you able to first contact your family?

BLAKE: I probably did it by letter, after getting back to my own outfit or maybe it was after in LeHavre when we was in the staging area there to come home.

NELSON: Were you hospitalized or rehabilitated in any way after your release?

BLAKE: No.

NELSON: What were the immediate and long term affects and problems, mental and physical of your POW life?

BLAKE: Well, I would say the biggest thing is that you just never thought of it much for the next 30 years.

NELSON: Did you still or ever did have nightmares and post traumatic stress disorder about this experience?

BLAKE: No.

NELSON: How has the POW experience affected your life today?

BLAKE: I think you just lived through it, thankful for what you did. I did feel sorry for the people who are prisoners of war or missing in action because it isn't just yourself, it's the family that you left behind, your wife. In my case, for instance, I was married two days before I went overseas and missing for four months.

NELSON: Have you ever been treated at a VA hospital? If so, will you clarify your treatment.

BLAKE: I have never been to a VA hospital.

NELSON: Do you have war related disability today?

BLAKE: No.

NELSON: Has your attitude today about and POW experience changed during the last fifty years?

BLAKE: I can't say that it changed any.

NELSON: Would you care to comment about the support you did or did not receive from your family after you came home and how that influenced your life during the last fifty years?

BLAKE: I think that I was welcomed back home and I was glad to get back home. My family and my wife and everybody treated me very good. Why would I complain at all about that?

NELSON: Why do you think that it had taken so long for the POW's to organize and speak about such experiences?

BLAKE: I think it was just part of your life ... you just went through it yourself and it don't mean nothing to a lot of people, so you just can't say anything about it.

NELSON: Would you list the military campaigns in which you participated and the decorations you received?

BLAKE: I've gone to a couple of meetings of prisoners of war in Illinois and I had one, I think, in '88 or something like that. We did go to a big ceremony that gave you a medal for being an ex-POW and so forth, but I've not gone to too many of those type of stuff. All the ribbons and so forth that I've got in a case that I have at home that somebody made for me.

NELSON: Prior to the end of the war were you aware that any civilian concentration camps existed? If so, please explain how you wrote about them and how much you knew at the time.

BLAKE: I don't remember anything about this.

NELSON: Did you help liberate any prisoners of war at camps?

BLAKE: No. We went through a couple before we got out but I can't say we liberated anybody.

NELSON: How did you learn about V-Day? What was your reaction to that?

BLAKE: We _____? _____ the day I was home this happened in August.

NELSON: That was _____? _____ May, 1945.

BLAKE: Well, May, that was the war in Europe. We was still in prison camp and it just came about through the camp that the war was over and shortly after that the Russians liberated us.

NELSON: How did you learn about VJ-Day? What was your reaction to that?

BLAKE: VJ-day I was at home on a leave of absence and when we heard about that I was just glad the war was over ... and I think that we did the right thing at that time.

NELSON: What was your opinion of the use of the atomic bomb when it was used against Japanese civilians at all in August of 1945?

BLAKE: I think it was necessary for it ... I did think ... I'd hate to think that the use of the A-bomb and so forth was necessary. It saved a lot lives ... American lives ... when that happened. I stayed in the service for two years after that and got out in 1947.

NELSON: Has your opinion changed over the last fifty years and how?

BLAKE: I can't say that I was necessarily changed too much.

NELSON: Well, thank you again for cooperating with this project.

