

# THOMAS D. GILBERT

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## THOMAS D. GILBERT

\_\_\_\_\_3, [1994]. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village & Museum Center which is cooperating in a state-wide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens that participated in events surrounding World War II. We are in the home of Tom Gilbert whose address is. . .

**GILBERT:** 645 Francis Avenue.

**NELSON:** 645 Francis Avenue.

**GILBERT:** Loves Park.

**NELSON:** Loves Park. Okay. Mr. Gilbert is an ex-prisoner of war in World War II. We are going to interview him about his experiences of about 50 years ago. Can I call you Tom?

**GILBERT:** Mmhm.

**NELSON:** Okay. Let's start out with your full name.

**GILBERT:** Thomas D. Gilbert.

**NELSON:** D?

**GILBERT:** D as in dog.

**NELSON:** Where were you born?

**GILBERT:** I was born here in Rockford, Illinois.

**NELSON:** What date?

**GILBERT:** January 19, 1921.

**NELSON:** Can you give us your parents' names? Particularly your mother's maiden name?

**GILBERT:** My father's name was Louis R. Gilbert and my mother's name was Catherine Quirk, her maiden name.

**NELSON:** Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**GILBERT:** I had 3 brothers and 1 sister.

**NELSON:** And their names?

**GILBERT:** The oldest was Charlie Gilbert, Louie Gilbert and Eddie Gilbert. And then I had a sister Aileen Gilbert.

**NELSON:** Okay. Any special details about your family or any special event that you would like to tell about your family? Did they come over—Did your parents come over from the old country?

**GILBERT:** My mother came over from the old country when she was about 18.

**NELSON:** Which country.

**GILBERT:** Cork, Ireland. She came over and she was still...

**NELSON:** She met your Dad over here?

**GILBERT:** Yes. She had the brogue all her life.

**NELSON:** Okay. What was your life like just before the war?

**GILBERT:** It was good. I was talking about getting married. Going steady and then the war broke out so I postponed that a little bit and after I went into the service, I married my wife prior to going overseas which was only a matter of a week.

**NELSON:** Back up a little bit. Did you graduate high school?

**GILBERT:** Yes, St. Thomas High School.

**NELSON:** And what year?

**GILBERT:** '39.

**NELSON:** Did you have a job before the war?

**GILBERT:** Yes. I was working as a printer with Wilson-Hall Printing Company.

**NELSON:** What thoughts did you have just before the war? Did you remember news items about Hitler and what was going on over in Europe? Do you remember that?

**GILBERT:** Not too much because it didn't seem like there would be a war coming. My wife and I, sitting in the theater—the lights went out and they notified us about Pearl Harbor.

**NELSON:** Oh, that's where you were on Pearl Harbor day?

**GILBERT:** That's when we first started really being worried about the war. And when it came to being drafted, I was one of the first they took.

**NELSON:** Okay. What was your reaction to Pearl Harbor?

**GILBERT:** We thought it was terrible, the same as everybody else. But not really realizing how bad it was, but still thought it was a terrible thing to happen. And I felt right away that I would be into it before long.

**NELSON:** Your number was coming up, in other words, for the draft? What events led up to your entry into the military service? How were you drafted, or when were you drafted?

**GILBERT:** I was drafted about August 15<sup>th</sup> or so and then they gave me so many days. I went into the service on September 1, 1942.

**NELSON:** How about your family? What did they think about your going into the service?

**GILBERT:** I hated to go, of course, and everybody hated to see me go but it was something I had to do.

**NELSON:** Couldn't get out of it.

**GILBERT:** No, I didn't try to get out of it. I knew it was something I had to do.

**NELSON:** When you were drafted, where did you go for the physical?

**GILBERT:** I went to Chicago for the physical and then they sent me down to Camp Grant and gave me examinations and physicals and everything there and then they transferred me to Jefferson Barracks in St. Louis. I was there only a short time and they moved me over to Scott Field in Belleville, Illinois, and they put me into radio school there.

**NELSON:** How old were you at this time?

**GILBERT:** At that time I was 21 years old. So they put me into radio school and then moved me out of there when I went through the full course. I was sent down to [Biggs] Field for training.

**NELSON:** Where is that at?

**GILBERT:** That's in Texas. Just across the border from Juarez and I went through my training there and then I was sent to Tucson, Arizona.

**NELSON:** Was this your basic training?

**GILBERT:** This was my Air Force training. From there they sent me to Florida, to Buckingham Field, for gunnery training. I had my 6 or 7 weeks of gunnery training, maybe 2 months. And from that point they sent me to Tucson, Arizona, and there I met the members of the crew. They put all the crew together and we got all acquainted and started flying together for practice missions and so forth.

**NELSON:** When you were drafted, how did you end up in the Air Force?

**GILBERT:** Well, after taking all the examinations they said that was where they would place me.

**NELSON:** Okay. You didn't volunteer?

**GILBERT:** No, I didn't volunteer. I could have been in the Infantry or anywhere, but that's where...

**NELSON:** They didn't give you a choice.

**GILBERT:** No they didn't give me a choice.

**NELSON:** What were you trained to do?

**GILBERT:** But that not given a choice, but that's still where I would still have wanted to be, in the Air Corp. Everybody wanted to get in the Air Force.

**NELSON:** What were you trained to do?

**GILBERT:** Radio operator.

**NELSON:** Can you tell us something about your training?

**GILBERT:** Well, we had to go to class and learn everything about the radio, Morse code, and all the different types of equipment we would have to use on the plane. And we went through about 6 to 8 week course in that. And then we had to go from there into a training period where we flew on the airplane and made all the different communications with the ground and other airplanes and so forth so we would be prepared to go into battle.

**NELSON:** Was there a unit designation in your training.

**GILBERT:** Not a unit. No.

**NELSON:** Just training? Did you enjoy this training? Did you think it was adequate?

**GILBERT:** I enjoyed it, yes. I think they gave us plenty of education. They gave us plenty of time to learn. Our training period was pretty short. In fact we were used as an emergency crew to go overseas immediately to fill in for a mission over there that was going to take place August 1<sup>st</sup> at the Ploesti airfield.

**NELSON:** That was '42?

**GILBERT:** '43. August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943. It made me leave quicker. I was actually on my honeymoon at the time and they came right into the hotel with the MPs and said I had to go immediately back to camp. They took me back to camp and told me I was going to leave for overseas, but not where. I had to go back and get my wife and put her on a train and send her home and then I came back with the MPs and they put me on a plane. They outfitted me for real cold weather, heavy underwear, heavy clothing.

**NELSON:** This was in Arizona?

**GILBERT:** This was in Lincoln, Nebraska, where we got together for moving out. So we figured we were going to Alaska or somewhere and we got on the train and started going East and we went to Maine and then across to Scotland and they...

**GILBERT:** By ship or by plane?

**GILBERT:** By plane. They took all our clothing from us and gave us summer clothing. Then I went to Africa. They moved me back to London, back to Africa, back to London and then back to Africa and then I got to the air base just in time when they called for—they were going to Polaski [Ploesti] the next day.

**NELSON:** What unit was this?

**GILBERT:** I was in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group. It was called Feds Flying Circus. It usually started as a group of 6 performers and they would put an end to...Ted Timberlake was the commander. He later headed the Veterans Administration. He headed the VA for maybe 10 years—15 years maybe. So the flight was ready to take off and all of a sudden they called for Sergeant Gilbert. I went to the headquarters

and they said I was going to fly on that mission with another group. Somebody on the crew that I was replacing refused to fly.

**NELSON:** This was in Africa?

**GILBERT:** This was in Africa. Libya. Benghazi, Libya.

**NELSON:** This was your first mission?

**GILBERT:** That was my first mission. The toughest worst mission I ever made and it was a mission where we took 174 airplanes over 1200 miles in and 1200 miles back and we lost over half of them.

**NELSON:** Do you remember the date?

**GILBERT:** August 1<sup>st</sup>, 1943. We got up at 3 o'clock in the morning and we took off from Africa and bombed the target.

**NELSON:** Were these B24s?

**GILBERT:** B24 heavy bombers. My airplane hit one of the cables of the balloons—that held the balloons—we were flying only 20 feet off the ground.

**NELSON:** Were these barrage balloon?

**GILBERT:** My plane was flying about 20 feet off the ground.

**NELSON:** How about anti-aircraft?

**GILBERT:** There was still anti-aircraft, but we were too low. They were shooting at us with every kind of gun you can think of from the ground. We were right on the ground and stayed there until we left the target. Then after bombing the entire oil fields we headed right straight back individually. We never went with the group. We all took off by ourselves and headed back. On my airplane we had about 3 dead and we had to throw out equipment to make the plane lighter because we didn't have enough fuel to get all the way back.

**NELSON:** Did you prepare to bail out?

**GILBERT:** No. I didn't even carry a parachute. They didn't want to carry the weight. So we were flying just off the ground all the way back so the fighters that were coming at us couldn't go under us and shoot. We had over 250 bullet holes in the airplane so you can imagine how we were shot at.

But we did make it back. We hit our airfield and we just ran out of fuel as we hit the field. I was injured. I was shot in the left leg and back and so forth.

**NELSON:** At that time.

**GILBERT:** Yes, at that time. So they took me in to the hospital right away and cut all the flack out of me and sent me back to my ...

**NELSON:** How long were you in the hospital?

**GILBERT:** I was in the hospital and had the flack cut out about 2 hours.

**NELSON:** And then they sent you back where?

**GILBERT:** To my group. But I still had a lot of flack in me, because it was coming out for years. The wounds were all flack wounds, not bullet wounds. But I was just full of it. When I took my boot off, I turned it upside down and blood poured out like you'd pour it out of a bucket. We were in the air for 1200 miles and that was bleeding all that time.

**NELSON:** How about the rest of them? You said there were 3 dead.

**GILBERT:** The pilot made it back and the co-pilot. I was in the back of the plane where we had all the damage. The whole airplane was shot up. When we opened the doors to come out of the airplane, blood just rolled out onto the ground. There was blood all over.

**NELSON:** Can you remember the unit for the record?

**GILBERT:** I was in the 330<sup>th</sup> Bomb Squadron of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group. I was in the 2<sup>nd</sup> air wing.

**NELSON:** How do you think that raid performed? And what were the results?

**GILBERT:** They told me it destroyed the oil wells. We hit it perfectly as far as knocking out everything, although there was an error by one group that went in. One group went through and dropped bombs and they went through another group's area. We were set up with 5 groups going through hitting 5 different areas.

**NELSON:** Spread out?

**GILBERT:** Well, we were coming in at different times. So, as one group went through and dropped everything, another group came through in the same area as the bombs were blowing up and they were only 50-60 feet off the ground, so they got the brunt of it.

**NELSON:** So you lost that one?

**GILBERT:** We lost a lot that way. My group, even though we were one of the first groups through, we lost our lead plane with our Commander, Colonel Baker. He got a Congressional Medal of Honor. And we also lost, oh maybe, ¾ of our group. We went out with about 26 airplanes and probably lost 20 or them. And that was 10 men aboard each plane.

**NELSON:** Did the Russians attack this field, too?

**GILBERT:** Prior to us going over we were told at our briefing that the Russians took a group of airplanes over to bomb it and they lost all their airplanes. In fact at our briefing, we were taken out in an area away from the rest of the group—the 93<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group—for those that weren't flying, so that we were isolated from them, and they told us when we go on this mission, Colonel Baker made the statement that "we may lose every one of you", he said. He said, "This is actually—we may none of us come back, but we'll accomplish what will end the war" and so it didn't make you feel too good.

**NELSON:** That was my next question. How did you feel about that?

**GILBERT:** He himself was killed in that raid and his whole crew went down. In fact, his crew, as we were going into the target, he was right in front of me and he got hit and there was a building there—a big munitions building and he steered his plain right into the building and it exploded and took the whole thing out. We were so low the guys couldn't parachute out of an airplane. And all the way back from there to Libya, I could see these airplanes shot down one at a time. They were all [trying], burning. I must have seen two of them hit the ground and blow up and they were all spread out all over.

**NELSON:** Did you see anybody bail out?

**GILBERT:** Nobody could bail out. I have seen guys bail out and hit the ground. Parachutes wouldn't open. When you're that low you couldn't bail out. In our airplane, we didn't even carry parachutes. So it wouldn't do any good to bail out anyway, but there were some planes that did.

**NELSON:** After you got back and your leg patched up, did you ever think you ever wanted to go back?

**GILBERT:** No and that scared the heck out of me. I was scared to death.

**NELSON:** Now after you got patched up and got back to your unit, how soon was it that you went out on another one.

**GILBERT:** We went out 8 days later.

**NELSON:** In the same area?

**GILBERT:** No, we bombed a field in Bari, Italy. We hit ... And 15 days later we were supposed to hit [Tojo] Italy and on the way to it, we got hit and so we had to abort and as we were aborting we dropped all our bombs into the sea. But we went down and we landed in a Sicilian air field and it was for fighter planes and a B24—it didn't seem possible we could land on it—but we did and we were all bogged down in the sand and everything. So the war was—the Americans were coming in and the Germans were leaving right where we landed. So we left our plane and got into the fields and hid. Destroyed our bomb sights and everything. The next day the Americans were already in, so we went back to the camp where the plane was. We had the engines repaired. This was an army group and they put big trucks on our wheels and pulled us out of the sand and then we lined up and they were betting we would never make it out of the field. It was impossible they thought, but we did. We just barely made it out and got back to our base the next day. So they were getting ready to send back that we were missing in action. So we were only about 2 days before we got back to our base in Libya.

**NELSON:** How many missions did you fly in all?

**GILBERT:** Well, actually just the 4.

**NELSON:** One to Romania, one to ... 2 to Italy ...?

**GILBERT:** There was one to Tolesti, one to Bari, another one to [Tojo] and one to England. We were bombing an airfield and then we were shot down. After the [Tojo] mission, we were all moved to England and I flew out of England, one mission, which made 5 missions. Made one mission and then we came back and then I made another mission and got shot down.

**NELSON:** Your last one, hmm?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, we were going into the target and got hit by a rocket and knocked an engine out.

**NELSON:** Do you remember what date it was?

**GILBERT:** It was September 15, 1943 at 8:30 in the evening.

**NELSON:** No doubt of it.

**GILBERT:** What happened was. It was a very strange thing. Prior to that the Germans used to capture American B24s, put their own crews in them and then go into a group and after they got in the group, shoot the group up. And that happened a few times. So after we got hit, we were on fire in one engine. At that time, the bombardier and the navigator bailed out. We made a turn...

**NELSON:** Were they supposed to bail out?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, we were on fire. We were going to go down, the pilot was trying to ... we were heading to the channel. You could see the channel right in front of us. We were setting here and the channel right here. Our group had hit the target and were on our way back, but we started [folding] into our group, which was a "no no." You were absolutely not supposed to do it. The pilot ...

**NELSON:** So you were on your own after that?

**GILBERT:** So when we were on fire and it was 8:30—it was dark, or getting dark. They saw us coming in, so every airplane in our group opened fire on us and they just shot the dickens out of us thinking we were an enemy group. Planes coming in ... we lost an engine so we didn't drop our bombs, we had to make a turn to go back. They went on through, hit the target and they started back. They were traveling faster than we were so as they came through here, we tried to join them and they just shot ... There was no way we could have gotten back. We would have went down anyway, but that had to kill a lot of our guys.

**NELSON:** Did you have any radio communication with them?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, but ... at the time we lost our oxygen, we lost out radio ...

**NELSON:** This was high altitude flying?

**GILBERT:** Mhmm, we were at 18,000 feet and they sent one man back to tell us we had to get on oxygen bottles because our oxygen was knocked out. We

didn't know it but you don't act correct then. So he didn't get a chance to tell us until we noticed the bell went off to tell us to bail out. Well, where we go out, there's a door about so big that we keep the gun in, the radio operator sometimes they go back and use that gun. Well, the airplane was solid fire. It was on fire from the front. It was like a blow torch, so I went back to grab the gun, to take the gun out of the hatch, so we could lift the hatch up so we could jump out. Well, what happened is, I had burnt my hands clear off. In fact from there on down ...

**NELSON:** From right above your wrist?

**GILBERT:** From here on down. It just sizzled when I grabbed the gun. The gun was red hot. So, anyway, one of the guys ran to the window and dropped. His name was Howells. He lives in Florida now.

**NELSON:** Dropped out?

**GILBERT:** Dropped on the ground. He couldn't quite make the window. So I picked him up and threw him out the window. Then I got ready to jump out the window just as the airplane blew up. I was really half way out the window when the airplane blew up.

**NELSON:** So that kind of helped you.

**GILBERT:** Yeah. We had 6000 pounds of bombs aboard. They were incendiary bombs.

**NELSON:** So you were actually blown out of the plane?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. I was blown out of the plane.

**NELSON:** You were knocked unconscious?

**GILBERT:** I hit something that broke my left leg. I don't know if that was when it happened or not. I hit the ground. But I threw the parachute on one side. I only had it hooked on one side. You're supposed to hook it here and here and it open up from the front. Well, I hooked it on this side. There was just one buckle holding it but I went out the airplane and on the way down there were so many fighters and they kept firing at me, so then I lay limp in the parachute so I looked dead. My parachute was on fire. It was simmering you know. I was going down awfully fast so when I hit the ground that was probably when I broke my leg, my foot. So then with my ... I managed to cover up the parachute and I started walking.

**NELSON:** Did you know where you were?

**GILBERT:** I was in [Evette] France. And a guy came out of a farm and asked me something and I said, "I'm Americanish". So he took me to a—I was walking on my broken foot.

**NELSON:** Was this a Frenchman?

**GILBERT:** A Frenchman. So he took me down the street to a house where 2 old ladies were in there and he told them that I was an American. They prayed over me and threw holy water and everything on me, but I didn't know much that was going on because I was shot in the back and I had a couple other wounds. In my head—I had one here.

**NELSON:** Right beside your forehead?

**GILBERT:** Can you see it?

**NELSON:** Oh, yeah.

**GILBERT:** And I had 2 hip long fragments...

**NELSON:** On your right side.

**GILBERT:** But they were shells. They were shooting at me from the airplane. They hit me 3 or 4 times. They couldn't talk English so they finally got a little girl about 9 or 10 years old. She could talk English. She came in. They had me in a rocking chair all covered up. She said, "We have to turn you over to the Germans, because you are going to die tonight and they will bury you where your family can find you." That's what she told me.

**NELSON:** A little girl.

**GILBERT:** About 9 or 10 years old. I can remember that. Then the Germans came and I had a 45 in my ... they grabbed that and they grabbed everything they could on me and threw me into a truck.

**NELSON:** Back up a little bit. Any of the other crew members?

**GILBERT:** I didn't know what happened to them.

**NELSON:** Never met them on the ground or saw any of them?

**GILBERT:** After they threw me in the truck they took me down to an ambulance and in the ambulance there were 3 other guys, now I knew one was

Howells, the guy I threw out. Everybody was groaning and I didn't know who the other 2 were. But we were the only ones shot down that day so they had to be my crew. So, then they took me into an interrogation center and in the interrogation center they asked me who I was and who my co-pilot was and everything and they kept hitting my hands, you know. They were slapping my hands because they were hurting so bad, I'd pass out. I would come to and pass out.

**Tape 1 - Part 2**

... train depot. I was laying on the floor and I looked up and people were walking by and guys were around and I passed out again. The next thing they did, they picked me up in a gunny sack, took me on a train and threw me in a corner and I woke up and went out and woke up and went out and the next thing I knew, I was in a hospital and they put me in this \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_ Hospital in Paris, France, and that's where I was for 4 months but also ended up in there, one of my crew members, 2 of them were in there but I didn't know one of them was in there for about 3 months. The first one I knew was in there after I had been there a month.

**NELSON:** What was his name?

**GILBERT:** Walker was one, Joe Walker and the other fellow was Clarence House. In there I was totally blind. I couldn't see. I was all shot up. My face was slit all the way across ... came down and took my nose half off ... I was torn apart. So they had a surgeon from Vienna, Austria, who went through that St. Louis Jesuit Hospital.

**NELSON:** Oh, here in the States?

**GILBERT:** They brought him out of Vienna and he did the plastic surgery on me. My whole face was rebuilt. My nose was completely rebuilt, but I was unconscious most of the time but when I came to, they put me in a bathroom with a tube of water. They would soak me in it because I was burned all over and they had sheets over the mirrors. Every time I went in, they had sheets over the mirrors, but one time I went in and the sheet fell down and I looked at myself and I dang near died. I couldn't believe it.

**NELSON:** Is that why they had the sheets?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, so then I—I had no idea what I looked like.

**NELSON:** Your feeling after that changed?

**GILBERT:** So then—well, after I was in there about 3 months, I got gangrene in my hands. It's all gangrene—all back there. After 50 years it's still bad. They told me they were going to take me up to the operating room and cut both hands off at this point.

**NELSON:** Right above the wrist?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, about 3 inches above the wrist. I was ready for it.

**NELSON:** You were ready for it.

**GILBERT:** So they took me up and laid me on the table, started running around the table getting ready. All of a sudden a voice came over—bomb nearby.

**NELSON:** This was in Paris?

**GILBERT:** American Air Force.

**NELSON:** This was in Paris?

**GILBERT:** Yes, in Paris. And geez I tell you. Buildings were...glass was broken out of the windows, tables were moved around and they started cussing at me and said they were going to work on their own people first and they took me back down to the room. Well, when I was in the room, there was an old (I thought she was old at the time) nun and she came over and she brought over a pan of water and it was yellow with herbs, like tin, and she would take my hands, and she kept this up for 2 days and then about 4 days later, the doctors came down again and said they wanted to take my hands off. They looked and said, "There's no gangrene." There wasn't any. They said they would watch it and that was the end of it. From there on, nothing.

**NELSON:** Your hands recovered.

**GILBERT:** I am really so fortunate that that air force hit nearby.

**NELSON:** Do you remember the name of the nun or any of the people

**GILBERT:** No, I don't remember. She was real good to us, but guards had to come into the room when she came in. I was on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor of the hospital and each room had bars on the steel doors and a guard would stand outside of the door looking in through the opening. He was always there. And when someone came in to work on us, they would



come in with them, so we were never able to talk to each other and so when they would take us to the bathroom or something, they would stay right with you and bring you back.

**NELSON:** Did you know any of the other members were there in the hospital?

**GILBERT:** Shortly, I knew House was there, but I didn't know Walker was there until a couple or 3 months later, and I never did get to see him, but I knew he was there.

**NELSON:** You were there 4 months you said.

**GILBERT:** I was actually shot down September 15<sup>th</sup>. They took me in there about the 17<sup>th</sup> maybe and December 20<sup>th</sup> they moved me out of there.

**NELSON:** That was in '43?

**GILBERT:** Mmhm, '43. They moved me out of there and Walker. The other guy was still there. They took us down to the train depot in Paris and I was still so weak and bleeding. I was still bleeding from my hands, bleeding from my head.

**NELSON:** They didn't make you walk, did they?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. They had 4 guards on us—2 of us. When we got to the train and all of a sudden, the commander in the train came running up to us. Hoffman, a captain, and he took a swing and knocked us both down and stomped on us and kicked us. The 4 guards just standing there watching. He kicked us, he half killed us.

**NELSON:** Just because you were Americans.

**GILBERT:** Yeah. So the guards put us on the train and he came walking down the aisle again after we were in the train, cussing at us like everything and one of the guards said, "You gotta kind of not feel bad toward him because last night the American air force bombed Hamburg and killed his whole family, and he hates Americans like you wouldn't." So we were really scared of him all the way and I thought he was going to attack us any time. But they took us from there through Hamburg and the train had to stop and we had to get out and be marched through Hamburg and in Hamburg you could see Americans were hanging from telephone poles.

**NELSON:** Other fliers you mean?

**GILBERT:** Other fliers. Those who were shot down and the people just hung them by their feet, or testicles and I had to see that. And there were 4 guards on us and they marched us on through—so when we were on the airplane, when we had to go to the toilet, we did it right there—but they took us to where there 10 stalls and the maintenance man would open the door and a person would walk in and do what they had to do and they would walk out and the next person would go in, but when they put us in there, they left the doors open and it was terrible.

**NELSON:** They had to keep track of you.

**GILBERT:** Yeah. So then they put us back on the train to go again. Then they put us on another train and took us to Frankfort on the train and they put us into an interrogation center. Well, when I got in the interrogation center, they put me down about 3 floors. Way down. They opened this door up and the floor was all dirt with a stool in the corner. Couldn't see out and mice running all over the floor and I'm bleeding like everything. So they throw me in this corner and I'm setting there with my hands like this and I hear a squeaking and the mice and everything, all bloody. I just about went crazy. So then they took me out of there and asked me who my co-pilot was and I wouldn't tell them nothing. So they took me down to the room and put a chain around this wrist and a chain around this wrist and put me over a hook.

**NELSON:** Put you over a hook?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, with my feet that far off the ground.

**NELSON:** About a foot off the ground?

**GILBERT:** Yeah and let me stay there, and I passed out. And when they took me down, I just laid there. I was in the most pain you can imagine. So I passed out again and ended up in this darn cell again. So they called me up to the major's office about 5 times—Hoffman—and asked me who my co-pilot was and I said I wouldn't tell you so he went over and said, "I'll show you how smart you are." He went over to a book case where there were a bunch of bound books. He pulled one out and said, "You were in the 93<sup>rd</sup> bomb group. Your crew was this, you went to school here, a whole history on us. Crews that hadn't even been shot down yet, they had the whole history on them. So then he said they were going to shoot me the next morning. They were right outside. They were shooting somebody every morning. So they took me out there and I was standing there and they came up again and they said, "We are going to

tell you one more time. Who was your co-pilot?" I said, "I'm not saying. Just shoot me." I felt like...

**NELSON:** You were ready to get this over with.

**GILBERT:** He marched me out of there and put me on a street car. Took me to the end of town, put me on a train and there I met with other American prisoners and \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_.

**NELSON:** Did you ever wonder why they kept asking who your co-pilot was?

**GILBERT:** I think what happened was I didn't know it at the time, I borrowed a parachute when I—It was one of the officers who briefed us on everything and they thought he was with us probably. I found that out later. They just thought he was with us. So they put me in a prison camp.

**NELSON:** Now where was that?

**GILBERT:** Austria, Stalag 17B.

**NELSON:** After they put you on a street car? They shipped you...

**GILBERT:** They put me on a train. I met these other prisoners. Then we stopped and picked up a few more prisoners and a few more. They put us in box cars and when they took us into the camp, they marched us all the way from \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_ Austria up a winding road to where the prison camp was. It was about 5 miles.

**NELSON:** Was it in the Alps, or not?

**GILBERT:** It was in Stalag 17, Austria. Right where \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_ was. It was on a plateau. And then they got us outside of the big door and they made us strip and we could smell gas and we heard about it but we didn't know much about it but we figured we were going into a gas chamber now, so they put us in the door. Geez, I tell you, they run through a hot shower, there were about 30 feet of showers into the other side. Now, this was December 24. And then they took and shaved our heads and gave us different clothes and took us to our barracks where we were assigned. And that was our first day in the prison camp.

**NELSON:** The day before Christmas.

**GILBERT:** So, then I was so bad I couldn't do anything with my hands, so then they put me from

that barracks into a hospital barracks, so I was in the hospital barracks the rest of the time.

**NELSON:** Was the hospital barracks in the same location?

**GILBERT:** Oh yeah, it was a big barracks—16, 17, 18, 19, 20. Ours was instead of a bunch of people in there, we had probably 40 on each side and the other ones probably had a 100 and some.

**NELSON:** Being in the hospital barracks you had more room.

**GILBERT:** Well, it was not much different except that everybody in there had lost legs, or arms, or broken backs, or broken pelvises. They couldn't move around. A lot of broken backs, a lot of broken pelvises because when they jumped out of the airplanes, if the straps were too tight ... they split ya and we had a lot of broken pelvises. We had a lot of them missing legs and I was burned and couldn't move my hands at all.

**NELSON:** How did you manage?

**GILBERT:** Well, usually I had somebody help me. Help get my clothes on.

**NELSON:** Did you know any of the other prisoners by name?

**GILBERT:** We get together every once in a while yet.

**NELSON:** Could you name some of them for the record?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. We had a Don Williams who lives in Arizona now. He used to do the most for me. Button on my pants, we didn't have zippers then. Carried the food and that. And later when I got better, I had a guy with a broken back and I used to bring his food to him. [Brass] soup it was mostly. There would be a big vat about so big and we had tin cups or whatever you could get. We'd get in line and dip that out. You'd look into it and there'd be all kinds of maggots swimming around in it so you'd almost have to go in a dark corner because it was so full of maggots.

**NELSON:** You didn't want to see what you were eating.

**GILBERT:** Once in a while they'd throw in a potato in this big vat. Otherwise it was just hot water. Kind

of a [brass] soup. Once in a while there'd be a few rutabagas. You didn't find any because they were cut up, but there were always the maggots.

**NELSON:** Did you have any bread?

**GILBERT:** Every day they'd give us a slice of black bread. The bread that was partly sawdust, you know. Every day we got a slice of that. And for breakfast, we'd get a little water, and for supper a little soup and you had to go to the faucet to get water, and you only had so long.

**NELSON:** At a certain time I suppose?

**GILBERT:** Mmhm. Everybody would line up and put their cup under it.

**NELSON:** How about the latrine?

**GILBERT:** We had latrines in front of each barracks with about 4 holes. And then they had another building with a bunch of them but there were rats in the bottom and you were scared to sit on them because there were rats all over the bottom.

**NELSON:** Did they allow you to go any time, or was there a specified time?

**GILBERT:** You could go any time in your barracks but you couldn't leave your barracks. There were 4 stools in there but you couldn't go outside of your barracks to go to that one after certain times. And then usually, if there was a big rainstorm or something, they would have a roll call on us. We had roll calls every morning and 2 or 3 times during the day.

**NELSON:** Was that for checking for missing?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. And to agitate, and also for checking your barracks while you were out there.

**NELSON:** Can you describe the physical layout of the camp?

**GILBERT:** What I do remember was it was all fenced in and a road down the middle and then we had about 10 barracks on one side of the road and 10 barracks on the other side of the road. Then on this side on one side we had [rushes] etc. But the fence was a double fence between us and the barracks were all set on down, all numbered 16, 17, 18, 19, 20 up to 39 or 40. So there were probably 30 barracks.

**NELSON:** You mentioned it started at 17. Did they name a movie after that?

**GILBERT:** That movie was made about the same barracks I was in. That was made from that camp, except the story was completely different. The Germans shipped the spy out.

**NELSON:** So it actually happened?

**GILBERT:** Not exactly that way. They shipped him out the last minute.

**NELSON:** To some other camp, I suppose.

**GILBERT:** Well, probably to German areas, because he was an American posing as an American, but he was born in this country.

**NELSON:** He was a spy? How about receiving mail or Red Cross parcels. Can you tell me about that?

**GILBERT:** I was in there one year. I got about 3 letters that were all marked up; blacked out, so you couldn't tell what was going on. One parcel post, but that came after I left. I left word that anything that came for me was given to this House, a guy in my group and he said he got it and everything was punched and he said you couldn't eat nothing. They had put a bayonet in it and mixed it all up. He said they couldn't get nothing out of it.

**NELSON:** So really the Red Cross didn't ...

**GILBERT:** We got parcels, but we had to split it and sometimes the Germans would bayonet everything so you didn't get—but everybody was skinny, but everybody had a fat little belly. We were skinny, but we had pot bellies.

**NELSON:** How about doctors?

**GILBERT:** We had one American doctor that would—

**NELSON:** Was he a prisoner, too?

**GILBERT:** He was a prisoner, too. His name was [Mangaster]. He handled everybody. And then we had some volunteers that worked in hospitals ... that helped out. But we didn't get any equipment or nothing. We didn't get any tools or anything. For instance, we had one guy have an appendicitis and it was going to break and the Germans wouldn't do nothing so we had to lay him on the floor, hold him down and one of the group cut it open with a pen knife and took the appendix out and then sewed him

up with a needle and thread. And they didn't have anything to give him to put him out or nothing. They just held him down. He came out of it all right.

**NELSON:** A couple of other questions here now. How about laundry facilities?

**GILBERT:** No. None.

**NELSON:** There wasn't any?

**GILBERT:** No.

**NELSON:** How about toilet paper?

**GILBERT:** We didn't have toilet paper either but one thing we did get through the Red Cross was—they used to send... cigarettes and we would use the paper off of that and we would use anything we could find, but there was no toilet paper.

**NELSON:** How many men died or were killed in the camp?

**GILBERT:** Well, I think there were only a couple who died in the camp.

**NELSON:** Were they too badly injured or sick?

**GILBERT:** They were sick. There was sickness. But we had one guy when we were being released, come back under repatriation. He was in the camp. He was kind of crazy, you know. So he got out of the camp and went through the gate, because we were going to be sent back to the United States anyway. That's when we had our repatriation. The worst injured were traded for Germans. Well, on the way out, the guard yelled for him to stop and he just kept walking and instead of going down to get him, they shot him. So he was killed and we had a funeral for him there.

**NELSON:** Was he buried there?

**GILBERT:** Buried there, right there.

**NELSON:** In the camp?

**GILBERT:** Mhm. I don't know what they did with the body later.

**NELSON:** Do you remember his name?

**GILBERT:** No, I don't. I got pictures of it and everything.

**NELSON:** How about clothing and blankets and so forth.

**GILBERT:** Well, we shared a blanket. Of course when I was in the hospital there I had a blanket myself but the rest shared. For the mattresses, they'd give you a gunny sack, a big one, a great big one, then they would have a big pile of hay and you would fill your own gunny sack \_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_. And you'd fill that up and sleep on that, but everybody had lice and everything and then the beds were just 4 big stakes with a floor and...

**NELSON:** Double high?

**GILBERT:** Double high and there were 4 on top and 4 on the bottom. 2 and 2 and 2 and 2.

**NELSON:** How about clothing? Did they provide?

**GILBERT:** No. Clothing they gave us when we went in, but the clothing we got when we left—we couldn't use ...

**NELSON:** Was that your own?

**GILBERT:** No. The clothing was what they captured. And you might be wearing—I wore English trousers and English shoes and I had an American shirt and I had an Italian jacket. Everybody was that way. Some had American stuff, some had this and that. Some had leather jackets, some didn't. Just whatever they gave you from what they took off of dead soldiers.

**NELSON:** How about recreation?

**GILBERT:** Well, behind our camp we had a big track—one half mile, no not one half a mile, a quarter of a mile maybe and all we did was walk around that.

**NELSON:** With guards watching?

**GILBERT:** Guards were in their towers. They didn't bother about us there because we were completely surrounded by guard towers.

**NELSON:** That was the only athletic ...

**GILBERT:** Some of the guys tried to play baseball or something, making a ball out of a cap. Not baseball, but football. Fill a cap up ...

**NELSON:** Keep in shape?

**GILBERT:** Outside of that there was nothing to do.

**NELSON:** Any book to read or anything like that?

**GILBERT:** They did give us some books. They had kind of a library with some books, but not too many.

**NELSON:** How about religious services?

**GILBERT:** We had Father King. He was from Iowa. And the Americans built kind of a chapel. And he'd have Catholic services at certain time, then he'd have Protestant, then he'd have Jewish. He'd handle it all.

**NELSON:** You had Jewish prisoners?

**GILBERT:** Yeah.

**NELSON:** Did the Germans treat them any different?

**GILBERT:** Terrible. They always treated the Jewish extremely bad. They treated those with a German name real bad. Like I had one of my crew members, a tail gunner, name was Walther, Joe Walther and they made it Walter and that's a strong German name and boy! They actually treated them as traitors.

**NELSON:** Did you attend any religious services?

**GILBERT:** Oh yeah, I did every day.

**NELSON:** How about special holidays, like Christmas? Not necessarily religious services, but what did you do on the holidays—like the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Christmas.

**GILBERT:** Like Easter and all that, we tried to do things, like at Christmas we put sticks up there and with gauze, we made decorations.

**NELSON:** For a Christmas tree?

**GILBERT:** Yeah and things like that.

**NELSON:** But it was all things you found around there, makeshift ...

**GILBERT:** Yeah.

**NELSON:** How about the 4<sup>th</sup> of July?

**GILBERT:** No. They would dispense with that. Nothing. Really Easter went through. None of them

dates. Really the only thing we had on those days was special masses or something.

### **Tape 2 - Part 1**

**NELSON:** Today is March 7, 1996. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Village in Rockford, Illinois. I am interviewing Thomas Gilbert, 645 Francis Avenue in Loves Park, Illinois. Mr. Gilbert is an ex-prisoner of war—World War II. We are going to interview him about his experiences of 53 years ago. Tom, would you please start by introducing yourself to us?

**GILBERT:** My name is Thomas D. Gilbert of 645 Francis Avenue in Loves Park, Illinois. I have been a resident of the Rockford area all my life.

**NELSON:** Okay. We would also like to have the names of each of your parents.

**GILBERT:** My father was Lewis R. Gilbert. My mother was Kathleen Quirk Gilbert.

**NELSON:** Did you have any brothers or sisters?

**GILBERT:** I have three brothers and one sister. Two brothers have passed away and I have a brother still alive and my sister, Aileen.

**NELSON:** Are there any other details about your parents or your family that you would like to give at this time?

**GILBERT:** Well, my parents were residents of the city of Rockford. Dad was in business for many years as a salesman selling auto supply parts. He had trucks on the road delivering these parts in different areas and he was a very successful salesman.

**NELSON:** I see. What was life like for you before the war? Where were you and what were you doing? In school, or at work?

**GILBERT:** Before the war, of course, I went through high school at St. Thomas and then I took my first job at Wilson-Hall Printing Company which I was being used as a truck driver delivering different printing materials and also ran a press for the printing company.

**NELSON:** Do you remember about how much money you made?

**GILBERT:** I made \$27.00 a week.

**NELSON:** Okay. That was off the cuff. I was just curious. What thoughts did you have about the war before the United States became directly involved in the conflict?

**GILBERT:** Well, I read all the articles, but I wasn't expecting us to get into it and I wasn't really concerned. I was more concerned with running around with my wife at that time. I wasn't engaged to her yet but we were close boy and girl friend.

**NELSON:** Did you hear of the December 7, 1941, radio announcement about the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese? If so, where were you at the time and what were you doing at the time? And what was your reaction and response to those around you?

**GILBERT:** Well, at the time my wife and I and my brother and his girlfriend went up to Janesville, Wisconsin. We were watching a movie. They stopped the movie all of a sudden and made the announcement that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and war had been declared. So it shocked everyone in the theater. It shocked us all. We were dumb founded to think that it wouldn't be long before I would be right in the service.

**NELSON:** Had you formed any prior opinion or developed any feeling about what had been taking place in Europe or Asia?

**GILBERT:** Just as a kid 19 or 20 years old would. We weren't too well informed.

**NELSON:** All right. Do you recall reading newspaper accounts or seeing news reels of German aggression in Europe?

**GILBERT:** I watched a lot of new reels, yeah, and so forth. At that time the news was real good as far as the theaters were concerned.

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

**GILBERT:** I didn't have too much, no.

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

**GILBERT:** Well, they had a draft. And when they pulled the names out, I was one of the very first they pulled, so...

**NELSON:** I must apologize for the electrical fade out at the beginning of this interview, so I will repeat the first introduction portion of it. Today is May 7, 1996. My name is Charles Nelson. I am a volunteer with the Midway Museum which is coordinating with the state-wide effort to collect oral histories from Illinois citizens who participated in the momentous events surrounding World War II. We are at the home of Tom Gilbert who lives at 645 Francis Avenue, Loves Park, Illinois. Mr. Gilbert is an ex-prisoner of war of World War II. We are going to interview him about those experiences of 53 years ago. Thank you.

**GILBERT:** We thought we would get near Lincoln, Nebraska. That was where my base was and believe it or not, I was planning on a two weeks furlough. When I got there, I was there 2 days and they came and told me that I had to immediately get back to camp. They were going to ship me overseas, so my wife was sent back to Rockford.

**NELSON:** A short honeymoon.

**GILBERT:** A short honeymoon. My wife was sent home and I went on to England.

**NELSON:** What were you trained to do?

**GILBERT:** I was trained to be a radio operator on a heavy bomber, a B24.

**NELSON:** And a gunner.

**GILBERT:** And a gunner.

**NELSON:** How did you react to this training?

**GILBERT:** I enjoyed the training. We had a good training and I thought it was something I would like to do.

**NELSON:** Did you have any special memories of this time? Any special things?

**GILBERT:** I don't remember. It was pretty much all training. Getting prepared.

**NELSON:** Which theater of war did you serve and how did you get there?

**GILBERT:** Well, I flew from Maine to England and then I was sent from England to Scotland and we weren't quite assigned yet and when I got to Scotland they decided to send us to Africa. So I went to Benghazi, Africa, and the day I arrived to Benghazi

(add to page 5 of 1<sup>st</sup> interview) they put me as a volunteer on the first mission which went to Trieste.

**NELSON:** That was your first mission?

**GILBERT:** That was a tough mission.

**NELSON:** (Inaudible)

**GILBERT:** I was shot in the left leg ... up the side of my leg and foot and back. I received the Purple Heart for that and I received the Distinguished Flying Cross.

**NELSON:** Do you recall what your emotions or thoughts were at that time about being involved in that mission?

**GILBERT:** My mind was on the mission. Everything looked good until I saw the plane along side of me drop into the sea and blow up. And we were flying about 20 feet off the ground. We had to go 1200 miles to the target and 1200 miles back. So we were just over the tree tops all the way in and I thought it all looked interesting and then I realized all of a sudden, these guys were shooting at us. We went into that target and all hell broke loose. It was the worst experience I ever had in my life. I was hit several times and we made the trip back and we were throwing things into the sea so that we wouldn't have the weight on the airplane.

**NELSON:** Did you lose any engines?

**GILBERT:** We didn't lose an engine, but we were low on fuel. We were flying back all by ourselves. We weren't in a group coming back. Everybody flew back by themselves and they were dropping into the sea. But when we hit our base at Benghazi the one engine went out as we hit the base and they said we only had enough gas for another 5 or 10 minutes.

**NELSON:** Well, now, you were injured on \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_. What did your crew do to you? Were there any other injuries?

**GILBERT:** Yeah we had about four deaths.

**NELSON:** On that mission?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, on that mission.

**NELSON:** And you were injured. How did they treat you?

**GILBERT:** Well, I never saw the crew after that, that I was with.

**NELSON:** I mean going back while you were in the airplane. Did they have to take care of you?

**GILBERT:** No. We were shot at all the way back until we got to the coast. We had fighter planes coming in from every angle, so we were at our guns at all times.

**NELSON:** Okay. Can we go into when and where you were captured? You were on another mission? What was that?

**GILBERT:** That was the fifth mission.

**NELSON:** Was there anything that happened on the 2, 3 or 4 missions?

**GILBERT:** No.

**NELSON:** Now we are going into mission #5. Can you tell me about this mission?

**GILBERT:** This mission was one when we were supposed to go in and bomb an airfield near Paris. We started into the airfield. We got a short distance from it and a JU88 lopped a bomb at us and knocked our #3 engine.

**NELSON:** They got up above you and dropped a bomb?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, they got above us and lopped a bomb at us, a rocket on us. So we aborted and started back. We were doing pretty good and all of a sudden our group came back from hitting the target. They were flying to our right. Our pilot decided to fold in on them so that we could get protection from them going back, because we did think we could make it over the channel. The pilot said he was folding in. The co-pilot told me later he ordered the pilot not to go in, but the pilot wouldn't pay any attention to him. The rule was at that time, that when you're alone, don't fold into your group because they will shoot at you because they don't know if you are the enemy or not in a stolen airplane. So we did fold in and as we did, our group opened up 100% on us. They just blew us all apart.

**NELSON:** What about your markings on your tail. Couldn't they tell who you were?

**GILBERT:** Apparently one guy started shooting and they all started. But we were wrong. Our pilot was wrong in going back into our own group. We should have tried to go over the channel by ourselves. The co-pilot was very upset by it. But the pilot was killed on that mission.

**NELSON:** Okay. When they were shooting at you, what happened after that?

**GILBERT:** Well, they were shooting at us. Our bomb bay was full of incendiary bombs and they blew up. As they blew up, I was just trying to go out the window. I first tried to pull the gun(?) on the escape hatch and it was red hot so I was burned completely. Just sizzled so I couldn't get out there so as I headed to the side window. One of our gunners had fallen in front of the window. I picked him up and threw him out the window and I went right out behind him. He was unconscious when I threw him out, but he did live. I don't know how he pulled his chute but it was pulled.

**NELSON:** Were you injured at all besides burning your hands?

**GILBERT:** I had bullet wounds in my head—see, I've got one right here. And I had third degree burns on my face, my hands. Then I had a bullet through my ankle and so forth. What happened was, when I bailed out, going through the air and as you looked ahead, you could see a fighter plane coming in on me so as we came in, he opened fire on me and that's how I was hit. So then I made off I was dead lying in the chute. He made a couple more passes and then took off. So that's where I received the bullet wound.

**NELSON:** Tell us about the events that led up to your capture.

**GILBERT:** Well, as I was going through the air, my parachute was all on fire because it was all simmering, so I was going through the air pretty fast and I was trying to fold it so I could go faster than let it open up again, as we were taught we should do, but my hands were all burned and my skin came off like a glove, so I couldn't do it, so when I hit the ground, I tried to bury the chute as best I could and I finally walked (with a broken ankle) to a farm house and they took me to another home with 2 old ladies in it and they were in the underground. Well, I was so badly burned and so badly shot up, they called a little girl over. The little girl was about 8 or 9 years old and she could talk English. And she told me I was so badly injured, I was going to die and they would bury me, I mean the Germans would bury me so my

family could find me so they were going to turn me over to the Germans. So I laid there and finally the Germans came in with a truck and they picked me up and threw me into the bottom of the truck and drove me to a small hospital. When they got me to the small hospital, they threw me on a table and started slapping my hands and face and asked me who my co-pilot was. I just said my name, rank and serial number and they continued to slap me around until I passed out. The next thing I knew they were moving me to a hospital in Paris. They put me on a train in a gunny sack and laid me in the aisle. People walking up and down looking at me and I'm totally burned and bleeding and everything. When I got to the hospital they had the doctor come from Vienna to do plastic surgery on my face, but they didn't work on my hands, but I did get to a point in there where they ordered that my hands would be cut off because they had gangrene in both of them. Well, when I was taken up to the operating room in the hospital in Paris, our air force hit nearby and bombs were dropping all around so they took me out of the room and called me all kinds of names and said they weren't going to work on me, they were going to work on their own people. They put me back down into my room. There was an old nun, she must have been real old. She came in with a pan of herbs, kind of yellow beans in hot water. She soaked my hands for two days, day and night, and when they came back to get me in about four days later to cut my hands off, the gangrene was almost all gone so they didn't cut my hands off. I was very fortunate there.

**NELSON:** The Lord was on your side.

**GILBERT:** That's right. So then from that point on I was taken—after being in the hospital three months—they marched me through to my prison camp. Not a prison camp...

**NELSON:** How about your ankle? Did that heal up?

**GILBERT:** Oh, yeah, that healed up.

**NELSON:** So you could walk?

**GILBERT:** Oh, yeah, after three months, I could walk because I was in bed all that time. They took me into the interrogation camp. Well, on the way to the interrogation camp they took me through Hamburg. Hamburg was bombed the night before and we were surprised because when the other guy and I, my crew member who was with me when we were put on the train, the train commander came back and started beating us up in front of the guards. We had 4 guards. He just beat the heck out of us. We were finally put



on the train. The guards told us later the reason he was so mad and beat us up so bad was the fact that his whole family was wiped out the night before when our Air Force hit Hamburg. So you could understand. So as we got to Hamburg the train had to stop because the tracks were all torn up, so we had to walk through to get to the other end.

**NELSON:** What time of year was this?

**GILBERT:** This was December 20<sup>th</sup>.

**NELSON:** So it was cold?

**GILBERT:** It was cold.

**NELSON:** Snow?

**GILBERT:** No, no snow and as far as—we had diarrhea and everything. They wouldn't let us go to the toilet. They just made us go in our clothes. They wouldn't feed us. So we were about three days there where we just stunk.

**NELSON:** Just miserable.

**GILBERT:** Just stunk. And when they took us into the—through Hamburg, believe this or not—it was a hard thing to see. They had captured some of our flyers and had nailed them to telephone poles and hanging from telephone poles and the people were trying to get to us, the other guy and I, and the guards were holding them off with their guns and finally we got onto the train and went on to the next stop, which then, they took us into a place where they were interrogating. What they did with me—they put me into a cell way down the bottom of this place. There was—some place on the Rhine. It was a city.

**NELSON:** Cologne? Lenz?

**GILBERT:** No. Anyway they took me down in the basement, threw me into this cell. On the floor was just a lot of straw and under the door was just a little thing where they threw the food under. But there was mice screeching all over the place. I was bleeding from the head. I was bleeding from the hands. I was bleeding all over.

**NELSON:** From the beating you took from that guy?

**GILBERT:** No, I was still bleeding...

**NELSON:** From your injuries?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. I was still bleeding. So the first thing they did was try to question me. I said name,

rank and serial number. So they took me into another room, tied a chain around this wrist and a chain around this wrist, hung me up with my feet about a foot off the ground and left me there for 17 hours.

**NELSON:** Oh my gosh.

**GILBERT:** So when they took me down—cut me down, I just about died I was so bad, but then they threw me into this room again with the mice and everything running around. I just about went crazy. I mean they were squeaking all over and I couldn't eat because they would put the pan under the door and they would crawl into the pan. I tell you, it was a terrible thing. So finally they threatened that they were going to shoot me if I didn't tell them who my co-pilot was and so I said "shoot me." I didn't care. I said, "Just shoot me." So they took me on a street car and put me on a train to Stalag 17.

**NELSON:** What about your other crew member that was with you? What happened to him?

**GILBERT:** He went another direction.

**NELSON:** Did you see him after that?

**GILBERT:** Later. They had him another time. But when we got to Stalag 17, we were both in the same...

**NELSON:** So you were put on a street car and where did they take you—to Stalag 17?

**GILBERT:** They took me to a train. They put me on a train and on that train there were about 30 other prisoners and we were all together as prisoners—30 or 40 prisoners.

**NELSON:** You were probably in worse shape than the others.

**GILBERT:** No. there were one legged—and guys with arms off and broken backs. It was pretty bad. I was the worst as far as—I couldn't dress myself. I couldn't use my fingers. I couldn't work my hands. I couldn't do anything for myself. So then we went from there into Stalag and that was [Krems], Austria. The minute we got to [Krems], Austria, we came up this long hill to the camp that was on the top of the hill and all we could smell was gas and some of the people were yelling, "Gas 'em, gas 'em." Stuff like that. When we got up there, we smelled gas. What they made us do, was take our clothes off and then run us through the building, but it was hot water coming down and we had to run through that shower.

Then they took our clothes and run it through a de-lousing—that was the gas we smelled.

**NELSON:** Scared you for a while?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. Then they made us wait out in a field and they gave us our clothes and we went in and was put in the camp. The camp had barracks that held—each bed carried 16 people.

**NELSON:** How was the food at that camp?

**GILBERT:** Well, the food was— well in the morning, you would have hot water and then at noon you might get [grass] soup with maybe a bone in it. You didn't know if it was a dead horse or what. And then at night you'd get hot water and [grass] soup again. And then we would get—every day we would get one piece of hard bread—sawdust bread. And then we did get parcels about once a month, but they would be stood up, and there would be nothing in it of course and then the camp would use it to have a—make soup and stuff.

**NELSON:** Did you get any Red Cross parcels or anything like that?

**GILBERT:** That was just what I said. About once a month. But we had to share them. There wasn't one parcel to a person.

**NELSON:** Well, as you said, they came once a month. How were they distributed then?

**GILBERT:** Well, the camp leader would break it up. Maybe just divide it. The Germans would put their bayonets through a lot of the stuff.

**NELSON:** What was the reason for that?

**GILBERT:** I don't know. That's what they did.

**NELSON:** How were they shared per man?

**GILBERT:** About once a month. It was about one for 6 people.

**NELSON:** And what were the contents of these packages?

**GILBERT:** Well, we never really knew because the camp leader was handling it all. But I knew there had to be B-bar. We got about one B-bar per month. We got beans, powdered milk. But they used that themselves.

**NELSON:** What was sanitation like in the POW camp in which you lived? Did you have a central latrine?

**GILBERT:** In front of each barracks we had about four seats that just went into the ground and there were rats and everything down there. And then we had one for the whole camp with about 20 or 30 seats, but we didn't have any toilet paper or anything. We used anything we could get, straw or...

**NELSON:** What type of water supply did they have?

**GILBERT:** They had water where they would turn it on a couple of times a day which only gave you a chance to get a cup of water if you could make it.

**NELSON:** So you couldn't take a shower or anything like that?

**GILBERT:** No. About once a month—

**NELSON:** How about your laundry?

**GILBERT:** We couldn't do that. About once a month they'd take you up and shave your head and run you through that shower.

**NELSON:** How about hospitals, doctors. Were there medical facilities available? If so, how were the sick and wounded cared for? Did men become sick or injured in camp? Was there any dysentery?

**GILBERT:** There was a lot of dysentery. But we had some die from it. But we had one barracks; part of it was used for the doctor and some guys that volunteered to assist. We had in there...I was in there for a time and I had guys with one leg, guys with broken backs. A lot of them with broken pelvises. A lot of them got broken pelvises because they went down in parachutes and that split them. They weren't wearing a check chute probably. They were wearing seat chutes. We had blind and all that.

**NELSON:** You said that some people died. How were they buried?

**GILBERT:** We don't know.

**NELSON:** What did they do for clothing or blankets?

**GILBERT:** Each one of us was given a blanket and we were given a mattress that you had to fill up with straw. It was a gunny sack that you filled up with straw, but it was full of lice and everything.

**NELSON:** Were there any recreation facilities available to you such as books to read, athletic equipment or rooms for gatherings or plays or religious services?

**GILBERT:** The guys themselves did put on plays and set their own plays up. Also in back of the barracks we had about a half mile track that we made ourselves just walking around, which we would walk around all day long.

### **Tape 2 - Part 3**

**GILBERT:** Well, we had a Kertenbaum—a guy named Kertenbaum was the camp commander. He lived in Iowa. He now lives in Tucson, Arizona. He was the commander and then we had the escape group and they had the fellows who would go to the Germans to fight our causes. Go-betweens. It worked out pretty good.

**NELSON:** Were there anybody who collaborated with the Germans that you knew of?

**GILBERT:** I don't really know of anybody that did. No.

**NELSON:** Were there any compulsory exercise programs?

**GILBERT:** No.

**NELSON:** What were the guards like?

**GILBERT:** Well, we had one guard. A guy named Schultz. He was trying to be real nice to us. In fact they used the same guy, trying to be real nice to us. He checked the guys every day. He always tried to be real nice. He would bring things in to trade and he was always trying to get information out of the men. Outside of that the guards didn't have anything to do with us. They wouldn't talk to us?

**NELSON:** Did you talk to them?

**GILBERT:** We weren't allowed to. They wouldn't talk to you. The only one you could was Schultz and that was his job. The other guards wouldn't even talk to you. Wouldn't say a word.

**NELSON:** Did you have any contact with any of these others—say the Russians?

**GILBERT:** No. The fence was a whole row of fence, then tin cans, then another fence, then tin cans and

then another fence. So there was no way you could have any conversation. We could see them.

**NELSON:** What was a typical day like? What time did you get up?

**GILBERT:** We'd get up pretty early in the morning. They'd wake us up and we had to be outside and have a roll call. This was day light. Every person had to be out there. Then they'd go in and check the barracks. They'd call you off one at a time, check your dog tags. You had to call your prisoner of war number. Mine was (? German numbers). That was one hundred five twenty. That was my number and they would check that off. By the time you go through all those code numbers, a couple hours went by. Then they would let you go to your barracks. And then at noon again they would check you off again, not every noon, and then every night again they would do it. And if you had a big rain storm or something, they would call you out sure as the devil and do it.

**NELSON:** Was there any effort to try to lead a normal life whatever that might have been?

**GILBERT:** No. You couldn't because they had spies in the camp. They were prisoners themselves and they were always trying to run things down and giving false information about New York being bombed and Chicago being wiped out. The Germans had wiped them out. Things like that.

**NELSON:** They were Americans?

**GILBERT:** They posed as Americans. We know they were quite a few of them. We didn't know who they were. Everybody had a hard time knowing who they could trust and who they couldn't and the Germans wanted to keep it that way.

**NELSON:** How about military discipline?

**GILBERT:** They were all prisoners there and you did what they told you to and that was it.

**NELSON:** I mean within the camp. Did you observe rank or not?

**GILBERT:** No, in fact we didn't even know who was what rank. We just knew everybody by their last name. That's all you knew. And we were all sergeants or staff sergeants and so forth. Nobody under sergeant.

**NELSON:** They separated you then. There was no lower rank.

**GILBERT:** There was nobody under that.

**NELSON:** You mentioned earlier about the gas chambers. You had heard about them?

**GILBERT:** Just rumors and that's all—from other Americans and one time we had one guard tell us if we didn't do what they told us to, we were going to go to the gas chamber, but they didn't tell us anything about it.

**NELSON:** How about work detail? Did they give you anything to do?

**GILBERT:** Well, according to the Geneva Convention, they couldn't work sergeants. They had to volunteer. If you didn't volunteer, they couldn't work you. But they did get volunteers in some cases where they said they wanted to use them for something. Then they would get them out of the camp. Guys wanted to get out of camp and then they ended up—one time a group volunteered and they sent them out to pick up dead bodies and throw on trucks. Those guys never volunteered again.

**NELSON:** Do you remember any other guys who volunteered for work detail?

**GILBERT:** No. The guys themselves decided within the camp. Say the guy was a school teacher some place, they would set up classes and teach English or whatever was their specialty. And there were guys who were barbers in private life and they tried to be barbers. And they always seemed to have straight razors—they managed to get them someplace—and they would shave you dry—didn't have soap or nothing. The Germans wouldn't let you grow beards—so much lice and stuff you know. That's why they shaved our heads they said too. But it was also because if you escaped they would be able to pick you up.

**NELSON:** Did you ever have any contact with civilians?

**GILBERT:** No. I marched one time to get my eyes checked. The civilians were kind of scared of you. They never wanted to get near you.

**NELSON:** Were there any escape attempts while you were there?

**GILBERT:** We had one guy that got away about 3 times. They called him Frenchie. He lived in Milwaukee. He'd be gone about a week and they'd bring him back and throw him in the dungeon.

**NELSON:** That was his punishment? Solitary?

**GILBERT:** Solitary. He did it about 3 times, but they always caught him. I really don't know anybody that got away and stayed away. They always brought them back. We were in a bad place to get away. We were up on that plateau and we weren't close to anything.

**NELSON:** What was the terrain—forests?

**GILBERT:** No, it was just a flat plateau, no trees or anything. In the winter time, boy it was cold. What we used to do—you know we had these barracks, we tried to start little fires to keep warm. The guys would take shingles off the outside and boards to burn. When summertime came the barracks were almost torn apart. We'd tear a board off the side because it was cold up there.

**NELSON:** Did you have little furnaces?

**GILBERT:** Just open air fires. They had little furnaces parts and everybody would gather around, but there were so many in the barracks that that kept it warm too. You get a barracks with two ends with 140 in each end and you're all close together and sleeping 8 in each bed.

**NELSON:** How long was each bed?

**GILBERT:** I'd say the barracks were 100 feet long. And probably 40 feet wide. Maybe 120 feet long and 40 feet wide.

**NELSON:** Towards the end of the war were you repatriated?

**GILBERT:** Well, after a certain period of time, the Swedish government, not Swiss, sent doctors in there to examine everybody that was badly injured and we probably had about 120 that were badly injured, real bad, but they still didn't take but about 20% of those that were the very worst and those that really couldn't take care of themselves and I was one of those. They took about 20 of us out of there and put us on a freight train, a box car, and they took us through Nuremberg just as Nuremberg was bombed by the American Air Force and we had to stay in the box cars while everybody went for cover. So every time there was an air raid, they would lock us in the box

car and one time we were all thirsty and we couldn't drink nothing so the train commander got jugs of water from the train, the steam you know. Boy, everybody got sick after that, but everybody had a little drink of water.

**NELSON:** It was hot water?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, hot water, but it was from the train engine, you know. Everybody was sick. Everybody had the runs. It was terrible. But then they took us to [Stattos] Germany [possibly Sassnitz?]. They took the train we were on and they put it on the ferry and we went over to [Trelleborg] Sweden and when we got over there, the Germans turned us to the American Allies. We got on this [Trelleborg] Ferry and well, nobody was safe even then because we were still in their waters, but when we got over to [Trelleborg] and when we got over there, we met the American Red Cross and they took us on trains there to [Gothenburg] and we were in [Gothenburg] a short time and then they put us on the Gripsholm. That was a luxury liner.

They took us from there to Liverpool and on to New York. Into the channel and then on.

**NELSON:** Do you remember when that was?

**GILBERT:** That had to be about August 23 or 24<sup>th</sup>.

**NELSON:** 1944?

**GILBERT:** 1944.

**NELSON:** From Liverpool you went back to the United States?

**GILBERT:** From Liverpool we went right into New York, Staten Island.

**NELSON:** By ship?

**GILBERT:** By ship. But I know when we got on the Gripsholm. There were only about 127 of us on it. We all had our nice rooms and we were treated real good. They took us out that first night and had a steak dinner and we all got sick. We couldn't stand that steak. We all got sick. Everybody.

**NELSON:** What were your feelings at that time?

**GILBERT:** I could get only think of ice cream and getting home and ice cream and cake.

**NELSON:** Did you have any worries about your wife and family?

**GILBERT:** Oh yeah, everybody did. We heard a lot of rumors in the camp. That was what those spies were doing. They would say they heard your wife got married again and all that kind of thing. That your wife had a couple of kids. They would tell us all kinds of stuff. They told me—one of the guys came up and said, "I was with your brother in the 393<sup>rd</sup> Bomb Group." Well I didn't know what group he was with and he said, "He was killed." He said, "His name was Louie Gilbert." Well, my brother was over there but he was in a B17 Group and wasn't anywhere near the 393<sup>rd</sup> group. They told me that just to...Always doing something like that and a couple times that Rockford was a machine tool center and Rockford was just bombed, killed all kinds of people and they would tell you stuff like that. And we thought it was true. We had no way of knowing it wasn't. And you'd get reports on the radio. The Germans would make up all kinds of reports.

**NELSON:** You did have a radio then?

**GILBERT:** Just what they would have on their post. They would only give us German songs and stuff. Every once in a while they would announce that New York was bombed again and that kind of stuff. But we did have one radio that the Americans had put together. Every night one guy went around to each barracks and told you what was news on the radio. And all we ever heard was the Germans were in Stalingrad, and they got beat back and they were in and they were out and stuff like that.

**NELSON:** It was all German news?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. We didn't hear anything on that radio about what was happening in the U. S.

**NELSON:** Okay. When you got back to the U. S. what happened?

**GILBERT:** Well, when we got back there, they let us call our wives and that. Our wives could come out, but we would be moved out as quick as possible and they might not even see us. Which we were. And they sent us to different hospitals throughout the country. For instance with a burn center, they sent me to O'Reilly General a burn center in Springfield, Missouri. Then General Eisenhower gave all decorations there. I know he came up to me and said, "You've really got a fruit cake there." I had about 6 of them he gave me.

**NELSON:** Can you name them now?

**GILBERT:** I received the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, the Purple Heart, the American Theater, and the African Theater.

**NELSON:** And Eisenhower gave them to you?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, and he also gave us a letter and it said, "Allow this soldier 90 days furlough upon his demand at any time" which he only meant once. When we came back, it was kind of funny. They took me to O'Reilly General and the next morning, I said to the captain, "I want a 90 day furlough. I want to leave today." He said, "You must be crazy. You've been away too long." And so I said, "I have the letter." He read the letter. So he took me to the commanding officer, General Foster, and he said, "We can't give you a furlough." I said, "You read the letter." He read it and said, "When do you want to leave?" And I said, "This morning." And they got a jeep all ready; they got me all set. Took me down and put me on the train and gave me that furlough right then and so I was at home for 90 days.

**NELSON:** You came home then. That would have been in August of '44.

**GILBERT:** September of '44.

**NELSON:** That was home here in Rockford?

**GILBERT:** Yeah.

**NELSON:** Did you have any apprehension about what your wife would think?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. Because she had got reports and telegrams about how badly burned I was. She thought I was killed in action for a long time and from there on, she didn't know what I looked like. She knew all these burns. My mother and father met me in St. Louis and then we went to Chicago and my wife met me there. We stayed in Chicago a couple days. Then we got notified that Rockford wanted to have a big parade in my honor and I didn't want it. So I wouldn't go back for it. So we came in without letting anybody know. I didn't want to meet people. I was scared to meet people or anything. My hands were still all bandaged up.

**NELSON:** Did you still at that time have nightmares?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. That airplane that I was in when it went down, I went down a hundred times. Even yet I have a nightmare and the whole thing comes back like that. And then that other thing, thrown in that cell bleeding and with all those mice. I just about went crazy. And still mice bother me terrible. I can't even look at one. Isn't that crazy? I can't even look at one.

**NELSON:** Were you treated at all for this, back in the states?

**GILBERT:** No.

**NELSON:** After you got back here? Did you recuperate? Did you get a job?

**GILBERT:** Yeah. I took about a month off.

**NELSON:** You were discharged at this time?

**GILBERT:** No. After the furlough. I went back and had another couple of furloughs and then I went back to Denver, and I was discharged from Denver. I had a medical discharge and a regular discharge. I had the points and everything. I had more points than anybody at that time. I was overseas so long, so I had plenty of points.

**NELSON:** What did you do after you were discharged?

**GILBERT:** I went to work for Weiman Furniture Company.

**NELSON:** Did you have follow-up treatments?

**GILBERT:** No. Right away I came up with high blood pressure and never got over it.

**NELSON:** Did you get treated at a VA hospital? Did you have anything to do with the VA?

**GILBERT:** Way later in life. Not right away.

**NELSON:** Do you have any war related disability?

**GILBERT:** Yeah, my hands.

**NELSON:** Do they bother you a lot?

**GILBERT:** O yeah, they do. The cold weather gets me something terrible. Even in this kind of weather. They can't do anything about it. I've had dermatologists back in the hospital. You see, I had

plastic surgery on my face, but not on my hands, because I was an experimental case with the Germans. The Germans took about four guys and they did a different kind of plastic surgery on each one. They had the four of us and they did different types of plastic surgery. Of the four of us, mine was the only one that came out. The others were all scar tissue and their faces are solid scars yet, but they didn't even work on hands. That was ...but I was strictly done as an experimental case with them.

**NELSON:** Has your attitude about war and POW life changed over the last 50 years?

**GILBERT:** No. I'll never forget it. In fact about 5 or 6 years after I got out of the prison camp, my wife and I would be walking down the street and about two blocks over, somebody would be having a bonfire burning leaves and I would say to my wife, "Dorothy, can you smell that flesh burning? That flesh burning is something terrible." I could just smell it. Nobody else could smell it, but I could smell that flesh burning—just terrible. Now I can do it, and it doesn't bother me, but for five years any bonfire would make me sick, the smell of it and maybe I wouldn't even be close enough to smell it. I would just see it.

**NELSON:** Earlier I was talking to your wife and she said you didn't even like to talk about your experiences. Why do you suppose this is?

**GILBERT:** Well, I think one of the reasons is—another guy and I got together and started getting POWs together and fliers together. We've got 140 of them now. Every month we have a breakfast meeting and that's all they do is talk about at the Atrium. There are different ones at the table. Everybody wants to get it off their chest. They all feel the same way. They don't talk to anybody outside but the fliers get together and they talk about it. It's really helped everybody. Herb Healy and I were having breakfast one morning and we decided let's get together and get some of the guys together. The only way you could be in the club was you had to be overseas and you had to have the enemy fire at you. You had to be shot at—anti aircraft. Herb and I started that group.

**NELSON:** (Long pause). Some of these questions like, "During your combat duty, did you capture any enemy prisoners." Some of these don't apply. Oh, do you remember VE Day?

**GILBERT:** Yeah.

**NELSON:** Where were you?

**GILBERT:** I was in the Coronado Theater.

**NELSON:** Gee, you were in the theater when it started and—what was your reaction?

**GILBERT:** Oh, gosh, we were really happy. Everybody was screaming, yelling and that. I was probably happier than anybody.

**NELSON:** Do you remember where you were on VJ Day?

**GILBERT:** Same thing. I was just about ready to be discharged. The commanding officer in Denver, Fort Collins, was in the hospital with me in Africa and he recognized me and I went to his home for dinner three or four night before VJ Day. He even let me use his car. That's something for a Colonel!

**NELSON:** How about the atom bomb? Where did you hear about that?

**GILBERT:** I just thought it was a terrible thing we had to do, I guess. But I hated to see it.

**NELSON:** Your opinion now—what do you think of it?

**GILBERT:** I still hate to see it. It was such a terrible thing. I hate to see people maimed like that because I know what it is. I hate to see so many innocent people get it. When you're out bombing, you really feel bad about it. You have to bomb a city, you know there's a lot of innocent people going to get hurt.

**NELSON:** Outside of dropping your bombs in the sea, at one time you were talking about...

#### **Tape 2, Part 4**

**GILBERT:** He didn't know he had a flower in the barrel of his gun. And they would do things like that. You get a guy like Don Williams. He was always doing something like that. It kept life interesting. One time we watched the Russian barracks and one Russian was on top of the barracks and the guard would fire at him and then he would run to the other side and the guy would run around the building and fire at him again and he'd be just tempting the guard. Finally he jumped off the roof and ran into the barracks. Well, the guard had these dogs you know. These dogs were deadly. They didn't bother the Germans but they did the Russians and Americans. So he let the dog go after the guy and all of a sudden you heard yelping and screaming. The guard ran in

and the Russian had killed the dog and taken all the meat off it already.

**NELSON:** For food you mean.

**GILBERT:** Serves them right. I don't think they turned dogs loose after that.

**NELSON:** Did they turn dogs loose against the Americans?

**GILBERT:** No, I didn't see them against the Americans. They carried them. No.

**NELSON:** Any other little stories?

**GILBERT:** I remember one time in the barracks. These rats were this big. They were about a foot long. They were big sons of a gun. One time all the prisoners were chasing this rat in there. They finally killed it. And one time a rabbit got loose in the camp and everybody was chasing it.

**NELSON:** Did they catch it?

**GILBERT:** No. It got away.

**NELSON:** Ran outside the fence I suppose.

**GILBERT:** Yeah. It was just a crazy thing.

**NELSON:** Well, that about winds it up I guess, Tom. Well, I've enjoyed talking to you.

**GILBERT:** Well, a couple of years ago I wouldn't have said a word.

**NELSON:** Well, thank you.