Excerpts from **Wisconsin Veterans Museum Research Center**

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996

Frederick M. Wald, a Marinette, Wisconsin native, discusses his career in the Air Force, including being held as a German prisoner of War during World War II. Wald talks about enlisting in the Air Corps in 1941 and being based at Tyndall Field (Florida) when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred.

He mentions being rejected for pilot and glider training, graduating from gunnery school and aerial gunners' armament school, and having repeated complications with outdated medical records.

In Boise (Idaho), Wald discusses forming a flight crew, flying a B-24 to Europe, and assignment to the 392nd Bomb Group, 578th Bomb Squadron, 8th Air Force based in Wendling (England). He details being shot down on his second mission: losing three of four engines, the failure of the bailout alarm, and having no memory of his jump.

After regaining consciousness in a French farmhouse, he talks about being sheltered by the French resistance for two weeks before being captured by the Gestapo. Wald talks being moved from the jail in Rouen to Luftwaffe headquarters in Paris, staying in the Rennes prison, and being held in solitary confinement in Frankfurt. He portrays being interrogated, including hearing he was a traitor, being scared by witnessing dummy executions, having beard hairs yanked out, and getting beaten with rubber hoses.

Wald reports on the clothes he was issued, having good food at the interrogation camps, and being shipped to Stalag Luft VI (Heydekrug, East Prussia) in an overcrowded boxcar. He portrays the compound and states the British and Canadian prisoners shared their Red Cross packages with the Americans, who didn't have their own. Wald details the insufficient food rations and his resultant weight loss.

After hearing the approach of the Russians, he tells of being evacuated by overcrowded ship to Swinemünde. Sent to Stalag Luft IV (Tychowo, Poland), Wald talks about being evacuated several months later to Stalag 13D (Nuremberg, Germany), where the prisoners were vulnerable to shrapnel from frequent Allied bombings. He talks about finding other prisoners in the camps who were from Marinette (Wisconsin).

Evacuated again, to Moosberg, he comments on being liberated by the 14th Armored Division, getting sick from eating rich food, and being flown to Le Havre (France). Wald touches on being interrogated, having to drink a canteen of eggnog every day, receiving money, and returning to the United States.

After the war, he speaks of reenlisting in the Air Force, assignment to Andrews Field (Washington, D.C), and transfer to Salina (Kansas). Wald speaks of flying B-29s until an airplane malfunction gave him a fear of flying. He describes volunteering for duty in Japan, duty loading airplane ordnance, and being frustrated by the lack of promotion opportunities.

I applied for aerial gunnery school, which I was accepted. I got my medical records updated a little bit and completed the course. I graduated in, I don't know, November of 1942, and then I was shipped to Salt Lake City to go to aerial gunner's armament school, which is about three months long; and then graduated and was promoted to staff sergeant. I was supposed to be shipped to the Davis-Monthan [Air Force Base], Tucson, Arizona. And again, I was on a train, and I got yanked off the train because somebody found my medical records weren't updated because of my surgery. They yanked me off that shipment, and I wound up going to Boise, Idaho. I met a guy on the train, and his name was **John Rickey**, and we became real good friends. And, um, we went down to fly in operations, and we met a pilot, and we formed our own air crew down at that Boise, Idaho, at Gowen Field. Our first phase of training we flew B-17s, and then we switched over to B- 24s, and then we completed two phases at Boise. And our last phase was at Wendover, Utah – or Nevada, as it straddles those two state lines, and we completed our bombing phase there. You know that [??] a real quick assignment came in to go to England. We took a short leave, we came home, went back to Wendover, and from there we took a train to Herington, Kansas, and we picked up a B-24D airplane. And we flew that from Kansas to Detroit, Detroit to Presque Isle, Maine, Presque Isle, Maine to Newfoundland, to Greenland, Iceland, and Ireland, and then we took a ferry to England. And we were supposed to go to one base, and we wound up in Wendling, the 392nd Bomb Group, 578th Bomb Squadron.

We always, you know, trained and flew as a crew. But once you got into combat there were standard operating procedures. If your crew wasn't supposed to fly that day they would pick you out, and they would call you a spare, and you would fill in for another crew for their missing people. So, I made many training missions, and then the first mission was in Bremen [Germany], and then the second mission I was flying with this other crew as right waist aerial gunner, and this was their first

mission and my second, and we got shot down on that mission. Over-- we lost an engine just prior to the bomb drop, and we dropped the bombs and made a right turn to go home, and we lost another engine. And we made it back as far as the Rouen, France, area when the oil cooler in the number two engine blew up, and, gee, a B-24 doesn't fly very good on four engines, let alone one.

So, about that time I noticed the bomb bay doors opening up, and three guys were bailing out – "What the hell's going on?" So the others left, the waist gunner went up to the flight deck to see what's going on. He says, "Get out", you know, because the bailout alarm didn't go off, and I guess our intercom was all shot up. About that time, the bomb bay doors closed, so we couldn't get out of there, and we were always told never to try to go out the windows, for fear of hitting the stabilizers in back of the props. And then, the only way to get out was through that rear camera hatch, and of course we were flying at 29,000 feet, and we had all these heavy sheepskin clothing on, and a chest-type parachute, and I didn't think I could get out that little hatch. So, uh, some guy went up ahead of me, and that's the last thing I remember. I don't remember leaving the airplane, I don't remember pulling the ripcord, I don't remember hitting the ground.

I woke up three-four hours later that night in a French farmhouse. And at that time France was occupied. The French resistance underground had picked us up and kept us from the Germans. We were there with them for two weeks, and then the day we were supposed to catch the train to go to Paris and then down into the Pyrenees into Spain, the Gestapo and the SS [Schutzstaffel] and other military units had a big search of the area. They encircled this old lady's farmhouse, and there was nothing to do except to surrender.

But in the meantime, when I came to, the French must have taken all my heavy leather sheepskin flying clothes off of me including my helmet headset, canvas helmet, and then I guess, uh, about all I had on was what we called our electric flying suit which we called the "Blue Bunny Suit". You know, it was something like an electric blanket I guess, but it was tailored. You had a jacket, a pair of pants, and you had the slippers, but even then it was cold, you know. This old lady had us up on the third floor of her farmhouse and of course everything was blacked out. In the meantime, we could go downstairs to go to the bathroom which was an outhouse. It was in the nighttime hours. She fed us real good; oh, she was a wonderful cook. So, we were free for fourteen days.

When the Gestapo picked us up they took us to what must have been a village jail. We stayed there overnight, and then we went, I am only assuming, we went to the city of Rouen jail, and we were there for three days and three nights. Then they took us to Paris. The German air force was named the Luftwaffe. And then, we went underneath the Arc de Triomphe and down the other side of the avenue, and we went up to the Luftwaffe headquarters up on the fourth floor, and they interrogated us. And we gave them our name, rank, and serial, and nothing ever happened, and then later that afternoon they shipped us to the infamous Rennes prison. The one thing about this prison was that you couldn't enter the prison from the outside; you had to go through a tunnel and then take steps up in the cellblocks. And I guess it was ten, fifteen of us in the same room, other POWs that they had captured.

The cell had a three-by-eight-inch window, way up near the ceiling, you know. And I could hear the 8th Air Force. So then, we were there for, I can't remember, it must have been another week or two weeks. And we were interrogated twice because we were in civilian clothes that the French had given us. We were – we were really given some psychological mistreatment.

Well, because I had a German name they were pretty rough on me on that, telling me I was a traitor to the fatherland. And then, outside the interrogation room, in a courtyard, they would have a four- to six- member firing squad, and they would practice dummy executions. And if you don't think that's enough to scare you, boy, that is. And then, oh heck, we hadn't shaved for a month whatever it was. And we all had – I don't have much of a beard, but they had a fondness of pulling whiskers out of your chin with their fingernails. And they beat us up with rubber hoses, hit you behind, uh, your knees and in the elbows and things like that. They wanted your squadron and group, they wanted the ID insignia on the tails of your airplane, where you were stationed, what the target was for that day.

So, after the Gestapo released us to the Luftwaffe, they sent us to a place called Dulag Luft [POW transit camps for air force prisoners] which was in the heart of the marshalling yards in the city of Frankfurt. They bombed Frankfort about six times while we were in that prison. You could hear the "whamp" of the bombs falling. And they must have had some antiaircraft guns real close, too. And you could hear the explosions of those big 88 mm guns they used to have. We later learned that our air force bombed the hell out of it, so they moved it outside the city limits. But at that camp, they again had us in solitary confinement, and they investigated and interrogated us. Ah, I guess we were there six, seven days. And then, we were given a complete uniform: OD [olive drab] "Ike" jacket, a pair of pants, pair of shoes, pair of socks, one pair of underwear, and an overcoat, and a

flight cap. And they were really serving us good food in this little interrogation camp. We were always saying, "If POW life is gonna be like this, you probably could get by," you know? So, then they released us, and they put us on a boxcar – about fifty, sixty people to a boxcar, and you couldn't sit down, and you couldn't stand up. We were on the rails for seven days,

We wound up at a camp on the border of Lithuania and East Prussia in them days. I guess it was so far north up in the Baltic Sea that nobody even knew we were up there. But there was-- one compound was full of RAF [Royal Air Force] airmen. Some of them must have been there for four years, you know. 1939, they got shot down. This was 1944.

The inner compound was made up of Canadians, and the other, our compound was made up of Americans, you know, gunners. And because the German Air Force considered their air force the top branch of service, we never had to work. The Army NCOs had to work. So, our buildings looked like they could have been where they took the harvest products and stored them in these narrow rooms. In-between each room there was a firewall of I imagine it was stone, some kind of stone.

So, I guess there was 1,500 to 2,500 Americans there, plus the Canadians. And a couple weeks before we were evacuated early in the morning you could hear the Russian big guns booming. So, they evacuated Stalag Luft 6 [then Heydekrug, East Prussia, Germany; now Silute, Lithuania], and they put us on two wooden coal boats and put us out to sea for three days and three nights. And that's another story on how horrific it was.

They must have had so many people in the hold of those ships that if you wanted to sit down you had to sit down underneath another guy's legs; there was no way to stretch out. And, uh, we landed at a port called Swinemünde [seaport on Baltic Sea in N.W. Poland]. We didn't know it at the time, but that's where the Germans had their V-rocket assembly points.

Then we were moved by boxcar again to Stettin [then Germany; now Poland], and then from there we were moved to Stalag Luft 4 [Tychowo, Poland]. This was more or less a fairly new camp, because there was people there when we arrived. So, what happened was, um, I'm going a little bit too far ahead of myself – normally, we were supposed to be given one American International Red Cross parcel for foodstuffs up in Stalag Luft 6. But they didn't have any, so out of the kindness of the heart of the British and the Canadian[s] they gave us one box for two men. We were supposed to have that once a week, you know. But even having two to a box is

better than nothing, because, you know, the only thing the Germans gave for food was, we would have a slice of what we called black bread and then maybe a little cup of barley soup, maybe a small potato per day.

When I was up in that Gestapo prison in Frankfurt in solitary confinement they gave us a piece of black bread and a bunch of what looked like pickled minnows to eat. I mean, after going three or four days without eating you had to eat it. As horrible as it was, if you didn't eat it you starved to death, you know. So then we were at-- we got there late July, 1944, and we were there at Stalag Luft 4 until the 1st of February, which was my birthday.

My compound was the first to move out again. We were in B compound, and he took us to, uh, Nuremberg, which was the site of Hitler's stadium, where they had all them big rallies. And they had all these little tarpaper shacks, so we got to live in those, and also Stalag Luft 3, which was an officers' camp. They were evacuated, and they joined us at Nuremberg. And then, the reason we left Stalag [Luft] 4, was because the Russians had gotten too close to us again.

The other three compounds, the guys were put on an eighty-seven-day march through Germany. So we were lucky that we got to go to Nuremberg. And, uh, I guess we were at Nuremberg only a couple months when General Patton's armies got too close to us, and they moved us to Moosburg, Germany, which is about thirty kilometers from Munich – while we were at Nuremberg, the RAF would come over just about every hour of the night and bomb the targets around Nuremberg. I guess we were underneath an antiaircraft battery, and, lord, the shrapnel would [laughs] would rain down on us. So, they had the Russians' POWs build slit trenches for us in the middle of the streets. So at any time if an air raid siren would sound off we'd drag our tables – one table we had in the barracks – and head for the slit trenches and hope to heck that the table would save us from the shrapnel. Because shrapnel could, you know, cut ya pretty bad, coming down on ya. I had picked up four or five pieces, but I can't find 'em anymore.

When General Patton got too close to us they moved us to Munich. And at Munich they must have had 150,000 POWs there from all the nations in the Balkans, and Poland, Russian, English, Canadians. And then, the 29th of April, we were liberated by the 14th Armored Division. The night before we were liberated the Germans just disappeared. Most of the German guards were in those days were fifty, sixty years old. Most of them were here in America, and they went back to Germany, I guess, maybe on vacation. Then they got stuck over there and couldn't get back.

General Patton comes in the next day with riding boots, and he had one of those big renowned pistols on his hip, aimed for the tougher guard, and that's what the Germans had--because he hit one Oh, 500 yards away, it was the front lines. There was a river flowing through the edge of the forest. He never wanted POWs trying to cross the front lines and get back into military control, you know? Some guys took off, we never heard from 'em again. Then, uh, you know where Marinette is, right? It was unusual – there was seven of us from Marinette in the same POW camp.

Well, in the first camp we found there was three of us. Then we moved to Luft 4, and then we picked up another one. And then we went to Nuremberg, and we picked up one or two more, then we went to uh, Moosburg, and there was another guy. I had known five of the other six. From school, yeah, and we were all aerial gunners.

I think one of the biggest hardships in POW life was, there was never enough food to eat. I could tell you a lot of side stories, you know. The night that we got liberated, outside of Munich, the army always gave us you know, American bread. It wasn't sliced, but it was white bread. It was just like cake to us, you know? Not only that, after we ate it, people got pretty sick too, because of the richness of the food.

Then they took all the officers out first, and each section of the camp was taken out. We were trucked to an airfield some place, don't know where it was, and we flew to a camp outside Le Havre, France. We were taken to a camp near Reims France, where we were interrogated and given a new uniform, given a few dollars in change

Yeah. And one of the things that was mandatory was we had four roll calls, and we had to drink a canteen of eggnog every day, probably to build up our weight or something, because I had lost seventy-eight pounds. And then we were trucked to Le Havre and put on a transport ship, and we went-- we sailed into Boston. From Boston we went to-- they gave us another hundred dollars, and then we were put on a train to Fort Sheridan. Then we were given another hundred dollars [laughs], and then we were given sixty days' free leave, and then we were ordered to go to Miami Beach for more interrogation. And then I was allowed to transfer back here up to Truax Field for discharge, and then I was discharged on the 30th of September, 1945.