A Veterans Oral History

Heritage Education Commission
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Dan Murphy
Narrator

Linda Jenson
Interviewer

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LJ: Would you state your name, please?

DM: Dan Murphy.

LJ: Mr. Murphy, where were you born?

DM: I was born in Ada, Minnesota, but I lived 72 years at our farm at Felton, Minnesota.

LJ: Who were your parents?

DM: My parents were E. J. Murphy and Tessie.

LJ: And what did they do?

DM: He was a farmer and my mother was a housewife/schoolteacher. She went back into teaching during the war, really when she was in her 50s, because they couldn't get teachers.

LJ: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

DM: My dad was 65 years old when I was born, so he had a family before that. There were ten children, eight that lived. And they are all dead. Then he married my mother and I had a brother and a sister and they're both dead. So I'm the last one of 13 children.

LJ: And so did you go to school in Felton?

DM: Yes, I graduated from Felton High School; and I enrolled at MS *(Moorhead State Teachers College)*. I had about three years in when I enlisted in the Army Air Corps. And they called me in shortly after that then. So I finished my degree after the war at MS.

LJ: So it was the Air Corps that you were in?

DM: Yes.

LJ: And where did you go for your training?

DM: Oh, all over south of here. I took basic training at Jefferson Barracks at St. Louis and then I went to the University of Missouri. T

hat's a kind of an interesting story. At Jefferson Barracks there was a terrible flu epidemic, awful bad. In fact, Walter Winchell mentioned it, that not only to pray for the boys in Germany and in Japan but pray for the boys at Jefferson Barracks. Anyway, I was sick when they were going to move me out, but not very sick. I wanted to get the heck out of that place. So when the thermometer came down the line, I put it in my pocket or something. I didn't let them take my temperature and so I got by and they shipped me to the University of Missouri at Columbia for further training. Well the boys that didn't ship out that day because they were sick, three days later they went back to Moorhead State College. So that's where I would have gone if I would have not cheated a little bit.

Anyway that's not important and I'm not sorry I did it because my life would have been entirely different. I'd have been with a different crew, different Air Force probably, different planes and everything would have been entirely different in my life.

LJ: The guys that were sent back to Moorhead State, were they ever recalled back into duty again?

DM: Oh sure.

LJ: They were.

DM: Yes, that was just like I was. I mean, you went to a university for six weeks as of your early military training. And then I went to Ellington Field at Houston, Texas, and I went to Bombardier Navigator Training at Childress, Texas. And that's where I was commissioned a second lieutenant in April of '44 and then we went to Shreveport to Barksdale Field. That's where they

flew out of for this Afghan conflict. The big bombers and refueling machines flew out of Barksdale. And from there I went to New York and shipped overseas on the Queen Elizabeth.

LJ: So what was that first flight like?

DM: Which one do you mean?

LJ: Did you have to do your first solo flight?

DM: No, I was a bombardier navigator. The bombardier navigators had a little bit of flight time. We had 10 hours, but we never soloed. We landed and took off but we always had an instructor with us.

I chose to be a bombardier navi. Some guys tried to be pilots and they didn't make it and so then they made bombardier navigators out of them. But I chose to be a bombardier navigator because I thought I could end the war quicker by being a good bombardier than I could of being a good pilot.

LJ: What was that first flight like then as a bombardier?

DM: I really can't remember it that well. It was just a job that we had to do. I don't remember any particular fear or thrills or anything. It was just a job. I mean we had trained at Barksdale. We had trained in B26s for a month or so. We had many, many flights so we were used to the airplane.

LJ: From New York, you went overseas to?

DM: Landed in England. Yes and we were only stationed in England. My group, the 394th Bomb Group, was moved over to France about a week after I got there. And we stayed behind the lines about 50-60 miles. I was in three different bases in France.

As the front lines moved west, I was on the Normandy Peninsula first. Then I went down to Orléans, where Joan of Arc was. We moved up to Cambrai, which is up near Belgium; and I was flying out there when I was shot down.

We bombed only military targets, bridges and railroads and troop concentrations. We didn't blanket cities with bombs like the B17s and the RA, the Royal Air Force. They were the ones that really did that. They just went over at night and dropped saturation bombing on cities.

LJ: Where were you shot down?

DM: It was just into Germany by Holland. Our target was Ahaus, which was a troop concentration and a railroad center.

LJ: In your crew are there three of you on the plane?

DM: No, there were eight that day. It was regularly six but we had two young trainees that were along to learn the ropes.

LJ: Did all eight of you survived?

DM: All eight survived, yes.

UK: It was your 54th mission.

DM: Yes, it was my 54th mission over combat mission. And I was slightly wounded. I later got the Purple Heart and another man was wounded a little more severely. He went into a German hospital and we didn't see him again, but he ended up in the same camp but we just never saw him again.

LJ: So what happened after you were shot down. I mean, where did you go?

DM: Well, I came . . .

LJ: Did you get help right away or?

DM: No, you mean help from the enemy? That's . . .

LJ: Well help from anyone.

DM: No, I came down on the edge of a German village and I was surrounded. By the time I got to the ground why there was 40, 60, 80 people around there. And my parachute caught a little bit in a telephone wire or a highline wire of some kind and it kind of broke my fall, I think, and so I wasn't hurt. Supposedly, you wouldn't be hurt anyway but I wasn't hurt at all.

They started questioning me right away in broken German. Then here came a young boy, about a 14-year-old boy, that spoke perfect English. I was only supposed to give my name, rank, and serial number. That's all you have to give, according to the Geneva Convention and so that was all I was giving them. But he kept asking more questions and more questions and, and I pretended not to understand. I'd say "nicht verstehen, nicht verstehen" . . .

LJ: And what's that mean?

DM: That means, "Don't understand."

LJ: "Don't understand?"

DM: Yes and he was livid you know, because his friends were laughing at him. Apparently had told them he could speak English and his friends were laughing at him so he was just absolutely furious. He said, "I know you can understand me. I went to school in England. I know you understand me." And I said, "nicht verstehen." By that time the military had come up and when they led me away, he said, "I hope they kill you." You know, he was really mad.

You've got to understand that the Germans spit at us and kicked at us and stuff, too, during my captivity, but it's certainly understandable. You know, the Americans, we've had a little taste of 9/11 but the Germans endured three years of 9/11, day after day and night after night, three years. So understandably, they were ticked off.

LJ: So from that point, you were held captive?

DM: Yes.

LJ: Prisoner of war?

DM: Yes.

LJ: You and the seven others in your flight crew?

DM: Yes, they took us to Stalag Luft I, that means "luft" is "air", you know, and "stalag" a "prison," prison one.

UK: Before they took you there, they rounded you up and took you to a couple of different places where they interrogated you. [unclear]

DM: Yes, I was never on any forced marches, luckily. They took us in a crude train to Bremen. I think that Germans don't have union stations like we – you're too young to remember that, too. But like New York has Grand Central Station where five railroads all come in there and you can depart on another railroad. Well apparently they didn't have that because they'd march us a mile or so in Bremen and then in Hamburg, again, they marched us a mile to get on a different train. That's where we were kicked at and spit upon and stuff. We went into an air-raid shelter, too, because there was an air raid.

LJ: Scary.

DM: We went into one that was marked "kriegsgefangener," that means "prisoner-of-war," and it was marked for us specifically. It was probably the poorest air-raid shelter they had, you know. But we went in there and stayed for a half an hour until the air raid was over. Eventually they got us to Barth, which is on the Baltic Sea about 100 miles north of Berlin. And that was Stalag Luft I.

There were many stalag prisons in Germany, I would say 40 of them; and we were just one of them. They interrogated us and wanted to know why there was nine men on our crew. And we all said there weren't nine men. I said there, I said there were eight of us and you got us all. They said, "Yes. We got eight of you, but they said there were human remains around the wreckage." And I don't know whether they were lying to us. I mean, the only way that could have been is if some German went up there before the bombs went off. I was observing it from the air. There was a big explosion, you know. And the gasoline went off and then about 30 seconds later the bombs went off. And that was a huge explosion. Well there might have time for some curious civilian to go up there and get blown apart, but I don't know. I think they were trying to trick us by saying there was nine men, because there wasn't.

LJ: How did they go about interrogating you? Were they abusive in any way?

DM: Not really, no. They pretty much followed the Geneva Convention. I think we were fortunate that particular camp was run by the Luftwaffe. Some of the others were run by the storm troopers, the SS and that's where the mistreatment was, but our camp they tried to stick to the Geneva Convention rules, I think.

LJ: What were the conditions like as a prisoner of war?

DM: Once a week we got a cold shower. It was really cold water and a cold room. I mean, there was no heat in the room. It was very uncomfortable, but at least we got to clean up once a week.

UK: How many were in your room?

DM: There were about 20 of us in a barracks. They had horizontal bunks on the wall that and a straw mattress; very rudimentary, poor, little thin mattress. But it was better than nothing.

LJ: What time of the year was this?

DM: March and it was very cold and damp. It was one of the most severe winters they'd had. There wasn't a lot of snow; about a foot of snow, I suppose. But, it was very cold and damp; right on the Baltic Sea. We were as close to Copenhagen as I was to Berlin, really. It was just across the sea there.

LJ: How long were you held prisoner of war?

DM: Eight weeks ... the war was about over. We had been told Eisenhower had sent an order a month or so before I was shot down that if we were shot down, we shouldn't try to escape because it would be fruitless and they thought the war was going to be over. I didn't believe it but apparently they had pretty good knowledge that the war wouldn't last more than a few months.

LJ: Were you well fed during your time as a POW?

DM: No, we got one bowl of soup a day from the Germans and black bread, quite a bit of black bread.

LJ: What was that like?

DM: Oh, terrible. It had sawdust in it. They were very poor and deprived themselves, you know. I think they were putting sawdust in their flour, too. What else was I going to say. That's all we got from the Germans was one bowl of soup a day and black bread. Each man would get a Red Cross parcel once every two weeks and that contained a small can of powdered milk and a small can of Spam from Austin, Minnesota, and a little tiny package of sugar and salt and a D-bar, like German chocolate, and cigarettes. Well, I didn't smoke. I've never smoked a day in my life. I never had a cigarette in my mouth, so I either gave my cigarettes to someone or I'd trade it for a D-bar because I've always liked candy and chocolate.

LJ: So even as a prisoner of war, you were still able to get those Red Cross parcels?

DM: Yes, one every two weeks. We heard later that the Germans took some, too. They helped themselves, I guess, a little bit but at least they gave us some like they were supposed to. I think we were supposed to have them once a week but we got them once every two weeks.

LJ: The year that you were a POW was 1945?

DM: Yes, spring of '45. In our room of twenty guys, three of them volunteered to be kind of cooks. There wasn't anything to cook but they'd dole out the Red Cross parcels and they even attempted to make a cake. They crumbled up the German bread and had sugar and a D-bar, and then they attempted to make a cake and that was some improvement, I guess, over what we'd been eating.

LJ: Yes, sure.

DM: Then we were liberated by the Russians.

LJ: What was that like?

DM: Well the first thing they did was insist that we wear black arm bands in mourning for President Roosevelt who had died in April. No, he must have died about the 10th of March, because they were wearing black arm bands. They said that if it wasn't for Roosevelt they wouldn't be here because of his lend-lease program. Because of the weapons that America provided, they were able to fight off the Germans, you know.

That was a horrendous war in Germany, worse than, I think, it was in Russia. I think it was worse than anything in Germany, I believe, just tremendous bloodshed and destruction between the Russians, and hatred between the Germans and the Russians. They were going to march us to the Black Sea and send us home supposedly on, by ship.

UK: Tell her that they came in riding horses and [unclear].

DM: Yes, a lot of them were drunk. I mean . . .

LJ: The Russians?

DM: Yes, they were just kind of the rag-tag outskirts of Zhukov's army, but they were a rough bunch, drinking and just a rag-tag rough bunch. That's the only way to describe them.

Our officers, we had some colonels and lieutenant colonels that had been shot down, too; and they convinced them that in a few days we'd be flown back to America or at least to France. They were successful in keeping them from marching us to the Black Sea. We were flown out by B17s and B24s that came and got us. The Russians were just awestruck. They didn't know there were that many airplanes in the world. You know, they just stood there with their mouth open watching those airplanes land. Because there was 100s of

them. There was 8,000 guys in the camp and I think we took about 20 on a plane and so that's a lot of planes.

LJ: Yes, where did you go from there?

DM: We went to Camp Lucky Strike, I think almost all the European prisoners went through Lucky Strike on their way back home.

LJ: Where was it?

DM: Well it was on the Normandy Peninsula right across from England near Le Havre. There were 8,000 from our camp; I think there were probably 200,000 men there. Because I remember my first taste of American food was a loaf of white bread and GI bread was good. It really was. It tasted like angel food cake to us because we'd been eating that black stuff. Then we finally got in the chow line and we had a meal. The line was so long that we went back to the end of line and got in again to have another meal four or five hours later. So that's how big Lucky Strike was. That was a huge camp. I think there was probably a quarter of million or half a million people there.

LJ: How long were you kept at Camp Lucky Strike?

DM: Only a few days. They gave us a choice of going right home or going to our base. I had a nephew that had been shot down before I was and he was only missing in action like me. And I thought, I'll be going back to the United States so I better find out what happened to Claire [sp?]; so they said I could go to Paris.

I went to Paris and went to SHAPE Headquarters and found out that he had been killed and buried in Flanders Field, so I hitchhiked up to Flanders Field in Belgium and visited his grave. Then I went back to Lucky Strike and by that time, all the good troop ships were gone so I went home on a Liberty ship and it took 14 days.

UK: Where was all your gear and things that had been at your camp when you were shot down?

DM: They had shipped that home in a box to Felton.

UK: So you didn't have any . . .

DM: No, all we had was new issue stuff. They gave us new issue there at Lucky Strike.

LJ: So you got on a Liberty ship, where?

DM: At Camp Lucky Strike at Le Havre, France.

LJ: And then that went to New York?

DM: To New York, yes.

LJ: And that was 14 days?

DM: Yes.

LJ: What were the conditions on that ship?

DM: Oh, they weren't good. We hit some stormy weather. I think it wouldn't have been 14 days if we hadn't hit that stormy weather but I was an officer so I wasn't mistreated. We always got the best of things, you know.

LJ: Any seasickness?

DM: No, it didn't bother me. We went right home to Fargo from New York and to Felton.

LJ: Take a train then from New York to North Dakota?

DM: Yes.

LJ: How long on the train?

DM: Oh, I don't remember. Two days and one night, I think.

LJ: What was that feeling like, knowing you were on the train to go home?

DM: Oh, that was great. I've often said that I think of that song. What is it, Annie? – "They all . . ."

UK: ***Green, Green Grass of Home.***

DM: *Green, Green Grass of Home.* "They all came to meet me, arms reaching, smiling sweetly. It was good to touch the green, green grass of home." That's what I think of and it was July, so it was nice.

LJ: Was your mother there and . . .

DM: Yes, my dad had been dead many years before that but my mother was there.

LJ: What did you do once you got home to Fargo and Felton?

DM: We were given kind of a month's leave and then I went back to Texas to get discharged. I went to San Antonio and they sent me to Denver, Colorado, where I was mustered out and back to Fargo. I went back to help on the farm and to finish my school. In the winter and spring quarters, I finished at MS in the spring of '46.

LJ: What was your degree in?

DM: Phy-ed and English and a journalism minor, but I never used it. I taught one year, then I went back into full-time farming and farmed my whole life. Then I met this lovely lady in '54.

LJ: Where did you meet her?

DM: I was in the service with her brother and that's really how I got to know her.

LJ: And when did you retire from farming?

DM: In '96, I retired about '90, really, but we continued to live on the farm and Danny was the farmer and he lived in Borup. And then in '96 we moved here and Danny moved to the farm.

LJ: Now, Danny is your son?

DM: Yes, he's the oldest son. We have four other children; two teachers and a doctor and a lawyer. And they're all going to be home here for a couple of days for Easter.

LJ: Very impressive. That's nice. Have you kept in touch with any of the buddies that you fought with?

DM: Well that's a good question. I didn't for about 40 years, I guess. But then 10-15 years ago, we started getting together again and we have an active 394th Bomb Group reunion every year. We're going to go to this one it's in September at Dayton, Ohio, at the greatest air museum in the world. Have you ever been there?

LJ: No.

DM: It's a wonderful museum.

UK: You should tell them that your crew just got together there in Dayton, Ohio, six-seven years ago. That's the first time you'd gotten together since you were liberated.

DM: Yes, two are dead, but four of us got together about five years ago.

UK: It was good because then your pilot died the next year.

DM: Yes, there's only three of us left; the copilot and the tail-gunner and myself are the only three left of the six.

LJ: From the time you went into the service until the time you came home again, how long a time span was that?

DM: About three-and-a-half years until I was mustered out, I guess.

LJ: What do you think about the war that we're fighting now in Afghanistan?

DM: Well that's a tough question. It's unavoidable that we have to fight. We have to fight terrorism and I think they're doing a good job of it. I've been a life-long Democrat, but I think Bush has done a wonderful job. He's a good commander-in-chief, I think. And we just have to do it. I agree with him that it's going to take a long time. You know, when you're dealing with people that don't care if they live or not, why it's like dealing with animals.

LJ: Very scary.

DM: You just don't know how to do it. But I think the young people will do a good job.

LJ: So do you think it's a war that can be won?

DM: Never completely, I don't think. In my estimation it won't ever be completely won but we can thin them out and, and make it more livable, I suppose.

LJ: How did the war affect your life, Mr. Murphy?

DM: Iit didn't have a great effect, do you think, Anne? It was just a job I had to do and, and I went back to what I had wanted to do was to either teach or farm. And I decided to farm. So it didn't have a big effect. I brought up

Roosevelt. He's always been a hero of mine, because I have said that he took us through the worst depression in history that started one administration ahead of him. He took us through the worst weather in history, the Dust Bowl of the 30s. And he took us through the worst war in history; fought on three fronts, half the world apart, you know. It's just amazing how he rallied the people and rallied the troops. He was a leader.

LJ: Do you have any final thoughts about what you went through? Any buddy stories that you wish to share?

DM: Not really that I can think of. You asked me how I want to be remembered, was that next?

LJ: That's my next question. How would you like to be remembered?

DM: I want to be remembered as a guy that just did his part, did what his country asked and flew 54 combat missions and had no choice about being a prisoner. I mean, when you bail out you don't have any choice about becoming a prisoner or not. That's about it, I guess.

LJ: Thank you, Mr. Murphy.

DM: You're welcome, Linda.