

**Interview with Frank Hylla**

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**Interviewed by David Overy**

**Overy:** Mr. Hylla, explain the circumstances of you joining the service. What was that about?

**Hylla:** It was during the depression years you know, there was nothing much to do at all; so I told my mother I was going to join the U.S. Navy. Okay. She knew there was a war coming on, it already started in '39. I went to the federal building in St. Cloud and waited there for a good hour, hour and a half and nobody showed up. I turned around, walked around the corner and fifteen minutes later said "I DO" to the U.S. Army. There was nothing for us to do at all. We would probably work all day for a dollar a day. I worked on a dairy farm from four o'clock in the morning until eight at night for a buck a day.

**Overy:** Is that right? Did quite a number of friends join the service at that time too?

**Hylla:** No, I was about the only one from the area that I know of.

**Overy:** You were in the army for almost two years before the war started, could you tell me about your experiences in the peacetime Army? What you did and where you were?

**Hylla:** The peacetime Army is a hell of a lot different than it is right now. Our drill sergeants were professional soldiers, and discipline was very tough; if they told you to do something, you had better do it-or else. Like my first sergeant was a big barrel-chested guy who's a Greek. He used to scare the hell out of us. When he walked in and talked to us; he had a real gruff voice.

There was no turning back from that guy. If he said something to you, you'd better do it. If he told you to squat and go potty, you'd better try; if he told you what color, you'd better try and get that color too! He was mean, he was vicious. I was disciplined in those days. Today they don't have that anymore.

**Overy:** I understand you went to Coast Artillery right?

**Hylla:** Yeah, I went from St. Cloud and they sent me over to San Francisco, Fort Barry, which is just outside of San Francisco. They put me in Coast Artillery, the anti-aircraft. I got my basic there, and there again, basic was real tough. We lived in tents and we had to be clean, they were tough. They checked your bunks and everything, if a quarter didn't bounce, you got gigged. All in all basic wasn't all too bad, we had a corporal there that was in charge of us that wasn't too bad of a guy. His name was Corporal Richter, I'll never forget that man; he taught us a lot about the service. He talked to us, about what to expect, what to do; he probably had fourteen-fifteen years in the service. In those days you didn't make sergeant until you had damn near thirty years in. Promotions didn't come easy. But anyway, it was the 65<sup>th</sup> Coast Artillery that we got put into. Ours was basically anti-aircraft. We did have some training on heavy coast, with the 155s; outside of Fort Baker, but we never fired on them. We would just go through the drill of it. Our anti-aircraft, at the time, was composed strictly of 50 calibers and 30 calibers.

**Overy:** Where these quads or duals or just single guns?

**Hylla:** Singles, we didn't have much. We knew there was a 37mm coming out but we never seen one until I had to [?]. We were very ill prepared for that war.

**Overy:** Did you feel that you were at the time?

**Hylla:** For service?

**Overy:** Yeah.

**Hylla:** Absolutely.

**Overy:** But the equipment wasn't very good at the time.

**Hylla:** Yeah, but it made you do your own thing. I don't regret one day of it.

**Overy:** Where were you during Pearl Harbor?

**Hylla:** Okay I'll have to back up a little bit. After I left Fort Barry, they transferred us to Camp Hahn, which was a training center for the National Guardsmen coming in. [?] Riverside, California. The 217<sup>th</sup>, 215<sup>th</sup>, 216<sup>th</sup>; and 217<sup>th</sup>, St. Cloud was 217<sup>th</sup>. I was an MP there, put me on MP duty. I rode with the sheriff of Riverside County, checking all the night clubs and bars. You must understand that the National Guard and the regular Army did not get along.

**Overy:** Oh is that right?

**Hylla:** The National Guard was "NG." They'd go "Hey NG, SOB," then a fight would start. We generally broke those up, I hauled in a few of my buddies from St. Cloud, people that I knew. I used to haul them in the back door, or gate. In the front gate they had to be checked out and everything else, arrested. We didn't want to get these guys in trouble. One day the officer of the day caught us bringing a whole load of St. Cloud boys in, that was it for me; I was through being an MP. Then they shipped me out to Camp Callen, in California, a training academy, another anti-aircraft group. That was kind of fun, we opened up the camp, and it had mud up to your knees. Then they started bringing the trainees in, they were draftees but we had to call them

trainees, started to shift a little bit. A friend of mine from Sauk Rapids, his father passed away. In the meantime, my wife, she's from Arban if you know where Arban is.

**Overy:** From where?

**Hylla:** Arban, it's just outside of Holdingford. A little bitty town, he said, why don't you stop over and see her? [?] So a couple weeks later we got married and I was making six dollars a month at the time but we rented a completely furnished apartment overlooking the ocean for 25 bucks a month. She got a job and that worked out real well. On December 7<sup>th</sup>, I was at home having breakfast and word came over the radio they had bombed Pearl Harbor; All military personnel return back to base. I went out to Highway 101 and hitchhiked all the way in. I came into camp and that place was in turmoil, believe me. They had everybody come and draw helmets, we never wore helmets at all. [?] We also had officers fresh out of OCS, they were there for the same purpose, for training. This second lieutenant was sitting in a corner crying all by himself, and I asked him what the matter was. "I'm scared, I can't get this damn helmet together." He was so nervous he couldn't get that one screw in to hold the lining to the helmet. I helped him with that and tried to calm him down. We had to draw ammo, and then go set up on the beach. There were reports of a Jap submarine on the outskirts. Not too many people know about this, but the Japs had a sub out there and they did shell Santa Barbara that same night. So there we sat with our little .50 calibers, .30 calibers, and browning's-automatic rifles and 30.06. Then we had three 37 mm anti-aircraft guns out there with four rounds of ammo for each gun.

**Overy:** Four rounds?

**Hylla:** Four rounds. Per gun. They had just gotten the new 90s in, and this was sitting there for practice purposes, no ammo. Down the line was the Coast Artillery with 155s, all they had were

sand filled shells, practice shells. This would be like throwing rocks at a sub. The Japs could have come on shore and this was all we had, and very little ammo. This is why I was such a strong advocate of good defense; plenty of ammo--if they had come ashore, they could have taken it.

**Overy:** Was Pearl Harbor a surprise to you?

**Hylla:** Yes it was. We heard rumors that they may attack but we just passed it off. We knew there was something cooking; we were more worried about the Germans than the Japanese at the time. It was a surprise. Hell, we thought we'd have them whipped in two weeks, like right now in the Persian Gulf; it took us a long time for us to whip them.

**Overy:** Were there any Japanese-American civilians around where you were?

**Hylla:** No, but there were some to the north of us, around the Los Angeles area. There was some controversy about that. We knew there were Japanese spies, maybe not the average family but there was always one in there. How the hell did they know where Santa Barbara was and what place to shell? They knew where all the fortifications were and everything, somebody squawked. President Roosevelt, hey we're going to round up these guys and the FBI was involved in it. It's a sad thing a lot of wives and children got involved. I still think it was the right thing to do, they were not to be trusted.

**Overy:** Did you sense a lot of anti-Japanese feeling among you and your friends?

**Hylla:** No, not at the time but after the attack there was plenty of it.

**Overy:** So much of the time before flight school was spent in coast defense duty?

**Hylla:** We had training people. I don't know how many groups I ran through; it was nice but it got boring.

**Overy:** What kinds of things were you doing?

**Hylla:** Close order drill, practice, everything. They had taken movies of this at the time. There was no actual firing. We did get a lot of people from Kentucky and Alabama, they were dead-eye shots on the rifle range; if they would have been made to shoot the Army way, they wouldn't have hit anything. The best thing to do for them on a long distance hike was to take their shoes away, with shoes on they'd never make it. That was kind of a standing joke. But as a rule these people turned out to be damn good soldiers. We did have a lot of Mexicans come in there, into our training academy. Some of these guys could not speak English, why in the hell they got them in there? You couldn't do anything with them. They were illiterate, they didn't know left from right, but I still think a lot of these guys were smarter than we were; they come in the service for good food and clothes. A few turned out to be pretty damn good soldiers but the majority were nothing. You couldn't depend on them to do something. Talking about shortages of equipment, we used to practice shooting balloons, supposedly with a .50 caliber anti-aircraft gun. They'd release these balloons, and anybody could shoot a standing target-you just open up and watch the tracers. But for practice we tied a B.B. gun on the side of the mount and have the trainee's line up on the balloon, then pull the trigger on B.B. gun, that's how bad the ammo situation was; they didn't have enough to practice with.

**Overy:** What caused you to put in for flight training?

**Hylla:** You get pretty bored pushing a bunch of recruits around, and you'd see these airplanes flying around. It was my pride and joy, I always wanted to fly one of those things. I talked with

my wife and we talked about it and she said if you like it why don't you go? The day before I left, my mother came in from Holdingford and I had to leave the next day which was kind of a heartbreaker for me. I always wanted to fly anyway. As an instructor in anti-aircraft we knew they couldn't hit a damn thing! That didn't scare me.

**Overy:** How did you put in for this?

**Hylla:** They put out bulletin looking for pilots, at this time the Army Air Corps was building up, it was a big deal. Then we had to report to a room and take an Army Air Corp screening test. It scared the hell out of me because I only had an eighth grade education, and they had college graduates out there. Out of the sixty people that took the screening exam, I was number two from the top.

**Overy:** What kinds of questions were on this test?

**Hylla:** Basically common horse things, a few math questions, physics, stuff like that; the majority was like-what would you do in this type of situation? It was kind of interesting. To really get it they give you a questionnaire to take home and study. My wife tried to teach me algebra, oh my god! Math!? I went crazy but I made out alright on that test again. Then December 2<sup>nd</sup> I got my orders to go to Nashville, Tennessee for classification. There again it was another doozer but most of that was physical ability, coordination, things like that. No math, algebra or geometry. They'd play a phonograph and see if you could follow the record, all kinds of stuff, it was interesting. Then we took another test which classified you as bombardier, navigator, or pilot. Luckily I got into pilots.

**Overy:** What criteria did they use to decide this?

**Hylla:** Most of it was coordination, and if a guy was sharp in math, mechanical ability-what makes a carbonator work, what fires a spark plug. That classified them in different categories. From there, two weeks later, I was back in Santa Ana, California for pre-flight school. There was a dinger! They threw stuff at you, math--you stayed up half the night studying this garbage. I made it through there OK. It was rough.

**Overy:** Was any of that stuff practical for being a pilot?

**Hylla:** Not really, the mechanical stuff yes but as far as math and all that--well what makes an aircraft go up and what keeps it up, things like that you had to study.

**Overy:** I was talking to a fellow up in Brainerd who went to flight school about the same time you do. He said he got out because the instructors treated them like animals. Was that your impression, that you were treated badly as far as discipline?

**Hylla:** No I can't say that. Absolutely not, if you goofed, well, you got it. Our instructors were damn nice people, they never bothered us. The most harassment we got would be from our upper classmen, ahead of us, like any other school. The officers were great no problems. Primary training, we had a civilian instructor; he used to invite us up to his house on weekends. We spent a lot of time together. We got along just beautifully.

**Overy:** What memories from preflight do you remember most vividly?

**Hylla:** My first solo, that was something different. That front cockpit looks pretty empty when you take off all by yourself. I soloed after about 6-8 hours. When I hit the ground I made a beautiful landing, then taxied up to pick up the instructor; "Hey Frank, pretty neat, want to take

her up again?" Why not? I went up for another twenty minutes or so and he sat there and watched me, "You're a little lazy on that roll there."

**Overy:** Did you have any close calls or scary incidents?

**Hylla:** No. Outside of this plane that took off in front of me. He was supposed to go and make a slow roll, and I was probably about a quarter of a mile away. He laid her on its back and the instructor fell out! Which was embarrassing for him, not the student. The student brought the plane down in good shape, but he was so damn scared he couldn't even walk because he lost his instructor.

**Overy:** That instructor must have had a bad time when he got out of that.

**Hylla:** He got it from us.

**Overy:** Did he stick around?

**Hylla:** He was embarrassed because the truck had to go and pick him up and brought him in right to the flight line. [?] My wife was with me at this time, but we couldn't get off the base at all in the evening just the weekends.

**Overy:** Was there much for you and your wife to do on the weekends?

**Hylla:** Plenty.

**Overy:** So things weren't really shut down because of the war?

**Hylla:** No, there were places to go, nightclubs, whatever. This instructor was good to us. Sundays we always went to church and had to be back on base for a parade on Sunday

afternoons. She had to go back to town, she had a little room, in a little apartment there which was pretty nice.

**Overy:** Any accidents that you witnessed?

**Hylla:** Yes. We had one student come in a little hot in a PT-22, and they waved him off because his landing wasn't quite right. He goosed the engine and cartwheeled it down the runway. He didn't get hurt or anything, he just wrecked the airplane.

**Overy:** So training wasn't particularly dangerous?

**Hylla:** Not really if you watched your P's and Q's. Half of our class washed out.

**Overy:** What kinds of things?

**Hylla:** The one guy wrecked an airplane--just bad flying. If it took fifteen hours to solo they wouldn't, if you didn't solo after about 8/9 hours, forget it. They washed out for other various reasons too, screwing up, not getting along with others.

**Overy:** What's the difference to go from the single to the twin engines?

**Hylla:** When you leave primary you've got 165 horsepower, then they put you in a PT-13; it's like going from a Model T Ford to Cadillac. The engine just purred so smooth. We had a lot of night flights with that plane. That was a damn good airplane. That was at Bakers Field, we did night flying and a little bit of formations. Then we had military instructions, they were great, there was no chicken stuff. Discipline was tough, you had to keep your bunks...they were inspected every day, if you kept in line you didn't have any problems. From there we went to Stockton, to a dual engine aircraft and that's a lot different. Your flying changes quite a bit, you've got two engines instead of one. Like when you take off, you don't get that you get with a

single. A lot easier to fly really. You feel more confident, with two engines instead of one. You would do single engine landings, and cut out one engine when you're flying, what are you going to do? But there wasn't all that much of a change.

**Overy:** Did your training prepare you for what you would be doing?

**Hylla:** In the service?

**Overy:** In the service, yeah.

**Hylla:** They run you through something like 12 weeks or something like that, in reality we didn't get the training that we should have gotten. Especially when you get on those twin engine planes--the training was so fast, because they needed pilots. We didn't get the training in the four engine aircraft that we should have gotten. All I knew was how to fly the damn thing and how to land it. I didn't know how to fuel transfer or anything. They took you out of this and six weeks you were overseas. Most of our training then was high altitude bombing, some air to ground gunner, there was nothing on the operation of the aircraft, how it works. I didn't know how to transfer fuel from one tank to the other, the engineer would do that. The training wasn't that good

**Overy:** So all you really knew how to do was fly the plane?

**Hylla:** I knew how to fly the plane, lay the eggs, and bring her back; that was it. We could have taken another six months learning about that aircraft, as far as the nitty gritty of it, we didn't know nothing about it. We knew we had two sparkplugs for each cylinder. We knew, if we wanted to land in some strange town on a night cross country, we knew how to screw up these

spark plugs, you lose so many RPMs you can't fly, and you've got to settle down. All you do is shut one mag off and drop the RPMs, land in this town and go and celebrate, it's been done.

**Overy:** You went to Tucson fall of '43 and got your crew, then where?

**Hylla:** McCook, Nebraska. That again was a lot of night cross country flying. High altitude practice missions. That's where we actually got most of our training, dropping bombs at 25,000 feet. Practice bombs, of course. Air to ground gunnery, things like that. A lot of formation flying. In gunnery practice we would have to dip down to about 30-40 feet above the ground and let the gunners try to hit a target on the ground; one day we had two targets. But that's not attacking us. The gunners didn't get the practice they should have.

**Overy:** How was your crew? Did you get along pretty well?

**Hylla:** We had one guy, our radio operator, he didn't like officers; we made a Christian out of him in a hurry. Of course we had one officer too that thought he was god because he had bars. That was not my idea because I was a GI before I got my bars. I used to get along fantastic with him, you had to. We lived together, flew together, drank together, and we hoped we didn't have to die together. We were family, real tight knit. In the air on the intercom, we never called anybody sir, it was 'Hey bob, or Hey Frank,' strictly first name basis. On the flight line, if we had an inspection, then we had to. Each one depended on the other.

**Overy:** Did you know of crews who just simply couldn't get along with each other? Or you knew you had to get along?

**Hylla:** Yes, we knew we had to get along. We had one guy that thought he was King Tut, he was a pilot, that crew didn't stay with him long. They could transfer out, request a transfer and the

next mission they'd be out and they'd be on somebody else's crew. No way, my crew stayed together. We did get along beautifully. We had this bombardier that thought he was King Tut and we made a Christian out of him too. Just took him aside and told him, "This is it, if you don't like it, out!"

**Overy:** What was your flight over like? Was that kind of fun? Or was it just drudgery?

**Hylla:** You really want the real story?

**Overy:** The real story, yeah.

**Hylla:** You'd never believe it if I told you. We took off from McCook, Nebraska, and it was about 20 below zero. We had our leather flight suits on, we didn't know where we were going. We got up and opened up our orders--West Palm Beach, Florida. We wound up there wearing only our shorts. We ran into some Navy fighters on the way down, they came in pretty tight. I told the crew, "Hey, these guys are playing with us." We got on their frequency and said, "we got 'cha," "Oh hell" they said back, "We got you long before you could have fired a shot." They came zooming down, that's good practice for the gunners. Of course they didn't fire, they just tracked them. At West Palm Beach, we landed there and it was muggier than hell. God it was horrible. We only stayed there overnight, we couldn't get uptown or anything, we stayed there two days. We couldn't get uptown, we stayed at the base. From there, if my memory serves me right, we went to Puerto Rico, we had three days there. It was kind of neat, they had a nice officers club. My navigator and I decided we were going to get some booze to take along overseas. We went to the officers club and got a case of Johnny Walker Red Label. Cost us thirty-six bucks. It's about damn near that much per a jug now. There were twelve bottles in there I think. We took it back to our tent, okay, you take three, you take three, and we give a

couple to the gunners and we put it in our D4 bags, you could fill them. From there we went to British Guinea, we stayed one day over there. That's where I met Polly Gard. We had a good time there. I played the slot machine and made myself ten bucks. The next day we took off to Fort Aleza, we knew we were going to Africa by then. Things were very quiet there, Fort Aleza, Brazil. It was sweltering hot and muggy, horrible. Then we got orders to take off at five o'clock in the morning. My navigator, he couldn't hit anything in the states, we came from McCook, Nebraska looking for Des Moines, Iowa, about 500 miles south of there; but on the way to West Palm Beach he hit it right on the button, and all the way down he was right on the nose. We took off for Dakar, we were about an hour out to sea, of course we were also out on submarine patrol too, looking for German subs.

**Overy:** Were you flying in squadrons?

**Hylla:** No, we flew singly, we didn't fly as a group. You're all by yourself. This is the funny part of the damn show, Jerry, he had everything plotted out [?] and all that stuff. He's all nervous and excited. Jerry comes up and says, "Frank, you know what? I could stand a good drink." We had another 8-9 hours left to cross. Pretty soon he comes up and he had a couple of snorts taken out of it, "Hell, give me one too then." We put the engineer in the front seat, and the pilot seat was on automatic pilot anyway. We sat back and played poker, and we killed just about the whole jug. About an hour out of Dakar the engineer called us and said that we should be getting there pretty soon. We put the oxygen masks on, we ran with it. Jerry missed that thing by three minutes. Three minutes. That's when we were unloading the damn airplane putting our B4 bags out. One of the zippers broke on a B\$ bag, and three jugs fell out onto the rocks. Luckily none of them got broken. A lot of those men brought funny things over there.

**Overy:** That was strictly illegal I imagine? Bringing booze over?

**Hylla:** No one really cared. Our squadron commander had two-three cases aboard, that didn't matter too much.

**Overy:** What do you remember about North Africa?

**Hylla:** In Marrakech, we stayed about four-five days if I remember correctly. Our airfield was in [?] anyway. We stayed there and we could get odd days and go into Marrakech. We couldn't speak French, but we would walk into the bar and have a glass of wine. A group of six of us decided one day we were going to go see what the Casbah looks like, that was off limits, forbidden territory. We stayed at the hotel there, we got to this one bar on the outskirts of town. How the hell we got there I don't know. Anyway, we got a hold of these cabbies with horse and buggies, we had a few jugs of wine with our .45s. We went to see the Casbah and it was scary as hell. He brought us in to a place and said that there were good wine and nice girls in there. He brought us to a cathouse! Plush rugs, just beautiful inside. Sweet smelling perfume. Pretty soon the girls come out. Just for the hell of it they put on a dance for us but none of us had anything to do with them. We decided to get back. The cabbie was sitting there waiting and wanted his money before he would take us. This guy with us started yelling for a MP and the cabbie took off and left us, and it was getting dark about this time. In this Casbah the streets are about maybe ten feet wide, and here was six airmen walking two abreast with each a wine bottle and a .45. [?] We walked about two hours, and we were getting scared about this time. Finally we got a hold of some little kid that spoke a little English. We wanted to get out, well how much? However many francs it was, he took us out. He has us out in two minutes and we were walking right behind the

damn gate. This MP started laughing, “Did you guys have a good time in there?” We were never so damn glad to get the hell out of there. It was really something.

**Overy:** Were you scared and thought you were going to be attacked?

**Hylla:** Well it was really scary. There were no lights in the streets, aside from the light from fires, they were roasting almonds or something. That was scarier than hell. I thought the MP was going to bust a gut when we came out of there.

**Overy:** You must have looked scared.

**Hylla:** We were. We had a couple of 45s. It was rough. From there we went to Tunis, and that was uneventful. It was a nice town, I took in some movies. The only excitement we had was when we had to go back to Algiers to pick up some airplane parts. There was nothing to do. We flew practice bombing missions, stuff like that. We went and stayed overnight in a nice hotel and there was nothing for us to do there really. In the morning we started taxiing out to the end of the runway. Here comes the jeep from across the field with three nurses in it. They were from the hospital in Tunis. They wanted a ride back because they had to be back in the afternoon. I said they could ride back with us, surely we won't have issues. We gave them a ride and my navigator was talking to these gals, American nurses. He said that we were going to have a squadron party, and he would shoot off some red flares to let them know when it was. Our executive officer, the captain, flew a ship with Jerry in it. We didn't fly over the hospital, we stayed on the outskirts, but Captain Ray flew right over the hospital and shot these flares off. He got nailed 50 bucks fine for that. The squadron commander arranged to get a truck and we went up town and got a keg of Dago Red wine. We parked in front of the officers club, and they had a dance going that night with a little band. We danced, we couldn't walk in ourselves so the nurses

had to bring us in one by one. These three gals would go in and then come back out, back and forth. The band was supposed to quite playing at one o'clock but we gave the GI's I don't know how many bucks to keep on playing, they got through at five o'clock in the morning. In the meantime we were looking for cops and stuff. We had swiped a 110 volt generator, Jerry and I. We were running short of light bulbs so we were looking for light bulbs. Jerry located a case of light bulbs and I spotted 5 gallons of medical alcohol. That was good stuff to drink. You could drink it, but you had to mix it 10-to1. So I copped that 5 gallons of alcohol and threw that in the truck. "Major, come here, let me show you something." He said, "Where in the hell did you get that? That's medical alcohol you can't drink that stuff." "You can." "Okay, you keep that in your tent. I don't want that in my office." Everybody came around for a cup of that, it lasted about a week.

**Overy:** From North Africa you went to? Pantanello?

**Hylla:** That was our permanent base, and one we flew out of. It was about 70 miles west of Bari. It was brand new, there wasn't enough landing strips for everybody, so some of the shifts went over to another base. It didn't take the engineers long to finish the runways. We flew over a group, this was our group headquarters.

**Overy:** What was it like living in Italy?

**Hylla:** We lived in tents, it wasn't all plush. The food, GI food, green eggs, stuff. We used to go barter for eggs and stuff like that. We had our own stoves, 50 gallon drums cut in half and shell casings for the chimney, we would use 100 octane gasoline to keep it warm.

**Overy:** Sounds dangerous.

**Hylla:** It was. Who gives a damn? We had a tube coming in from the outside and let it drip. As long as the fire kept going, if the wind blew it out and the gas kept dripping, which was another can of worms. The pilot lit one after it had been out all night and the damn thing blew apart.

**Overy:** It surprises me that in the camp you had to provide your own heating facilities.

**Hylla:** They didn't supply much for heat, they had plenty of blankets and such. Of course, you had to keep your pet warm too. We had a squirrel monkey that Jerry and I got in Africa.

**Overy:** You picked up a monkey in Africa?

**Hylla:** That damn little thing, he stayed right in our tent, he wouldn't go anyplace else. We would feed him Hershey bars, he would eat anything. We gave him some bread one day soaked in booze. If you think a monkey is funny when he is sober, you should see one when he's half plastered. We finally gave him away to another group about a quarter to half mile away from us, and that damn monkey made it back to our tent. He was funny.

**Overy:** Did you have much contact with Italian civilians?

**Hylla:** We had Italian civilians working on the base, in the kitchen and the officers club, like that. Stuff started to disappear; guys would come back from missions and things would be missing, like boots and blankets, stuff like that. They caught this guy, and they went to town and they knew right where he lived. We went to his house armed. I had a little Tommy gun, we went in and this guy had canned food from our base, Navy blankets, everything. We took the whole damn thing. I think he was selling that stuff, it was like a little store house. So we cleaned up that whole damn thing and took it all back with us.

**Overy:** Was there a place in town for R&R?

**Hylla:** We used to go into Bari quite a bit. Bari was a pretty good sized town. It was on the coast and we used to be able to go down to the beach there and watch these Italians eat these raw fish. [?] Of course we had our favorite places we used to go in for a glass of wine or whatever. They had a mess there where you could go eat, nationalities of the people living there, stationed around that area. One particular day, the neighbors, another bombardier was with us. Not my crew but my buddies' crew. He was Jewish, a damn good bombardier too. There were four or five of us walking down the street and run across a good looking gal from Poland, wearing a British uniform with a Polish emblem on her shirt-sleeve. I said [speaks Polish] and she looks up at me and here was this American officer talking to her in Polish; I think she dropped a clinker in her knickers. Then they kept on the conversation and the first thing she said was, 'That guy, he's Jewish. He's a Jew!' I said, 'Really, he's Jewish, this is America, it doesn't mean anything. You're black or white, you're Jew or German, Italian, whatever. We're all the same it doesn't make any difference. She couldn't quite understand that. I found out she was a nurse in a hospital just outside of Bari. She invited me to come up there. The next day I wasn't flying so I went over and asked for her and talked to her and a couple of Polish doctors. I went to see the patients, and what I saw going through that tent, you would never believe. Guys laying there with no arms, no legs; very little medical equipment, just nothing. These were the boys that took Monte Casino. That really struck me hard. I went up to each one and talked to them. I told them I would be back in a couple of days. I came back to the base and told the guys about it. I got a bunch of cartons of cigarettes, they were about 50 cents a carton. Duty free and everything else. I probably had about ten cartons of cigarettes with me when I went back over there. They thought I was a god when I walked in there and gave each one of these guys a package of American cigarettes. Had some chocolate bars too, for the nurses. I was God. They invited me to have supper with them, they

had boiled potatoes and boiled fish, with no salt. It tasted like crap but I ate it. They said I could come back anytime I wanted to. This one nurse I met, I found out she was a nun. She was a catholic sister. We talked and I made several trips back there, bringing cigarettes and whatever I could scrounge. Canned goods and stuff. They thought I was God.

**Overy:** I'm surprised they wouldn't be taking better care of them.

**Hylla:** They had no medical supplies. These guys had colored bandages, just rags; little supplies. Could have been some of my cousins, I don't know. One day a fellow and I were uptown and we met this Scottish Highlander, he was a great big burly guy, with the kilts and the whole damn show. We had a couple of glasses of wine and some Italian whiskey. That stuff was like rot-gut. I got hungry and asked him if he wanted to go to the mess and get some food. He said we should go get a rabbit and he knew a place that would cook it for us. So we got out rabbit and took it to this café, and half an hour later we had it cooked and in front of us. This Scotsman got up and he knew what it was, it was a damn cat! He told the guy who owned the joint 'Don't tell me that's a rabbit, that's a cat!' He could tell by the legs it's a cat. They did this, take the damn rabbit out the back door and resell again and feed you a god damn cat! We had to eat the damn thing, That guy sure raised hell, he was about 6'4" with broad shoulders. He was a mean looking guy, he was friendly though. There were so many things that happened. I used to relive all of them.

**Overy:** Do you remember your first bombing mission?

**Hylla:** Sure do. May 5, 1944; for us it was a milk run, all we did was drop the bombs. But the second and third ones, they started to get rougher. We were all pretty much on edge, we had no fighter escorts. On the first mission we saw a little bit of anti-aircraft but not a bother. [?] A little small target, but from then on she got rough.

**Overy:** What was worse, fighters or flak?

**Hylla:** They both were about the same, you knew they were out to get you. You are scared, you're damn right you're scared, but the time you get out of your tent in the morning you're scared already. We all were, there would be a lot of BS on the intercom, back and forth each one trying to calm the other guy down. We were all scared, who wouldn't be? Our anti-aircraft guys couldn't hit anything, but the Germans were right on. If they knew which target you were going to hit they would send up a box barrage. They wouldn't shoot at any particular airplane they would send a bunch up. You had to fly through it. That was demoralizing as hell. Fighters you could protect yourself against as you could shoot back, but flak, there is nothing you can do, with the exception of this tinsel type stuff we used to drop that would screw them up. A few did get through though and screwed up their radar. Maybe some of those were like what we had in the old days prior to radar. Scared the hell out of you. One time it was so thick you could walk on it, came back with 365 holes in the airplane.

**Overy:** What were the pre-flight briefs like?

**Hylla:** They would say to avoid this area, there would be concentration of anti-aircraft, maybe 250 guns, the Germans had that 88, that was deadly accurate. They'd give you their point, the Germans would move that stuff and they were pretty mobile. We didn't see too many fighters because we had escorts, P-47s, P-38s, and P-51s. They could go in only as far as they dared, they could only travel so far when they had to turn back, then we were on our own. Then another group would come up and meet us, escort us back. The best one I had seen was the checker tailed P-51 group. They had colored boys flying them, and they were something different. Those guys

didn't give a damn, they were good. They saved us many a time. They were great. Of course the P-38s weren't too shabby either.

**Overy:** Did you have quite a few tough missions?

**Hylla:** We never got shot up too bad. One time the pilot got hit and also the navigator, one piece of flak got them both. That was coming back from Wiener Neustadt. Wiener Neustadt was a hot spot; that was death. That was a bad one. Ploiesti wasn't a milk run for anybody. I had three runs over there and that was rough.

**Overy:** Lots of flak or lots of fighters? Or both?

**Hylla:** Both. Munich was another bad one. Southern France was fairly easy, a lot of these missions you never seen a bit of flak but somebody else got it. There wasn't such a thing as a milk run for everybody. If we came in on the first group, the second one would really properly get it. One particular time something that I can't quite figure out what in the hell happened, we were flying tail end Charlie, number 7 slot, as low as you could go. That was death alley right there. My tail gunner had a P-38 on our tail. I said to keep your eye on him, he's coming in closer. It turned out to be an enemy ME 210, he came right into our group. I looked out the window and I could see him, I was that close. All the guns were firing, I don't know what he was doing so close to us. We could see the pilot, it was that close. I can't quite understand, we talked about it a few times. If it was an American in a stolen German plane trying to get back with us, we don't know. But the rule was that if a German aircraft wanted to surrender, he would drop his landing gear. That was a sign, but this guy didn't drop his landing gear. Some people thought he was just flying at our altitude and got a little too close. The gunners on the ground would set time que's on the shells. If he had wanted to surrender all he had to do was drop his landing gear and

there wouldn't have been a shot fired. That's number one [rule of] surrender, both sides would honor that. So there I was.

**Overy:** What were your duties on the plane, as a pilot?

**Hylla:** We were strictly flying the airplane. You have eight sets of eyes to keep you informed about what's going on. Your job was to keep that thing as tight as you could, except over the bomb run when the bombardier takes the aircraft over. The lead bombardier does and we dropped our bombs where the lead one did. The bombardier was just extra baggage, he just threw the switch.

**Overy:** Unless it was the lead bombardier?

**Hylla:** Unless it's the lead bombardier. We dropped our bombs on the lead target, we all lined up on the target in case something should happen to the lead bombardier.

**Overy:** How far did the formation reach?

**Hylla:** We were scattered all over the sky, wingtip to wingtip.

**Overy:** Is this area bombing?

**Hylla:** Yes. They always dropped their bombs, but every bombardier was also lined up. If you have seven airplanes wingtip to wingtip, it's pretty tight, 112 feet wingspan. You're not scattered too far apart. Then other squadrons will be flying alongside of you.

**Overy:** So the pilot is checking his instruments and the distance between the other airplanes?

**Hylla:** That's right. He is a glorified bus driver. You had to have other eyes looking out for fighters and everything else. The pilot concentrated on keeping that formation tight and that was

it. The two pilots had to work together. Like when we were flying over Wiener Neustadt and my pilot got hit I had to grab the stick or we would have collided. You keep your feet off the throttle until he says to take over, you fly twenty minutes and then take over. You didn't fly the aircraft more than twenty minutes apiece, you couldn't. That time I had to fly it a long time -- I have never been so pooped in my life. But I got her down ok, no problems.

**Overy:** Tell me about the day you were shot down June 30, 1944 on the way to Blechhammer.

**Hylla:** That was the longest raid of the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force. We were supposed make a shuttle run into Russia, drop our bombs on Blechhammer, go to Russia, go down, load up and go back up again.

**Overy:** You said several crew members had promotions that day?

**Hylla:** I didn't want to fly that day for some ungodly reason. I never refused a flight but the flight surgeon came up and I said, 'Doc, I got a case of diarrhea and I can't fly today.' He gave me a pill and told me I would be OK. I took the pill and my engineer comes up to me, He says "Frank, I got a feeling something is going to happen today." Bologna, I thought, we had those feelings before. Then the tail gunner comes up and says he doesn't want to fly today. He wasn't a kid who didn't want to fly. Everybody was pretty much on edge. Anyway, we did take off, and we got over Hungary and ran into a hell of a big cloud bank. The lieutenant colonel leading the group that day, the big brass didn't fly too often, they usually had a captain or something. We were worried about this guy. He took us right into this cloud bank. We had to break formation so we wouldn't collide with one another, which we damn near collided with another aircraft. We broke out of it and there they were, waiting for us. I said "we're already in prison camp." We could have gone over this cloud bank or under it, it wasn't that thick. The fire power of the squadron depends on how tight you're flying. If you have one airplane you've got 10 guns, with

seven airplanes real tight you have that many more guns. Six fighters jumped us, I think we got two of them. We tried to get away, we went into a dive to try and pick up speed. There was another airplane about a half a mile away, we tried to catch up with him to get more firepower to work with. I put it in a dive, goosed the engines and dropped the bombs. But they got us first. I looked back and the whole thing was a blaze. I hit the button, the “bail out” button. Jerry was standing right behind me and the electrical system was out. Jerry was going to go up to the front of the ship to tell the nose gunner and bombardier to get the hell out. In the meantime he got stuck in there, he couldn’t get out. That’s what he told me afterwards. I jumped out just before it blew up. As my chute opened I could see parts of the plane blowing. I jumped out through the bomb bay, it was like a blazing furnace in there. I tried to get out the top hatch but there was no way to make it out of there. The bomb bay doors were open. Gasoline and hydraulic fluid was spraying all over. I free fell for I don’t know how long, I think I passed out. I pulled my chute at about 3,000 feet. Had hell of a time getting that damn thing open. My hands were like bacon, all fried up. My face was all burnt. I hit the ground and busted my leg. I took my 45 out and I stripped it, threw the parts away. The 45 there wouldn’t have done you any good there anyway. They’d probably use it to kill you.

**Overy:** Were you told to do that when you landed?

**Hylla:** I did it on my own. If you’re armed, they get you. I was unarmed. Anyway I start talking to this guy, English first and, no capisce, you know. Then I talked to him in Polish. Pretty soon here comes the boxcar and a whole bunch of damn people, one of them had a gun twenty feet long and six inches across pointed right at you. You didn’t argue. They threw me in the boxcar and took me into this one place. I met the crew, what was left of it. Jerry was in there and his

face was all black, singed. His ears were burnt off, and his nose. I asked what happened to the other two guys. [?] I don't know what happened there. [?]

**Overy:** When did you meet the Hungarian family? The ones who wrote that letter to you?

**Hylla:** Yeah, well from there they put us in a wagon and they dropped Jerry and I off at a first aid station. They took good care of us. They didn't care about the leg, the burns they took care of.

**Overy:** This was a German hospital?

**Hylla:** This was a Hungarian doctor. I had two watches, one Minnesota time, the other GI time. I had my escape kit with about \$150, maps... [?] They took all my cigarettes, picture of my wife and my rosary, the rest of it they took. They walked us over to the hospital. Jerry died the 10<sup>th</sup> of July.

**Overy:** Did they try to take good care of him too?

**Hylla:** Yeah. They did the best they could. They dressed him and they used antiseptic for burns that built a scab on it. The nurses, they were good. All good. But we were under lock and key with a guard. The third or fourth day we were in there, the pilot that shot us down came to visit us. The first thing he did was salute us. He tried to talk to us in Hungarian, we tried to talk Polish to him. The little German I knew didn't [get us anywhere]. His mother and sister came in every day to visit us. They used to bring raspberries and strawberries and feed it to us. The Hungarians were wonderful people there.

**Overy:** What were the extent of your injuries besides your broken leg?

**Hylla:** I had some face burns. Jerry was really rough. They told me he died. A person could never be that lonely in his life. Ever. Anywhere. Your best friend passes away and you can't do a damn thing about it. The feeling of loneliness. What's going to happen, the uncertainty of things.

**Overy:** I found it remarking when reading that letter that they stood guard over you? What was that about?

**Hylla:** Well the guy who wrote the letter was a surgeon. He was a damn good one. I could talk to him in Polish, and he knew a little bit of Czech. We could talk back and forth. I gave him my name and address and he said I'll write to you after the war is over. And he did! I sent parcels over there. He had a baby a couple weeks apart from my oldest daughter so I sent a bunch of stuff. Baby formula, diapers, baby clothes, and some tobacco for himself. The nurse was another one I sent a package to. She had a family of four children and they had a hell of a breakout of polio. She was wondering about the vaccine. I showed the doctor the letter and he said, "I'll give it to you." So I air expressed it over and she got it in four days. [?] I showed you the other letter from [?]. They had an uprising in Hungary in 1956. I contacted the Red Cross and I don't know how many long distance phone calls I made, but it was [a lot]. In case this man show's up, I'll sponsor him, I'll take him. I had jobs lined up for him and everything. [?] I remember this guy was a surgeon. [?] It didn't mean anything if he was a doctor or not. They refused to become a communist. [?]

**Overy:** I find it strange that Hungarians were our enemies, were they not?

**Hylla:** No they weren't.

**Overy:** So there was no love lost between the Hungarians and the Germans?

**Hylla:** They had their own people in there too you know. [?] He was anti-Nazi, boy I'll tell you. He'd swear at them and everything else. Most of the Hungarians and Hungarian visitors were the same way. This Hungarian hospital I was in, one day a crew of five men came in, cleaning up the hallways and got in my room. They are scrubbing away, cleaning the floor and were talking Polish amongst themselves. I understood every word they said. I wondered what-the-hell these Polacks are doing over here in Hungary. One finally came up to me and asked me something, tried to talk English with me. I didn't understand him, and shook my head. Finally he went back to the other guys and said he wished he could make me understand because this might be his way out of that place. I told him to ask me in Polish I might understand you. They stood there gaga. They were conscript laborers brought in there by the Germans, from Poland. That was really something.

**Overy:** Okay we were talking about the Polish conscripts.

**Hylla:** Well from there I went back to the military hospital, they had a Czech-guard. Czechoslovak. He was my guard. He was drafted into the German army. He felt really bad I was leaving because he told me he was going to the Russian front and knew he was not coming back and would get killed. So he gave me all the coins he had to pay and told me to keep them as souvenirs and spend them on whatever I wanted. So the next day I was on a train and stopped at Lake Balaton. The guard I had there was a decent guy. Riding in a compartment on that damn train with everybody eyeballing you.

**Overy:** So it was just you and a guard?

**Hylla:** Yeah, just the two of us. We had a couple of warm beers and then I wound up in Stalag Luft III. It wasn't exciting at all, the trip. I met some of my old buddies and got assigned to a room. They saved everything.

**Overy:** They saved everything?

**Hylla:** Well, bits of food, like potato peels, they didn't throw those out. They fried them up. [?] I have some of my uniform I saved certain parts of it, like my jacket. They made stuff out of powdered milk and margarine and sugar. Mix that together and you had whipped cream. We made cake with Red Cross crackers by grinding them up. Baking powder, sugar... it was good. As long as you got your food parcels from the Red Cross... VFW's don't support the Red Cross anymore and they saved us when we were starving to death. Of course a little bit from home like cigarettes and chocolate bars. All the canned goods like SPAM and stuff like that the Germans would punch holes in it and open a can so you couldn't save it. All those cans were always punched so we couldn't use them and store them. You'd have to eat them right away. But the crackers, prunes, raisins, sugar, tea, and coffee and stuff that was all saved. Pretty soon you got a big supply of raisins, prunes, and sugar! We made some wine out of that stuff and it was pretty potent. We always had a kettle of that stuff brewing.

**Hylla:** We knew every day what was going on out there. In a group of Americans there's always somebody that knows how to make something. We had a radio! Some of the parts, I supposed they'd bribe the German guards and give them a couple of cigarettes to bring the part in. We got the BBC news every day. Nobody knew who the hell had the radio because the guy who had the radio would give that to somebody else by putting it someplace and a guy would pick it up and

do the same damn thing. So they couldn't trace were the radio was otherwise it was certain death.

**Overy:** It was death penalty to have the radio then?

**Hylla:** It was. We got the BBC news and putting that together with the German news, you could pretty much tell [what was going on]. In the evening we'd have someone give you the news and we got it every day but nobody knew when the hell it would come. In fact my own roommate, I found out he was number two in that chain. We got all the news, plus what the German guards told us. We tried to get along with them pretty well. It wasn't like Hogan's Heroes, but we tried to get along with them. There was a pair of socks that I'd knit. Knitting needles had come from the barbed wire fence. The wool had come from a sweater. We got sweaters from the YMCA and Red Cross and stuff. We could use the socks more than the sweaters. There's always somebody that knows how to do something.

**Overy:** So somebody taught you how to knit?

**Hylla:** Yeah, when you have a bunch of Americans, you never know what the hell you're going to have in there.

**Overy:** What were your living conditions like?

**Hylla:** There were 12 people to each room. Had triple bunks. We had a little wood stove. The coal we got in winter time we used very sparingly to cook up meals or whatever you had, barley soup and things like that. [?] Coal was very important. The showers were ice-cold. Not too many people took too many showers. There wasn't that much soap. We got little tiny bars of soap.

Drinking water, we had plenty of that. In summer, we'd walk the perimeter and try to get seeds to plant a garden but that never worked out. Nothing but sand.

**Overy:** Couldn't grow anything because of the soil?

**Hylla:** What's the name of that story, "The Great Escape"? That was Stalag Luft 3, but another compound. There were four compounds there, I was in the south compound. In the north compound this actually happened because we were digging tunnels too. It was all sand. They'd come around looking for bed boards. Guys had long socks and that's where they put the sand from the tunnels. After, they'd then sift the sand out of the socks where the guys were playing volleyball.

**Hylla:** Christmas day we cracked open one of our raisin-wines to celebrate. A German walked in we told him, "It's Christmas Eve, have a drink." He decided he should try one, sit down and drink now. We got him so damn plastered he couldn't walk. He took his clothes off and threw them in the can. We kicked him out bare-naked. I never saw him after that but all the raisins and all the sugar stopped. They confiscated everything. It was fun while it lasted. Pretty soon the raisins and sugar came back. We never did find out what happened to that guy.

**Overy:** Did conditions vary from one camp to another? Was the first camp the best?

**Hylla:** Stalag Luft 3 was an officer's camp. It was a propaganda camp. All we could write in a letter was, "hey we're still alive, and we're getting along." When we got into Spremberg, it's a Stalag VII-A, she was rougher than hell in there. Towards the end of the war they brought all of these people into this one camp. We marched for two days and two nights. If I remember correctly it was in Spremberg and they put us in box cars. That thing was packed. The people in it, there was no room for you to even sit down. We stood, had very little water. As far as going to

the bathroom, everybody went in one corner. The guys were sitting in it. We were never let out of the box cars until we got to Moosburg. That was the most horrible trip, but compared to what the boys went through at the [Japanese camps, that was still a piece of cake.

**Overy:** How long were you at Stalag Luft III?

**Hylla:** I think I got in there in September and left the 29<sup>th</sup> of January. About four months there yep. Which wasn't all too bad. The Air Force kicked up their bombing raids and were hitting all of the railroad marshalling yards and so the Red Cross parcels started to dwindle. You got your own package, for one pack a week, but then one pack for two men. Then it dropped to one pack for four, then one to six. It got pretty chintzy. This was at Stalag Luft III. When we got to Stalag VII-A we each got a parcel, but there was no more after that. It was damn near starvation.

**Overy:** What did you get from the Germans?

**Hylla:** Well, from the Germans we got potatoes which were half rotten. We had good hamburger once in a blue moon, which was probably horse meat but we didn't care. You could smell it, it stunk. Blood sausage, nobody knew what the hell that stuff was made of. Nobody ate that stuff. We did get barley which made good soup. Believe it or not, mineral water. Gallons and gallons of mineral water. Aside of that, there wasn't a hell of a lot more. Oh dehydrated sauerkraut, but it had sand in it. A few rutabagas once in a while. That would be about the extent of it.

**Overy:** Did you get enough food from the Germans that you could've lived on without Red Cross parcels?

**Hylla:** No way. Not even at Stalag Luft III. Black bread, which was fifty percent sawdust. That bread wasn't good to eat unless it was two weeks old. It would make good toast. We used to cut it about that thick.

**Overy:** Why did you have to wait a couple week before you ate it?

**Hylla:** It tasted like hell when it was fresh. When it dried out it wasn't too shabby. Another thing, there were twelve men to a room. One guy did the cooking and one guy dived the food. The guy dividing the food, he'd divide it and he had the last choice. In other words, if the slice of bread was a little thick than another one, he'd get the skinny one. There was no possible way that this guy could get more food because everybody would watch him and each other. Actually the guy that divided the food got last choice.

**Overy:** Tell me about the organization among the prisoners themselves. Was there one guy who acted like the security? Is this actually true?

**Hylla:** Absolutely. Your first man would be the highest ranking officer. We had a full colonel and his word was law. As far as security goes, the security was so tight that we knew where every German guard was all of the time. If something was going on in the barracks that shouldn't be going on there would be guys in the window watching for German guards. There was also signals. We knew the Russians were close, hell, we could hear guns. We knew where every German guard was at all times, we knew his personality, his habits, what he'd be looking for, and where he'd be looking.

**Overy:** Did you say the best place to be was Stalag Luft III?

**Hylla:** Yes. It wasn't a bad camp. No camp was good, but it was better organized.

**Overy:** Were your sanitary facilities adequate there?

**Hylla:** There was a toilet at each barrack. There was also a main one where you'd go to take a shower. Showers were very limited and only a few could take the showers each day. Had quite a bit of B.O. especially with no soap. The amazing part of it was all the POWs there that were from poor families or middle class, they fared the best. The wealthy really suffered. They couldn't take the pressure of being and living in degradation like we were. Low income families, farmers, they knew how to get by with stuff. Nothing was handed on a silver platter.

**Overy:** Did you do any of the digging of the tunnels yourself?

**Hylla:** No.

**Overy:** What was your physical condition at this time?

**Hylla:** It wasn't too bad. We had exercise. We played volleyball, baseball, and softball. A lot of walking around the perimeter.

**Overy:** What about your wounds?

**Hylla:** Mine were pretty well healed up. When I left the interrogation center in Budapest, they opened up on me on account of the damn S.S. son of a bitch. I come in and, of course, a German officer sitting there. I remember the exact words too. He said, "What outfit are you from?" I said, "My name is Frank T. Hylla 0-757620 United States Army Air Force." They gave me a cigarette and said, "Before I can send you to prison camp or let the Red Cross know where you are, I got to know what outfit you're in and what your plans are." Two hours of that stuff. They put me back in the cell again. Next day brought me out again, this time with S.S. We had heard about the S.S., you know. After half an hour I told them to go take a piss you son of a bitch, I'm not

telling you anything. He whacked me a couple of times. I still had bandages on and they hit them and I started to bleed. Nothing, it just made me more arrogant. He slammed me into solitary confinement which just bread and water. I don't know how many days I stayed in there. It had a little window I could look out, and every morning I'd see people get hanged. A lot of Americans went through that interrogation center. My biggest salvation in my time of confinement was my rosary. I'd pray one in English and one in Polish. They knew they wouldn't get anything out of me, I didn't know anything anyway.

**Overy:** What happened when you left Stalag Luft III?

**Hylla:** First we had two days and two nights of walking. Six of them broke right out and took off to the woods. They shot three of them. Nobody got away, and if you did where would you go? We got into Stalag VII-A. This camp was a holding place for Jewish people that were to be exterminated at Dachau. Rats in there, lice, you'd never believe it. Straw mattresses all matted down and made out of burlap. They took us into a shower, and we had heard about that so imagine what our feelings were when they told us to take a shower and take our clothes off. We went through and luckily came out of it. Then you were on your own.

**Overy:** And this was a holding pen?

**Hylla:** It was a holding pen for the Jewish to be exterminated at Dachau. We found out about that later. Anyway the conditions there were horrible. Food was zilch. We got one Red Cross food parcel for 18 men and raw potatoes. Occasionally they had coffee. The coffee was burnt barley. They'd crack it and make coffee out of it. We did a lot of walking. There wasn't enough room for everybody to really move around. This was the first part of February. It wasn't warm.

**Overy:** What was this camp like? Was it different from Stalag Luft III?

**Hylla:** Stalag VII-A was a pig pen. I don't know how many people were there, I'd say 100,000. They had Russians in there, they had everything in there. English, Australians, Americans, everything. It was a central point. An order came out from Hitler to execute all POWs, but German officers didn't go along with it. On this one particular Sunday, the 29<sup>th</sup> of April--they told some of us we would walk to the woods with a couple guards and pick up bits of wood and branches and bring them for heat and cooking. This one guard who was with me was a Polish boy and I was talking to him in Polish and he says, "You can have my gun. If we walk about three miles, we run into the Americans, they are here three miles away." You don't know how tempting that was, but we had different uniforms than. So we go back. Three miles, that's not that far. So we come back in, the guy gave me his rifle and I shoved it underneath my damn mattress. He gave up, he surrendered it to me. The Americans came through right in the middle of mass. Here comes that army tank coming through. The priest says "God bless you boys, we're on our way home." Hell broke loose. A lot of firing. Some were badly wounded from cross-fire from tough Germans.

**Overy:** Tell me about your liberation particularly.

**Hylla:** This one GI walked in tougher than hell and I start talking to him and say when the war is over I tell him I'm going to come and visit you. I didn't have anything to write on except the back of my wife's picture. I did have a pencil and put his name and address on it. I said, "If I ever get to Dayton, I'll give you a call." I completely forgot about it until we had a squadron reunion in Dayton. A bunch of us POWs were sitting around bullshitting and I happened to remember. After four or five phone calls I located him.

**Overy:** What unit was he from?

**Hylla:** The 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. The following day, I'm making a batch of whipped cream for a cake and I looked up and saw two pearl handle revolvers. It's General George Patton himself. So I popped up and I saluted him and welcomed him. "What are you doing, lieutenant?" I said, "I'm making up some whipped cream." He stuck his finger in that bowl and spit it out saying, "You guys been eating this shit? Hell, this is good stuff." Then he went to the German barracks and he found stacks and stacks of Red Cross food parcels which were supposed to come to us. The German had kept them piled up. After that, I didn't much give a damn what happened to them.

**Overy:** Were there a lot of German guards killed?

**Hylla:** No, most of them surrendered. The older guys surrendered more easily and asked for protection. I didn't see this, but this was a story that went around camp, was that one SS commander was killed.

**Overy:** Tell me about the guards. Were they all pretty much alike? Were there some decent ones and terrible ones?

**Hylla:** The majority were older guys. Most weren't too bad. They had their orders too, but they got caught screwing up too. The majority were pretty decent. It was the younger ones you had to look out for. Or the SS. That was another can of worms, they never surrendered. The only thing you could do was kill them. They never gave up. As a rule the guards were not too shabby. A lot of the guards could be bribed very easily. Just give them one cigarette. These guys suffered as much as we did. There was no chance of escape there. After we marched out of Stalag Luft III and ended up at Spremberg. There were 25,000 to 40,000 POWs there. They had us split up into groups. Spremberg was a Hitler youth training center. That's where kids age 8, 9, or 10 years old

got their military training. As we marched through town there were little punks on the street corners. The guards halted us for break and we stopped. An elderly woman about eighty was crossing the street. Two punks yelled at her to stop and when she didn't they knocked her down and kicked her. Six of our boys broke out of rank to help that woman out. Our guards' rifles clicked. They went up to pick up this old lady and escorted her across the street. Their rifles were pointed at the punks, not at us.

**Overy:** Was this a German woman?

**Hylla:** Yeah, an old lady. These punk kids, they were going ape-shit at this time. Our guards had rifles pointed at those kids. If one of those kids had made a move at one of our POW's they were have shot them. From there on, we're on our way home. What a blessing.

**Overy:** Do you have any idea how much weight you lost?

**Hylla:** When I got shot down, I weighed 215 pounds. I know that. I think I came out about 160 pounds. So that's quite a bit.

**Overy:** It seemed like you went awhile without food and then you'd get a whole bunch. Is that pretty much what happened?

**Hylla:** They'd have what they called a bash. It was a special occasion like a birthday. If they had a little extra food they'd save it for those occasions. Maybe a tablespoon more.

**Overy:** Were you hungry just about all of the time?

**Hylla:** God, we could eat all the time. Yeah, we were never full. Never got a full tank. We drank a hell of a lot of water to keep the stomach full.

**Overy:** What kind of sicknesses did you have?

**Hylla:** Well, maybe flu of some kind. Something that you didn't eat, or something that you did eat that you shouldn't have.

**Overy:** Once you were liberated where were you taken?

**Hylla:** They were going to fly us out of there, but the weather was bad so we had to had to lay around for two or three days for the weather to clear. They drew lots to see who would go first. I was on the tail end so about ten of us, thought we would hitchhike back. We took off and had a map to know where to go. It was interesting, we could see the countryside.

**Overy:** How long from the time you were liberated did you start to come back?

**Hylla:** We hitchhiked to Brussels. We then turned ourselves into military authorities who were British. We had our IDs or dog tags on. They gave us a partial payment, maybe fifteen bucks, and checked into a hotel there. It happened to be V-E Day, the day the war was over. Belgians were celebrating all over. The British sent us to Camp Lucky Strike which was a big POW receiving center. They called it RAP which stood for retired American military personnel. There were so many people there, you'd never believe. Where they got the food to feed these people, I don't know. When you were done with breakfast, you'd start lining up for dinner, it took you that long. There was not much to do, it was just a camp. So I got out early on account of my wounds. They took me to the hospital. The 159<sup>th</sup> Field Hospital. I was there for a whole week. I got new clothes, new uniform, and was cleaned up. Then came back on a regular ship. We hit Staten Island, I had a good buddy there in Brooklyn. Went AWOL, got on the Staten Island ferry. Needless to say we had ourselves a hell of a good time. I had called my wife as soon as I hit the hospital, that's where I learned my mother-in-law had passed away. I thought I'd be home in

three or four weeks. Then, they put on a train which was going to Spokane, Washington, clear across the god damn country. I was madder than hell. We stopped in Minneapolis, a staff sergeant got off the train and got a jug of booze. I say, "This damn train is going right through my home town," of Sartell. Damn train stopped off at Sartell to coal up. GIs threw my damn bags out the window, "Lieutenant, there's your bags, go get her." I got off the damn train, picked up my damn bags and walked down Main Street which was a block away. There was a cab there that gave me a ride to St. Cloud. I asked how much I owed and he said nothing. I gave him a dollar bill anyway. My sister was out in the yard, ZOOM, she just about squashed me to death. I jumped in the Model-T Ford to go to my parents' place. First time in my life I'd seen my mother and my dad hold hands when they walked out that door. I stayed there awhile. Of course, she lived with her dad. (?) But I had to be in Spokane. Two days later the train was supposed to get there. So her and I we got on a bus, we beat the train. When that train got there, there was nobody on it. They all took off. They just flew the coop. I went to the hospital and turned myself in. I said, "I was supposed to be on this train." They said, "That train isn't here yet." She checked me in, said, "I'll check you in tomorrow. (?) that he went AWOL."

**Overy:** Was it hard for you to readjust to civilian life?

**Hylla:** Yeah it was, absolutely. Things changed. Well, I had a real antagonistic attitude. This one day I went to church. My mother was telling me about this one guy who was pro-Nazi. He told my mother, after the notice had come out that I was missing, he comes ups to tell my mother that it was a good thing I got shot down as I had no business going over there. He was strictly German, let me tell you. You know how my mother would feel about something like that. A lot of people told me the same damn thing. So in church one Sunday morning, all of a sudden BAM he hit me. I had seen that guy coming out of church and I had him. I just beat the living hell out

of him. These kids come up and help. So, anyway across the street was a (?) a couple guys invited me to have a beer with them. Here this guy comes in there again, he got the same damn treatment. I beat the hell out of him again. We went over to stay with her dad's place and one Monday morning here comes the sheriff of Stearns County. "Frank we got a warrant for your arrest." I told him what happened. He said, "Ah shit, Frank, don't worry about it." I told my dad about it so, my dad got a hold of Harry Burns. The judge is smirking and laughing and said it's about time to go on your way and threw it out of court. Then he said, "Would you ever make a statement like that about one of our people again?" He threw it out of court. It was rough. It changes you. It still hasn't corrected itself. I don't think it ever will.

**Overy:** Did you have nightmares?

**Hylla:** Oh, yeah. Wake up at night screaming. It's not the same. But I'm still here. I know a hell of a lot of guys that aren't.

**Overy:** Do you have any resentments about your WWII experience?

**Hylla:** I would never ever want to go through it again. I wouldn't take a million bucks for it. The POWs over there now, I know what they're going through. They're probably treated just like the Japanese treated out people. I imagine it would be the same thing. The Germans were half-human. The SOBs there, I don't think they are. The pictures they had on television, they take a soldier and they aren't going to say, "Hey, we shouldn't have done this." They were told to do that. Or else. You can tell from the way they talk. They just--one word at a time. I don't know what story it was in, the guy was blinking Morse code while under duress.

**Overy:** What impact or effects do you think the war experience has had on you as a person?  
What general impact did war have on your life?

**Hylla:** That's hard to explain. I could say quick temper. A lot of worry all the time. I never worried before about anything. Another thing too, protesters, I'd go in there with a blowtorch and burn their butts right off. You feel so strongly about something. I work with the kids at the Sons of the American Legion and those kids they weren't taught everything about the American flag. I love my country. We probably don't have the best damn government, but by God it's the best there is. It's hard to tell what your feelings are when it's happened. She can tell you more. She's seen the change.

**Overy:** Did you have a sense of bitterness toward the guys around here that didn't go into the service?

**Hylla:** I think about it. I really do. I know guys that were deferred for one reason or a stupid thing you know. Some guys will tell you, "You had it good over there," then you come back, well we never had it good. Most of these guys that probably weren't in the service or reserves who had never seen any action. That irks the hell out of me.

**Overy:** Did you have a really bad experience as a POW? Does anything really stand out? What was your lowest point as a POW?

**Hylla:** I think interrogation was the worst part of it. You're there by yourself and you just would talk to anybody there. Someone to talk to. You'd talk to yourself and start asking yourself questions, and answering, then you're in trouble. This one time they did throw a GI in with me. A sergeant. They treated him rough, just threw him in the damn cell and this guy was big. He started swearing and started talking like, "Okay we'll be out of this and things will be okay." We started talking, he was from Houston, Texas. The most depressing time, I mean the whole damn

thing was not a picnic, but another bad one was the march. The Black March at twenty-below-zero weather. A lot of frost-bitten toes.

**Overy:** How long did that last?

**Hylla:** Two days and two nights. That was the worst part of it and of course when we hit the delousing showers, we knew what had been going on prior to that.

**Overy:** When a bunch of men are thrown together under a condition like that in a prison camp does tension develop among the men? Were there any fights?

**Hylla:** There'd be disagreements, but no. We got along, we had to. We knew that. I knew my buddy's history, we talked, and we knew our feelings. Occasionally you'd get a guy in there-- like we had one that was from a well-to-do family and he was kicking his weight around. It didn't take him long to realize he had to cool down in a hell of a hurry. Had one guy that went to MIT, sharp kid, he was a B-17 pilot. All that guy talked about was women and what he was going to do when he got back. After he came back he joined the ministry and was down in Brazil for fifteen years as a minister! I couldn't believe it. All he talked about was going to bed with some broad.

**Overy:** Did you see any instances among POW's of collaboration with the Germans?

**Hylla:** Not to my knowledge. It possibly could have happened because he would have been treated better. I didn't see any in our barracks. We had seen people bargaining with Germans for a couple cigarettes for something. Like a radio we got, but otherwise no collaboration. They would have been spotted right away. None of that to my knowledge. Nobody ate any better than we did.

**Overy:** Did prison camp experience have any long term effects on your health?

**Hylla:** We all did. They claim that cardiovascular problems came from stress. Post Trauma Syndrome, a lot of that. It can affect your entire body. You should subscribe to the ex-POW bulletin. It will tell you all about the different types of diseases that the people got.

**Overy:** Were you well taken care of after you got back home? Do you think the government looked after you as a veteran since the war?

**Hylla:** Well, I was in a hospital in Cleveland for damn near a year. They treated us really good.

**Overy:** Was this to get you back to health again?

**Hylla:** That was for plastic surgery. I had it done on my hands twice. The VA has been damn good to us. POWs get special treatment. My heart medication, all that stuff, I get through the VA and it doesn't cost me anything. We probably don't have the best doctors in the world here, but they do what they can do.

**Overy:** If you could talk to one of the POWs now in Iraq what would you want to tell them?

**Hylla:** Have faith. Those guys there, there are about the same as we were. They know what to do. Through the experience of POWs in World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam, these people know what goes on for POWs and they are briefed on it. They are told what to expect, we weren't. All they told us to say was name, rank, and serial number and that's it. These people know what the hell to expect. I'm sure they will fare okay. You don't break an American that easy. No way.