

Interview with Bronko Smilanich

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Interviewed by David Overy

Overy ([00:00:11](#)):

So Mr. Smilanich, did you enlist or were you drafted?

Smilanich ([00:00:14](#)):

Well, I was working in Cleveland when the war broke out. I came back, joined the Marines. Went down there, joined the Marines. Waited a week or so and I finally got a call that said they couldn't accept because I had a chip. I had a chip when I worked cutting gears in a factory and one eye [inaudible 00:00:35]. Then I went back, I think I got drafted, I think, and I went to Fort Snelling and they put me into the Air Force. We took an IQ test and we were in the Air Force.

Overy ([00:00:47](#)):

I see. What kind of test was it?

Smilanich ([00:00:50](#)):

Generally IQ test. Then they took a bunch of us and put us in the Air Force and then from there I went to Miami Beach, Florida for training. Basic training. Was there about four or five weeks, marched around. Then I went to, holy Christ-- Salt Lake City, Utah. There was a big gathering there where they took all the Air Force groups, split them into groups, and sent them to different fields. From there I went to Buckley Field.

Overy ([00:01:31](#)):

In where?

Smilanich ([00:01:32](#)):

In Colorado. That was an air training gunnery school. No, I wouldn't say gunnery school, it was a flying school. Getting this backwards. After Salt Lake City I went to Tyndall Field, Florida.

There we got into gunnery school, went to classes, to gunnery classes. The first time I'd ever been in the air it was in a little two-seater fighter planes, shooting at tow targets and stuff. Well, a round gunnery with a machine gun set up on a turret. Then from there I went to Buckley Field. After I graduated from gunnery school, went to Buckley. Then we flew the B-24s in Buckley.

Overy ([00:02:28](#)):

What was your training like essentially? Did you think it was pretty tough?

Smilanich ([00:02:32](#)):

No. I look back, not really. I'm not a guy for much for walking formations and stuff, I don't believe in that. But the other was interesting. You went to gunnery, you went out to range, you went out flying. That was the best part of the whole thing. Of course, it was as much as most outfits get, left, right and backwards and forwards.

Overy ([00:03:02](#)):

What was your gunnery training like? What kind of things did you do?

Smilanich ([00:03:09](#)):

First we sat on the range with rifles, shotguns. After you got your marksmanship badge, or whatever you call it, then you went to a two-seater airplane training. Shoot you up in the air and they'd tow targets and you'd shoot at them and you'd have a gunnery class. Then you'd assemble, disassemble those .50 caliber machine guns or .30 caliber. Then you got to know them

backwards and forwards. I suppose it had something to do with airsickness and all that flying and stuff. Then you passed that.

Overy ([00:03:47](#)):

Did many people that you know of washout of that school?

Smilanich ([00:03:47](#)):

No, not too many, not too many.

Overy ([00:03:57](#)):

When you went into the Army, did you have any choice about going into the Air Force or were you just put there?

Smilanich ([00:04:06](#)):

Well, like I said, we had a test. They took a bunch of us, says, "Who wants to try for a test?" And a bunch of us went in for the Air Force. Of course, that was a little-- How would you say it? The Air Force was really something in them days. Lot of them want to take a crack at it, if you don't make it you're nothing out, you go back in the infantry or something.

Overy ([00:04:33](#)):

Was the discipline pretty tight in your training units?

Smilanich ([00:04:37](#)):

I don't remember that way. If you screwed up, you watched all the parachute packing in the airfield and stuff like that. Basic training was more regular Army style.

Overy ([00:04:52](#)):

I was noticing in the picture--

Smilanich ([00:04:54](#)):

If your tie wasn't right, you got penalized.

Overy ([00:04:59](#)):

I was noticing in the picture here that in this training plane that you were flying backwards. Is that kind of a strange situation like that to fly backwards?

Smilanich ([00:05:10](#)):

Well, the first time I ever in my life was in a plane and this guy, a smart ass, that pilot, he'd flip you around. You're in there, I'm grabbing onto them two [inaudible 00:05:21]. He couldn't move that goddamn plane, boy, he got wild. He hit me in the head with something until I let go. They got all them wires, that one type plane you had the wires. I grabbed a hold of them cables and he couldn't move the airline, or whatever you call them back there, the rudders.

Overy ([00:05:36](#)):

So you kind of got back at him?

Smilanich ([00:05:37](#)):

Yeah. But they take you, they loop the loop. I was a green kid, lots of them come home sicker than a dog, throw up and everything else.

Overy ([00:05:46](#)):

You never had any trouble?

Smilanich ([00:05:48](#)):

No. I was scared, don't get me wrong, but never got sick or anything. I liked being in the air.

Overy ([00:05:54](#)):

You got in the service when?

Smilanich ([00:05:58](#)):

October '42.

Overy ([00:05:59](#)):

October '42. You trained then for how long?

Smilanich ([00:06:04](#)):

Well, I went overseas in '43, a year, I guess. It's writ on here someplace, anyhow '43. Dates from 45 years ago, that's a long time. October 27, '42 I was active service, and then, then, then-- Date of departure November '43. European field of operations, date of arrival November of '43. I stayed there until I got shot down in April of '44. I got home June the 3rd of '45. That's 36 months.

Overy ([00:06:50](#)):

When you went overseas, where did you leave from? Your embarkation point?

Smilanich ([00:06:55](#)):

We flew over. We flew over to Greenland, Gander Bay, with a B-17 of all things. Not 24. Actually, we just ferried the plane over. Landed in Scotland. Went to Greenland, Iceland, then into Scotland. Landed in Scotland and then they brought us into our regular bases.

Overy ([00:07:17](#)):

Were your bases in England?

Smilanich ([00:07:20](#)):

Yeah. Shipton, England, 24 base.

Overy ([00:07:24](#)):

How long were you there?

Smilanich ([00:07:27](#)):

Well, from November, I think, I was in England from November 13, '43, that's date of arrival in Europe see. So '45 flying out of England.

Overy ([00:07:44](#)):

What kinds of things did you do when you were in England? Were you flying missions all the time?

Smilanich ([00:07:50](#)):

No, you got passes on the weekend. Went to London, chased the girls, drink. It's a normal GI routine. But you can look at the comment on here for many days in a row, all these dates here, one after another.

Overy ([00:08:11](#)):

Did you have quite a bit of contact with the civilians in England?

Smilanich ([00:08:18](#)):

Yeah.

Overy ([00:08:18](#)):

What were your impressions of that?

Smilanich ([00:08:20](#)):

England, my impression was 500 years behind time.

Overy ([00:08:22](#)):

Is that right? In what ways?

Smilanich ([00:08:24](#)):

Service, the homes. Of course, they had the big castle. But no GI, unless you're a small group they took you through. Even when you went to the restaurants, at that time you only got a meat pie. Hell, we went to a place one time and played big shots. He came over there and here was a livery guy with a big cart, with about \$10,000 worth of silverware. I got there a little piece of

meat that big. It was tough. That was after the Blitz and everything. It was tough over there as far as that.

Overy ([00:09:01](#)):

Did you find the people quite a bit different from the way you were?

Smilanich ([00:09:05](#)):

Well, no I don't think so. They treated us pretty dang good. There was no problems.

Overy ([00:09:13](#)):

You didn't sense resentment that you were there?

Smilanich ([00:09:14](#)):

No, none at all.

Overy ([00:09:16](#)):

[crosstalk 00:09:16].

Smilanich ([00:09:18](#)):

No, never, never, never.

Overy ([00:09:19](#)):

Did you consider that your time in England was fun?

Smilanich ([00:09:26](#)):

Yeah, I thought so. You went to a dance, they always got a dance. The women were all the same and the men never had any arguments with them.

Overy ([00:09:41](#)):

Because I'd heard that there'd often been a lot of resentment that the English having a lot of Yanks around. I just wondered if you had--

Smilanich (00:09:48):

I suppose towards the bitter end there maybe. There again I never had any problems. We had more problems with black groups. Not too many, but they were not Air Force, they were probably logistical groups or something. We had a hell of a time with them because there was resentment of [inaudible 00:10:10]. Young guys have it, I was 22 years old.

Overy (00:10:14):

So you saw more racial problems than there were problems with--

Smilanich (00:10:19):

I believe so. I think the English had more of the racial problem between the blacks than they did with the Americans.

Overy (00:10:25):

Is that right? They didn't get along with American blacks very well?

Smilanich (00:10:28):

No, I don't think so. I'll tell you the pressure I had, because, hell, eight, 10 of us guys you went in there and you'd take your 45 with you and clean the place out. You wouldn't shoot nobody, but-- That's the only incidents all the time I was there. We didn't go out too much. When we got back from a mission, we didn't want to go out and get shot in the street someplace.

Overy (00:11:00):

I've talked to a couple men who piloted B-24s. What was it like being tail gunner?

Smilanich (00:11:10):

Cramped, cold, in the beginning, in the beginning. We used to go up the Baltic, Norway on the run over the North Sea. You pull that thing back to charge your gun and it would freeze solid. Then you had electric flying suits and every time you'd get burned here and burned every time

we bent. Everything was a little bit behind times. It made a lot of difference a year later, they had different kinds of suits. They never had those problems.

Overy ([00:11:40](#)):

What kinds of suits did you have?

Smilanich ([00:11:42](#)):

Had electric flying suits, like electric blanket.

Overy ([00:11:45](#)):

Is that right?

Smilanich ([00:11:45](#)):

And all wires and you sit in that chair, not much bigger than a chair, smaller in fact, and you cramped. You'd get blisters from the burns from the suits. Bad thing about a 24, if you got hit by a fighter, the hydraulic system would go. Then everything would be a mess, then everything would freeze solid beside you once the hydraulic lines got hit.

Overy ([00:12:14](#)):

So your electric system were keeping you warm, if hit it went out too?

Smilanich ([00:12:17](#)):

Yeah. What was a better deal at that time too, we had them heavy leather, wool, sheep-lined were good outfits. But they're bulky. Hell, you had to squeeze in the turret with that big, bulky leather sheepskin and the big boots.

Overy ([00:12:35](#)):

Did the electric suits keep you fairly warm?

Smilanich ([00:12:37](#)):

Oh, yeah. You got hot, you got too hot, in fact. You got burned in places. That's when I got shot down, I had an electric suit on. They took the flying suit off and your jackets, whatever you had, and I walked around, it looked like long johns. A pair of long johns with an electric blanket built in. I tramped along the Frankfurt and that when I was captured in one of them suits.

Overy ([00:13:04](#)):

When you were in the turret, the rear gun turret, if it was that small, how in the world could you fire your weapon?

Smilanich ([00:13:17](#)):

It's not, maybe about the cramping, but the gun's up in front of you. You had a square sight there and you had a big thick armor plate square in front of you. And the turret would move, the hydraulic would move it back and forth. It wasn't that cramped.

Overy ([00:13:35](#)):

What did you normally do? Were you in the rear turret all the time, from the time you took off until you got over your target?

Smilanich ([00:13:42](#)):

Yeah. We waited until you got in the air, then you went in the turret. And when you landed you got out of the turret. Because I stayed in that turret and on the landing, boy, when that sucker went up 20 feet, you don't do that again because that tail comes whap. But we met guys that had baltered or guys get trapped in there. They get hit by enemy fire in that turret, you couldn't get them out. You had to land with the damn thing.

Overy ([00:14:17](#)):

Like in the belly turret, the rear turret?

Smilanich ([00:14:17](#)):

Yeah. Your hydraulic systems and that all worked, it wasn't too bad. Then you had a chest pack.

You never carried a parachute with you, you had it alongside of you.

Overy ([00:14:27](#)):

I see. What kinds of things did you think about being in that turret for all those hours all by yourself?

Smilanich ([00:14:39](#)):

You never forget it, I always figured minutes.

Overy ([00:14:41](#)):

You what?

Smilanich ([00:14:42](#)):

Minutes. You go on a 10 hour trip and it seemed like it was all over in 10 minutes.

Overy ([00:14:47](#)):

Is that right?

Smilanich ([00:14:48](#)):

Well, you're scared. By the time everything's over, you're back. I said a lot of times, like you say, a lot of times you sit there, maybe you're in the air six hours, like Berlin raid. That's maybe a seven hour trip, you're in there all that time, but you never think it was seven hours. Your mind is not on time, it's when they coming, or when are you going to get hit, or if you're going to get back and stuff? I'm glad you brought that up. One thing I never thought of home, tedious as it was, or anything, it's like that.

Overy ([00:15:33](#)):

Did you get a lot of conversation over the intercom system? Did they talk to you back there?

Smilanich (00:15:37):

Once you got in the air, before you went across the Channel, you'd talk and talk. Then you'd have to have radio silence, see. When a fighter comes in, usually you'd say he's coming in at 9:00 high or 2:00 high, or he's coming from the east. You'd hear a guy scream or you'd hear something, you'd get excited. And there's a lot of bellowing and a lot of noise and action. It's all gibberish when you try to think about it. You don't have no real conversations, it's all fast and furious. I've always thought about it, Jesus cripes, I got I think 20 some missions there. I can't remember one time when I had time to sit and enjoy something. You went and you came back and then you're ready for the next day. You looked around, see who didn't come back, and that's all you thought about. Then we got shot down. Holy cripes, I didn't know what the hell was happening. I was sitting in the turret and I found this out all later, 20 years later, my pilot's daughter. I said, "What the hell happened?" He said, "Well, nine fighters were hitting us from the front. Then some came from the back." Geez, I was sitting in the turret, my leg went up and I went like this. I didn't think I pressed my mic and said I was hit or nothing, but I heard the warning bell. Abandon ship. I heard the pilot say, "Abandon ship." Shit, I got out of that sucker and sat down and I was tying my damn shoes by the bomb bay, I'm waiting for that bell. I didn't wait for that second bell, I just took my shoes down and jumped out see. Then the rest of us. This replacement we had told us a story in the book there, that he looked around and everybody was gone. Only the pilot was left in there. He had to pull the navigator out of the hold, it was all smashed up in there. But I think I was the first guy out of there.

Overy (00:17:46):

Did you have a set procedure that you were supposed to follow when you were hit and to abandon ship?

Smilanich (00:17:51):

Yeah. You went to the bomb bay. You're supposed to wait for the second bell, see. With all that counter fire and noise, I didn't realize either-- The reason I got out, to tell you the truth, I looked down and there was a goddamn machine gun bullets coming. Fighters are coming in. Boom, boom, boom, I said the hell with-- I'm supposed to take my shoes, and you take your GI shoes because you got them electric flying boots. I took the damn shoes out, put them on and jumped. I wasn't going to wait until some more machine gun bullets come on. And the rest of the crew [inaudible 00:18:23]. Where the hell did you go? I landed right in the middle of a German training camp, right in the goddamn middle, right on top of two machine gunners. The rest of them landed not too far away in a [inaudible 00:18:37] placement. We were in the vicinity.

Overy (00:18:42):

What did you do? I've read quite a bit about the Air Force and World War II, I've heard about the danger of fighter planes. Did you figure the fighter planes were more of a danger to you than flak was? What did you think?

Smilanich (00:18:57):

Flak.

Overy (00:18:57):

The flak was the worst?

Smilanich (00:19:00):

You look up at it and you see that whole sky poom, poom, poom. Lots of it. Then you see one blow up and that. Geez, we got to go through that son-of-a-bitch. I can see it all happen just like that. When you look back, when the filter, when you get through it you say, well, geez, we made it. That ack-ack, oh, you see lots of them go, I'll tell you. But a fighter, I think that day, I don't

remember when this happened. There's a fighter out there and he's coming and his wings are flaming, and I push my gunnery guns and maybe just about that time the pilot says abandon ship. Usually you lower your damn landing wheels, when you're going to give up, if you can. This guy come up, just like he stopped and he went like this to me. I could see him right out the back there, a German pilot, like this. I'll bet you it wasn't maybe a minute or two minutes later we bailed out, or a minute later.

Overy ([00:20:05](#)):

So he saluted you as he went by?

Smilanich ([00:20:06](#)):

Yeah. Honest to God, just plain as day. He pulled up right behind me, he stopped firing his guns. I suppose my guns went down when I heard the bell. And he went like this and peeled off. Geez, I've seen them, a guy would be [inaudible 00:20:22] in the squatter, we'd blast them right out of the air. Come right after them with the plane and shoot them right out of the parachute at times. No kidding. But funny, you know? It's funny, even the guys I wrote letters to. You don't sit and say, geez, it was a nice day, or you talk about Christmas. He's looking and he's waiting for the goddamn action, the ack-ack if you get hit. You ain't got time for anything, it goes just like that.

Overy ([00:20:59](#)):

So you figure it was the fighter that shot you down?

Smilanich ([00:21:00](#)):

Yeah, the fighter tore the whole engines off. I don't think we ever got hit by ack, antiaircraft. See, I don't even remember. We could've got hit. What they do is they hit you with antiaircraft. Once you get tore up, then you leave the formation and then the fighters come in see. Then they got you like cold meat then you see. The story I heard now, my pilot never mentioned it. I talked to

him over the phone in South Carolina. He was the last guy to leave the goddamn plane and they were taking this navigator out of the thing and they were down, oh, hell, maybe down to 2,000 feet, going down. They had to get the navigator out, he was hurt. Got him out of the waist window and Chip lurched and he went out of the window with him. Without a chute, no, no, no, that's the way I was told. He landed without a chute into a big tree, broke his collar bone, broke his hip and he survived without a-- The pilot. That's hard to believe.

Overy ([00:22:12](#)):

So he must have fallen a couple, 3,000 feet.

Smilanich ([00:22:13](#)):

Yeah, 1800, maybe. Then the thing hit a side of a mountain or some hill or something down there and the thing exploded. Nobody was in the plane, thank God, none of us guys died.

Overy ([00:22:26](#)):

Did you have any training at all in parachute jumping?

Smilanich ([00:22:28](#)):

Yeah. Sure. We used to jump off a 20-foot wall and we had some kind of elastic that dropped you. Not too much. We got hit on a, I think it was our sixth or seventh raid. We limped back and he told us to bail out. And that's the first time I really bailed out. We hit the goddamn beach and he landed the plane, he stayed with the plane.

Overy ([00:22:55](#)):

So you bailed out over England then?

Smilanich ([00:22:56](#)):

Yeah, over England, the goddamn beach. That was more scary, that time you had to go, or you'd be dead.

Overy ([00:23:07](#)):

Tell me about the day that you got hit and had to bail out over Germany. Tell me about that.

Smilanich ([00:23:17](#)):

Well, I bailed out and I pulled the goddamn ripcord and I had that ripcord in my hand and I said, goddamn-- They used to talk about in the barracks, talk about save that damn ripcord you belong to the caterpillar. You still can belong to it if you-- Save the ring because they want proof that you bailed out. I'm sitting there and I'm looking down and I said, "Jesus cripes, it looks like a fenced-in area." So I pulled the cord trying to get away from it, see. And thank God I didn't get there. I landed right in this training camp, right in the thing, landed right on top of two guys in a machine gun nest there. These two guys grabbed me. Pretty soon a soldier and an officer come running. I felt my face was bleeding and my leg had a hole in it. We had first aid packs, see. We didn't have our pistols with us. I reached for it and this officer or whoever it was, felt the German put the pistol to my head. "[German 00:24:22]" and these two guys picked me up and carried me to the barracks. Then they took me to a little hospital, clinic that they had there. Then I got scared, Jesus cripes. A guy looking, he had a goddamn bloody apron on, messy. He had a goddamn needle and he gave me a shot of tetanus right away, I guess it was. Pretty good. Stayed there maybe about an hour or two and then they put us on a strong wagon with four or five other fellows. To this day, I think it was only one guy from our crew, Mikey, Harvey Mikey was in that wagon with me. They took us to railroad yard, took us to what they call like an interrogation center. Then they come in and they took that flying suit I had the maps and the coins and the compass. And they put you in a goddamn cell, hell, smaller than my bathroom, by yourself. Every morning you're going to be shot in the morning as a spy.

Overy ([00:25:29](#)):

Did they tell you that?

Smilanich ([00:25:35](#)):

Sure. You're supposed to get rid of that stuff if you know you're going to get captured. It was an escape kit, see. I shit my pants a few times. Then before I got out of there, they brought me into an office. There's a colonel or commandant or something, and there's two German soldiers. He wants [inaudible 00:25:55]. I said, "No. My name is Ron Smilich," and my number. Pretty soon a little kid comes in dressed [inaudible 00:26:06] and he gives me a couple of boots and "American swine," and he roughed me up. You don't know what they'll do, two big soldiers there. Then he finally, the guy could talk pretty English. "Well," he says, "We know you're a Belgian." I didn't say nothing. So I don't know. If I said I was Serbian, maybe they'd treat me like they did the Jews. Pretty tough. The Trotskis. Then they took me back to the camp. Then I think about two days or three days later they put us all on a big train and head us down to through Frankfort. In Frankfort, we marched down there, the whole bunch of us. Maybe 1500, 2000 of us, lined up, going through a bombed out, Jesus cripes. And the civilians start attacking us. They come out throwing rocks and some with pitchforks, but the guards, they took their bayonets out, kept the civilians away. Then we got on a goddamn train, all boxcars. We were going for a few days and we got to the prison camp, see.

Overy ([00:27:12](#)):

And you were shot down over which?

Smilanich ([00:27:15](#)):

Hanover.

Overy ([00:27:15](#)):

Hanover?

Smilanich ([00:27:18](#)):

Yeah. Then we got to the prison camp and I went in, again, they carried me in on a stretcher. Only medical care you got was [inaudible 00:27:25] when they stopped in some little German town and they had what they call a gray nurse, Red Cross, and they greased you up with some salve and put bandages on your leg.

Overy ([00:27:35](#)):

You were wounded both in the leg and the face?

Smilanich ([00:27:39](#)):

Just skin shrapnel, splinters on my face. But I had a hole in my leg with shrapnel. They brought me in a prison camp, Jesus cripes, a whole bunch of guys at the gate, there's a lot of old prisoners, old country prisons. I heard some guys talking Serbian, well, you can read in there. Jesus cripes, they took me up on the hill and that was the German hospital up the hill. They took care of all the German soldiers and everything. But these doctors run it, they're from Belgrade, Yugoslavia. I stayed up there a couple weeks. They put a cast on, dug that shrapnel out of my leg, wrapped me up. I come back, hell, two weeks later. You ate better.

Overy ([00:28:28](#)):

You mean the hospital?

Smilanich ([00:28:29](#)):

Yeah. They had a little better food. A little more variety. Not like you see food here. I mean there was maybe three or four different things on the menu and that's all. Barley soup and bread. Then I'd go to the hospital every two or three weeks. Then I got to mixing with all those Serbian

prisoners over there. I met a guy by the same name I got. And there's another thing, my folks came here and I never checked where my folks, the actual town they're born and raised. I didn't know too much about that. This could have been a relation of mine or something. That's another thing a guy thinks about.

Overy ([00:29:16](#)):

So these Serbians were in the same prison camp with American flyers?

Smilanich ([00:29:21](#)):

Yeah. They had Serbians, English, French, Russians, lots of Russians. It was a big camp, holy crapes. The Russians had it tough there. They hung them and shot them there every day of the week in the camp. Americans we got a few get shot trying to escape. Food was tough. First of all, you got American Red Cross parcels, but when they started losing the war you wouldn't get none of that stuff. One loaf of bread for nine men and maybe a little barley soup or something like that.

Overy ([00:30:00](#)):

Were the other foreign nationals--

Smilanich ([00:30:04](#)):

Not integrated.

Overy ([00:30:05](#)):

In the same barracks? They weren't in the same barracks?

Smilanich ([00:30:05](#)):

No, all different compounds.

Overy ([00:30:09](#)):

Oh, I see.

Smilanich ([00:30:09](#)):

Compounds. Americans in one compound, next door was Russian compound, one compound of French and English. Serbians were mixed in a little with the Russians. But most of the Serbians were up on the hill. They had what they call [inaudible 00:30:25] at the hospital.

Overy ([00:30:27](#)):

Were these Serbians military personnel?

Smilanich ([00:30:29](#)):

Yeah, they were part of [inaudible 00:30:30]--

Overy ([00:30:31](#)):

Part of [crosstalk 00:30:31].

Smilanich ([00:30:31](#)):

Techniques or whatever they are. They got captured way back in the '40s, in the early '40s, '39 and '40s, it'd been a long time.

Overy ([00:30:39](#)):

Were you as an American treated better than the Serbians and the other nationals?

Smilanich ([00:30:44](#)):

Yeah, I think so. The doctors I think had a little more normal.

Overy ([00:30:51](#)):

The what?

Smilanich ([00:30:51](#)):

The doctors up on the hill. There wasn't no barbwire or anything up there. Lot of guards, but no barbwire. The camp was all guards and barbwire. They lived right in the main big buildings in what was called the hospital up there.

Overy ([00:31:07](#)):

Who lived in the big buildings?

Smilanich ([00:31:08](#)):

The doctors and the hospital help, see.

Overy ([00:31:11](#)):

In the hospital?

Smilanich ([00:31:12](#)):

Like work or ease if you're on a call.

Overy ([00:31:16](#)):

How did you manage to talk to the Serbians? Were there times when you got together?

Smilanich ([00:31:17](#)):

No, when I came in the camp I heard somebody talk.

Overy ([00:31:17](#)):

Oh, I see.

Smilanich ([00:31:24](#)):

You came down the hill and they were back watching the guys come in, see. And the doctors had to be there to take care of the wounded, I suppose.

Overy ([00:31:32](#)):

I see.

Smilanich ([00:31:33](#)):

That was a very pleasant surprise, I'll tell you.

Overy ([00:31:38](#)):

When you're in prison camp, as I understand it, they separated the enlisted men from the officers, right?

Smilanich ([00:31:44](#)):

Yes. There were no officers.

Overy ([00:31:46](#)):

What kind of things did you do in prison camp with other Americans? How did you spend the day?

Smilanich ([00:31:52](#)):

Well, we had a library.

Overy ([00:31:52](#)):

A library.

Smilanich ([00:31:58](#)):

Well, not a fancy one, but there was things to read. You had ballgames out in the compound at certain times of day. We would sit around. You could play cards. They had a little theater there at one time. What the hell else there? You had your church, you had your religious services on Sunday, people going to church. It was, for a prison camp, pretty ordinary. The Germans were not uncivilized.

Overy ([00:32:35](#)):

And this was near what town?

Smilanich ([00:32:36](#)):

Krems, Austria.

Overy ([00:32:39](#)):

Krems?

Smilanich ([00:32:40](#)):

Yeah. That's about maybe 50 kilometers from Vienna in Austria.

Overy ([00:32:46](#)):

How did some of the other prisoners react? Did you have people that really went nuts in those camps?

Smilanich ([00:32:51](#)):

Oh, yeah. We had a fellow there go goofy. See they got wire one foot high and 20 feet of open space, then they got the two big double wire fences with the taller-- And he jumped the wire. Once you go over the wire, that guy in the tower, he shoots you. They shot him and they wouldn't let nobody touch him, see. But the Polish chaplain went out there and they're going to start a riot, see. Right away they bring in squads, set up machine guns and German tanks. They'll shoot the whole bunch of you. But the chaplain went in there and picked up that kid. I think he was barely alive, but he died later on. The Russians they just used for target practice in their compound.

Overy ([00:33:35](#)):

They'd just shoot the Russians?

Smilanich ([00:33:36](#)):

Oh, yeah. Of course, the Russians were treating-- They had no Geneva Convention there, see. That's the way I understood it. In the beginning, we got parcels you'd throw a couple of cigarettes over the fence or a biscuit or something. They didn't get anything [inaudible 00:33:56]grass off the ground, the Russians, nothing. And they'd go over the warning wire area and they would

shoot them right there. Between our camp, I don't know if it's true or not, there was 40,000 Russians in that camp. And when the war was over, there was maybe 5-6,000 left alive. Starved to death and dysentery and epidemics and hanging them and shooting them. American, we lost maybe four or five, escapees and stuff like that.

Overy ([00:34:27](#)):

What happens in a prison camp when a bunch of enlisted men, as far as did you establish some kind of chain of command or some kind of leadership? How did that work?

Smilanich ([00:34:38](#)):

Yeah. All barrack leaders, and then they reported to-- We had a major for commanding one officer, maybe two. We had a captain.

Overy ([00:34:49](#)):

German officers?

Smilanich ([00:34:49](#)):

No, American.

Overy ([00:34:49](#)):

Americans.

Smilanich ([00:34:50](#)):

And they were in command of all the prisoners. You had to report to them. But we had the crystal set, the radio, we had the news come in in the morning. Sneaky.

Overy ([00:35:02](#)):

This was illegal, obviously.

Smilanich ([00:35:04](#)):

Illegal, sure. Then they'd hide it. Then the Germans would search the barracks and tore everything up. They'd make you stand outside for six, eight hours if they're looking for something. We had a good system.

Overy ([00:35:20](#)):

Did you have any--

Smilanich ([00:35:22](#)):

Food distribution was equal. When that came, everybody got, you divide a parcel three ways. They made sure that nobody cheated anybody. Our loaf of bread was cut nine ways, usually cut that big or that big, cut it equally. And you dished out the barley soup equally.

Overy ([00:35:45](#)):

This was under the charge of your officers in there? Did they overlook that?

Smilanich ([00:35:49](#)):

No, the men in the barracks--

Overy ([00:35:49](#)):

The men in the barracks.

Smilanich ([00:35:52](#)):

Had a leader and then they had their lieutenants, or something that you would call them.

Overy ([00:35:53](#)):

But you elected your own leaders?

Smilanich ([00:35:58](#)):

Yeah. You elected your own, every barracks had their own outfit, see. Organized. You had to be, otherwise, hell, they'd probably eat each other up alive.

Overy ([00:36:09](#)):

What kind of disciplinary measures did you take? If somebody who was an American prisoner broke the rules, what kinds of things happened? Was there any kind of--

Smilanich ([00:36:23](#)):

Not very much, not that I know of. I tell you what happened to me. I'd go up on the hill and you could get tins of cocoa or French stuff or crackers that you couldn't get in camp. So the guys in the barracks pitched in and give me cigarettes, you'd use them for money, see. Geez, I had about 20 goddamn packs of cigarettes in my shirt back. I'm going up the goddamn gate and guard comes and takes me to the commandant. He strips me and gets all the cigarettes, keeps them. Trading them was illegal, but I'd done it before. The guys figured, well, the guy gives you the stuff. Then he called the major. And you talk about movies, cooler or solitary. No, he says, "Goddamn, too bad you got caught." It was similar to that thing. But then you never had a chance to do it again because they were onto you. They'd strip you naked to see that you weren't [inaudible 00:37:31]. They never brought no more discipline on you. What the hell, you were helping your buddies out. You weren't trading with the enemy, you were trading with the goddamn buys at the hospital, see.

Overy ([00:37:41](#)):

And these guys at the hospital were Germans?

Smilanich ([00:37:46](#)):

No, no, it's the Serbians.

Overy ([00:37:49](#)):

The Serbians.

Smilanich ([00:37:50](#)):

The Serbians. All the guys, they used to have that hospital food, which was much better than what they had down there. They were serving the Germans up there too and they're probably stealing it off the Germans, see.

Overy ([00:37:56](#)):

And the Serbians were doctors up there?

Smilanich ([00:37:57](#)):

Yeah. And orderlies, or any guy that had a job. He had a hell of a lot more stuff to get at. So, a tin of cocoa was like gold. You never got something like French cocoa, crackers, or English crackers or stuff like that. Or German good stuff. Eggs, a couple of eggs was like gold. They'd be worth a pack of cigarettes to a guy who'd bring you an egg back, see.

Overy ([00:38:29](#)):

Were there any instances you knew of Americans in that camp of collaboration?

Smilanich ([00:38:36](#)):

Not that I know of.

Overy ([00:38:36](#)):

Not that you know of.

Smilanich ([00:38:37](#)):

Uh-uh (negative), never. Well, we had goddamn guards in there. We had a guard in there and come up to you with [inaudible 00:38:48] American. "Goddarn," he says, "I got a restaurant in White Plains, New York. I went to visit my mother and father in 1939, Hitler grabbed me. Man, I want to get back. I wish you guys would finish this war." He talked English, he was American but he went to visit his folks and Hitler grabbed him and wouldn't let him go back. And there

was some vicious guards too. They'd rough you, rough you they had the butt if you didn't jump out of that bunk. All wooden bunks with gunnysacks full of straw, hay and delousing.

Overy ([00:39:22](#)):

Did you have adequate heat and clothing?

Smilanich ([00:39:29](#)):

No, no. We had a little goddamn wood-- Made out of ceramic tile in the center of the barracks.

You had to stand in line quick. We always had ingenuity. Making toast out of that black bread,

then you had chocolate. Once you got a parcel, you shaved that chocolate and make a little

goddamn chocolate pudding. For Christmas, we had some big laundry kettles in the back where

the latrines were. In the laundry room, a guy would wash his clothes in a kettle, hot water.

Everybody in the barracks saved, had it put in a piece of their candy bar and shaved it all up and

we had big goddamn thing of raisins, chocolate pudding and we had that thing going pretty good.

Started a fire under them goddamn big kettles. About that time when we're cooking, they call us

out. Roll call. I don't know what was the cause of it. We stayed in the yard and everything

burned to a goddamn crisp. Boy, that was supposed to be the prima deal of the whole year. And

the guys would make a little hootch out of potato peelings and stuff like that. You had guys are

pretty slick. You've seen that show Stalag 17B, but it's not as enjoyable as that. It's similar, the

barracks and everything were similar to what we had over there. In fact, the guy in our camp

wrote that movie you know.

Overy ([00:40:56](#)):

I didn't know that.

Smilanich ([00:40:56](#)):

Yeah, the guy in 17B, Stalag 17B, that's where I was at. He wrote the movie. But they doctored it up to make it look more or less a--

Overy ([00:41:09](#)):

What about sanitary facilities in a prison camp?

Smilanich ([00:41:12](#)):

Tough. You had lice. Of course, you went through a delouser. You got that powdered up. They always cut you bald headed to keep the lice down. You wash your own clothes and the barrack's leaders always made a point that you did your laundry and you washed it.

Overy ([00:41:31](#)):

Did the Germans give you soap to do the--

Smilanich ([00:41:34](#)):

Yeah, that hard-- Jesus, you rubbed like hell, no lather to it. It wasn't too fancy, but it worked. And we had all types of treats.

Overy ([00:41:44](#)):

What about showers?

Smilanich ([00:41:45](#)):

Goddamn, I don't remember. There was water for showers. I'm sure there were showers, but usually it was a basin. Like when you wash your face and put your leg up and scrub your legs. Sit in that goddamn pot where you wash your clothes, a big kettle, like a buoy kettle. Big metal sucker. But the delouser would have a shower room, I think. They'd spray you and then you'd go in there and get washed off, see. But that was in a different building altogether. It wasn't open to the public. The Germans maybe once a month or something, they'd run you through to get your

haircuts and get deloused and then come back. Clothes. My wife, I bet she sent 200 parcels of cigarettes, sweaters, never got one of them. Some of the guys got a parcel once in a while, but I never got any.

Overy ([00:42:53](#)):

But you did or didn't get Red Cross?

Smilanich ([00:42:53](#)):

You got--

Overy ([00:42:54](#)):

I assume you got Red Cross?

Smilanich ([00:42:58](#)):

When we got there, Red Cross, every week you'd get a box. It was considered a pretty good thing. You got milk, coffee, cigarettes, four or five packs of cigarettes, can of tuna, raisins, crackers, jam, jelly. A ration for a week.

Overy ([00:43:18](#)):

Did you lose a lot of weight when you were in prison camp?

Smilanich ([00:43:26](#)):

Oh, yeah. Well, in the end, we didn't get the parcels. You never got a parcel oh, hell, for six weeks at a time then because the Germans running out of food towards the end of the war.

[inaudible 00:43:33] they said transportation and that. I weighed about 80-90 pounds when I got out. I weighed a 135 when I got shot down.

Overy ([00:43:43](#)):

So you weighed less than a 100 pounds?

Smilanich (00:43:44):

Yeah. 80-85-90 when I got back.

Overy (00:43:48):

Were you hungry much of the time when you were in prison camp?

Smilanich (00:43:52):

Oh, yeah. You get that piece of black bread, you'd put a paper [inaudible 00:43:57] boy, every crumb, you'd eat that thing. That's all you got to eat. You'd save your milk can and your feed can for you-- You make handles on them out of wood or wrap them around with a strap. That was your serving dishes. And you got one scoop full of barley soup sometimes. Potatoes or sauerkraut. I think once in six months I was there, they had a meat ration, we found out it was an old horse that they, a couple of cowboy horse they chopped up. That's the only meat I ever had.

Overy (00:44:37):

When you're in circumstances like that, with a lot of men constantly being together under that kind of situation, was there a lot of friction between the guys?

Smilanich (00:44:49):

Not that I know of. My opinion, the way that I see it, when the hell is it going to be over, if we're ever going to get out of here alive? You know what I mean? What the hell's going to happen tomorrow. You might get killed. The Russians sent over 826s and bombed half of that camp all to hell over there. Then the Germans would threaten you and exterminate the whole tribe. We evacuated the camp, you know. When the Russians had taken Vienna, we got orders, the Germans got orders move us out. We marched towards France, we marched about 400 kilometers. That's a bad time too because we stopped at some farmyards and sit there and nothing to eat. You didn't get no rations. You had to grub around, you'd find a few potatoes. Not

a hell of a lot of rations issued that I remember. And the 14th Armored Division come through on some tanks and they liberated us. They took us right into France.

Overy ([00:46:06](#)):

It must have been what, the late winter of '45 and then they marched you out of the camp?

Smilanich ([00:46:13](#)):

Yeah. May of '45, that's when we got liberated. So it was the spring.

Overy ([00:46:18](#)):

So they simply moved you out and marched you which way?

Smilanich ([00:46:22](#)):

Towards France.

Overy ([00:46:23](#)):

Toward France?

Smilanich ([00:46:23](#)):

Yeah. Through Austria up into France. That's the time I almost got-- Another thing about Serbia, they had slave labors on these farms where we bivouacked. Some girl there I talked to her about getting me something to eat. She says, "Okay, I'll try to get something to eat for you." See at a later tonight by the barn when it went dark. Of course, me too, I was thinking nice looking girl. I go up that damn ladder up in the barn, she said that's where she'd be. I got to the top of the ladder and a goddamn man he, just touched my shoulder. Here that guard had her up there see [inaudible 00:47:07]. I never missed a rung going down, I went like a rabbit. We lost a lot of guys on that march too. Had the SS/Gestapo-- Smell like hell, the Germans were evacuating some of those concentration camps and marching these poor Jews and slaughtering them. If they'd run, they shot them in the head laying for miles, kilometers.

Overy ([00:47:38](#)):

What did they do, evacuate your whole camp at the same time?

Smilanich ([00:47:42](#)):

Yeah. I don't know. I don't know what happened to the Russians or the Serbians. Americans got orders, I think we got a little preference. I suppose they got orders from Allies, you move the Americans out. Because they were afraid the Russians would be more brutal than the Germans, see. That's what I thought. Maybe I'm wrong.

Overy ([00:48:01](#)):

They figured the Russians would be more--

Smilanich ([00:48:03](#)):

More brutal than the Germans to the prisoners.

Overy ([00:48:06](#)):

Oh, I see. So did you have any idea of where you were going?

Smilanich ([00:48:11](#)):

No.

Overy ([00:48:14](#)):

Did you have any idea what was happening in the war?

Smilanich ([00:48:17](#)):

Yeah, we knew the war was on its last legs.

Overy ([00:48:21](#)):

Did the guards talk to you about it?

Smilanich (00:48:22):

Oh, yeah, they knew. A lot of the guards took off too. They went home or whatever. You could see everything was busting up. That's why the SS Troopers were the [inaudible 00:48:34].

Overy (00:48:38):

Tell me about that march from camp. What you can remember about that.

Smilanich (00:48:43):

Well, a lot of time you'd march for, oh, 10-12 miles maybe. Maybe 20, I don't know, I don't remember. Then they say, okay, we're going to stop and we stopped in the woods. You'd sit there. You could start a fire or you couldn't start a fire. A lot of times you couldn't start a fire because they were afraid the goddamn bombers would come over. Sometimes we'd start a fire and you'd sit there by the fire all night long. Maybe you'd sleep right along the ground. One time we stopped in a town and there was a big factory. They said that's where you guys are going. A whole column. Man, you never seen nothing like that in your life. There was about four or five stories of factory, more of a shell. We stayed there and I guess dysentery had broken out [inaudible 00:49:38] guys were running back and screaming, yelling dysentery. Couldn't hold their bowel and, man, you never seen nothing like that in your life. Holy cripes. Next day a lot of the guys had to carry them on improvised stretchers, they're just weak. And we moved and the major started barking and he said, "The guys are in tough shape, they can't go." I don't know what happened then. We stayed two or three days at some farm area and bivouacked. I don't remember when they passed out any pills to cure the dysentery for most the guys. But they kind of want to wait. Boy, that was terrible. You never see 500-600 guys all with dysentery screaming and crying.

Overy ([00:50:21](#)):

Did you have trouble with dysentery?

Smilanich ([00:50:21](#)):

No.

Overy ([00:50:26](#)):

Did you ever figure out why you didn't?

Smilanich ([00:50:26](#)):

No. Maybe I'm tough. You ever hear a story about a Serbian?

Overy ([00:50:32](#)):

No.

Smilanich ([00:50:32](#)):

Two guys walking in the jungle. They come on a cannibal restaurant. The cannibal gave them a menu and he says, "Germans 10 bucks a plate. Finlanders 12 bucks. We had list of Serbians \$30 a plate." "How come these Serbians are so expensive"? He said, "You ever try to skin one of them tough son-of-a-bitches?" But I don't know.

Overy ([00:50:54](#)):

Tell me about the march. You said a lot of people tried to escape during the march?

Smilanich ([00:51:02](#)):

Yeah. After we got all together in France, geez, what happened to-- He disappeared. Maybe he got away, maybe he got shot. The SS troopers were a skull and bones outfit and they shot everything that was meant to be.

Overy ([00:51:20](#)):

And you were given absolutely nothing to eat on that march?

Smilanich (00:51:23):

Some rations I think were issued, but I don't remember what they were to tell you the truth. We used to go out and guys go this is good to eat. They'd have a root or something. What the hell was [inaudible 00:51:37]. You'd get potatoes. They'd bring some potatoes [inaudible 00:51:39] one or two potatoes and roast them on the fire. Water, wooden bucket or something, dish out water. No coffee, no nothing.

Overy (00:51:49):

Were the guards walking, were they in trucks or what--

Smilanich (00:51:55):

Yeah, they had-- The commandant he had a German personnel vehicle or a little car. Our major was riding with him, the lieutenant. The whole column followed two, three, four vehicles.

Overy (00:52:15):

How long were you on that march? Do you have any idea?

Smilanich (00:52:18):

I think we left-- I got liberated May 5th. That would be when the 12th Armored Division came through. That's when we got liberated. When did Roosevelt die?

Overy (00:52:36):

Oh, mid-April.

Smilanich (00:52:38):

We were way back in a tunnel, an Austrian tunnel at that time we marched through there when we heard that he had died. Then the people were crying too. The same people, it's funny, the same people that wanted to kill you when they captured you, was giving you sandwiches. The war's over, the same people, the same town probably that you went through down, came back.

You could have a glass of wine or sandwich when you're [inaudible 00:53:11] and give it to you.
Flowers. It's funny how the wars, I'll tell you.

Overy ([00:53:23](#)):

Tell me about your liberation. The circumstances of that.

Smilanich ([00:53:31](#)):

First thing, when we got liberated they took us to a town. We went through that town, they emptied every building. Everything, whatever was taken, I don't know, packages, stuff we got. Then they had a pile of weapons and cameras were there that they made the German people put them. Everybody grabbed what they could. You went through all these stores to find something to eat. There was candy and stuff that you found in a store. Everybody ate and I suppose some guys found some wines and stuff like that. It was like a looting spree, you know what I mean?

Overy ([00:54:08](#)):

And this was in a German town?

Smilanich ([00:54:09](#)):

German town. When the 12th Armored brought us to the town, they said, "Well, from here you'll get regular transportation, a train or something."

Overy ([00:54:17](#)):

They just turned you loose in the town?

Smilanich ([00:54:19](#)):

Yeah. We didn't take no orders because, hell, we were starving to death. We just went out through every building we could find to find something to eat.

Overy ([00:54:28](#)):

Do you remember what the town's name was?

Smilanich (00:54:29):

No. Some German, small German town. Go in the halls and holler, "What you got to eat?" The old people there put out on a table and they ate. Some of the guys ripped the plates, you know how guys are. Then we got to France and they sent us to Camp Lucky Strike. Oh, hell, there must have been 30,000, 40,000 GIs there, come from all the camps. Then you went to Le Havre, France, that's where we took off by ship, we went back by ship. But the Lucky Strike camp, they'd give you a suit of clothes, they'd give you some French wine, give you a little [inaudible 00:55:16]. After all they'd give you shots and whatever medicine you needed. You had two or three days and then they took them-- I think Camp Lucky Strike was in Le Havre. Then we boarded the ship and came back to the States. We got back to New Jersey. You get into that great big Army air base. Here you see guys that are, dog robbers, you know what a dog robber is, he's a waiter in a white uniform, all Germans. Sitting at big table eating big steaks. Everything you could think of was on that thing. We started getting mad because the way these guys were treated as prisoners in America and the way we were treated, oh, we started a ruckus. And the MPs quieted it down. I get back and I hear a story of being over there that they started a riot because they didn't get beer on Hitler's birthday, or didn't get turkey.

Overy (00:56:26):

The German prisoners were complaining?

Smilanich (00:56:28):

The prisoners, yep. And they would go to town and fraternize with the American woman, instead of staying in their camp, it was no prison. The only time we fraternized, our camp was in a big valley and you had a farm there. And you'd see some woman there, you couldn't tell if she was

40 or 20 or 80. You'd throw a cigarette and she'd lift her dress up, that's all the closer you got to a woman in a prison camp. No woman, no woman in the camp at all.

Overy ([00:57:10](#)):

By the time you were liberated and got back to France, did they put you on any kind of diet or anything?

Smilanich ([00:57:16](#)):

Yeah. I went to a convalescing hospital in St. Petersburg, Florida. Stayed there about six weeks, they had my wife come down. Looked at my leg and said, "Where did you get that?" "Well, got shot down." "We know you were chasing some woman and got shot." Get you madder than hell. Then we stayed at some hotel, stayed about five or six weeks then they sent me home.

Discharged me.

Overy ([00:57:43](#)):

So they tried to get you in pretty good health then before you went home?

Smilanich ([00:57:47](#)):

Yeah. They fed you real good, no question about it. When you got back to the States, it was real good.

Overy ([00:57:50](#)):

What kind of treatment did you get in the hospitals before? What happened to you in the hospitals after you were liberated? What kinds of things would they do for you?

Smilanich ([00:58:02](#)):

Well, they made sure your diet. They'd give you tremendous physicals. Most times they'd ask you what problem you had. I tell them piles or dysentery, then they'd give you a procedure on

that. Whatever problems you had, then they'd treat you for it, see. A lot of rest and relaxation. Anything you wanted, [inaudible 00:58:30]. It was pretty good.

Overy ([00:58:35](#)):

When you think about your treatment in that prison camp, do you think that you were treated about as well as possible under the conditions? Do you think you were mistreated? How would you characterize that prison camp experience?

Smilanich ([00:58:57](#)):

I would say, you obeyed the rules you never had no problem. Germans understood that very good, that's what I say. You toed the line, you never got crap. Of course, you always had one or two guards that would be [inaudible 00:59:13]. It wasn't like it was an order from the commandant. If you stayed in line, you never went by that warning wire, you gave your name and number when they had roll call, it was pretty well organized. And what amazes me, I worked at this reformatory for 20 years. You got criminals there, Christ, they get treated better than some people out on the streets. And they cost so much money. Where the Germans, they had a system there, rules. You could do this and you couldn't do that. When you go to a prison here in the United States, even a verbal abuse you lose your job at the reformatory. That's the difference between discipline and knowing what you expect and knowing what you got to do. Of course, we had guys that'd dig a tunnel. They'd dig a tunnel trying to escape, we had guys escape there. They knew the possibility of getting shot just like that. There was no argument about it. You're in the wrong place at the wrong time, you're going to get a bullet in your head. They expressed the fact that the war's going to be over, there's not much we can do. We'll make it as tough as we can for the Germans without getting them so goddamn mad where they shoot us, which they would have done, I think.

Overy ([01:00:40](#)):

What kinds of things did you do to irritate them?

Smilanich ([01:00:42](#)):

Well, you'd stand in line and you wouldn't answer them. They call your number and then get mad. Then they kept you out there for six hours, just like Minnesota out there, a little more mild. And when it come to haircuts, you'd reach down and get a bunch of sand, rub in your hair, ruin his clippers. Couldn't cut all the hair then. I can't think of a few more. Oh, they had the little crystal radios, they had them hid, they had the news every day. They'd come and report the news. They had them going, they were pretty damn smart some of these guys, these leaders. They had them irritated. They didn't know whether we were going to break the whole camp and you'd get [inaudible 01:01:31] tomorrow or not, but we didn't because it's too dangerous see.

Overy ([01:01:35](#)):

So the general idea was we got to wait out until the end of the war and make it as best we can.

Smilanich ([01:01:42](#)):

Yeah. You hear these movie stories about whole camps organize a breakout. It's a story because they had a system there. Like I said, I talk about these prisons with [inaudible 01:01:54] and all the steel. They don't need it. All you need is barbed wire and a couple of guards up there. One strand of wire 20 feet. When you put that in your brain, once you go over that 20 feet, then you got to make that other 20 feet, you're dead. If our criminals in the United States understood that, we wouldn't have too many criminals that want to go there. Maybe I'm wrong in talking about I'm not a humanitarian, but it's so wrong that a guy is fighting for his country that doesn't break the law, they get abused like that. But you got to understand it, that's war. The same thing with the criminals. There's a war. You can't sit in your house and worry about a guy who can blow

your head off because you got something that he wants. When I worked at the reformatory I told them, I says, "Man, you guys are lucky. You got TVs in your cells. You bitch about steaks, three meals a day. You got a menu to eat breakfast stuff. You should have been in that prison camp. You [inaudible 01:02:56] you didn't get nothing. You knew who was the lord and master.

Overy ([01:03:07](#)):

Did you get letters from your wife? Were you able to write her quite a bit?

Smilanich ([01:03:12](#)):

Yeah. Not too often. Every three or four months. She had, in fact, I think she waited about four months before she knew I was missing. She heard that on a ham radio station. Some ham operator picked it up in Germany. And she was pregnant when I left and she had delivered the baby and lost the baby, and I didn't know about that for many months. Not too many letters. Like I said, I never got too many packages. But just enough to keep you in shape. Germans are intelligent people when it comes down to organizing and how to keep control. You got to give them that much credit. You didn't get no mail. So what's more important, your mail from your home, or making some shitty rule, which doesn't hurt you? The major and the hot shot told us, they kind of explained it, "Fellows, this ain't no goddamn picnic. You're being very nice, but you have to stick with it. Don't go getting 50 guys shot because you're thinking goofy."

Overy ([01:04:30](#)):

Did you always think you were going to make it, that you were going to get out?

Smilanich ([01:04:36](#)):

No. I thought a lot of times going out of the barracks and trying to make it through the thing, but I don't see how you can make it. You got to go through two double wires and guards and dogs and machine guns. I don't remember hearing of anybody-- The only way they escaped they had

work detail. I think it was a corporal or under, had a chance to go work at a farm, which you got better food. You went and worked in the valley in the farmer's venue and you got a good meal. Then you could escape from there because they'd maybe send one guard with 20 guys, see.

Overy ([01:05:11](#)):

Did you go on some of those details?

Smilanich ([01:05:14](#)):

No, no. That sergeant, they wouldn't let us go on a work detail.

Overy ([01:05:23](#)):

You did or you didn't really think you were going to survive? Did you think you were going to make it? Or did you think about that very much?

Smilanich ([01:05:30](#)):

I never thought about it. One day at a time. Really, honestly, I never thought about it.

Overy ([01:05:34](#)):

One day at a time, sure.

Smilanich ([01:05:38](#)):

When you wait for the next day and you made that next day, the next day, the next day pretty soon it adds up to 13 months and you're there.

Overy ([01:05:45](#)):

Did you ever think about just running into the wire just to get it over with?

Smilanich ([01:05:49](#)):

No. Never was that desperate.

Overy ([01:05:51](#)):

You mentioned that fellow who did.

Smilanich ([01:05:54](#)):

The guy's going, it shocked me, That's guy in tough shape, boy, I'll tell you. Never figured to commit suicide, hell, shit, there's always a little hope.

Overy ([01:06:17](#)):

They often say that one of the things that keeps people going in a bad situation is humor and the humorous things that happen.

Smilanich ([01:06:25](#)):

Yes.

Overy ([01:06:28](#)):

Talking about humor. What kind of things did you find humor in? Did funny things happen?

Smilanich ([01:06:40](#)):

Stories. You always had some clown doing a jig or something. Mouth organ, I don't know where the hell he ever got it. Or a Jew's harp. Make it out of a tin can with some drums and that. Or some guy card tricks. You get the same maybe 120-130 guys in a barracks, you always got some pretty good guys to work things up.

Overy ([01:07:11](#)):

You were telling me about the guy that was burned?

Smilanich ([01:07:13](#)):

Yeah. From head to foot. He's on the boxcar. Jesus cripes, the nurses greased him all up. He looked like a mummy. Then I think they took him to a German hospital. They took him off the train.

Overy ([01:07:28](#)):

It was soon after you were captured?

Smilanich (01:07:29):

Yeah. That was the time when they were transporting us to [inaudible 01:07:33], the interrogation center. I think the Germans were settling up what they took the wheels of really moving guys and putting them in their own hospitals. Got them in shape. Then either ex-- How the hell do you say that? Send them back to the States.

Overy (01:07:52):

Repatriate?

Smilanich (01:07:52):

Yeah, repatriate them or send them to the hospital or send them back to camp if he got in good shape after he went to the hospital. Like I say, I tell this, every guy says, thank God myself. I could see the Japanese prisoners, I could see them guys really hitting the wall. Because that was the most terrible, hopeless thing. I never read about or seen the bomb in my life, my brother was telling me about this. They were animals compared to the Germans. That's something. You talk about not eating, we ate like kings compared to what they did. Even the German's black bread, you got a slice of black bread, you didn't feel bad. But the maggots and the garbage that the Japanese fed these guys, or they didn't feed them. I don't think they fed them at all. They'd go without water for three, four days, imagine that. The Japanese done that.

Overy (01:09:08):

Yeah, they sure did.

Smilanich (01:09:11):

Like, hell, we had German coffee. It tasted like chicory. They'd bring a kettle of that coffee. It had a taste to it, chicory. It was liquid. Then when you got your parcels you had your Taster's Choice, or what the hell, instant coffee. I don't think one Japanese prisoner ever heard of that.

Overy ([01:09:41](#)):

When you think about your military service, and the kinds of things that you went through, do you have any resentments about having to do that, having to go through that?

Smilanich ([01:09:58](#)):

No. It happened. I've been here for 26 years, all Germans. Never in 26 years said why you're part of the Hitler group, German. I never done that, I never felt that way. But they do it here, they'll do it to you.

Overy ([01:10:19](#)):

What do you mean?

Smilanich ([01:10:22](#)):

They'll talk about Hitler was the greatest guy that ever lived. Even in these days after 20-30 years of all that [inaudible 01:10:32]. I never think of offending a guy. I didn't like it because they called me a Serbian here because I'm the only Serbian in this whole town. I get it, boy. I don't have no enmity against a nationality of German. I've never had a vicious word for any guy. Even to get me mad or [inaudible 01:11:03]. It was his fault the way the German [inaudible 01:11:06]. It turned my stomach sometimes to see these guys talk about Jews and black people. Hitler, didn't get enough of him.

Overy ([01:11:23](#)):

How do you think the war and your experiences affected you in the long run? Do you think it had any considerable effect you as a person and the way you look at things? What impact do you think that your experiences in World War II had on you?

Smilanich ([01:11:36](#)):

I think it was the best adventure, best experience in my life.

Overy ([01:11:42](#)):

Is that right?

Smilanich ([01:11:45](#)):

Honest to God, honest to God. It's funny to say.

Overy ([01:11:48](#)):

I know, I've not heard anybody say that.

Smilanich ([01:11:50](#)):

It's funny to say. That's the way it was. I always figured, Jesus cripes, you see a lot of guys never come back. Sometimes you wonder in this goddamn real world, there's a war going on every day. You talk to people now, a war going on every day, it's more vicious than what you've gone through. I get kind of angry at our government sometimes about leaving people hung out to dry. I'm sure with all our power and that. The Vietnam War is a good example. We have guys getting slaughtered for no reason at all. At least they'd give us a good shot when we left over there. We were all gung-ho. Which is I think most Americans, some from around World War II feel that way. Goddam, it was a good deal You've seen the goddamn world, you've seen different countries, you did a lot of things you'll never do in your civilian life. Myself, I don't think I'm a warmonger. Maybe if I was 20-30, I'd join the service again.

Overy ([01:13:15](#)):

But you think the war actually had a beneficial effect on your experiences?

Smilanich ([01:13:17](#)):

Yeah. It's educational. You see a world as it is. You don't see it with our congressmen they think it's so beautiful. You'd get to a point where you say Christ this has been going on for a 1,000 years, this slaughter. It's got to be. We got no control over it. What gets me mad is you talk about

the generals and these guys, I was watching a World War I deal here. Go get slaughtered, we've got to move. And they're sitting back there 40 miles from nowhere telling them [inaudible 01:14:03] because I said so. When you think about the reasons, they weren't the part [inaudible 01:14:09] the reasons what you fight a war for. I'm not saying I'm right, but definitely I think, I said Jesus Christ it's not worth-- But, of course, the way you look at it if you didn't have a war every three years you wouldn't have enough room to stand on this earth.

Overy ([01:14:29](#)):

Sometimes I think about that.

Smilanich ([01:14:30](#)):

It's a vicious chess game. Your move, my move.

Overy ([01:14:35](#)):

Did you think you were actually a better person as a result of your war experience?

Smilanich ([01:14:39](#)):

Sure, sure, you bet. You meet different people, you learn different things. The only thing is, man, I'm sitting here talking to you and the only thing there's a lot of guys, Jesus Christ, good buddies of yours, not home. At the prime of his life he gets wasted. Really, when you think about it, you feel sorry for a couple years and the world goes on. It happens every day all over this whole world.

Overy ([01:15:08](#)):

Did you have a hard time-- Well, let me put it this way. I've had numbers of Vietnam War vets in my class. In my war classes. And some of these guys still have problems.

Smilanich ([01:15:28](#)):

I can see, I can see why.

Overy ([01:15:29](#)):

Did you have any problems like that after you [crosstalk 01:15:32]?

Smilanich ([01:15:35](#)):

I'll tell you why. I got a good answer for you. Maybe I might be wrong, [inaudible 01:15:36], but I can give you an answer. When I was a little kid in this country, we had dirt floors, kerosene lamps, really nothing. My father was an immigrant, couldn't read or write. Worked in the mines, worked for peanuts. I don't think he ever bought my mother a dress because he never had the money. So when I went through it was a hell of a lot better. When I got in that Army, I'd never tasted an olive in my life, I'd never tasted celery, we don't have that stuff. So maybe this is three steps better than what I had at home growing up. Know what I mean? Know where I'm coming from?

Overy ([01:16:12](#)):

Sure.

Smilanich ([01:16:13](#)):

Vietnam people they've had 20 years of TV and cars and everything. Like the kids today, the college kids, they've got everything they could ever dream of. So they go over there, it's going to be a hell of a lot tougher over there. Maybe there's a little connection there. For guys like me, us little, what they call us, peons. You go over there and you're riding a goddamn train, you fly in an airplane. You don't even do that as well off in America. You can go on an airplane, it's going to cost you money.

Overy ([01:16:50](#)):

So for these kids in Vietnam going in the Army was a downer?

Smilanich (01:16:56):

Yes.

Overy (01:16:56):

Where it wasn't for you.

Smilanich (01:16:58):

You take a guy out of a home like this and put him in the jungle and live like a goddamn dog and get shot like a dog. Geez, look at all the pits and all that-- That's vicious. You get in the drug situation. That's why they went into drugs because it was tough, it was tough.

Overy (01:17:19):

But your life growing up was so much harder than it was when you got in the [crosstalk 01:17:24].

Smilanich (01:17:26):

Certainly. I think it got a little bit--

Overy (01:17:26):

That's fascinating.

Smilanich (01:17:28):

If you [inaudible 01:17:29] me, I think that's-- You take a little farm boy from Arkansas that's a hillbilly and that, Jesus Christ, this is something that opens your eyes. You don't believe the world is asleep. You got food on the table. Guys serving you. Over there, hell. We never went hungry. The old man always had a hog he raised or chickens and slaughter them and milk an old cow sitting in the back yard or something. It wasn't gravy, you had to bust your ass. You had to work for everything.

Overy ([01:17:59](#)):

Let me ask you this. You said your brothers went in the service too, all of them.

Smilanich ([01:18:03](#)):

Yeah.

Overy ([01:18:04](#)):

I understood your father being an immigrant, what was his reaction to all his boys going into the service?

Smilanich ([01:18:11](#)):

To tell you the truth, he never blinked an eyeball. Maybe he thought it was an honor or something. We all served, we all got honorable discharge, all did their job, come back. Of course, maybe he liked it because I was married, my wife got the allotments. The boys, they were living better than they ever did. If you want to think of it that way, it was money coming in. Maybe there's a point there. He's got three boys, they're sending allotments home, whether it was 20 or 30 dollars a month, it was better than what he was getting in the mines there, five dollars a day or something like that.

Overy ([01:18:52](#)):

Did he ever give any indication that he was proud of you for-

Smilanich ([01:18:54](#)):

Sure. Oh, yeah. All got honorable discharges, did our jobs, never got thrown in the brig or the stockades. Then when I got back, I went on the GI Bill and learned to be a bricklayer. I never took four years of [inaudible 01:19:19]. My dad says, "Boy, that's a good deal. What the hell. You just college got handed to you, I couldn't give you no college." None of us kids could afford

college. [inaudible 01:19:27]. I think he was pretty satisfied the way things turned out for everybody.

Overy (01:19:38):

Did he ever talk to you about the old country very much?

Smilanich (01:19:38):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Overy (01:19:43):

What brought him over here to begin with? Was he a single man when he came over? Was he married?

Smilanich (01:19:48):

If I remember right, in them days my mother was promised to him by-- She came on a second boat or something.

Overy (01:20:02):

She was Serbian too?

Smilanich (01:20:03):

Yeah. You were a vassal, you know what I mean. You worked for the guy that had all the land.

And I suppose it really just had something to do with it. Stricter than hell. You had to give half to the whatever.

Overy (01:20:25):

Well, the reason I asked you about your father's reaction is because very often immigrants it seems in this country, either fighting themselves or having their sons fight, is somehow a proof of their citizenship, the loyalty of their commitment to their new country. That's why I was asking those questions.

Smilanich ([01:20:55](#)):

Okay, sure. He got his naturalized citizen. Proudest moment in his life, really. Learned a little English, not a hell of a lot, until the day he died. How to write his name. When you look back, it's kind of interesting on what it all adds up to. That's a sad part about it. You bring up Vietnam, I don't think I've met a dozen of them. They're holy terror, they're vicious. They want to get back at something. Somebody owes them something. Lots of them do. They're tough. They got a raw deal, I would say they got a raw deal. But they come back different than we did from World War II. I believe they did.

Overy ([01:21:38](#)):

They come back more bitter than you did?

Smilanich ([01:21:40](#)):

Yeah.

Overy ([01:21:43](#)):

How did you feel being a combat veteran and going through what you did in World War II?

What was your feeling back during the Vietnam War when you found out some of these young men were burning their draft cards and running off to Canada?

Smilanich ([01:21:57](#)):

Terrible. Oh, man, it's awful. I didn't think an American would do that. But then the Jane Fondas and all that garbage. Geez, you get upset. Then you look a little more broadminded, things go on as you get older and see the way the world turns.

Overy ([01:22:21](#)):

So you don't feel quite so badly towards them now that you did then?

Smilanich ([01:22:24](#)):

No, not at all. It's history, whatever you want to call it. It's going to happen again, it looks like. We're not disciplined, we're not patriotic, we're not ingrained with a spirit like it was in the '40s. You're never going to get that again, I don't think you are. Not in this country. You wonder what the hell it all amounted to? I was thinking this the other day. Bush is going to meet Gorbachev someplace, they're going to have a little talk. Possibly it could be a talk, well, goddamn these people are giving me a lot of trouble, Gorbachev, all these-- I think we better start something. Maybe Bush will-- Now this is just thinking, fantasies you could call it. When people get out of hand, we can't control it. We're the leaders, once you get people talking back to you, man, you better start doing something. Whether it's start another war or you do this. You lay off of me while I take care of this. I'll help you here.

Overy ([01:23:37](#)):

Could be a dangerous situation.

Smilanich ([01:23:42](#)):

Sure. That's the way world-- All through history, leaders. You think thousands, hundreds of people, you do what you want to do. You talk about the feudal ages, it ain't no different. But it's only a little more finesse to it, you know what I mean? When you really think about it. I'm 68 years old, I couldn't give a shit less. Too old to worry about it anymore. You see the patterns fit in, the whole history. I do a lot of reading, I like history. But you see the whole history of the world and there ain't no reason for it. There's really no reason for it. Unless, like I say, there's no space to live. You can't kill them off in a battle, then you have that, what the hell you call it in Sweden there, where you get--

Overy ([01:23:42](#)):

Eliminates?

Smilanich ([01:24:34](#)):

You eliminate them. They won't go that far. It's kind of scary. I got grandkids, I got kids you wonder what the hell. Even that--