

**Tennessee State Library and Archives  
403 Seventh Ave. North  
Nashville, Tennessee 37243**

**Oral History interview with World War II pilot Crawford E. Hicks**

**Interview: Feb. 2, 2008, at the home of Steve Hicks, Nashville, Tennessee, relating to Hardy A. Mitchener Jr. (whose POW diary is held at TSLA)**

(Edited Narrative Version, based on Gwynn Thayer's transcription, Spring 2009)

TSLA: Today is February 2, 2008. We are at the Hicks home in Nashville, Tennessee, with Mr. Crawford E. Hicks and his sons. We are Gwynn Thayer and Jami Awalt from the Tennessee State Library and Archives. We're here to talk about Crawford Hicks' experiences in World War II and, in particular, his knowledge of Hardy A. Mitchener Junior, who was navigator on his B-17 aircraft. This all started when the Tennessee State Library and Archives acquired [Mitchener's] diary, purchased from a manuscript dealer in 1994. (*invites Hicks to look through the diary*)

HICKS: Okay. Now the first page here is a picture – this [*I.D photo*] is German-made to identify us, and the picture of Mitch is very typical. We were not happy, and we showed it. Mine was just as bad. I hadn't had any sleep for some time and I was tired – we all were.

TSLA: Did you get a diary like this as well?

HICKS: No, I did not. Some of the people did diaries. Mitch was sort of an artist who, as you can see, drew some pictures in here.

TSLA: The story about what happened from the beginning, from when you all were shot down, to your stay at Stalag Luft III.

HICKS: Rather than trying to read his recollection of this day of disaster, let me tell you what happened and I think we will pretty much agree on it, I'm sure. There were ten people on the airplane. We had the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, bombardier, engineer, ball turret gunner, radio operator, a left waist gunner, a right waist gunner, and a tail gunner. Each of us had a job to do, and we were very, very compatible. We'd been together since, oh, 1943, so we'd flown together a whole lot, and we respected each other very much. On the day in question, the formations were set up – we bombed in 18-ship formations. These formations were made up of two-three-ship formations per squadron, and there were three squadrons. We had what we called a high squadron, a low squadron, and a lead squadron. On this day in question I was leading the formation (we called it an element) of two other airplanes – leading that in the low squadron, meaning there were three airplanes ahead of me, and I was behind and below the other three. We had already dropped our bombs. I don't remember where our target was . . .

TSLA: Oscherslaben.

HICKS: Oscherslaben. Okay. The powers that be really didn't need to tell me where we were heading because I was just going to follow the leader, who was ahead of me. Mitch [as navigator] had to know it, so he had put it in his log. But we had hit Oscherslaben and dropped our bombs. And keep in mind we were flying the low airplane of the squadron of 18 planes. A Messerschmitt 109 – ME 109 – came through the formation head-on. Now the Messerschmitt had a 20-millimeter cannon firing out of its nose. The pilot of a Messerschmitt would aim the airplane and then fire, whereas in our fighters they could not fire through the propellers as the Messerschmitt did. Our fighter airplanes had machine guns in the wings, and these bullets would converge at a point out there in the distance. It's very difficult – when you are at altitude you have no depth perception whatsoever, because you have no reference points. Well, anyway, the 109 came through and I recall so clearly seeing that big gaping nose hole. I don't think it's bigger than an inch or an inch and a half, but it looked big, as I recall. And when they fired, they would have tracer bullets every seven or so shells, so they could see where they were firing. I could see these things coming at me, but I couldn't duck. Couldn't do it. So they hit us in our right wing and set our two right engines on fire. I fell out of formation and dropped back because we couldn't maintain the speed. I tried to put the fire out with fire extinguishers, which we had in our engines, but they wouldn't work. So then we feathered the props, the propellers.

TSLA: “Feather” means . . . ?

HICKS: A propeller is nothing but a huge screw, with the blades of the propeller being the threads of the screw. But when you feather, you make those blades, the threads, turn straight ahead, so they do not create wind resistance. That's feathering. And it's only true with propeller-driven airplanes. So we couldn't put the fire out in the two right engines. We had an escape bell, and I rang that for everybody to start getting out, to bail out. In the meantime the fighter made another pass at us from underneath and hit the aircraft. I could feel the impact. I didn't hear it, but I could feel the impact. We were at maybe 20,000 feet at the time – I really don't know the altitude. Mitch might have known because he kept a record of all this for his log. But anyway they made another pass at us.

The bombardier was in the cat walk. The configuration of the airplane was that the navigator and the bombardier had their office, if you will, in the nose of the plane. And then the co-pilot and I sat up in the next level. So they would get from their office up to our level through the catwalk that came between the co-pilot and myself. The navigator was in this catwalk trying to get up to see us, and when they made this other pass at us, they hit him in the chest. He asked me, “What are we going to do?” I said. “I'm trying to put the fire out.” I had gone ahead and set the alarm, and then I saw blood coming out of his mouth and we realized that he had been killed. So everybody else started getting out.

The big concern I always did have was with the ball turret gunner. See if you can envision this. The ball turret gunner is below the airplane, and he has to be small even to fit in there to start with. In order to get out, you had to have the ball turret turned in a certain position, a certain way. So my concern always was that person – Steve Vasilik was his name – he was in the ball turret. The very first thing I said on the intercom was “Get him! Get Steve out of there!” So they did get him out. This was so important to

me. I could just see myself being down there and everybody else gone, and the airplane going down and I just couldn't . . . I mean, that's the fear that I had. So we got him out and everybody started leaving the airplane.

I remember this: we had two engines on one side, not working, so I had the engines on the other side going as hard as they could go. But the airplane turned, and went up on its wing, with the good engines up – we had so much pull there, so much thrust, that it caused that to happen. So I had to get back in the seat. I had to trim the airplane up and keep it level so everyone could get out. Once they did, then I went down through the navigator's escape hatch, which was below the pilot's compartment. This was the first jump any of us had made, but, you know, we were all very, very calm. We were scared, yes, but we were not frightened -- we had control of what was going on. And I remember letting myself out of the hatch and hanging on to the edge of the hatch, closing my eyes, and saying a prayer, "Lord, help me get through this," and I left.

I started tumbling – almost got sick because of the tumbling – and finally straightened out. I looked over my shoulder and we would have been going down, descending all this time, since we first got hit, and so I reached up and over to my left shoulder and pulled the rip cord through the parachute and it opened and, as I recall, I had a couple of swings and hit the ground. So it was sort of tight there. But my chute caught in a tree and let me down easy. My feet didn't even sting, you know, like when you jump down off something.

This location was near a little town of Nienburg, Germany, just across the border from Belgium. Of course we had been briefed on what to do – they said we should take our gear, throw it in one direction, and walk in the other, to see if we could throw people off. So I did that. I saw this motorcycle policeman coming over the hill, and he came on down and searched me. I was smoking at the time, and I had a Zippo lighter, and he took my lighter. Well, you see the picture of Mitch – I looked that way or worse. And I held my hand out and looked him right in the eye and I said uh-uh, just shook my head, and he gave the lighter back to me. We were out in the field, he had a gun and I didn't. Now that doesn't mean I'm brave – don't get me wrong. I think I was in shock. But anyway, it happened like that. Well, we walked. He made me take my parachute and my Mae West (that's the flotation device we always wore), and walk to this little village. When we got there and he started screaming bloody murder, just screaming bloody murder! He was French by the way, and he had been impressed into the German war effort. So he started screaming, and I took the lighter out of my pocket and gave it to him, and he shut up. So apparently that's all he wanted. Then I asked for a glass of water. We'd gotten up at about 3:00 in the morning; this was 11:00. I asked for a glass of water. Incidentally, "water" in Germany is *Wasser*, *Trinkwasser*. It's very close; it's easy to communicate. So they brought me a glass of water, and I put the parachute under my head and made a pillow and went to sleep, took a nap, and had a man with a big long gun guarding me. They woke me up later on and they also had the co-pilot and radio operator. The radio operator was Ullis Briggs – of course, guess what we called him. "Useless." You know, that's always the way it is (*laughter*), but he was a real sharp guy. So this was the 30<sup>th</sup> of May now, in 1944, so we were walking under guard with these German soldiers with their big long guns at our backs and . . .

TSLA: How many of you were there at that point?

HICKS: Three at this point.

TSLA: Three. So you are with “Useless” (*laughter*) . . .

HICKS: Briggs and Bianco. The co-pilot and the radio operator. Eugene Bianco. That’s Rob’s godfather. So the three of us were there, and this nice looking German girl came riding by wearing shorts, and she was pretty, had pretty legs, and he whistled. The radio operator whistled at her. Now I’m telling you the truth. Nothing happened, but nonetheless he did it. So that was the situation. I don’t know where Mitch was at this point. He had gotten out earlier, so we were strung out over about, I guess, a ten-mile area. We were put in this jail, at a military post, and we had a slightly elevated, wooden bed, and we lay on the bed, and were given some of this horrible black coffee and horrible black bread, and that was it. No nothing, no cover or anything. So we lay there and slept. From there we were taken to a train, and from there to Frankfurt, Germany, which was the interrogation center. I don’t know where I saw Mitch. Maybe I saw him then . . . it could have been.

TSLA: Dulag Luft?

HICKS: It could have been, I don’t know. *Dulag* means prison, so it could have been; *Luft* means air. That could well be, but I couldn’t verify that. But that was the interrogation center. Now, we were treated decently. We had been warned by our intelligence that they were going to try to frighten us by claiming that we were spies, and all these kinds of things. So when I went into interrogation, a nice-looking young man in a German uniform, spoke beautiful English, said, “Mr. Hicks, how are you?” I was smoking at the time, as I said, and he gave me a cigarette, and we sat there and smoked. And then, all we were supposed to do was to give name, rank, and serial number. Well, that’s what I did. And he said, you could have been a spy, and we could have you shot, and this kind of thing – exactly what we had been told. Moral to the story: if you are forewarned, you are not nearly as anxious as if it is a surprise to you.

TSLA: Those interrogators were notoriously agile at getting information out of the Americans. They were fluent in English, and some of them had lived in the U.S.

HICKS: Quite true. They showed me names of all of my crew members, and, you know, they knew an awful lot about us. Okay, talking about that, before each mission we would be briefed as to what target we were going to hit, and what altitude we would fly. The initial point, the I.P., is a point close to the target, where all the airplanes in the group close up and fly straight and level for 30 seconds, 45 seconds, something like that, as long as they need., to get set. The bombardier takes control of the lead airplane. Now the Norden bombsight, which was top secret at that point in time, was set up so that it was hooked to the cruise control, if you will, of the airplane, and the bombardier could twist knobs to change the direction of the airplane slightly, and to change the elevation just very slightly, so as to correspond with what his gunsight was calling for. We practiced with this gun, with the Norden bombsight. You would fly, straight and level; you’d lock

the crosshairs in on a target, flip your button, and, as soon as the airplane hit the right spot, when the bombs from that level, with those air conditions, were dropped, they'd hit the target. All of the calculating was like a computer, except this was 1944. So that's how the bombs were dropped. The initial point was that point, and it we had to be there and fly straight and level, and that's when all the hell broke loose.

TSLA: What was the time frame, from the moment that you were hit, till the moment that you evacuated the plane?

HICKS: Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, that kind of frame. We were on fire, two right engines on fire, and we had fire extinguishers in the engines themselves. I tried to put it out, but we couldn't, and I smelled smoke coming in through the gasoline lines, and so we said, let's go ahead and get out. So I'd say, 10-15 minutes, something like that. I kept us in touch with the group as best I could. We couldn't keep up with them speed-wise, but by lowering our altitude we could keep up the same speed by losing altitude. So, we were at about 10,000 feet when we all jumped out. That's my guess, I don't know.

TSLA: And an alarm going off in the background. . . .

HICKS: Well, the alarm is only set because we have to get out. On the day in question, we were briefed to fly, let's say, 27,000 feet – the intelligence said that was the best altitude to bomb. So, let's say we were briefed to fly at 27,000 feet, and we had a big blackboard at the end of the runway just before we took off. And it said "angel plus two." That was our code to increase our bombing altitude by 2,000 feet. Now, this is important from Mitch's standpoint. I didn't know anything – all I did was drive the airplane, but Mitch was the guy that had the information, if anybody did. They kept him in the interrogation center an extra day, trying to find out from him why we changed the bombing altitude. Now I didn't know, and Mitch didn't know. We had not been told. This was a good idea – they didn't tell him any more than he had to know. But anyway, they did keep him there an extra day.

After we got through there, we were put on prison cars, regular trains with seats, with bars on the windows, and taken to right across the border from Breslow, Poland. I don't remember the day. We got shot down the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, and we got to this point, I think, the 7<sup>th</sup> or maybe the 8<sup>th</sup> of June, 1944.

Now let's do some history here. The 6<sup>th</sup> of June was the invasion. So this was two days after the 6<sup>th</sup> of June. Now, here's the funny thing. I don't know whether Mitch saw this or not. This was outside the camp. You know these loading platforms by the railway station? Well, there was the meanest looking German guard you ever saw in your life. Not too tall, sort of heavy, and he looked to me like he bristled with guns all over. He stood up on the loading platform, as we were all milling around here down below. He had his hands on his hips and he looked down at us and he says, "Jesus Christ, fellows, where are you guys from?" I swear it is the truth. It was the funniest thing, and of course we just broke out laughing, to hear somebody from home. Here we were in a traumatic situation, and we had this fellow – he had a very Brooklyn accent and he had been raised in Brooklyn. He'd gotten over to Germany and gotten caught, and was stuck there, but

he was the first to tell us that the invasion had started. That's how we heard it, and of course it was a tremendous gift to bolster our morale.

That was the highlight, really, of that trip. We got on into the camp, and didn't know what was going to happen. We had nothing to say about what was going to happen; we just did what we were told. And, of course, one of the earliest people I saw was Mitch. He was already in there, and another member of our group had also gone down just three or four days earlier, and we got reunited. Then we were assigned to rooms in this compound. Stalag Luft III had five compounds – north, south, east, west, and central. It seems like we were in the west compound. Around ten acres in each compound, and around 1,000 people in each one, that would be my guess. We had long barracks; there were twelve of us put in a single room and we had four triple deck bunks around, and then had one eating table in the middle, with stools on each side; cabinets (the pictures in [the journal] look to be pretty accurate) for food and what few possessions we might have later. That was our room. And we had 12 guys who lived there from May until, like, October. And then some more fellows came in, and three more were added, so we had 15 there, and they brought in another triple deck bunk.

TSLA: Mitchener refers to that specifically: he calls that a problem in arithmetic, when you have to add new people (*laughter*).

HICKS: Well, they did it. Now, one of the newcomers was an interesting person. He was a real dear friend of mine. His name was Charles A. Lindberg. That was his correct name. And, no, not related to the Charles A. Lindberg, but he was also a pilot. So anyway, he came in and he was a fantastically good professional musician, and played guitar. Now, Gene, my co-pilot played guitar a little bit. He did pretty well. And when they found out that Chuck could play, the YWCA provided us with some musical instruments. Because Chuck and Gene were so good at playing music, they were given custody of two good guitars. And so they would go, by permission from the Germans, from barracks to barracks every once in a while and play for everybody. Chuck knew some new songs I hadn't heard before. "I Walk Alone" (*sings*) – that was one of them he brought, but the two of them would sit in the room at night in their bunks and play, and you have no idea of the nectar that we were getting. Oh, it was the sweetest thing. We had not had any music for six months, or something like that. That was the thing we missed the most, one of the things.

TSLA: I've heard there was a kind of respect between the Luftwaffe who were overseeing you in Stalag Luft III, and you all . . .

HICKS: Lot of it, lot of it.

TSLA: . . . and so it was very different to be a POW in that context than it would be in Japan. Could you tell us something about the relationship you had with the guards?

HICKS: All right. Referring you to *Hogan's Heroes*. Now that camp in *Hogan's Heroes* was pretty much identical to our camp physically. In fact, I think it was taken from our camp. The relationship with the guards was not quite as good, but we did have a good

relationship with the guards. They were either old men or people who couldn't do anything else. But they were not bad people; we were not mistreated. We did have camaraderie with them. As a matter of fact, there was one sergeant who wanted to move to Texas when the war was over, and so we called him Tex. And he responded to Tex because he spoke good English. And there was a captain there, but he wasn't anything like the *Hogan's Heroes* captain.

But let me get back to Mitch, before we go too far. Mitch was in the Army before going to navigators school. He had been in the army, and he had been to cooks and bakers school. That means that he took training in the chemistry of food, how to prepare, how to serve. He had all of these things like this, how to make something out of nothing, which he did beautifully by the way. Mitch was one of the oldest ones of our group. Now, Mitch also – and please, I'm saying this because it is coming straight from my heart, and it's the truth – Mitch was one of the most important people in my life then. I'll tell you more about that. You know, in the military you operate by hierarchy and rank. Well, there were two first lieutenants in the room. I was a first lieutenant, too, but I didn't know I had been promoted to first. But anyway, there were two other first lieutenants in the room, and so this senior first lieutenant was in charge of the room. But the second first lieutenant didn't want anyone else to be in charge, and he was always trying to usurp the first guy's authority.

Mitch was a very junior second lieutenant. But because of his personality and ability, Mitch organized our room, and here's what he did. Not how he did it, because Lord, how he did it, I don't know! He had one man in there, McDougal, who was only 19 years old – a navigator also. And he was very good with his hands. We got food parcels from the Red Cross, and in these parcels you had cans of powdered milk and the name of this was KLIM – “milk” spelled backwards. These KLIM cans were a great source of material for us. So Mitch said okay (and everyone agreed to it), okay, I will take care of all of the cooking, and McDougal will take care of building pots and pans. Everybody else keeps the room clean, and does K.P. (Kitchen Police), and everything else. I don't remember how we did it, but we did it on an equitable basis.

So Mac was exempt from doing K.P., but the rest of us pulled our stint on K.P. And the only time this first lieutenant had anything to do was when we had some kind of a formal function – like when our officers were coming in the room, he called everybody to teams, but that was that. Mitch ran the show. Hardy Angel Mitchener was one of the most fabulous people I've ever met.

Now, as time went on, I was hungry. I weighed about 200 pounds when I went in; I weighed about 155 when I got out. It wasn't mistreatment, just not enough food. And I was depressed from not having food, and not knowing, you know, what's going to happen and all of these kinds of things, and I would start complaining. I hated Mitch's guts – he would ridicule me, he would make me feel small, he would do all sorts of bad things, verbally, to the point where I couldn't complain anymore. I was afraid to. (*laughter*) But this is one of the best things that ever happened to me, because he wouldn't let me feel sorry for myself. This was the kind of guy he was. He had this kind of rapport, and this kind of ability. There were some senior officers – we had a couple of lieutenant colonels and a full colonel, and we were all second lieutenants, everybody there, just about, or captains – but these guys used to come down for him to show them how to cook, because he was the best cook in the bunch. We had the best food in the

whole building. We had a birthday cake every time somebody in a room had a birthday. And you know how he made it? I think it was some kind of cherry juice or whatever food color he might have, he would take the KLIM, the powdered KLIM, and he would make what looked like a...what do you put on top of a cake?

TSLA: Frosting? Icing?

HICKS: Icing, thank you! That was a senior moment. (*laughter*) But he would put this, this white KLIM, powdered KLIM, on top of the cake. The cake was German bread, chopped up finely, and with prunes or raisins, which we got through our Red Cross parcels, mixed in to get a little bit of sweetness. We didn't get that much sugar, once in a while, but we got a cake every darn day, made out of bread. And then with the icing on top, for birthdays he would take red coloring and he'd put something on there. Yeah, this was our life, and this was because of him. You see why this thing is important?

TSLA: He does talk about the food and that A-C-C-O . . .

HICKS: Yep, ACCO, that was our food bank.

TSLA: The other interesting thing, comparing what you are saying about Mitch, and what the diary reveals, you say that he didn't let you feel sorry for yourself. You could tell there's pain and unhappiness in the diary, there's a lot of talk of hunger, and longing for home, and longing for freedom, so, it's still there, he just didn't want everyone to bask in it.

HICKS: Yes, yes, but he...I never complained. I'll guaran-dang-dong-tee I did not ever complain. (*Laughter*) Because I was afraid of him. (*more laughter*). And I loved him. Believe me. Yes ma'am.

I don't know what ACCO stood for, even. It is an acronym for something, but it was our bank, our food bank. In our Red Cross parcels they had supposedly enough food for one man for one week. We got half-rations all the time, so we got enough for a half a week. But in these parcels there was this KLIM I told you about, and prunes or raisins also, and some hard English crackers -- real hard crackers. But they would have a D-bar, and a D-bar\* was a chocolate bar, a highly nutritious bar of pretty good size. Now, keep in mind that money was of no consequence to us over there. One fellow had a ten dollar bill that he had stashed away in a pocket on his belt, and we all looked at it like it was an oddity. Our medium of exchange was D-bars and cigarettes. And Lucky Strikes were the highest quality -- they carried the largest weight, and set up points in the ACCO for various kinds of things, so you could trade this, which had 10 points, and get two of these which cost five points. It was the point system, the D-bars being the most valuable, and Lucky Strikes and Camels were the most expensive cigarettes; Chesterfields were down a little bit; Old Gold (we had a bunch of Old Golds, and people didn't like Old Golds), then

*\* Note: the D-bar was specially developed by Baker's for military rations, to stand up to heat; the military issued three types of food rations: the lightweight K ration, the emergency D ration, and the food-for-a-day C ration.*

we had Cambridge cigarettes and they were pretty bad, and then we got Turkey cigarettes which were bar sweepings (laughter). We thought they...but we smoked them! (laughter) But this kind of stuff, of course, was pretty universal, this feeling. We didn't have anything to do. I did learn how to play bridge, and I played solitaire. I literally wore the spots off of the deck of cards, playing solitaire while we were there, and of course I lost money. I kept a mental record of money, and what I won or lost. I don't recall being bored. We had a good room, and I was hungry.

I cannot give Mitch too much credit, because he deserved more than I could ever give him for what he did for me, personally. He didn't keep me alive, no, but he was so instrumental to keeping me happy.

We were there in Stalag Luft III from June until December. During that time the YWCA furnished instruments. Now keep in mind, we had a lot of talented people in prison camp, a lot of talented people. We had a sixteen-piece band that played on special occasions. You remember Kay Kyser? You're too young for that! Kate Kaiser was a band leader and he did a contest, he'd play the beginning of a song and ask someone to identify it, and if you identified it, you went on. Well, Mitch and I had that program, and we were participants as an act, if you will. Mitch was a tap dancer. I think he got it from his father, who was in entertainment. But Mitch could tap dance, and he could sing a little bit, and when I was in school, I used to sing a little bit, but there was something else I did. The boys have heard this – excuse me, boys, but it's going to come out again (laughter) – but we decided that we'd do an act on this music knowledge thing, and it went like this. He said: (sings) “E – I, gimme a piece of pie, E – I, what kind of pie? E - I, any kind of pie! Raspberry, gooseberry, huckleberry pie,” and then Mitch would go into his dance. He would shuffle up there in the stage, you know. And then, he'd do that for a little bit. Then, (sings) “There goes a stray, and the boss said to kill it, So I shot him in the back with the handle of a skillet! Well, E – I . . .” We did that for ten minutes. (laughter).

SON: We grew up hearing that.

HICKS: And we won first prize. Now the first prize, by the way, was a piece of cheese. And it was wonderful (laughter). Yeah, I'm jumping around, but going back to food and Mitch. Mitch instituted a rule at the very outset. He said, “I'll do this. I'll be the cook, and I'll take care of all these things, but all the food that comes into this room belongs to me, every bit of it. If you get a package from home, I get it. Everything that comes into the room, I get.” He did not make any exceptions at any time -- you can have your clothes, you can have everything, I get the food. He took that food and made repasts out of it, made good-eating food. We had the best meals of anybody in the whole building because of this kind of thing. This is why the cheese was so important. This is where the cheese went. It went to the room.

Then in the fall Chuck and his crew came into the room and we got our music, and then come Christmas time, I think I got two packages from home in the eleven months, and I got it just before Christmas, and it had some washcloths in it. One of the best Xmas presents I've ever had. Because I needed washcloths. And had some Lucky Strike cigarettes.

TSLA: The guards gave you your packages? Did they ever take some for themselves?

HICKS: I'm sure they did. But we did get them. I got two packages. I got about six letters from their [*his sons*'] mother. We were just engaged then, got about six letters – they were gold, they were gold. That was the tie to home. Got some, two or three, from my mother and knew what was going on with her. But she knew I was all right. That was the big thing. I don't know whether it was Christmas night, or shortly after Christmas, we were notified that we were going to move out. We had been hearing the guns. I don't have a date on it, but he does. At nighttime we could hear the Russian guns coming from the east, so we knew that they were afoot, and so, some time in the later part of December '44 we got the word. We had two roll calls a day, *Appell*. One in the morning and one in the evening. So at the morning *Appell* we were told that we were moving out that night. So we went back to our rooms and the Germans did give us a full Red Cross parcel to take with us. We had these bunks, and we had mattresses of excelsior, which were better than hard wood. We had sheets on our beds, and we had blankets. And so we took those sheets and tore 'em into strips. I had an extra woolen shirt, you know, a military shirt, and a box. I don't know where I got the box, it was about the size of a soup box, and it fit just inside the shirt. So I buttoned the shirt up, tied the tails together real tightly, put all of my possessions in it, which weren't very many (the food mostly), tied all that in there, and took these strips from the sheets, and tied on strips to each of the arms. I had been issued a French officer's overcoat which was real long and went almost down to the ground. When we started moving, I put all my stuff in that shirt box and tied it on my back, dropped the lines over and around my waist, and tied them in the front. So I had a real good pack – it rode high and was very accessible. I also had a woolen scarf, and so I cut some of the thread out of it, and made a hood out of it, nice and warm. And so we moved out . . .

TSLA: On foot, with the guards?

HICKS: Oh yeah, we had been told that it was quite possible that Hitler would have us all shot. And we did get word later on that he had issued that order, but that the German general wouldn't follow it out because it was foolish. So we didn't have any problem. We left at about 1:00 in the morning. Now keep in mind we had been awake since about seven that morning, and we actually moved out something like 12:00 that night. We walked all the rest of that night, all the next day, all the next night, and then about 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning we stopped and had a break. We had rest stops in between, but we walked all this time.

TSLA: Which direction were you going?

HICKS: We were going south, southeast.

TSLA: Mitchener indicates "Uncle Joe" [*slang for Stalin*] is coming. . . . and then he mentions a rest stop in someone's home . . . about 13 hours later, and 29 kilometers, resting a bit in the hamlet of Freiwaldau, halted for five hours.

HICKS: I don't remember when they were, and how long they were. I didn't think they were five hours, but we did have rest stops. In the depth of that night, two things happened that were really important. One of the nights we were walking along, and a team of horses pulling a wagon apparently had run away, and were coming down the road toward us, so we jumped out of the way, to get out of the way of the team. Some of the guys apparently took off and ran into the woods, trying to escape. And the Germans let their dogs loose and started firing, up over our heads. Well, I was scared to death. And I had that pack on and I was lying face down in the snow...*(laughs)*

TSLA: *(Reading from the diary)* "Down the road, rattled a rickety wagon. Frayed nerves suggested machine gun fire. To the woods! Goon guards opened fire!! 2,000 Krieges hit the hard-packed snow, and for 15-20 minutes the sweat resembles July. We made it Mom - only intense cold accounted casualties." That must be what he's talking about.

HICKS: That snow felt so darn good on my face! *(laughter)* It, it felt wonderful! It really did. It just felt wonderful *(laughter)*. And I remember thinking, I wonder how effective this pack on my back will be from stopping a bullet. *(laughter)*. And you know what, it wasn't panic; it was just being realistic, you know. Hey, hey, *c'est la guerre*. And that was our favorite expression, blame it on the war. Everything you blamed on the war. No matter what you had wrong, you blamed it on the war, but that's one of the things that did happen. Another one happened – whether he was in on this, I don't know – we had one of our infrequent rest stops, middle of the night, and this wonderful German lady came out with a pitcher of hot water. That's all she had, just a pitcher of hot water, and we had our cups with us, canteen cups, and I remember she gave me about a half a cup of hot water. And it was just like nectar. Because I was thirsty, and I was cold, and this water, and this was just a German lady. We were, you know, this was in January, now.

TSLA: I wonder if it's this person? *[Reading from the diary]* It says, "A driving blizzard outside, and surroundings as above, yours truly warmed ate eggs and ham with special attention of true German hospitality. A truly good and pleasant woman. All delicious."

HICKS: Well, it wasn't the same woman. I don't question what he said, because we would stop in these little villages and we would fan out. I went to one place – this was more in daylight – and the lady let me in when I knocked on the door, you know, and she had, nice and warm, she had one of these brick German stoves, like they have, where they warm the room and they cook on it and everything else. And she had some potato soup, which was potatoes and water. And she gave me a bowl of it. But then she also had a radio, and I said, "Okay?" And she said "Ja, go ahead," so I turned it on to BBC. I listened to BBC for a little bit, just a few minutes.

TSLA: Now did it surprise you that a German citizen was being so generous? To feed you and let you hear the radio?

HICKS: I don't know. No, I don't know why I wasn't surprised. But they were not angry with us. I think they felt somewhat like we do. They felt sorry for us, I think. I don't

know the answer to that. But this happened. I got this kind of treatment from the Germans, this kind of treatment.

This march – it wasn't a march, it was a walk. One of the guys in the room was named Mortimer Reginald Greenwald. Would you believe that he was Jewish? Yes, he was, very much so. And again, one of the finest gentlemen I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Greeny was smart. He spoke, seemed like he spoke seven languages. Because he was a linguist, he liked languages, and he was always learning. He was trying to learn Russian while we were over there. But now, on this march, people were getting tired. Mitch wouldn't let us – I was afraid of him (*laughter*). I was afraid I couldn't say I was tired or anything. "Shuffle," he called me "Shuffle," because, way back then when I was still flying in Dalhart, Texas – I have a size 13 shoe – and I needed some overshoes, galoshes, you know, and so, I got a pair of size-14s issued to me. So I shuffled along, and he called me Shuffle, from then on. And that's what I went by, Shuffle. Everybody in the whole room called me Shuffle. (*laughter*). Why did I do that?

So I told you about the horses, and the lady and the radio, kept on walking until we finally got to a pottery factory. Eh, did he mention that?

TSLA: I don't think so.

HICKS: It was an abandoned pottery factory or something like that, where it was warmer, a little bit warmer. And each of us had our individual stoves with us. Now we had gotten these cans – some other cans besides the KLIM cans, a can of about, uh, what, 4 inches across, and maybe two inches high, three inches high, and you take a church key [*can opener*] and make a little tab on the inside – you have to be able to put another can inside, a smaller size, and you'd cook your food in this smaller can. You put little twigs – now, wood was very, very precious – you'd put twigs in the bottom, even grass, and that was enough heat to heat coffee, and stuff like that, so we'd carry that with us. So in the pottery factory, that's where I learned to how to mix cocoa and chocolate, and cocoa and coffee, to have a good drink. It was very good.

It was from there that we got on the boxcars. Have you ever heard of a yard gate? Have you ever heard of a forty and eight box car?

TSLA: Yes, to hold 40 men or 8 horses.

HICKS: We were on these boxcars, 40 and 8 – that was a World War I name, too. Except we had 52 guys in each car. Fifty-two. Now, that's pretty good. The fellows, to make room for themselves, would tie their blankets up and make hammocks out of them so they could relieve the congestion somewhat. Now, please, I've got to do this, although it's a little bit gross. So we'd be riding along fat and dumb and happy and then stop for a break. And everybody'd get off the train and ... everybody had to go to the bathroom. So everybody'd go to the bathroom right there in the marshalling yard. You'd look out and you'd see 200 guys going to the bathroom. And then everybody'd get back on their respective train.

Our guard – we'd all get on, our guard, now believe me, would throw his gun up to us! We'd take it, he'd come on up, re-shut the door, and start singing "Lili Marlene" again (*laughter*). Now, we were on the train for about three days. And we would stop.

Keep in the mind this was still the latter part of January and there were still a lot of air raids going on. There would be an air raid siren going off, and the guards would jump off the train and lock the doors, and we were still there. We didn't like that too much. But nothing we could do about it.

But we finally got through there and were taken to Nuremberg where the war trials were held. And we had, uh, not very good conditions there. The barracks were pretty bad, not very good food. Mitch was still there, but we were not as well organized. Now let me tell you about Mitch. Mitch was a wonderful guy, but he was a show-off, too. There was snow in the ground – Nuremberg, the latter part of January. One spigot of water that served all of us.

TSLA: How many men?

HICKS: Oh, I'd say 200, 300, but it was workable. Okay, so Mitch goes out there, middle of the day, takes his towel, takes his clothes off, every stitch, snow on the ground, ice-cold water, soap, and he goes out there and [*demonstrates*] does all this, and washes himself all over, and then takes water, crazy S.O.B., but he did it! (*laughter*). And I'm convinced to this day that he did it because he liked to show off! (*laughter*). And I loved him for it. But, but he took a bath out there in that cold, cold, cold, cold, cold area. And we were all watching. Not a modicum of modesty about him, in that respect. But anyway, that did happen.

Now, it was in Nuremberg that the Royal Air Force, the RAF, and the American Air Force were bombing quite a bit. At nighttime the RAF bombed, and in the daytime, the Americans did the bombing. When the air raid was on, we had to go back in the barracks and stay there, and I remember seeing a B-17 getting hit in its wing, and the wing falling off, and nobody getting out. It was pretty hot and heavy, war was still going pretty hot and heavy. At night the RAF would come over and drop a line of flares, and they'd bomb everything along the line of the flares. Well, at least that's what we were told. Except every once in a while, these darn flares would blow over in our direction, and we weren't sure whether or not they knew where the line was. So we went through this a few times. And this was not too good. One time there was an errant bomb dropped and it dropped it close enough that it knocked the wall away from the floor, wood floor, about this far, so it sort of scared us.

Now, this is a little bit of an aside, but Edna, my wife, lived in London during this time. She was born in 1930, and so in 1940 she was ten years old. They lived in bomb shelters and everything else, and she went through the bombings from the Germans. The Battle of Britain. She saw the fighters and this kind of thing. Okay, that was just an aside.

Well, that was Nuremberg, and then we got ready to be moved again. We walked from there to Moosberg, north of Munich. We left there on Easter Sunday morning of 1945, and we just walked. It was 100 kilometers, which is not quite 100 miles, and we took ten days to do it. And this was in the spring. This was in April or the latter part of March, April. So it was really a piece of cake, just walking, plus the fact that we had our D-bars. There was no chocolate over in Germany, so we were king of the road – we could buy anything we wanted. We had D-bars and we had cigarettes, and they didn't have any of those either. So we had cash in our . . . have cash, will travel. One of the

first things that a couple or three guys and myself picked up a large two-wheel cart and they were good engineers. It was so well balanced that, in order to push it forward, all you had to do was push down on the handle, and that caused the weight to shift and go forward. So we got this – there were about four of us all told – we got this cart and we got a half sack of potatoes and half of a ham and bread and things like that, so we lived pretty high on the hog for ten days. We went to Moosberg and stayed there, and I don't recall anything happening there of great import, except that one Sunday. On Sunday morning, April 29, 1945, we heard small gunfire coming across the hill. We were sleeping in tents then. We had a little bit of ground cover, not much. Sleeping in tents. So I just lay down, went back to my bunk and lay there, because what safer place could there be when there were bullets around. And then after a while, a tank came over the hill and went through that gate and put the American flag up, and I started crying, and that was it. Patton was there. Personally came in. And I was walking right beside the guy.

SON: Did you double step with him? You told me you had to double step with him?

HICKS: I had to run to keep up with him! I'm six feet tall and he was chewing tobacco, three stars, had a high-pitched voice, said, boys, you've done a good job! You know, he wouldn't let me kiss him, though (*laughter*). He was, he was really something else to see. And what a tremendous relief this was.

TSLA: That was your moment of liberation.

HICKS: Yes, it surely was, yes, ma'am. We went from there to Lucky Stripe, which was in France, I was in Reims, France, on the day that the armistice was signed, and a lot of celebration went on then. We came back home, went back to our respective homes. I wasn't married yet, but had got reunited at home. Of course, the first one I saw was my wife, their mother, and then we walked together for an hour or so, then, I went out to my sister's house, and then she took me to Mama's, out to the farm (they had no telephone) and back home.

Later on, Mitch came up to Louisville, and then so we went back with Mitch to Tennessee, to Nashville, and spent the night with him, and met his father and his mother, and I think we met his sister, but I don't remember. I remember his mother was not too pleased with us, keeping his father up for so long – maybe his father was not feeling well, or his health was bad, or something, but I do remember this about his father, and I never forgot it – his father had a gold nugget in his ring, that he had gotten when he was in Alaska. And it so happened that I went back to Alaska and was stationed there, the year the boys were born, and I got a gold nugget while I was up there. I still have it – I have it in my high school ring. Mitch is – I don't think I've really given you as much good stuff about him – he was a fabulous person.

TSLA: You say his father was in entertainment?

HICKS: I think he was. But he was a real nice guy and it seemed like Mitch said he learned his dancing from his father. Mitch couldn't sing worth a nickel, but he had good rhythm, and he could tap dance, and he was a student of personalities. He liked to play

with people. Not a bad sense, but I've seen him make somebody angry, and then say something to them and make them happy again, and make them angry again. He had that kind of capability. He was a student of human emotions, or something, I don't know. But anyway, a fabulous, fabulous person.

TSLA: Did you keep in touch with him at all after the war, beyond this point?

HICKS: Well yes, we did, immediately afterwards and for a little bit, but then everything fell apart. Take Gene, Rob's godfather -- we didn't have communication with him until Rob was born, and then he came down for his christening, and then no, we did not keep in touch except that he came to see me in Lexington, in the '50s. The crew members -- most of them are dead, the rest of the guys.

TSLA: Is Mr. Briggs alive?

HICKS: Yes, he is. In California. Ullis Briggs is in Ukiah, California. I communicate oh, a couple times a year, and call each other on, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May. "Hey! Hey, boy!" *(laughter)* This kind of thing.

Marvin Allen is dead, Steven Vasilik is dead. He came to visit us one time at a POW reunion. But he's dead. New Jersey. Allen, Briggs...

TSLA: Crawford Hicks, Eugene Bianco,

HICKS: Bianco's dead

TSLA: Lester L. Kunz, who died in the attack -- did you ever talk to his family after?

HICKS: Yes I did, one time. They wanted some information about what happened...

TSLA: Frances Young, Ullis Briggs, Lowell Reid, Marvin Allen, Stephen Vasilik, and Kenneth Geldermann. And there is someone else in this report here, George Hartz, who wasn't on your plane, I think reported on what he saw.

HICKS: He may have been on another plane; he saw us go down.

TSLA: Let me backtrack a minute, because Stalag Luft III is famous for the Great Escape that took place before you were all there. Was there any talk of that? Tell us about that.

HICKS: Quite a bit, yes there was. The Great Escape did take place from our camp. I don't think it was from our compound -- remember they had five compounds. This was in northeast Germany, and very sandy soil, pine trees, but it did take place from there. From all the accounts I've heard, they had to do the tunneling, 90-something of them? Was it 97 of them escaped?

TSLA: Three actually made it, the whole way home; forty-seven were shot by the SS on Hitler's orders, and the rest were sent back to the Stalag Luft III.

HICKS: Okay, that was from our camp, yes. Now, Dunkirk . . . and we're still talking about the same thing. 1939 is when England declared war on Germany because Germany invaded Poland. And then the Germans pushed the English soldiers back into the ocean, literally, at Dunkirk. And Edna told me that they used row boats, about 25 miles across the channel there, they used rowboats, everything they had that would float, to get those guys back home, and they got a lot of them home. But some of those people at Dunkirk were in our camp. Some of them, a few of them. They had, of course, their wonderful ceremonies about the Queen's birthday, when they would dress up and have a party.

So yes, we were very much aware of the Great Escape, and what had happened. And when we had our roll call, the German captain would come around. We were set up according to buildings, standing at attention, and the senior officer in the building would return the salute from the German captain. We had this roll call twice a day, counting heads as we stood there at attention. But on the day either of the escape or the time that they murdered all of the guys, we had passed the word around, we're not standing at attention this day. So when the German captain came around, we stood at parade rest, which is, uh, less than attention. And he shouted, "*Achtung! Achtung!*" And then the senior Air Force man told him what was going on, that this is because you murdered these people, and then he just went on and took the head count. But we were aware that this was the same camp from which they did the escape.

TSLA: Was there any attempt when you were there for people to try to escape?

HICKS: Ok, good point. Now remember, if you think about your geography...

TSLA: The region was called Silesia. It's way in the boonies! (*laughter*)

HICKS: Way in the boonies, that's exactly right. We maintained our own military hierarchy in the camp, and this was important – this helped keep our sanity. Maybe I can digress on one point, with this military hierarchy thing, of great impact to me. We were feeling sorry for ourselves. We got the word one day – this was in the middle of the summer of 1944 – that we were going to have what we called a stand-by inspection. Now, Rob and Steve were both in the military – a stand-by inspection is one where you clean up your room, your area, and you clean yourself up, and you stand, have your dress clothing on, and you'd better be shaved. You stand at attention while the inspector comes by and looks at everything, looks you over. That's a stand-by inspection. We got the word, from our own people, that they were going to conduct a stand-by inspection of us. We raised hell about it. We didn't like that worth a nickel. Because, hey, we're POWs! (*laughter*) But guess what, we had to do it anyway. Of course with Mitch, we put the furniture up on end and scrubbed the floor with scrub brushes and G.I. soap. We did all that. We washed – I had some woolen trousers on when I got shot down, and I washed those, and of course they had shrunk up to halfway up my leg, but nonetheless they were clean, they were clean (*laughter*). And we had a stand-by inspection. Now, that was one of the greatest morale builders that I have ever seen in my life. The powers that be knew that it was important for every person to have some self-respect, and this made us have it. This made us have it. And so this is part of what Mitch was doing, too, what he did to me.

I loved him. He was, he was fabulous. What else can I say about Mitch? Good looking, liked to sing, he liked to be around people . . .

TSLA: Did it surprise you that he died so young?

HICKS: Oh, yeah. Yes, it did. Matter of fact, we had lost touch with him since he came to Lexington to visit with us. We didn't communicate much, you know. It was only by accident that we heard he died.

TSLA: There have been some studies about navigators and other aviators who had a higher rate of cancer; in particular, a study about what we now call the air force, having irradiated devices put in their noses to help with the pressure changes. I can show you that study. And I was wondering – a lot of men died of cancer at an early age, and that's been fairly controversial, obviously because in a sense it is considered experimenting on aviators, experimenting on soldiers. But here he is, according to obituaries, he died, after a rapid, three-month illness, of cancer. That's all I know.

HICKS: I didn't know about this cancer thing. The crew members. For whatever this is worth, Gene Bianco died of leukemia or something. So Gene died of cancer, as you say, Mitch did . . . I don't know what . . . Marvin Allen, what was the cause of his death, and Geldermann. I hadn't heard from him. Steve Vasilik, I think, had heart trouble, and Francis Young, I think was Alzheimer's disease, so the only cancer that I'm aware of . . . I've had prostate cancer, but here again it was a thousand years ago when I was flying. Of the ten of us, that's the only thing I know about their deaths.

TSLA: How many missions had you flown before you were shot down?

HICKS: I flew one, as co-pilot, to France. Remember this was the first of May, 1944, and I flew by myself, not as a part of the crew, because I wanted to see if I could handle it, you know. I've only gotten near to airsick twice, and this was one of them. I was so scared that I almost got sick. And they said, I guess he can do it, so I flew as first pilot from then on. We flew nine missions as a crew.

TSLA: Did you feel a special burden of responsibility because you were the pilot, or did you feel like you were all on in this together, equally?

HICKS: I really thought strongly that I was responsible for them, to make sure that they knew what was going on and everything. We never had any discipline problems, never did. Well, one time I was in the hospital, up in Goose Bay, Labrador, and the bombardier started drinking, and he and the other crew members got into a fight almost. Somebody stopped him, so I had problems with him a little bit, but no, we had no disciplinary problems. I did not feel any load for them – it's not an onerous responsibility. I did feel the responsibility when we had to bail out. I felt it then.

And I remember thinking, Crawford, you are the captain of the airplane – you stay here until they get out. I remember that, and that was about it. That's not heroics. It's just

the way it was. We were all very cool. It was not pandemonium. We had been briefed on what to do, and we did it. That's what it amounted to.

HICKS: Have you seen the *Memphis Belle*, the movie? Let me say this, and this is true. Everything that happened to them, in their one mission, happened to us at some time during our mission, except one thing. We did everything else. I remember on one mission, the airplane ahead of me blew up, and I saw blood on my windshield.

TSLA: There's a lot of talk about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in veterans. Were you ever affected by that, in any way? I mean, you dealt with some pretty scary things.

HICKS: Well, I know this, that I'd be awakened at three o'clock in the morning – I'd wake up, and then I'd say, "God, is today the day I get killed?" That's about the extent of that kind of thing, because I knew I had to do it. That's not heroics, it's not – it's just real. I honestly think that Mitch kept me from having the depression I could have had.

TSLA: And how did Mitch keep himself together?

HICKS: I guess because – Steve, you are the psychologist. Help me now. But he liked to have this kind of interaction with people and he liked to be able to conduct it, and so therefore he did it, because we were good friends. He was never demeaning to me – just raised hell with me, that's all. I have tremendous respect for him, admiration for him. He's the guy that kept me going.

Oh, I must sing a song to you all. (*laughter*) Remember we had a lot of talent over there, and we were also always hungry. I can't remember all of the words, but I'll do the best that I can. And this is a parody on "Stormy Weather."

TSLA: (*looks at the Mitchener diary*) I wonder if this might be in here as well. But please go ahead....

HICKS: If it is, if you can get the words out, I can do the whole thing. (*sings*) "Don't know why, There's no sugar in my pie, Kriegie rations, My appetite has overcome my passions, I'm hungry all the time. Tables bare, There's no food here anywhere, It's starvation, My soul has reached the depth of degradation, I'm hungry all the time..uh...da, da, da, I don't remember the other words to it.

TSLA: (*finds it in the diary*) Here it is! "Our table's bare, Hungry Kriegies everywhere." (*feeds him lines as needed*)

HICKS: (*sings*) "Our table's bare, Hungry Kriegies everywhere! It's starvation! My stomach's reached the depth of degradation. I'm hungry all the time. I dream of eggs and ham until my condition is most pathetic. And the bread and jam I understand is all synthetic. Delirious as I am, I'll probably end up diabetic. And that's when I blow my top!" (*laughter*) "I can't go on, All my energy is gone! It's malnutrition. A man cannot live in my condition. I'm hungry all the time!" (*laughter*) I love that one, I tell you, I've don't know all the versions, but I tell you, I love it

TSLA: There's another song here . . .

HICKS: Well, remember – as I said, we had a lot of talent over there, a lot of talent. Oh, there are some poems which I can't recite because I don't remember, one about fighters. When we were on our missions, we had fighter protection sometimes, but not all the time. And we called them . . . we were Big Brother, and they were Little Friends. That was our name for each other. And so we'd look over and see the Little Friends, and we'd be most happy, because we knew we would probably not be hit by fighters. Except one day, I was leading the top element of the squadron, and I was playing around back there. I wasn't paying attention to what I was behind, wasn't keeping up with the formation, and I heard "Bandits, bandits, at twelve o'clock level!" Well, "bandits" means that fighters were coming in. So I pushed the nose down and I pushed the throttle forward to catch up with the rest of the guys and this 109 – I think it was a 109 – came under my left wing so close that I could recognize the guy's face today if I saw it, except he had a mask on. But right on his tail was the prettiest P-51 you've ever saw in your life. Right on his tail, chasing him! So that made me feel very good. We got through that one all right.

TSLA: A couple of things that are in the diary, I don't know -- it says "Lt. Mitchener" on it, and "programs."

HICKS: Well, he may have done this for Thanksgiving, because he always had something special.

TSLA: For dinner?

HICKS: For dinner, yeah. If it wasn't authentic, it looked good!

TSLA: The poem I was referring to talks about, I guess, a personal memory at home. It says, "Saturday Evening Post, white starched shirts, Love until it hurts, the fun of chasing fires, The Sunday Book Review, spaghetti at Toni's, and doing things for you." I don't know if he knew his wife, Estelle, before, or they met after . . .

HICKS: I think it was after. He never talked about her

TSLA: "Mother-in-law, that Alice blue gown you wore, Spinster Aunts, world's fair, cuffs on my pants, rose in your hair, old glory, bed-time story, The hopes you bring, Halloween faces, August skies, Fireplaces, Your laughing eyes, A cup of coffee, A hole in one, The boys in for poker, Rides thru the park, Steaks on the grill, Holding hands, Making plans, our little son." So I assume that was about his dreams of the future?

HICKS: Well, you know what, he never mentioned her, so I wonder if this was his own private world. He wrote it there, but I never heard him mention this at all.

TSLA: We don't have the marriage record yet for when he did marry Estelle, but from what I can tell, he married her when he came home after the war. There is a little confusion because his mother and his wife had the same name – they were both named Estelle.

HICKS: The Kentucky Derby . . . Mitch came to Louisville and we all went to the Kentucky Derby that year, and I don't think he was married then.

TSLA: What was your life like after the war? Did you continue in the military?

HICKS: It wasn't really good. I wanted to – I would have liked to stay in, but I wanted to go to college. So I got out of the military after October of 1945. Rob was born in May of '46, so I got out and started at the University of Louisville in February of 1946, as a freshman. I went on the G.I. bill and I wanted to go to law school. And I worked full-time wherever I could get a job. Steve was born four years after Rob, and so it wasn't too good [financially]. I got recalled into the air, by the Air National Guard, in October of 1950, and I had one semester to go to finish law school. So I went back in with great joy because I had money coming in for a change, because we were broke flat, you know – no money at all. So that was it – I was going to college.

TSLA: There, there was uh, some confusion on the name of the plane? It refers to *Little Ginny*.

HICKS: You know what, I'm not really sure. We did not fly the same airplane all of the time, contrary to what people thought. Some people used to do it, but we didn't fly the same one. It could have been *Little Ginny*. I thought it was *Wildfire*, but I've been told it wasn't.

TSLA: According to the Air Force History Support Office, the aircraft records showed the name *Little Ginny*.

HICKS: Okay, I guess that is it, because I really don't remember.

TSLA: You also have a nice picture of the crew here in this newspaper article.

HICKS: We did wear those uniforms, those jackets. Our airplanes were not heated, and they were not pressurized.

TSLA: I've read some accounts about how some people died because they were so cold.

HICKS: I don't know of anyone dying, but I know this: we were briefed about what it would be like on our missions, and one of the things that I was most interested in was what the temperature was going to be. I had a rule for myself: if it was 20 degrees below zero, or warmer, I would wear the G.I. shoes – you know what I'm talking about? Those big shoes? It's not a boot, but it's a real heavy shoe that the soldiers wear. I would wear two pairs of socks and below that, if we were talking about flying altitude, I would wear

heated shoes, and these were just cloth moccasins with wires running through, heating wires. It was cold.

TSLA: Did the earlier fliers not have that heated equipment? Maybe it was worse in the beginning? I remember reading if they lost their gloves or their jacket, it wasn't good.

HICKS: Matter of fact, we had them, Gene and I – when we'd finish the bombing run on the way back home, we used to take our heated gloves off, because our hands got hot. You could see our hands steaming, you know. But it was cold, cold and miserable. But, being gross, you know you had to go to the bathroom once in a while.

TSLA: Practical matters again.

HICKS: Yep, yep. Practical matters. And you know what? It's awfully hard to go through layers and layers and layers of real heavy clothing standing in the bomb bay of the airplane, trying to hold a doggone little fool jar with a tube on the end of it. *(laughter)* Did I clean that up? *(laughter)*

TSLA: The family version! *(laughter)*

TSLA: That's right. *(laughter)* In between bombing missions, how would you all pass your time at Polebrook?

HICKS: Well, we did some flying. In fact, I flew up to Birmingham one time to do something, and we did some practice flying when new things were coming out. We did not have radar, by the way. It was in its infancy. The crew went to London one time on a three-day pass, and I got to London, just once I think. But we didn't have time – we were busy flying all of the time. Remember, in a thirty-day period I did ten missions, so that's every two or three days, flying a mission.

STEVE HICKS: Can I share a little story?

TSLA: Please, please. Would you identify yourself so we know who you are?

STEVE HICKS: I'm Steve, the middle boy. A couple years ago, my son and I and my family took my dad – Crawford – back to England. One of my missions was to go back to Peterborough, where Crawford was stationed, and where he last flew out, fifty years – was it fifty years? – earlier.

HICKS: Yeah.

STEVE HICKS: And going back . . . it was a very grey day. We just – my son, Dad (Crawford), and myself – got into a cab and we got there – this cab took us there – and it was just a big field. A drizzle of rain, and it's grey and chilly and cold, and the taxi man finally let us out. And we let Dad walk a little ahead of us, because all that was there was one little monument and a part of runway left. And it was so emotional. It reminded me

of the scene in *Saving Private Ryan*, going back and seeing, you know, what a hero is. He's special.

TSLA: What is incredible to me is your memory of everything – you know, you remember this like it was yesterday, but this was a long time ago. I'm amazed by that. It just seems like it was an important part of your life.

HICKS: Oh it was, it was. Well, but what is it, Rob? I can remember long-term things, but I can't remember what to put in my coffee now? But Steve's story . . . it's true, but this was no hero, this was no hero. This was . . . we were doing what we had to do. I did what they made me do, what I was told to do, and they taught me how to fly and I . . .

ROB HICKS: Well you might – you didn't tell them about the process of taking off, and how you felt, getting up, and I always thought that was interesting . . . to me – I was in the Air Force. (I'm Rob, Rob Hicks. I'm the oldest one.) Once again, I was in the Air Force – no one shooting at me or anything. I've had a hard time understanding the feeling of knowing that you may not . . . you may be dead at the end of the day.

TSLA: At the age of 21.

ROB HICKS: As a routine, as a routine! Plus the fact that I look at my son, who is now 30, for example – I look at somebody 19, 20, 21, 22, as a kid. I believe I was 23, but you know, once again, they weren't shooting at me. I was in a rather safe environment. That's the part . . . I don't know if he talked a little about this, but imagine . . . here's a kid, a kid! that's flying – what – a million-dollar airplane!

HICKS: Yeah, something like that.

ROB HICKS: . . .responsible for a bunch of other kids...

TSLA: The moral responsibility

ROB HICKS: Because remember now, I would be in college. And believe me, we were kids at that age. Tell them a little bit . . . I don't know . . . to me it was fascinating, just some of the things like when you took off, what you were thinking, what you were doing.

HICKS: Well, okay, now . . . B-17s, let's see. I don't know how heavy it is . . . four engines . . . I always thought that one person could handle all the throttles of all four engines at one time because of the way they were configured. I flew left-handed, and to this day I drive left-handed. We'd have these throttles and runners . . . Flying formation is fun – you're constantly pushing this and pushing this and turning this and then kicking this and kicking this, the whole time that you're flying. That's eight or ten hours worth. You get tired, but it's exciting. It's exhilarating. You get a load of bombs on board, 5,000 pounds, and you can feel it. Have you ever driven a truck? You know how heavy it is, how you can feel the heaviness? Well, you could feel the heaviness of the airplane.

Now, I was frightened. When I first woke up. And then I'd say, "Well, hey, Crawford, you've got to do it. Go ahead and deal with it, you know. But you start the airplane and you get ready to taxi out onto the take-off runway, and when you push those throttles forward – you've got this heavy airplane, you push those throttles forward, and you feel that power and you feel it going, it's exhilarating! I did an instrument take-off every time I took off, because it's always bad weather, until I got up. But in the air, once you got started, this other . . . this fear wasn't there. It was exhilarating. Does that make any sense, Rob? It was . . . you were in the excitement of the thing, and so you would do it. And you had to drive so long, and make a turn here, and drive so far here . . . Let's see – "drive!" – we were flying, you know. (*smiles*) And then you'd break out and you'd hunt for a flare with the color that you wanted, and you'd attach to that. Oh, funny – kind of funny, really – we would form over the beacon into our group formation, and I happened to be there first that time, and so the first guy there would always shoot a flare, but a particular color, and other guys would start forming on his wings. And this particular day I was flying, doing a circle, and a group of B-24s, which are four-engine airplanes, but a different kind . . .

ROB HICKS: Liberators.

HICKS: Liberators, thank you. And we were going here, and they were coming – they were going to run through us, run right through us. And I remember that – er, don't do this in a B-17! – I turned it upside down, just like that! But you had to do what you had to do. And we made it because you can do that if you don't play with it too much.

TSLA: Wow.

HICKS: But anyway, that sort of thing happened. Hey, we did have to throw everything out, on the way home – we got hit in our wing tank and lost gasoline. We had to throw the guns out over the Channel, and made it. Let's see, we had to crank the wheels down one time [by hand], but these are things that you do.

ROB HICKS: More about actually flying, when you were getting shot at. You told me a little about it earlier, but you know the sense – see, here I'm thinking, you are flying this thing, you've got flak, you've got these things flying at you, you described that to me.

HICKS: Okay. You're flying, now. When you are flying formation – we always flew formation so we could have a good bomb pattern, and also for protection from fighters that came and had a lot of guns fixing on you. Okay, but in flying formation, you would pick...

ROB HICKS: Did everybody in the plane call you Betsy, or was that just your name?

HICKS: That was my name, I believe. "Come on Betsy, come on now. Come on, hey, hey." Just talking to the airplane.

TSLA: You were talking about formations.

HICKS: Okay, and here's how you fly formation. You have this section of the airplane that you are flying on. Doesn't make any difference if you are on the wing or above it – well, you are usually flying on the wing. You pick up two points on the airplane. Let's say that this is one of the points here at the corner and this is the other point over here. Now you are flying back here, using your throttles and your stick, the stick being the wheel that moves forwards and backwards and turns, and your throttle, your rudders which you kick left and right . . . you control them all at one time, which you did automatically – you could. Ok, but you would keep those two points in the same relative position, or statement, in relation to you. You with me?

You keep those two points all of the time as you fly. Now (and I think, as Rob was talking about) when the flak was coming in, of course you were scared, but I wasn't scared now. I was concerned, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it. So you had to go ahead and do it, you know – it was sort of . . . it was there, so hey, let's do it! But you were so busy keeping those two points in their relative positions that you didn't have time to worry about anything else. One of the things, Gene and I (the co-pilot and I) were so compatible, I was not afraid because I was busy all of the time, very busy flying. And I remember on several occasions thinking that Gene might like to fly a little bit, if he felt like I did. But he didn't want to fly when we were in combat, under fire especially. So his job was to watch out for enemy airplanes and watch out for flak -- where it was coming from, things like this – and I flew it. So we were very happy in doing this because it kept us busy. Otherwise I'd have been scared to death. The flak was around, it was around.

TSLA: During this time, did you talk a lot with the crew about what was going on in terms of the war and Hitler and Stalin and Churchill? Did you talk about all that, or was it really just kind of what you guys were doing in your airplane...

HICKS: In the airplane, because that was so, you know, above us. We had nothing to do about those things. And so we didn't talk about it.

ROB HICKS: You know, in our culture today, there's always controversy about everything. Did you all ever have any discussions about "should we be doing this?" Did you ever have any questions?

HICKS: No, no. I thought sometimes, on a few occasions, about killing people, and I'm pretty convinced I did. But, well, I had no way I could have stopped it. I didn't have enough guts to be a coward – no, I didn't have enough guts to say, "I'm afraid, I don't want to fight any more," if you will. So I flew. I don't know whether that answered the question, but yes, it bothers me that I killed people. But I have talked to Edna, and she's been through the Battle of Britain, and they killed a lot of British people. And Dunkirk killed a lot of British people, so there was a lot of killing going on.

ROB HICKS: Did you have any sense of hatred for the enemy, or any emotional feelings about the enemy?

HICKS: Emotional . . . well, we looked down on them. I'm afraid we called them "goons," and in prison camp we called our guards "goons." At first we called them "ferrets," and then they found out what a ferret was and they didn't like it, so we started to call them "goons." And so this was the derogatory . . . we treated them derogatorily in our minds, except that lady who brought that hot water out. She was a sweetheart as far as I am concerned (*laughter*). She was a sweetheart – that water tasted so good, so good . . . just clean old hot water, think about that. Think, cold and tired and hungry, and she...

ROB HICKS: As far as the Messerschmitts, I guess you were kind of removed from that hand-to-hand business . . .

HICKS: Oh yeah . . .

ROB HICKS: What was the sense of that down on the ground? My wife's father was in the Battle of the Bulge and it was hand-to-hand.

HICKS: And this is one of the reasons why I wanted to fly. This is one of the reasons I did not want to be on the ground. Because I didn't . . . that kind of thing I wouldn't have liked. Flying was much, much better.

ROB HICKS: I've got to tell you about this – this is one of the most fascinating . . . because knowing my father, he is one of the most gentle people I've ever known – wouldn't hurt a flea, and yet, being able to isolate the job from the fact that people were being killed . . .

HICKS: Yep, that's what you did. That's what you did. Right.

ROB HICKS: You have to play tricks in your mind, or something like that.

TSLA: At the same time, you know you are fighting Hitler.

HICKS: We did have that, clearly – we were fighting Hitler, and we were doing good things. We did have that feeling. How much of course was . . . some of it was propaganda, but a lot of it was truth.

ROB HICKS: You didn't have a sense of innocent people being killed at the same time, or do you think it was . . .

HICKS: Well I'm sure there were. True. We hit Berlin four times.

TSLA : We are thrilled with everything you've offered us. This is exactly what we were hoping for. You've provided so much information, I can't thank you enough.