

John Ray Lemons: John Ray Lemons Jr.

Aaron Elson: That's a very distinguished name.

John Ray Lemons: Well, I'm not sure. I used to think that we came from England somewhere but we don't really know. I always said out of casual concern that I had that our parents were probably all buccaneers or pirates.

Aaron Elson: Did you ever trace the family back?

John Ray Lemons: No, we never have. We have started within the last month and a half digging into the Lemons name. We have gone back to the 1800s in the United States and we think we've found all the cousins. I've found now that I have hundreds of cousins with the name Lemons offspring that have different names, like there must be at least 15 different names are all offsprings of four Lemons brothers. And my dad's father was one of them.

Aaron Elson: Would you call that a Lemon tree?

John Ray Lemons: That's what we called it, a Lemon tree. Or the Lemons clan.

Aaron Elson: Where do you live?

John Ray Lemons: I live in Dallas, Texas. And there I'm a native Dallasite, born and raised in Dallas.

Aaron Elson: What was Dallas like in the 1930s when you were growing up?

John Ray Lemons: When I was growing up I lived in the poorest area of Dallas, and my folks were so poor that we moved every 20 or 30 days when the rent came due because we couldn't pay it, so we moved. We constantly moved from one house to the next, and this really is not a bunch of baloney, that's the real facts. I have pictures of all the houses my parents lived in when I was growing up, there's about 15 or 20 of them.

Aaron Elson: So they were poor but they owned a camera?

John Ray Lemons: No. I took the pictures by going back and locating where we lived. They didn't have a camera. They were so poor they didn't have a window to throw it out, probably.

Aaron Elson: So your father was very affected by the Depression?

John Ray Lemons: Yes he was. He was well off, and then all of a sudden things went bad, and I remember when I was a kid, I must have been six, seven, eight years old at the most, they would come and pick up the furniture, get the washing machine, and get the couch. Then they took the car. And then the first thing you know we had nothing. And I remember the Salvation Army came in at Christmas, the first time I ever remember getting a gift that year from anybody was the Salvation Army for Christmas, one little car.

Aaron Elson: Did you have brothers and sisters?

John Ray Lemons: I have two. I have a sister who is younger, and a brother still younger.

Aaron Elson: And how about schooling?

John Ray Lemons: I grew up in Dallas like I said, went to many elementary schools and wound up going to Woodrow Wilson High School in Dallas which is where I graduated from, and went to work for an oil company right out of high school. In those days things were kind of tough, in 1937, '38, so I decided I would go to night school and go to college, which I did. And they even let me go to SMU on campus, but I never did get my piece of paper.

Aaron Elson: When you say you went to work for an oil company, that wasn't Magnolia Petroleum, was it?

John Ray Lemons: It was Magnolia Petroleum Company. I worked for Magnolia Petroleum Company, and then it became Mobil Oil, Socony Mobil and of course now it's ExxonMobil.

Aaron Elson: And what did you do for them?

John Ray Lemons: Well, in the early days I was what they call a production clerk, and over the years I worked in oil and gas production, pipeline, a little of everything, and wound up getting into what they call property taxes, which was my profession from about 1952 until I retired. And I wound up being a national manager, western region of the United States of America for Mobil Oil Company.

Aaron Elson: Wow! So you never bucked a chain tong?

John Ray Lemons: Never. I stayed all the way, because in those days, if my memory serves me correct, most people who were loyal stayed with a company if the company was good and that was a great company, and I doubt that today you could find many that would have been as good as that one was for me.

Aaron Elson: When were you born?

John Ray Lemons: I was born November 4, 1919.

Aaron Elson: So you would have been ten years old when the Depression hit? When the stock market crashed?

John Ray Lemons: In 1933, '32, '31, yes. I was about 10, 11, 12 years old. And I had to help make a living by doing anything I could to pick up a few bucks every week somehow.

Aaron Elson: What had your father done?

John Ray Lemons: My dad was originally a traveling salesman and then later on he was very handy with his hands and went into the auto repair business. He owned an auto repair business for years and years, and when he died he still was in the auto repair business.

Aaron Elson: How did you wind up in the Air Corps?

John Ray Lemons: Well, in 1941, December 7, the next day everybody at the office I worked for at Magnolia wanted to do something real quick. I was already married in 1941, and I said I would be willing to do something but I'd like to be a cadet and get in the Air Corps, and two of my buddies, all of us went down in I guess that would have been June of '42 and took the cadet test. We all passed, all went to get the physical and we all went through that fine except the doctor who examined us called me back. He said, "I want to see your leg. You have a scar on your left leg." He said, "What was it?"

I said it was osteomyelitis. I was eight years old. If you look at this leg today you could see that scar. And he says, "I can't let you go in. You couldn't stand the G's."

I said "The G's? What are the G's? I never heard of such a word."

He said, "You won't understand but I can't pass you."

I said, "I've got to go because we're all gonna be P-51 pilots. My dad works on the flight line. Man, I've got to fly one of those things. And the other two guys I was with, they want to do the same thing."

He said, "I'll tell you what I can do. I'll get you a waiver and we'll send it off to Washington, D.C. You can bring me your X-Rays when your mother did all this when you were a kid."

I said "She may have them," and sure enough she did. I took them to this doctor, he sent them to the surgeon general and I'm waiting to this day to hear the results. And of course I never did hear, I kept going and checking and never got it, and the first thing I knew I was going to be

drafted, and I was drafted. And the first thing I did, they asked me what I wanted, I said, "I was a captain in ROTC in high school. Maybe one of those. I'm pretty good. I'm a good Army guy."

"Good." The next day I got orders, go in the Air Corps.

I went to Miami Beach, and went through the basic training stuff there. they sent me to gunnery school at Fort Myers, at Buckingham School there, and from there they said, "We'll send you to aircraft mechanic school at Sheppard Field." So I went through that, and the next thing I knew I was assigned to go to Salt Lake City, Kearns Air Base, which is where they put the crews together.

Aaron Elson: Now what happened to the P-51 pilots?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, I meant to tell you that. It's a good part of the story, because the two buddies of mine both became pilots. But I didn't know this until after I got home, after the war was over. One of them became a P-47 pilot. He flew the CBI [China-Burma-India Theater] hauling material and supplies over the Hump, and the other became a B-24 pilot, flying as first pilot on a B-24. And I met him of all places in about March of 1945 in prison camp. I greeted him at the door as he came in. So none of the three of us ever became a P-51 pilot.

Aaron Elson: What was it about the P-51 that ...

John Ray Lemons: Oh, it was just such a great airplane. We just thought, Man, you're a hot pilot. Man, that thing goes fast. It's the fastest one, it's the most maneuverable, it's the latest. We've gotta have it.

Aaron Elson: Okay, so that was June, when you got your crew.

John Ray Lemons: We got my crew, and then we were assigned to go to Colorado Springs.

Aaron Elson: And you wound up as a gunner?

John Ray Lemons: I wound up as a flight engineer/gunner on a B-24.

Aaron Elson: Is that an officer or a noncom?

John Ray Lemons: That's a noncom. In those days I guess we were buck sergeants and became staff sergeants and became tech sergeants.

Aaron Elson: And how did you wind up in the 445th Bomb Group?

John Ray Lemons: I have no idea. When we found out we were going to be sent overseas they sent us to New York, and they gave us about a day and a half at the most to go through all the training, getting all the shots, and they didn't tell you where you were going or what, except they said, "We've got to get you through. You have so little time to get you on board to where you're going." And so they loaded us up with more stuff than you could ever haul and carry, and that's what we were taking with us. They said, "We're going to put you on board a ship. You are the last five hundred men on this ship. It's going to have 18,500 men on board and it's going to be the Queen Elizabeth. Nonstop all the way to a destination." They wouldn't tell us where. Of course after we'd been out, they told us when we got on board, finally, "You're the last 500 guys, the 500 Air Corps guys, to be loaded on this ship," and we had more stuff than the infantry guys had. They just laughed at us with all this gear, going up the ramp, can you imagine, going up from the ground on the ramp up to the top of that Queen? I thought I can't make it, they're gonna have to push me up." But I finally got up there. And those infantry guys just laughing their heads off at us, because you're just a bunch of pimps that can't carry anything hardly, all they know how to do is fly an airplane.

Aaron Elson: Now the Queen Elizabeth, you must have had a nice stateroom, no?

John Ray Lemons: Uh-uh. Top bunk in the lower bottom of the ship. And to make a long story short, when we got on board they told us, "We're gonna zig and zag, we'll have no escort, nothing. That we can go fast enough, we can outrun all the subs." They said, "And for your entertainment," I'm going to tell you one other little story. "You're going to have on board ship with us today Glenn Miller's band, and they will play for you every day till we get to your

destination." So Glenn Miller's band on board was led by Ray McKenna, but Glenn didn't lead because he'd already got on an airplane going to England.

We landed at Gourock, Scotland, and we waited there three or four or five days, and they sent us to Ireland to a little town called Clontow.

Aaron Elson: Before we get to Clontow, what was the experience like listening to Glenn Miller's band?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, it was the most fascinating thing we'd ever experienced because they never stopped playing, all day long, except this little break, and can you imagine, 18,000 men being fed on a ship, so you're in a food line all day long but you could hear them because they were playing, there's speakers everywhere. When you got close to where they were playing you could see them. And I remember their lead singer, Johnny Desmond? Johnny Desmond I believe was one of the lead singers, and another one, I can't remember his name, but anyway I remember Ray McKenna because he was leading the band. And we said "Man, what a deal!" Of course then we found out they were going to be over there too with us. But we did get to see them, of course later Glenn Miller did come to our base.

Aaron Elson: Okay, so now you're in Clontow ...

John Ray Lemons: Ireland. And this is a place where they try to teach you what you're going to find out for being in a European combat with the Luftwaffe, and what to expect, and if you should get shot down what are you supposed to do, and all the things that you don't know, because you don't have a clue as to what's going on. And so we went through this training, and then they picked us up a little later on and said, "Now you're going to your base." So they piled a bunch of us in a B-24, there must have been 24 of us, and hauled us all over to a base, and it turned out to be the 445th Bomb Group at Tibenham, England. I arrived about June the 14th or 15, about ten days after D-Day.

My first mission I think was to Brunswick.

Aaron Elson: Were you scared?

John Ray Lemons: No. I just knew we were with a good bunch of guys. Our crew we thought were the best there was. We didn't think there was a better crew than our crew.

Aaron Elson: And your pilot was?

John Ray Lemons: James C. Baynham, from Texarkana, Texas. We had him from Texas, me from Dallas, the top turret gunner who became the top turret gunner because he had been to the Willow Run plant and knew more about the airplane than the pilot did, and certainly more than I did because I'd only been to school. So he was the top turret gunner, he was from Houston, Texas. His name was Howard L. Boldt. He's still alive [Boldt has since passed away], and the other person from Texas was Olin C. Bird who was the waist gunner, and he was the oldest man on the crew. He was probably 25, maybe 24. A farmer who had never been off the farm. He was very quiet, very bashful, very nonaggressive. He did his job. He was a good gunner. But he was just not as outspoken as the rest of us on the crew were.

Aaron Elson: If you started around July, you must have had quite a few missions under your belt.

John Ray Lemons: No we didn't. See, we were, the weather and all the things, I don't know what all went on, but we only flew one, it might be two weeks or ten days, another mission, and two weeks or ten days, another mission. So I had one...two...three...four...five ... my eighth mission was Kassel. And my pilot was on his 12th mission, because we had no ball turret gunners. They'd taken the ball turrets out. So we would not break the crew up. We said we want to all stay together. We all enlisted men will rotate except the top turret gunner because he is the best trained mechanic on the plane, so we need him in there. The rest of us rotate. So we'd stay home, each one would fly and the other one would take a different position. I flew as bombardier my first mission. The bombardier got sick and the pilot made me the bombardier. I never even knew what to do. He said, "All you've got to do is punch the button when the lead plane drops the bombs."

I said, "I know how to do that." Of course I was riding the front turret. And we got blasted on the first mission, too. We really got it.

Aaron Elson: What happened?

John Ray Lemons: we got a direct hit with flak, and it blew my turret clear off its track. Blew the doors off, and I was hanging out sideways, and the navigator got me back in the plane and that was my first mission. I thought, "Man, this is gonna be fun if they're all like this."

Aaron Elson: Seriously, that's what you thought?

John Ray Lemons: Yes. And after it was all over I said to my pilot, "How come the bombardier didn't fly that mission? That would have been his position. I was flying it."

He said, "Well, for some reason he got sick or something, so I made you it."

Aaron Elson: Maybe he had a premonition.

John Ray Lemons: He could have.

Aaron Elson: Who was the bombardier?

John Ray Lemons: The bombardier was Hector V. Scala, and he's from New Jersey. He was on the Kassel Mission, and he was killed. He was a young guy. He was very in love with a girl from Atlantic City. In fact when we were in New York we let him slip away for a few minutes to get with her somewhere just to visit, to tell her goodbye, and he wasn't supposed to do that but we let him do that.

Aaron Elson: I guess nobody ever found out what happened, did she marry someone else?

John Ray Lemons: I don't know to this day. I've often wondered if his family really knew what happened to him, because how do they tell you when somebody is KIA except to say "We inform you blah blah blah," and here's a telegram, and that's it.

Aaron Elson: So on those eight missions, after the first one did you have any other close calls?

John Ray Lemons: Yes I did. The Dessau mission on August the 16th, 1944. Dewey was flying on this mission. I was flying on it. Jack Pelton was flying on this mission. [George] Collar was on that mission. And our plane, we were in the diamond position, we were the tail end in the diamond. And our wing man, I was flying on the right waist that particular day, and I watched. The flak was just horrendous, and it's coming up, and it hit the plane that's over us, and we were getting bits and pieces, but this plane to our right got hit on the left wing and it broke off, and the plane just goes like this and crashes into the plane in front of us. That was Captain Carlisle's plane, and the one to our right was Lieutenant Gostales. Every man on that plane was killed, and Captain Carlisle, I can't remember for sure, I think about half his crew were killed and half bailed out. And we flew into both of them and went upside down. Went into a spin. And my pilot and co-pilot were able to somehow get the plane straightened out, but if I could have got out of the plane I would have bailed out. I could not. I was pinned to the ceiling.

Aaron Elson: Pinned to the ceiling?

John Ray Lemons: Pinned to the ceiling. And if it hadn't of been for him getting that plane, if I could have gotten out I'd have been gone, and so would the other waist gunner and the tail gunner if we could have gotten out. We couldn't even get the hatch open. We couldn't move. We were all pinned.

Aaron Elson: This was the G force that you didn't know what it was?

John Ray Lemons: That's right. And luckily for us, at about 10,000 feet that plane pulled out. And we were reported as the third plane went down. Sure enough we weren't down. We were about an hour getting back to the base, we were shot up so bad.

Aaron Elson: Did your plane have a name?

John Ray Lemons: The one I was on on that mission I think it was Will Er Run.

Aaron Elson: What kind of a feeling is that, being pinned to the top of the plane?

John Ray Lemons: It happened so fast you had no idea what had happened, except you saw that plane, and all of a sudden you're into the middle of the explosion of these two planes, and you say "My God, what has happened here? What do I do?" The centrifugal force of that got us pinned to the ceiling because we were upside down, and why the wing, I still say that wing should have broken off that airplane. It didn't.

Aaron Elson: Off of your airplane?

John Ray Lemons: Off of my airplane, yes.

Aaron Elson: That was on the mission to Dessau. Were there other close scrapes?

John Ray Lemons: No. Those, the first and the third, are my most memorable ones about things that went haywire, or could have been bad.

Aaron Elson: By this time, do you still think "Boy, this is gonna be fun?"

John Ray Lemons: I guess we were all so patriotic and dedicated and we just knew nothing was going to happen to us. We said it's just part of the game. We'll survive, no problems.

Aaron Elson: Was that your feeling, or did the crew discuss it?

John Ray Lemons: The crew was all, eager beaver guys. We were gonna do a good job and we just know we'll survive.

Aaron Elson: Do you think that had to do with being from Texas?

John Ray Lemons: I don't know that it did, because there's four of us were from Texas all right, but six weren't from Texas.

Aaron Elson: All right, now, Kassel.

John Ray Lemons: Kassel. Kassel was a mission as you well know, September 27, 1944, and we were told what it was to be and all that, it's going to be the Henschel munitions factories where they make the tanks and engines and all kinds of things for the war effort. And we figured from what was said at the briefing that it would be a fairly easy mission, there shouldn't be any problem. We'd have fighter escort, and the flak wouldn't be anything terrible, that you couldn't survive from. So even on my own plane I remember recalling one of the guys kept saying "This is supposed to be a milk run."

I said, "I don't like that word. I never have liked that word. I don't like the word milk run. No mission is ever a milk run. You might say that afterward but this is when we're on the mission." And that shut him up. I don't remember which one it was who said that. And they were just joking, but little did we know what was about to happen. And we didn't really know anything except we were leading three hundred and some odd airplanes.

Aaron Elson: Was your crew a lead crew in the squadron?

John Ray Lemons: No, we were not. On that particular day our position was the high right. Not the high high right. We were the high right, and we were about number three down the line on the high right.

Aaron Elson: And your squadron number?

John Ray Lemons: 702 Squadron. And Baynham was a good pilot. And like I said, all of a sudden from solid cloud cover, you couldn't see the ground, it was 100 percent solid cloud. And we were probably 23,500 feet, and that was probably about I'm going to say ten to twelve thousand feet for the clouds, so we were well above the clouds. But for some reason all of a sudden all we heard was something is happening here, coming up from the rear. And before you could say two more words, we were already hit. They came up 6 o'clock low where the ball turret position would have been a good one to shoot. The only person who could see was the tail gunner, or the waist gunners could get 'em once they got closer. The top turret guy couldn't do anything because they were beneath him. And we were on fire I would say in less than a minute.

Aaron Elson: What was your first indication that you were in trouble?

John Ray Lemons: The first indication was that I heard all the noise on the plane, and then the flames rolling out of the bomb bay, and you could see what was going on to your left and to your right. I was on the left side but I could see both ways and man, there's stuff going on everywhere you looked.

Aaron Elson: What specific images can you remember, if you close your eyes and think back?

John Ray Lemons: It was so sudden I guess you might say that you really didn't have a chance to realize that you were in serious trouble. And you'd never experienced that much of a volley of firing at you. I knew later on that they were shooting a lot further back than were because they had cannons. They were shooting 20 or 30 millimeter cannons and we were sitting there with a thousand yards on a .50 caliber. So they had an advantage right off the bat. Of course from what we always had been told, they liked to go for the tail, and liked to go for the engines. First thing get the gas tanks, because that gives you some definite problems right quick.

Aaron Elson: Did you get any firing in?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, I got some firing in but I have no idea if I hit anything. They were coming so fast and furious because all of a sudden they were just right into you and gone, and what they did, they went ahead, and by that time I was gone, I mean I was out of the plane by the

time they started coming back. Now Baynham stayed with the plane apparently after I got out, put it on automatic pilot and getting everything set up so he could get out.

Aaron Elson: How many people got out and how many were killed?

John Ray Lemons: Out of our plane, I was able to get, well, to make a long story short, I'll explain why we had the problem in the back. The tail, and the two waist guns, none of us that particular day thought about having the parachutes right there handy, or your escape shoes wired to your harness like you're supposed to. So I laid both the parachutes for the waist gunners against the bulkhead, and here we are back at the waist windows, and all of a sudden we need those parachutes. And it gets further more complicated. That particular day, they'd issued me a brand new harness. And being secure that there wasn't nothing ever going to happen, I didn't worry about getting it fitted. The loose straps were probably about six or eight inches loose, and I had to get the chutes, put mine on, put Bird's on, and Knox had already crawled up, he'd already been shot up pretty bad, he was crawling and bleeding. And I got the hatch open, got the two chutes on both of us, and this is less than a minute I would say. I got the hatch open, and Knox, I had to kind of just shove him, get him out. Then Bird, the other waist gunner, kept pointing to me to go first, I was trying to point to him to go first. I'll go next, because I've got the chutes on him and mine too. He refused. He said for me to go, so I went.

Aaron Elson: He was pointing at you?

John Ray Lemons: To go. And he's gonna follow me, I assumed. Well, I don't know what ever happened to him because he was killed. Whether he got hit, whether his chute didn't open, I have no idea what happened, but all I know is from what reports I found out that he was found dead near the little town of Nentershausen, not Nentershausen, Gerstungen. That's where he was buried and I finally found this out many years later. But anyway, I don't know what happened to him. Knox got out and he was badly wounded. He lost an eye and he'd been hit in the leg, and was bleeding pretty bad.

So I got out. I immediately pulled my ripcord, 23,500 feet. They were shooting. I was right in the middle of the battle. Guys behind me still getting shot at and guys in front of me were still getting shot at, and guys to the right, high right, were still getting shot at. An ME-109 went right by me, from me to that wall right there. I could almost touch his wingtip. I thought he was dumping my chute. He might have been dodging me, I don't know. I was already getting lack of oxygen, and all of a sudden I don't remember anything until I came to about 12, 13,000 feet, and I went through the clouds. And then I could see the ground. I see the ground coming up, I said "Man, I've got to watch those trees. I don't want to land in those trees." So I guided my chute,

and sure enough I landed okay, and dumped my chute, and folded it up. Before I could even get that folded up, two irate farmers had me, with pitchforks. They were screaming at me. I had no idea what they were saying.

"Amerikanisch! Amerikanisch!" I was trying to tell them I'm an American. But luckily for me, two young Wehrmacht soldiers, they come racing up, with bayonets attached to long tom rifles, probably 16 years old.

"Raus! Raus! Raus!" I knew that means "get out of here!" somehow, run. And I had on flying boots, what do you think you can do running in flying boots? But anyway, I followed them. They were pushing me ahead. And those two farmers let 'em go. And luckily for me, they kept marching me towards some little town, and as we got further, I could still see parachutes coming out of the sky. Everywhere we'd go, another half a mile or quarter mile, we'd pick up two or three more guys, and so we had about a dozen. We started heading to some little town. By that time I guess we probably had 15 or 16 guys. And some guy who was a German well-dressed official stopped, screaming and just cussin' us out and raising Cain and hawking at the two German Wehrmacht guys. And finally he was just going down and screaming at everybody, and he had his pistol out and he started flailing it. I was in the front row, and he started hitting. He hit me across the face three or four times. I felt like I was getting clobbered. And I jumped out of that front row, and he pulled that pistol. I said uh-oh. I stopped. And those two young soldiers woke up and said "Hey. Raus! Raus! Raus!" And that guy just let us alone. We were convinced after it was all over he had to either be the burgomeister or some big shot, or some public official, because he had on fancy boots and a full dress uniform.

That was the last we saw of him. We went to this little town where they kept me, and Eberhard [Haelbig] has confirmed the town was Eisenach. The place that they held me I said was a city hall. He said it was a Wehrmacht barracks. In the basement, that's where they had me, and we had about 25 guys. And the next morning, we had these guys that were all in bad shape, burned, shot up, with broken arms, or all kinds of injuries, needing medical help. They brought in four litters, and each of us that could walk put some of these wounded guys on these litters and carried them to the train and put them on the train. We marched probably two blocks or a block and a half to get to the train station. And the local citizens were screaming at us, and these two soldiers still were guarding us, getting us on the train. And then next thing I know I was on the train going to Wetzlar for interrogation.

Aaron Elson: And the bombardier. Do you know how he was killed?

John Ray Lemons: Yes I do. I found out many years later that the bombardier, navigator and the radio operator all landed and wound up in the same little town of Nentershausen, and all three were killed the next day by locals. The guys that killed, one was a soldier, and the other two were labor camp guards. The first one was killed by a soldier who was on leave that day and why he picked him out I have no idea. I think he killed Fields. And that's what [Walter] Hassenpflug

now has kind of qualified and clarified actually and matter of fact, two of those guys were actually in the Nuremburg trials and one of them committed suicide before he ever got sentenced. The other one was killed.

Aaron Elson: What was your interrogation like?

John Ray Lemons: I'll tell you what. If I had to describe what I thought I was doing, I was in there watching the movie that I had seen for the training film. The same routine that they told us that you would face if you ever got to be a prisoner. I'd seen the training films, they show you what you're gonna, name, rank and serial number and all that kind of stuff. But they wouldn't accept that routine. The guy that got me was from Buffalo, New York, he said, originally. He said he came to America, was there until 1939 and lived in Buffalo, and he knew a lot about that part of the country. And he said, "I can tell you where you're from. I can listen to your language. I know where you're from. You're from Texas." He knew where I was 'cause he had my dog tag, and I'm sure he already had figured out who my crew, the crew he thought I was on, he was wrong. Anyway, he said, "Have a Lucky Strike."

I said, "I don't smoke." I did smoke but I didn't want one. And I knew he wasn't going to do anything.

"Well," he said, "you've got to tell me something. What went on? What happened today? What were you guys doing?" He finally said, "You know, you've got to tell us something. You're not telling us anything. We're gonna put you in solitary."

I said, "I've told you what I can tell you. You know what it is. It's name, rank and serial number. I've given you that. Do you need me to repeat it for you again?"

He said, "I heard you. But you haven't told us anything. What happened today?"

I said, "I've told you all I can tell you."

He said, "Well, I'm gonna try some more." He said, "I'm gonna bring the big man in here in a minute if you don't do something, because we're gonna put you in solitary."

And sure enough he did. He finally took me out and put me in a room with a guy and I figured he was a plant. He probably was. But he had on a GI uniform. He wasn't telling me anything I believed. I didn't know anything anyway. I couldn't have told him anything. I went on a mission, you know. The guy finally, before he turned me loose I want to tell you what he did. He finally said, "I know everything about you. I know everything about your group." And he said, "I can show you what crew you're on. You're on the Johnson crew." Well, we had a guy named Johnson.

I said, "I don't know what crew I was on." He thought I was on the Johnson crew. So he gets the book out and opens this book up, my god, it had more information than I knew that we even had. They knew about us. They had names in each squadron, 701, 2, 3 and 4. He had all that stuff. And how they got that I don't to this day know. But anyway, he put me in solitary like he said he would, and I stayed there about two days. But what really surprised me later, when I got home, Baynham says, "I saw you at Wetzlar. Your face looked like you had been beat to hell." Well, I knew I'd been beat up because they clubbed me with a pistol.

I said "I didn't see you."

He said, "No, you didn't see me, but I saw you. You were in Wetzlar the same time I was." See, so I knew nothing about any of my crew until I got home after the war. I didn't know any of them were killed, and certainly didn't know what happened to the pilot and co-pilot, and certainly didn't know what happened to Bird. I still thought Bird was maybe okay. Well, what I did when I got home, I finally found out he was killed. So I told myself, I'm going to his home. I'm going to talk to his parents." I had been home on a 30-day leave, and I knew where he lived. Sunset, Texas, was a little town close to Wichita Falls. I drove up there and I was kind of apprehensive of what to say. And I walked up and knocked on the door, an old kind of farmhouse. And the mother and dad came to the door, both of them. I said, "I'm John Ray Lemons. I was on the crew with Bird and I just wanted to come by and tell you what happened on this mission, and I don't really know what happened to him because ..."

They said, "I don't understand it. Why are you here and he's not?"

And I just didn't know what to say. I didn't really know what to do. I said, "Well, I'm trying to just explain what little I know about what might have happened."

They said, "We just don't understand why you survived and he didn't."

And I just almost turned around and wanted to leave, but I tried to do a few more words of pacification, but they wouldn't accept it. So I got in the car and left. To this day I never knew what they really went through afterwards, or I don't even know if they ever really knew what happened to him. Because I didn't know that until Hassenpflug told me some of the stuff that he found out. So that kind of brings you to the point of what happened to the crew. Knox and Boldt were both in Obermasfeld hospital there at Obermasfeld, however you pronounce it. When Knox was liberated by the British and Americans, he and Boldt both were sent home, Knox was in a body cast still, he weighed 60 pounds. And they put him on a hospital ship, flew him to New York, and then his wife to be hadn't been married yet, got him to have an interview, and got him in the headline in the paper there when he got home. And Boldt went straight to the hospital when he got to the States and he was in the hospital for two years when they released him. So again, Baynham and I and Bosquet really were the only ones that came out more or less okay.

Aaron Elson: What was prison camp like?

John Ray Lemons: After I left Wetzlar, they put me on a train. I had no idea where I was going, I went to Stalag Luft IV, which Was Gross Teitschau. It's up in old Poland right near the Baltic Sea, and I got there in about October 6th or 7th, I don't remember the exact date, and I was there until the winter. It was a terrible winter where I had no clothes, remember, all I had is what I had on plus my flying boots and they took those away. So I had no shoes. And how did we get clothes in prison camp? The Red Cross sent clothes in. The Red Cross sent in food parcels, and we got a very limited amount of that stuff, but the clothes came in the same way. They'd get a load of overcoats, a load of shoes, or a load of underwear and things like that. And what they would do, there's four compounds, there's 10,000 men in this camp. Each compound would get its share of whatever they drew, and then each room, remember, you had 25 men in each room, it's ten rooms, that's ten rooms with 25 guys that need something, either shoes or whatever, a blanket even, I didn't have a blanket. It took me from October till December, I finally got a pair of shoes, which was a pair of Limey, what do they call their shoes, really good shoes, and by the time we were being overrun by the Russians, we knew that was coming, we had underground news every day, the BBC, and we knew what was going on. But we were told you'd better start being prepared to march. It's going to be a cold winter. So I some knitting material, I don't know to this day how I acquired that, but I knitted a hat, which went over my head and came down on my ears, and would tie under my neck, it had a flap that came down. Which I still have, by the way.

Aaron Elson: How did you learn how to knit?

John Ray Lemons: A guy in the room knew how. He taught me how, and I knitted that thing. So I had that hat and I had enough clothes that I was about as good as anybody at that point in time. But luckily for me I didn't go the eighty days. I went the southern route. I marched for a while and got on the train, and went to Nuremburg, which was Stalag Luft 7-A, or 13-D, but it was Nuremburg. And that camp was so infested and so terrible and it was cold, and it had no fire protection to get heat at night, and we were getting bombed by the British, because they were bombing Nuremburg, and we were right in the middle of the marshaling yards. So every once in a while you'd get a 2,000 pounder real close and you'd think it was right there. And then the British and the Americans were approaching, and so what do they do? We marched for 16 more days to Moosburg, which is on the Isar River, it's across the Danube going south, and that was where Mr. Patton was then coming with the 3rd Army, and he was right on our tail. The first day we were on the road marching we watched B-24s bomb the hell out of the Nuremburg marshaling yard, and we weren't five miles away. We saw all those B-24s doing that, and we clapped our hands, but nevertheless, in the next day or two we were marching down the road with deserters, civilians, and just hordes of people. Well, two P-47s saw this column, they thought they were somebody to strafe, so they strafed the column that I was in. Luckily for me, I was in the front of the column, but the guys on the rear did get hit, a couple of them got hit pretty good. But the German guard was up with me, I was the lead guy with this German, and boy, we

both ran when we heard these shells coming. We raced out in the woods and got behind a tree, and boy, I could hear those bullets going through the trees. When both of us turned around and looked after it was over, he'd thrown his rifle away, because he was running with me. The tree I was behind was about that big, and the one he was behind was no bigger than that, and I said "That wouldn't do us any good."

"Nichts gut! Nichts gut!" He says, "Kamerad, Nichts gut!"

"Yeah, he wasn't too good, but he didn't aim and get us." He didn't understand what I was saying.

Aaron Elson: The trees were what, about six inches...

John Ray Lemons: They were about six inches around. They wouldn't do you any good. Luckily for us, we didn't get hit. And then after that, we traded for some white sheets and parked a sign out in the road every time we stopped, POW, spelled it out. And the next day they came again, they saw that sign, and every day from that they followed us all the way to Moosburg.

Aaron Elson: When you say you traded, what did you trade?

John Ray Lemons: I had cigarettes I'd saved out of the Red Cross food parcel, and chocolate D-bars. Do you know what that chocolate D-bar looks like? You could get a lot of stuff for chocolate and a lot of stuff for cigarettes. I had a guy that was my buddy, he could speak German, and boy, he'd go into town and take our loot and trade for bread or potatoes or onions, anything you could eat. And so every night we'd have a feast on whatever he could trade for.

Aaron Elson: On those train trips, did you travel in boxcars or regular cars?

John Ray Lemons: Forty and eights. They probably had eighty guys at least in there. You could only almost stand up, you could not sit down. And they gave you a cardboard box to relieve yourself, one box for the whole car. So we kind of beat a hole finally in the bottom of the boxcar to throw the stuff out. They stopped the train about every day or so to get some water I guess for the train or whatever, and they let us get out and get some water from someplace. And they'd bring us some water.

Aaron Elson: On the marches, if somebody fell off, would they shoot them?

John Ray Lemons: No. Luckily for me in the group I was with, most of those guys were able to keep up. We probably made no more than 18 or 20 kilometers a day. But we'd spend the night and sleep in barns or in the woods, or wherever you could find that you could lay down. And what we normally would do if we could be in a farmer's yard, we had learned that they buried potatoes and we knew where to sneak around and swipe a few things. And have you ever heard of these little burners we made that you could cook with? It cranks. I had one, he and I both had one, and we could boil water that quick, and we could take a potato and cook it.

Aaron Elson: What would you use for fuel?

John Ray Lemons: Twigs. You just pick up little twigs. And you get your fire started with a little grass or something, and keep that cranking and feeding stuff in there, and your pan, we had a klim can, you know what a milk can looked like? The klim can is what you cooked in. It'd sit right on top of that little cooker and boy, you could boil that water in nothing flat, you could cook a potato. No kidding.

Aaron Elson: How big were the potatoes?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, we'd break 'em in half.

Aaron Elson: So they were big.

John Ray Lemons: Yeah, big, kind of like a russet potato.

Aaron Elson: 'Cause you go to the supermarket now, potatoes are like ...

John Ray Lemons: Oh, yeah, the little bitty ones. But no, we had big potatoes. I guess they're kind of like a russet potato.

Aaron Elson: So what did you weigh when you were liberated?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, I probably weighed, when I was liberated and went to Camp Lucky Strike, which is where I wound up finally, that's another story, what happened after liberation. I didn't get liberated to American hands until about ten or twelve days later before I ever got to Lucky Strike. What I did is, my buddy and I went over and took over a German hotel. Feather beds. We lived in those feather beds, and the man and his wife wanted to have us because "You're not Russkies, You're not Russkies. Amerikanisch, Amerikanisch."

"Ja! Ja! Oh, Ja! Ja!"

"Russky, No, No, No." So we got real meals every day while we were waiting. But the bridge was blown up so Patton couldn't get across right where our hotel was. The bridge must have been blown up by the Germans so the tanks couldn't get across, so all the tanks parked right there at this hotel. And that's where I saw Patton, as close as I am to you.

Aaron Elson: Really! And what did he say?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, he wasn't talking to me. He was chewing out a lieutenant in charge of that group of tanks. He said, in four letter words, blankety blank, Get those blankety blank sand bags off the tracks of that tank. All those tanks. You know what that does? That costs you speed and fuel. G-D, get it off!"

And of course that little lieutenant, "Yes Sir!" And I was as close as I am to you when he was telling him that. I didn't know who he was at first. I looked at him, I said "Patton? That is him." All that chicken stuff on the shoulders, too. That's the last I saw him, too.

Aaron Elson: Do you know which river that was?

John Ray Lemons: The Isar. I-S-A-R. It's a little river compared to the Danube.

Aaron Elson: All this time, how was your wife taking this?

John Ray Lemons: Well, my wife had a son who then was, let's see, when I was in Colorado Springs, she visited me in Colorado Springs, because I was living off base, and she came and spent about a month with me, and my son was six months old. So it would have been June of '43,

Aaron Elson: You saw your son before you went overseas.

John Ray Lemons: I saw my son, yes.

Aaron Elson: And what did she get, did she get a telegram?

John Ray Lemons: I have all the stuff she got. I've got the telegram missing in action, and then the next one, confirmation. The first one she got I think was dated sometime in October, late October, missing in action. And then the next one came about November sometime, and said that he is a prisoner of war. And then almost the time she heard that, she had heard through some other communications that I was a prisoner of war. And she had, you wrote these little cards that you sent home, have you ever seen some of those cards? POW cards? She saved some of those. "I'm fine. Hope everything's fine." That's all you could say.

Aaron Elson: Was she worried?

John Ray Lemons: No, she was young. She was probably, I'd say in those days, she was, we were married in '41, so she was 20.

Aaron Elson: How did the two of you meet?

John Ray Lemons: Of all things I met her at a place where they had a show called "Dialing for Dollars" in Dallas, and you could go there, if you were lucky, they played a game of dialing. If you were lucky enough you could get a silver dollar. She was there with a couple of girlfriends, and I was there with one of my buddies, and we met these two girls, and we chased them that night. And I met her, and finally got a date with her, and turned out to marry her. Long story.

Aaron Elson: After-effects, did you ever have any nightmares?

John Ray Lemons: No, I never did, and it's amazing to me, we had in my prison camp, in the first camp, we had 25 guys in the room, there were two or three in there that would have nightmares every night and get to yelling, like you think something's happening to them, but nothing, they're just going through a nightmare. But I never did have that. It never bothered me. I just knew it all worked out. I guess I was looking to the day it's gonna be over because I knew good and well we're gonna win the war, no doubt about that. I remember specifically, though, the December 25th dinner. They let us have a, what they called a feast, they brought us a full parcel of food, Red Cross, for two men. Gave us everything that was in that sucker, so we had a feast and they walked in and they said, "You're going to enjoy this because we know we are winning the war." The Battle of the Bulge. We knew what was going on, the Battle of the Bulge. They said, "We know we're winning the war now and you're going to rebuild Germany stick by stick and brick by brick."

We said "Uh-huh, uh-huh."

Aaron Elson: How about after the war?

John Ray Lemons: We wanted to go into opening up kind of like, do you know what a Western Auto Store would be in the United States? We had what they call in Texas White Auto Stores. They did repairs and they had auto parts. We were going to open up one of those, and we both went and talked to the people that franchise you and all that. They said you need ten thousand dollars.

We said "Ten thousand dollars!" No way. Forget it. So he worked for the Ford plant, went back to work at the Ford plant, I went back, well, first I went out to Colorado. I went up there. "Do you like vacations? That's the only thing you can do up here to make a living." He said, "We can't hire you because this is a vacation area. Part of the year, the rest of the time you don't do

nothing. You can't make any money up here. You better go back where you came from." I went back to the company and asked if they'd take me. They said yes. So I went back to Magnolia.

Aaron Elson: After your son, did you have other children?

John Ray Lemons: I had one child at that point when I got home, and then I had another son who was born in 1949, so the other was born in 1942 and this was '49. And then we split the blanket, my first wife and I, in 1957 or '56, and I played the single guy for a couple of years. Then I met Jean. Well, I already knew her. She worked for Magnolia. That's where I first saw her. When I first saw her she was 18 years old.

Aaron Elson: You were how old?

John Ray Lemons: I was 31, and she was 18.

Aaron Elson: Your son who was six months old when you went overseas, did he have any trouble adjusting or recognizing you?

John Ray Lemons: He didn't remember me. See, he didn't remember me because he only saw me when he was six months old. Baynham and I lived in the same place, my pilot, we both lived in the same place. He had his wife and I had my wife there, so we lived side by side.

All my son remembered, he said he'd seen pictures of me when he was a baby, "but I don't remember you, Dad. When you came home I didn't know you."

Aaron Elson: And how did that make you feel?

John Ray Lemons: Well, I was glad he was still around. But he was a good kid, he's a good looking kid, too.

Aaron Elson: And what does he do now?

John Ray Lemons: He's in the tile business. He designs tile for airports and school buildings and things like that, works with architects to do all kinds of fancy tile work.

Aaron Elson: What have I forgotten?

John Ray Lemons: Oh, I was trying to think of anything funny. I've always told the story about how all of us guys were so eager beavers when we were young, and you thought money was gonna get you everything. When you became a prisoner of war, it didn't mean nothing. I used to say, all I want to do is get home. I want to go home. I'm not worrying about that money, I want to make sure I go home. The thing that I always recall, when I first became a prisoner, the guys that had been there a while always said, "You're new. How long is it gonna be before we're all gonna go home?"

I said, "Man, we're gonna go home by Christmas of '44." But then I said, "Well, we'll go home by February of '45." And then later on I began to say, "Well, I'm not sure." And of course I used to say, "I'm sure glad they didn't have all those 262s and jets flying around when we were still flying because man, if they'd got those things in earlier, there ain't no way we could have survived that, I don't believe," because they were ahead of us on the jets. Well, I don't know, I guess you have to say this, that I think going through experiences like that, it makes you appreciate life, and material things don't mean a thing, they don't mean anything, they're nothing. I always wanted a Rolex watch, see that? I finally got me one. It don't mean nothing.

Aaron Elson: One other thing, the osteomyelitis, how did you get that?

John Ray Lemons: The doctor told me, and told my mother, too, 'cause I remember it, I was a kid, he said that's a bruise to the bone, and the bruise to the bone probably comes from something you did either getting hit or jumping off of trees.

I said, "I used to jump off the back of the garage all the time. Off the top of the garage, jump down on the ground."

He said "That very easily could cause that. Or else you got a bad lick on the shinbone or somewhere in there that created it." And he said, "You get a bruise, and it goes infected," and what they do, they drill down, what they really did is they cut out the bone, and then they stuff gauze in there, and they pull it out every few days draining the pus out of it is what it really was. And so that was something that, you said, "I don't know how I could have done that but I guess I did." And of course it kept me from being a 51 pilot. I've often said, "You know, if I were a 51 pilot, I'd probably have been killed on the first mission." Some German would have shot me down.

Aaron Elson: You never know.

John Ray Lemons: Never know. Life does for you what you think it came out right, so it came out right for me. I think that I had a lot of fun in the military, and I always have said this: I don't know that I could have ever picked a crew of guys, and we didn't get to 25 missions. We knew we were going to go for 25 missions or get it, but I said I couldn't have picked better guys because we were ten great guys. Everybody was, even Bird was the most, like I told you he was the most unaggressive guy that you could ever find.

Aaron Elson: When you learned that they had been killed, what went through your mind?

John Ray Lemons: I really couldn't believe that three of those guys were just flat murdered, just like that. And I never knew what happened to Bird, but I knew what happened to the other two, because I knew about Knox, but when I found out about Boldt, I knew, man, he had got shot pretty bad, the 30 millimeter cannons got him.

Aaron Elson: When you learned about that ...

John Ray Lemons: I got in contact with all the guys that I could get the information after I got back.

Aaron Elson: Oh, you were going to tell me a story about Lucky Strike.

John Ray Lemons: Oh, Camp Lucky Strike. When I finally got to Lucky Strike, after I'd been in that German hotel we took over, and when they finally put me on an airplane at, I can't remember the name of that little town in Germany, close to Moosburg. Anyway, we flew in a C-47, it flew us up to France, and landed in Reims, got on the train and went to Lucky Strike. And man, I'd never seen so many people, and food, food, food. I thought bread was like angel food cake, milk shakes, I couldn't get enough of them. Put eggs in 'em, ice cream, make 'em richer, and you know what I did? They had a slit trench from here to yonder a mile long, and that's where all the guys that came in, eating that food, you couldn't maintain it, it just went through you like dysentery almost. So I learned that you've got to slow down on that wanting to eat. By the time I went home, though, I bet you I weighed heavier than I'd ever been. In 30 days they kept me there at Lucky Strike I bet I gained 25 or 30 pounds. I ate everything they could throw at me. Then I came home on a slow boat, they blew an engine out in the middle of the Atlantic, we're sitting there for two or three days until they got it going again. I got home on June the 16th I believe, 1945. And didn't know what to make of seeing my family.

Oh, I didn't tell you one thing that's really, you said something that really sticks in your craw. When we were liberated by Patton on the morning of the 29th they had a battle, the tanks fought the Germans, and when the tanks finally came into the camp, they just ran through the barbed wire, bowled it over, and they'd already told us don't be stupid now, don't run out there and get in the way there and get killed, because here you've been here all this time, now you're gonna go home. So anyway, these tanks all came through, and man, everybody was going crazy, with joy, the war's over, we're gonna get to go home. And a guy rolls a tank out there from here to oh, a little past that wall. He puts the lid up. "Hey, anybody from Texas?"

And I said "Aaaay, here's one!" I ran over there and couldn't get there because there's guys all around. He said, "Where you from?"

I said, "I'm from Dallas. Where are you from?"

He says, "From Dallas."

I said, "What's your name?"

He says, "My name is Earl Cook."

I said, "Earl Cook? I used to work with a young lady in Magnolia, her name is Ione Cook."

He says, "That's my sister."

I said, "What?!"

He said, "Yeah. Ione is my sister."

I said, "You're gonna beat me home. I know good and well you'll beat me home. Would you tell my folks that you found me and I'm okay?"

And sure enough, he beat me home and he got in touch with my mother and my wife and told her that he had found me and I'm okay and I was on my way to come home sometime soon. And can you imagine that small world? He just passed away, too, that just blew my mind.

Aaron Elson: I'm sorry to hear that.

John Ray Lemons: Yeah, I was sorry to hear that. It turned out we were about second or third cousins. My mother's sister married one of his uncles, so he was about a third cousin by marriage I guess you might say, so we're really kind of like kinfolks.

Aaron Elson: All right, I think we done good.

John Ray Lemons: You know, I could go on, some of this stuff, it's just, I tried to write this stuff for my kids, I've been writing on this thing for a long time, I think I've got about 100 pages written. And I've tried to go back now and just shortcut a lot of stuff and I got to thinking about it, they might want to know some of the detail. I've got it on the computer anyway so they've got a copy of it already. I'm going to add to it because I've got a lot of stuff I can add to it. If you ever get to Dallas now, we have an organization, if you ever get there, what I'd like for you to come sometime and catch, we have a group called the Happy Warriors. We meet once a month, and every one of those guys are World War II guys, or some are 'Nam, but mostly are World War II, and every branch, you can't even name a branch, from submariners to Navy pilots, to ground pounders, artillery guys, anything that you want to name, Navy guys, everybody, and every once in a while we have one come up and he'll tell some story of his. And there's a hundred guys show up. We have a hundred guys. We meet at the Frontiers of Flight Museum in Dallas, which is a museum now of collecting all the old World War II airplanes, at Love Field in Dallas. The guy that's in charge of that thing was a B-29 bombardier/gunner, I mean bombardier/navigator in a B-29, and he ditched twice in the Pacific. And lucky to be alive, too.