Vernon Bigalke was born 18 February 1917 in Little Falls, Minnesota; he grew up and graduated from high school there. He served in the National Guard, 1938-40, and in April 1941 was drafted into the US Army.

By the beginning of 1945, Vernon was a platoon sergeant with the 259th Regiment, 65th Infantry Division. With two dozen other soldiers, he was taken prisoner by German forces at the beginning of February 1945, following a skirmish near the French – German border. After capture, for several months Vernon was marched together with other POWs throughout central and southern Germany; he never spent time in a permanent POW camp. This group of men was finally liberated by the American 12th Armored Regiment on 29 April 1945.

Vernon spent time in military medical facilities recovering from his months as a POW. He was discharged from the Army in November 1945.

Again a civilian, Vernon got married in 1948 (wife Betty), and for thirty-two years was a farmer outside of Little Falls, Minnesota. He spent eight years working at Camp Ripley, Minnesota, before retiring in 1985. For many years Vernon was active in leadership roles with the American Ex-POWs organization. He was interviewed at his home in Little Falls.
Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 15 June 2004, and this is an interview for the POW Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I am interviewing Mr. Vernon Bigalke at his home in Little Falls, Minnesota. First, on the record Mr. Bigalke, thanks for taking time to speak with me today.

V: You are very welcome.

T: For the record, you were born on 18 February 1917, right here in Little Falls, Minnesota, and grew up here and graduated from high school here. You spent some time in the National Guard, 1938-40, and in April 1941 were inducted, you were a draftee, into the United States Army. On the other end of that, you were discharged from active service in November 1945. In Europe you served with the 259th Regiment of the 65th Infantry Division. At the beginning of February 1945 you were a platoon sergeant.

I’d like to start at the time when you were in Europe. [Before we began taping I learned that] you were captured right about the beginning of February 1945, near the French – German border. I’m wondering if you would describe from your perspective the circumstances of how you became a prisoner of war.

V: I became a prisoner of war when we, when I say we that was the platoon I was in, we were trying to capture a pillbox. A pillbox is an installation on the Siegfried Line, which was well-fortified with barbed wire and minefields and so on. And our orders were to go out, to jump off about four in the morning and capture that pillbox before daylight. However, something changed in the orders and we jumped off about an hour late.

We had some distance to go to reach this pillbox, and before we got down to try to capture it, it got daylight and the Germans, we were out in front of this pillbox in a trench I believe about seventy-five yards from the pillbox. The Germans got us pinned down with machine gun fire and we couldn’t move, we was pinned down in the trench. However, we had communications with us, walkie talkie radio, and we called back for some artillery support. The artillery started firing on the pillbox, and some of the rounds were falling short. And they didn’t seem to do much damage to the pillbox, fact is, what the pillbox amounted to was about six to eight feet of concrete, camouflaged with old boards, which looked like an old barn to us. Our communications went out, and the artillery kept firing, and unfortunately some of
the shells were falling into our position. And this went on for some time until they finally quit. However, we lost some of our men, and had some injured ones.

We couldn’t do anything about it, we were still pinned down. The sand and debris flying around, a lot of our rifles got jammed up, and it was too far away to use our hand grenades, and they wouldn’t have done any good anyway with the way that was fortified. We were supposed to get around the side of it and take it with a flamethrower, burn a hole in the steel door. However that never happened, and later in the day, see this was probably about ten or eleven in the morning when the artillery finally quit firing, and all we did was just lay in this trench waiting, hoping that something would happen. Maybe we could wait ‘til night and sneak back under cover of darkness.

And they sent up a tank to try to take this pillbox. As they came up there was kind of a grade behind us, a knoll behind us, and they came up over the top of that and the Germans fired their eighty-eight [88mm gun], which they had stationed behind the pillbox. They knocked the tank out. So that was the end of that, and there we were in this, it was cold but it was a sunshiny day that day, kind of a bright day, so it wasn’t that bad waiting them out. So we was going to wait them out then and go back after dark.

However that never happened, because about four-thirty [4:30] that afternoon, just before dark, four Germans came out of the pillbox with those burp guns, burp gun is a nickname we had for it, it was just like our hand-carried machine gun. They came up to the trench and virtually stuck those machine guns down our throats, so there wasn’t a thing we could do about it but surrender. However we had one fellow there, I remember he was from some place in New York, and he said, “They’re not taking me alive.” So he got up and started to run, but he didn’t get very far before they shot him in the back.

Then they came out, and they got us out of the trench, and we had two guys, two of the boys were injured, two young fellows. I remember one, he was shot through the knee with a machine gun, the other one shrapnel took part of his foot off. So we picked those fellows up with us, there were five of us left, and we took them back into the pillbox. We were there, and it was just about getting dark then, probably about five, sometime after five o’clock.

(1, A, 53)

T: Vernon, what’s going through your mind at that point in time? In a sense, a difficult mission has turned into, you are now a POW.

V: Well, I guess, frankly it was a shock to us that we would that soon be captured. We really hadn’t seen too much real, that kind of combat before, however we had been in combat before. We had been in a, it was in the town of Saarland [spelling?], which the [US] 28th [Infantry] Division had taken, and we were sent in there to hold the town. So we did know what combat was, was like, but this, it was a shock to us, no doubt about it. Of course in that stage of the war, everybody was under the impression that this wasn’t going to last too long, we should be able to get out of this.
T: You as well? You thought the same thing?

V: Yes, we did. It was discussed, as much as we could discuss it. Well, we could see it, you could see it all around you that this war was about over, because we’d see German vehicles that were out of fuel, and so on. After the Battle of the Bulge [of December 1944 – January 1945] the Germans got sort of unorganized, you know, they weren’t as organized as well as they were before. However we had no idea what laid ahead of us, you know, it was just a day-to-day deal.

T: Can you remember being face-to-face with a German soldier pointing a weapon at you? What goes through your mind in that situation?

V: Well, I guess you don’t, you can’t fight it in that situation. I mean, if we had tried to resist them they would have killed us all right there. There was nothing we could do.

T: You were a platoon sergeant, right?

V: Yes.

T: So in a sense, was it your decision to tell your men to give up?

V: Well, it was pretty clear, pretty obvious. Like I said, though, this one fellow, he wasn’t going to be taken prisoner, and well, he got shot the way it was, so… Although we had no idea what was in store for us, ahead of us in time to come.

T: Once you were a POW, did you start to think about, what’s going to happen now?

V: Well, you did. Of course they told us that we’d be taken to a camp someplace, and of course we were under the impression that we would. After we left this pillbox they took us back to a command post. Now whatever happened in that pillbox, these two fellows that were injured, we had to leave them there. We said the Lord’s Prayer for them, and we had a medic along with us, he gave them a couple of shots of morphine, and we left them. Now what ever happened to those boys? I have no idea (with emotion).

T: You don’t know whether they survived or not?

V: No idea. I don’t know whether our troops came along the next day, which they probably did, and picked them up. I’m sure the Germans didn’t do anything that night with them, they left them there, because they all pulled out of there. And those two guys were left there. So I have no idea what happened to them. (pauses three seconds) And that works on you (with emotion). They were in my platoon.
T: Was there a sense of guilt on your part, as platoon sergeant, leaving those men behind?

V: Well, yes, there was. (pauses three seconds) But there was no way we could have taken them out, because the Germans... We did take them into the pillbox, they allowed us to do that, but in the pillbox the Germans had two injured guys in there, two of their own, probably injured previously, could have happened that day in that artillery and a piece of shrapnel hit them. But anyway, then we had to carry those two injured Germans out, on a blanket, with the help of a couple of the Germans.

(1, A, 93)

T: Was there any questioning of you or any of the men, there in that pillbox?

V: No. Well, they did, but not any organized interrogation, no there wasn't that. They talked to us, you know. Of course the first thing they tell you is, “For you the war is over now” (with German accent). Well, the war just started really, for us. When you look at some of the stuff we went through afterwards, then the war just started.

T: Were you concerned about what was going to happen to you and the men there? Or did you feel relieved to be out of that bad position?

V: You were hoping it would get better. Well now, if we get to a camp, you know, but we had no idea what these camps were like really, either. What you hear through the grapevine, we knew they weren’t good. They weren’t too bad the first part of the war, because they had food for them, and they’d feed them. But toward the last part of it... So we had no idea. And we thought we was going to get to a camp, which never happened.

T: From the pillbox, where were you moved to?

V: We were moved back to a CP, a command post.

T: This is the twenty-eight men you were captured with?

V: No, we went back with the five of us. Then after we went to this command post, then they brought in more than the twenty-two, I think it was, that come in, or twenty-three. They were from the same battalion, but different companies. So they were people that we knew, we knew they were from the 259th, but we really didn’t know them personally because you don’t know everybody in different companies. So we got in there, and then of course we were interrogated.

T: Talk about that. What was the interrogation like for you?
V: Of course according to the Geneva Convention you just give them your name, rank, and serial number. Which we did. But they interrogated us, they asked us where we were from, but what it really wound up to be, they knew more about us than we really knew about ourselves. They knew the day we got overseas, they knew what outfit we was from, they had some pretty good intelligence.

T: Sounds like you didn't tell them anything they didn't already know?

V: Exactly. You hit it right on the head there.

T: They had English speaking interrogators there?

V: They talked broken German, but we could understand them, the questions they asked us. Fact is, one of the guards we got then, he talked real good English. His name was Willy, we called him Willy, I don’t know what his last name was, but he was compassionate. He helped us through this ordeal wherever he could. He had been a clothing merchant before the war, he'd been over in the United States, in New York, and he went back in 1939 or 1940, and then they put him in the army, the German Army, and then he could wounded. So then they made a POW guard out of him. He was a baseball fan, he knew about the New York Yankees, and he knew quite a bit about the stateside here. He’d talk to us, but he couldn’t fraternize, he had to watch out because there were other guards there that had an eye on him. Especially one of them, we used to call him the big stoop, he thought he was going to succeed Hitler when Hitler was through, the way he talked. So he was kind of a hardboiled one. Then the other three were younger fellows, probably eighteen or nineteen, maybe they weren't even that old.

T: These two older guys, what do you mean by older?

V: Well, this Willy said he was twenty-nine, I think, at the time. We called him old because we were all younger. And the other fellow, just looking at him I’d say he was probably close to thirty-two, maybe older.

T: Now at this time you were just about twenty-eight years old yourself, born in 1917. Were you older than the men in your platoon?

V: No. I was older than some of them. I had some guys in there that were in the thirties, thirty-five, because several of them had been Army men before the service, Regular Army guys. I remember there were about three of them that were older than me, and then some of them were, they came in, they were just replacements that were just out of high school.

T: Some real age difference then.

V: Yes, there was. The two fellows that got injured, they were just young fellows. One was from Michigan, and the other one from Florida, I believe. They had just
graduated from high school the spring before that, so they were just eighteen, nineteen years old. But physically, the guys [in their] middle twenties stood it better than the real older ones, and better than the younger ones. They seemed to have a little more, I don’t know, a little more physical stamina or something.

T: That’s interesting. So not the eighteen, nineteen year olds.

(1, A, 140)

V: No. The middle twenties. I suppose they’d been around a little bit more, and didn’t take as many chances. And they knew how to take care of themselves. We had this one fellow, and this is before we got into combat very much, he’s just (**), he just sat around so much he finally froze his feet. So he was on the way back to England and the rest of us were going up to the front. We didn’t have that kind of equipment and clothing, and we told him, “You can’t just, in this kind of weather, you got to keep moving around, you can’t sit around, you’re going to freeze.” And he did, he froze his feet. And he was gone.

And then our lieutenant, our officer, he got an artillery shell too close to him and he got deaf, so he wasn’t even with us. And another sergeant and myself were the head of the platoon then, you see.

T: You started a several month long endurance march, in a way. The command post and pillbox you spoke about, how much time has gone by during this?

V: See, we got captured, like I say, around five in the afternoon, and then they took us back in the pillbox, and we were there probably an hour, maybe longer, two hours. Because I remember we walked back to this command post, I’d say it was probably two or three miles, it was dark then when we moved back. When we got in this pillbox, we got in there and they had an eighty-eight [mm gun] artillery piece standing by and they wanted us to move that. They wanted it moved and they couldn’t do it alone. But we refused to do it because according to Geneva Convention we didn’t have to. So they forgot about that and they didn’t bother us anymore.

T: You refused to do it, and they didn’t push you.

V: No, they didn’t push us. I don’t know what their intentions were, what happened in that pillbox, whether they went back there or what. Because they just left it then, as far as I know there wasn’t anybody left in there. Except those two injured guys. Whether they went back there again or not, I don’t know, no way to know.

T: Because you left it, right?

V: Yes. I suppose it was close to midnight, and then we marched out again from the command post to another command post and then we were interrogated again. Then they got a little rougher with us, the next day, when they interrogated us again.
T: When you say a little rougher, what do mean exactly?

V: Well, they pushed you a little. They didn’t, I can’t say they did it to some of the guys like the Japs did, pulling their fingernails out and that kind of stuff. They didn’t do that, but they threatened us, and they tried to push us. But they already knew as much about it as we did, so...

T: Any physical abuse of prisoners, or yourself or others, that you witnessed?

V: Nothing more than, you know how it is, you get a bunch of guys together and you’re going to stretch out your, you’re going to do as much as you can to hinder them. You still fight them all the way, even when you’re a prisoner you’re still fighting them. Of course you get out of line too much and you get a rifle butt between your shoulder blades. I remember one night when they, we had marched along... Now I’m kind of getting ahead of the story. Are we going to stop at this other command post?

T: Let’s. Now you said the interrogation was a little rougher. Same kind of questions, or different?

(1, A, 183)

V: Pretty much the same kind of questions. Just routine is what it was. At that point in the game I don’t think it made that much difference to them anymore. But I think it was a routine thing, and for the early part of the war I can see where they needed that information but they, they knew more about it than we did, so...

T: Did that surprise you that they knew that much?

V: Well, it did, yes. Although when we first got overseas there we had our passwords and everything, and you had to, every day you did something different. Like we had a division mess line, and you wore a certain equipment, you made a little change every day so you could recognize someone who was out of line [German infiltrator]. And they caught a couple of guys there, Germans in American clothes. They caught them in line. Sure, they were spies that were trying to pick up information.

But then we got to this second pillbox as it was getting daylight. That was probably one of the longest days of my life. We started off at four that morning that we got captured in, and we went all night and all the next day before we stopped. Then we started marching out of that second command post, we left there. There were twenty-eight of us then, and they gave us seven loaves of bread. They told us we had to get to a camp, and it would take about three days to get there, and that would be our rations for the twenty-eight of us. It’d be seven men on [each of the] four loaves.
T: So you had to ration that bread for what they said was going to be three days.

V: That’s right. And it was almost a week before we got there. It was longer than three days. In the meantime we had to start scrounging our own food, because they didn’t, that’s all the rations they had for us. We’d go through a little town or something and some of the civilians would pass out food to us. Once in a while you’d get to stop in a town and they’d cook some soup or something up for you, but other than that we got once in a while a can of meat.

(1, A, 205)

T: You mentioned civilians here. You marched a long time, went through cities and villages, little towns.

V: They were quite close together. Frequently you’d be going through a town.

T: What kind of reception did you get when you saw civilians, or they saw you?

V: It was varied receptions. Once in a while you’d get a little compassion, people that were older, people would be out there, especially older women would hand you out an apple or a potato or a raw egg or something. Next time you’d probably get poked at with a stick or spit at. You never really knew what kind of… Some of those people, some of them were compassionate and some of them were still upset.

T: Can you remember a specific incident where you feel you were helped or given something by someone, in a town?

V: Oh, I’d say we were helped quite frequently. I mean, that’s about all we got to live on, what we picked up, what we could scrounge someplace. I know one time we ended up in an old barn and we all sat down and started milking the cows, squirting the milk in your hand and licking that up. Of course they came then, and I can still remember that just like it happened yesterday, the guards came hollering in there, and there were about a dozen cows or more in that barn, we started milking and they started hollering, they says, “Krank, krank.” That means sick [in German], the cows are sick, they didn’t want us to get the milk from the cows. But we didn’t pay any attention to that, whether the cows were krank or not, because we still got the milk out of them.

T: Among this group of twenty-eight men, now it was the same twenty-eight guys the whole time, right?

(1, A, 235)

V: Yes, except one guy did escape. I don’t know if he got back to the lines or what, but we were being strafed one day by our own planes, P-47s [Thunderbolt single-seat fighter plane]. We could tell those P-47s before they even got close to us by the
sound of the motors. They were strafing the German lines and of course we were right in with the Germans. We were along the road and there was a culvert, I suppose about a three foot culvert, a round culvert with water in the bottom of it. We all crawled in that for cover except this one guy, and his butt end was sticking out and he had a machine gun bullet through the pocket of his jacket. He says, “Boys, I’ve had it; I’ll be gone tonight.” And he was—he wasn’t there the next morning. But it would have been simple when you were attacked like that, because the guards took cover too, they didn’t stand out there. A lot of time we could have gone.

The Germans had holes dug along the road, they called them Fliegerholes. Flieger means flyer in German, and when they’d get strafed like that they’d jump in those foxholes. We’d get in there and they’d jump in on top of us, or we’d jump in on top of them. After it was all over with you’d be out and going again. So at those kind of times it would be no problem escaping, but where in the heck would you go? There was minefields all over. At that time the older German men were carrying guns, the kids were carrying guns. They’d just delight in shooting a GI prisoner. They would have shot you in a minute.

T: So in a way the guards with you protected you, as much as anything.

V: Some did, it’s true.

T: You’re walking with twenty-eight guys, and it’s the same guys.

V: Yes.

T: Do you make friends in this group?

V: You do, sure. You help each other out. Fact is, I had a copy of the New Testament, we were all issued that when we got overseas there, and I had a copy of that. We kept passing that around, they’d want to read it. We had to kind of keep it away from the guards so they wouldn’t see it. However, I’m sure they knew we had it. I can be quite sure they did, because we would be reading it. But they never took it away from us. When they liberated us, I wish I had made an effort to keep it, but you know things happened so fast that… You know, it was a keepsake thing.

T: With the guys you were with, did you feel in any way responsible, even as a POW, for the guys in your platoon?

V: Well (pauses three seconds), we all did. We felt responsible for each other pretty much. The fact that I was a sergeant, I don’t think I felt any more responsible than the other guys did. We were all in it together, you know? And the fact that I was a sergeant, and there was another sergeant with me, we didn’t get any better treatment. We were just one of the boys, like the rest of them.

(1, A, 280)
T: Were the highest ranking NCO there?

V: No, there was one higher rank than I was. He had more time in, I was assistant platoon sergeant really, and he ranked higher than I did.

T: Did rank matter as you were marching?

V: No, not really. Because we didn’t even have chevrons on, they didn’t know what rank we were. If we didn’t tell them, they wouldn’t know. Because we took our chevrons off when they captured us. They didn’t know if we were private, or sergeant, or... Except when they interrogated us, then you had to give your name, rank and serial number.

T: So at that point then they would know.

V: Yes.

T: The men you walked with, did you have anybody, or more than one guy, who you felt you depended on or were closer to than anybody else?

V: I think so. I had a fellow, he was a staff sergeant, he was from Colorado, and we kind of looked after each other pretty much. It was pretty much that way all the way. His name was Harrington.

T: Like with you and Harrington, how can you help each other when you’re going through something like this?

V: Well, if you got somebody to hand you out something to eat, or something to share with them, you know, when you’re walking like that there’s days you felt better than you did other days. So you kind of lift their spirits up and keep them going. And of course we run short of water—you can get along without food a lot longer than you can get along without water.

T: Was water in short supply?

V: It was. We even drank water out of the ditches; sometimes we had to. But a lot of times, though, we’d go through these little towns and there’d be a pump out there. Sometimes the pump was dry, you didn’t no water out of it anyway.

T: The food that was supplied by the Germans. What was that, on a daily basis?

V: (laughs) Daily basis, there wasn’t such a thing as daily basis. You got something one day, and the next day you didn't get any. When you did get something you had to ration it out. There were those Red Cross parcels we were supposed to get, but the guards had those. Fact is, the guards, they weren’t over nourished either. They
were short on their rations. But they did have Red Cross parcels they were eating, that we were supposed to get.

T: You could see the Red Cross parcels?

V: Oh sure, they had them tied on their bicycles. They all had bicycles. And a lot of times we’d only have two guards on us, or three, a couple of guys would ride ahead. They said they tried to arrange for food and stuff, which they did. I think they did at times, they tried to get us something to eat. Where they could. Because we had to have *something* to eat. You know, you can live a long time on a small amount of food, but the thing is, you were walking all the time. And then of course we all got the diarrhea so bad. That was...

T: Did you suffer from that?

V: We did, yes. Especially under those conditions. A lot of times you’re walking along and you had to go to the bathroom, you couldn’t even go. They’d just keep you going. It got to be pretty, kind of messy.

T: In this group you kind of moved with the German army as it retreated.

V: Exactly. You got it right on the ball. That’s what we did, we were with the Germans, we were in the German army *(laughs)*. Same as being in the German army, moving...

T: So you could literally observe the German combat soldier up close, then.

*(1, A, 340)*

V: Yes we could. They’d have trucks and tanks moving along, and we’d be walking right along in line with them. However there was times when they tried to separate us, and we stop for a day and then we’d probably walk at night, and we’d be by ourselves. But then, as they were moving back, eventually you’d meet up with a bunch of them again. And not just them, because the civilians were moving in with horses and what, I even saw a horse and a cow hooked together on an old wagon.

T: Sounds like the situation on the roads was chaotic.

V: Exactly.

T: Describe that. What kind of chaos did you see on the roads?

V: Everything was moving. Every different kind of a vehicle was moving, bicycles and what not. Some people even were carrying some of their belongings along, what they could carry. That’s what it amounted to.
T: Were you concerned that—

(1, A, 365)

End Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

T: Were you concerned, being that close to German soldiers, that something what happen, that they would do something to you? Did you feel safe?

V: No, you never felt safe. One instance, we were marching right on the tail end of the German, I guess you could call it a convoy, but they were moving and we were the back end of it, and we got strafed. What happened, four guys, four young SS guys come along on motorcycles, brand new motorcycles, and being we were on the end they stopped us and they talked to the guards and they wanted to shoot the whole bunch of us, right there. They insisted on it. Well, the guards with us, Willy was trying to talk them out of it, he says, “That would certainly be foolish, the war’s about, it’s going to be over soon.” Well they stalled them long enough that finally a P-47 came over, strafing the line, and they took off then. That was just by the grace of god that we got saved there, because they were intent on shooting us.

T: Could you understand German?

V: Some, yes.

T: So you could observe, hear this conversation going on.

V: Well, we had a guy, he was from Kansas City, he acted as interpreter and he understood every word of it.

T: He could tell the rest of you what was being said.

V: You betcha, yes he could. And his face was as white as a snow bank when they were talking, because he knew what was up, you know. I could understand, why we heard it all the time, so you kind of get so you could, and being German I did know a little German anyway. My folks, my dad used to talk German, but I never was [fluent.] But a lot of stuff I could understand, you know.

T: Was that in a sense the closest call you feel you had?

V: I would say that would be, as far as being shot, although we had quite a few close calls when artillery would come in. I know one time we were just behind a German tank, and this is our own artillery, they got that one tank, and it wasn’t more than fifty yards in front of us. I can still see the Germans crawling out of that tank there, they were on fire, and the tank was out of fuel, it couldn’t move, so it was just sitting there.
One night we walked, well we had walked all that day, we’d kind of rested in the daytime, we started out about eight at night and we walked and it was about eleven and we come into a little town. Every one of these little towns they had what they called a Burgermeister’s square, the mayors of those towns are called Burgermeisters [in German], and that’s kind of a place where they have their town meetings. So we stopped there and we sat down along the building. Well, we kind of rebelled and we said, “That’s enough, we’re not going any more tonight, we got to rest.” The guards, kind of agreed, I suppose they were kind of getting wore out, too, so we sat down along the edge of the building. Pretty soon there was a colonel, a German colonel come out of one of the buildings there and he barked out a few commands to those guards. We said we weren’t going to move, but the guards slipped their bayonets on the end of their rifles, so away we went together.

(1, B, 033)

T: These guards, you’ve mentioned five guards. You kept the same guards?

V: Yep, all the way through.

T: The whole time?

V: Yes.

T: You’ve mentioned a couple by name, or by nickname. A couple older, and three younger, I think you mentioned.

V: Yes, that’s it.

T: How much interaction did you have with, say, those three younger guards? Was there much communication?

V: No, not with them there wasn’t. Like I said, they were just doing their job. They never really bothered us, either, but they were doing their job. They all carried rifles and rode bicycles. Then when they wanted a rest, they didn’t want to ride a bicycle, they’d make us push the bicycle. But we couldn’t ride it. We’d have to push it for them, and they’d walk along.

We took the bicycle, we tried to kick a few spokes out of the wheels, we’d get by with it. You did everything you could to try and harass them a little bit, but you learned you don’t know how far you could go with something like that.

T: So there’s a line, in a way?

V: That’s right. Whatever you can get away with, you do, but you better not... Because they were watching you, you know.
T: Were there differences of opinion among the prisoners? Twenty-eight guys can have different opinions on all sorts of things, how much to resist, whether to try to escape?

V: Yes, there’s different opinions. We had one fellow, younger fellow, he was from Battle Creek, Michigan, and he’d harass those guards, he’d try to harass the civilians, but he would take some punishment for it, too. But it didn’t seem to bother him that much. We’d go through these, we’d come to these little towns, sometimes he’d try to make a noise like a dive bomber coming in, trying to scare them. The guards would be on him all the time. He resisted in his way.

T: A younger guy?

V: Yes, he was eighteen, nineteen years old (*laughs*). He didn’t know any better.

T: Was that a problem for everyone else, him acting like that?

V: We had to kind of calm him down once in a while, because he could get us all in trouble.

T: These two older guards. One spoke English, you said, had lived in the United States. Was it possible to sort of, I don’t know, feel for this kind of a guy who was in a situation like this?

V: I don’t if you could say that we liked him, but we knew he was our savior. He was doing everything he could to help us. He’d been over in this country, and he understood us and we could understand him a little better, I think. He knew, why kill us or torture us, because this war, it’s going to end soon.

*(1, B, 060)*

T: Mentioning that the war was going to end, clearly the German army was retreating, you could tell by the direction you were moving.

V: You could just tell by the countryside that everybody was going, you know, moving. It didn’t make sense, because where would they go? The Russians were coming in from the other way. But they thought they had a chance to win it yet, I suppose.

T: Was it possible to get any kind of news really about how the war was going? Or was it more the rumors and situations you picked up?

V: We didn’t get any news at all, because we had no radios or anything. We picked up a little from the guards, like when President Roosevelt passed away, I think it was April.
T: It was April 12.

V: They told us, the guards told us, the story they give us, “Now you lost your leader, you’ll never get home, everything is kaputt.” That was their favorite saying, was kaputt. In the first place, we didn’t know if we should believe them or not, whether Roosevelt had died, and that kaputt stuff, we knew better than to believe that. But it was true, he had passed away.

T: You mentioned being strafed, and more than once.

V: Oh yes, more than once. They [the planes] come down the line, and they’re strafing with their machine guns and you get off the road. They’re coming down a straight line, they’re following the road. Of course they’re going to catch somebody. We always managed to get out of the way from them.

There’s places where we could take cover a little easier than others. When they were coming, you never knew what was going to happen, whether you’d get hit or not. You could hear the planes coming, they’d usually go up with the line, bank, and then they’d come down, straight down, either come at you from the front or front the back. Right down the road.

I can still remember those machine gun bullets, you know it depends on the angle they were shooting, how far apart they hit on the road. You could tell, like if they were on more of an angle or a slant, then they [the bullets] were further apart. If they were pretty much on top of you, they were coming pretty straight down.

T: They came pretty close to you then sometimes?

V: Oh yes they did. You betcha. We were lucky a lot of times. As far as that goes, I think it’s an everyday deal, you’re just, in those circumstances you’re just the same as when you’re right in combat all the time. If you get by one day, why you hope you can get by the next day.

(1, B, 088)

T: Would you consider yourself, at that time, a fairly optimistic person, as far as getting through this ordeal, that had no known end to it?

V: I didn’t, I don’t think any of us really gave up. We were always under the impression that we were going to be liberated here, soon. But soon was longer than we thought it was going to be. We figured it wouldn’t be so long, but it did come to an end. Well, we got disgusted, and we were sick, and we lost weight and all that, but they all hung in there. We all figured we was going to make it someday. And we did. Straight from the Lord, I’ll tell you.

T: You’ve mentioned faith a couple of times. Were you a particularly religious person before you went in the service, before you went overseas?
V: No, not particularly, not more than anybody else I don’t think. I was brought up in a religious home, and went to Sunday school and church and so on, maybe more so than some of them, but not more than others.

T: How do you feel your faith helped you during your POW time?

V: It helped a lot. It helped a lot.

T: How would you describe the support you got from your faith?

V: Every time you had a close call, you knew that the Lord was with you, that it could have gone either way, so you figured, the Lord was with me. That’s the way you look at, I guess.

T: Do you feel, if you look at yourself when you got back from the service, back from Europe, was your faith any different? Permanently changed, or not really?

V: I think yes. I think I had the faith before I went in, but I think it increased it. It certainly, you can see where it helps, that’s for sure. Yes, it increases it.

T: How about your health? Did you lose weight during these three months?

V: Yes, we all lost weight. Fact is, I think when I was captured I weighed about the same as I do now, about 182 or 185 pounds, somewhere in there. And when we were liberated it was down about 140 or something. So we all lost weight.

(1, B, 115)

T: The food, you’ve mentioned, was kind of hit or miss. Kind of whatever you could get.

V: Exactly. That’s what it was. Whatever you could scrounge up. We never got any stable rations or anything. Like I say, once in a while we would get, the Germans are great on canned meat. They’d give you a can of meat, but you start dividing that up, why that don’t amount to much of anything.

T: Were you ever marching with more than the twenty-eight men you’ve talked about?

V: Only when we left that camp I told you about, the one near Frankfurt [am Main]. Other than that, we never marched other than marching with the German army, or civilians. So just that Monday, one day, because Tuesday then they took us out.

T: It’s amazing, you kept the same group of guys.
V: Yes, it is. One escaped. And we’re not sure whether he made it or not. But he did kind of carry a chip on his shoulder all the time. I kind of looked for him to probably try to escape sometime or another.

T: What was his problem, the way you saw it?

V: (laughs) Well, I guess he just didn’t like the idea of being prisoner, which none of us did. Evidently he figured he could probably make it back. There’s a lot of them that tried, and some of them made it. Reuben Weber from here in town, he escaped.

T: He didn’t make it though.

V: He got picked up a couple of times, and thrown in solitary confinement.

T: Did it ever cross your mind? Here you are, marching down the road, you could probably get into the bushes.

V: It crossed our mind, yes.

T: What held you back?

V: I guess what held us back is that we thought we were better off not to do it. We’d have a better chance staying with them than trying to escape. You’re in unknown country, no maps, you don’t know where the minefields are, you don’t know who’s carrying a gun. And you wearing an American military uniform. And then you look at it from the other way, we’ve got these guards, and we thought we were getting close to the end.

T: Kind of playing the odds, and figuring the best odds of surviving are stay with the guards and just wait it out.

V: That’s exactly right. That was our best chance.

(1, B, 145)

T: As you were marching, where did you spend the nights? Some nights I know you marched, but when you didn’t, where did you sleep?

V: We spent quite a few nights right out under the stars. But they would manage to get us an old barn or an old shed. We never did get into a house anyplace, but we did get into buildings now and then, and get into the heavy wooded areas. We had four blankets that we carried, and that was for seven men. Everything was for seven for some reason or another. I can remember that we’d lay down, we laid on the ground, we’d alternate, the guy sleeping on the outside would go to the middle every hour, you’d alternate, to get the body heat to keep yourself warm.
T: It’s cold yet, isn’t it, it’s still winter.

V: We were in the southern part of Germany there, where it wasn’t like in the forests up in Belgium, where it got real cold. And this was March and April, where it started to warm up a little bit. It was cold, but it wasn’t the forty below zero stuff. And we had rain, too. One night I remember we laid out, we were laying out on the ground, and when we woke up in the morning we were laying in water about an inch deep. We didn’t even wake up, we slept right through the darn rain.

T: So exhausted you could sleep through a rain storm.

V: That’s exactly right.

T: Did you have problems with lice or fleas, any kind of bugs?

V: I’m glad you brought that up. Yes, we did, we got lice when we were in that camp. That wasn’t real early, that wasn’t real late [in our POW march]. We’d been out a couple, three weeks I think when we hit that camp.

T: Just that brief stop in that camp and –

V: -- we got lice.

T: How did that affect your daily life?

V: (laughs) Well, every time you stopped and had a chance you’d be picking lice off each other, you never got rid of them, but you got pretty miserable. They itch on your skin. And of course if they get too bad, like on your belt line and that, that’ll create sores and stuff. So we had those babies with us all the time.

(1, B, 170)

T: So in addition to the lack of food and the haphazard sleeping conditions, you’ve got lice on top on top of that.

V: As far as that goes, I’ll truthfully say we didn’t get tortured like those people in Japan did, people that were like put into cages and walk about three steps, we didn’t get that kind of treatment. The worst part of it was, we didn’t get nothing to eat and then no medical attention at all. If you were sick, you were sick, that’s all. That damned diarrhea, that was the worst part.

T: Did it come and go, or did you have it pretty consistently?

V: It would come and it went. It was worse some days, and some days it wasn’t so bad. Depends on what you’d get to eat, you know. One guy says, the less you eat, the
less chance you had of having diarrhea. If you ate a lot, you had a better chance of having diarrhea.

T: What do you think was the most difficult aspect of those months marching, for you personally?

V: Another thing that kind of bothers you, the fact is, your folks at home have no idea what’s happened to you. My folks got a notice first that I was just missing, missing in action somewhere in Germany. Well then sometime in March then they got a notice that I was a prisoner. They didn’t know at all. It wasn’t like it is nowadays, with our news the way it is—some of these people knew it before the people overseas did.

T: So did you think much about home, and how people were worrying about you?

V: Yes, that’s on your mind, you know, wondering about… But like I said, we had that hope that it’s not going to last that much longer. Like these airmen that were shot down in the early part of the war, they had a couple of years, some of them.

T: In that sense, did you feel yourself almost fortunate, in a way?

V: In that sense, absolutely.

T: Vernon, how did you experience your own liberation?

V: That was real sudden. The couple of days before we went past Dachau, and we were going east of Dachau, and we were outside of a little town where there was a lumber yard. There was lumber piled up there, two by fours I think. We were all, this was about four in the morning, before it got daylight in the morning, we were laying along the edge of these lumber piles, for shelter. And all at once, we heard shooting, all hell broke loose. The 12th Armored had come in from the west, behind us, and there was some Germans out in front of us, and they had a little battle out there. So they were shooting, well, then these guys come in there and they told us to lay low, to stay where we were.

T: Where were your five German guards?

V: Gone (snaps fingers). Never saw them again. They sprouted wings and flew away. We got to looking for them, and they were gone. We were looking for this one guy, but all five of them just melted away. Now this happened about daylight, and they captured about fifty Germans out in front of us, and they just held them. They told us to just stay where we were, because there was a British outfit coming in behind them. It was a couple of hours, and then they came in, a British captain and there was probably about a dozen of them. They took us back away to a little schoolhouse, and this was on 29 April [1945], and we stayed there. They brought in food for us, and they deloused us, brought in some different clothes. We were there
until 7 May, seven or eight days, and 7 May they picked us up in a C-47 cargo plane. Fact is there wasn’t even an airfield there, they landed right out in a pasture, took off right off the ground. We come into the Reims the day they were signing the armistice, so the planes were really flying around there. That was a busy place then.

(1, B, 228)

T: That week after you had been liberated—how did you spend that time? Doing what?

V: Well, (chuckles) rejoicing, I guess. All of us were still together. They left us food and stuff there. I can’t remember whether they came back then and brought us some more or not, but I know that we stayed there until the seventh. They deloused us, and so there was other people there then, of course. These were British taking care of us.

T: Was there any kind of questions there, debriefing, about who you were and where you had come from?

V: No, nothing there that I recall. After we got back to Paris there, to Camp Lucky Strike, then they did a little, they asked us questions and stuff.

T: What do you recall being asked there by the Americans, at Camp Lucky Strike? What did they want to know?

V: Not too much. What kind of treatment we had and where we were at. That kind of stuff. The war was over then, so I mean they had more information on it, you know.

T: Were they at all puzzled by the fact that you had never been in a camp?

V: I don’t recall that either. There were more of us that didn’t either, that never really got to a camp. You know, there was even people that were only captured a week or two that they never really got captured, they were separated from their unit is what they were. They weren’t prisoners.

T: At the end it was quite chaotic.

V: Yes.

T: Did you take a ship back to the USA?

V: Yes. We took a little Liberty Ship, there was only about four hundred of us on the ship, four or five hundred, if I remember right.

T: All ex-POWs, were you?
V: Pretty much, because when I got on the ship then, about the first one I met was a guy from Little Falls, he was a flyer, a co-pilot or a navigator.

T: Did you know him?

V: Oh sure, I knew him.

T: Just by chance you ran into him on that ship, among all those guys?

V: Yes.

T: On the ship like that, with other POWs, did you find yourself at all comparing experiences, in a way?

V: Oh sure. Everybody had their own little story to tell, where they were and what they did and so on. (pauses three seconds) But I think more than that was, we were so darned glad to be out of there and on our way home that you were thinking about what you were going to do when you get back rather than what you had been through.

T: So thinking forward as opposed to back.

V: Exactly.

T: Once you got back to the States, how long was it before you got back to Little Falls to see your family?

V: Well, if I remember right, we landed in New York on 12 June [1945], I think it was Camp Kilmer or Camp Shanks, wherever it was. Anyway, I took a plane back, not a plane, a train, and I got in Minneapolis on 15 June. I got off at the train station there, and I had a cousin that lived in Minneapolis, he was a manager of an A&P [grocery] store. So I got in contact with him, and I stayed with him there overnight. Then the next day I got on the bus and I headed for Little Falls.

(1, B, 281)

T: Did your folks know you were coming?

V: No, they didn’t know I was coming. (phone ringing) Then when I got to Little Falls, after I got off the bus, because I took the bus from Minneapolis to Little Falls, then I met some guy that give me a ride home. So I got home about, oh I think it was about one o’clock in the afternoon or something like that.

T: Talk about getting back home. You’ve been away for a long time, you’ve been through a lot. What happened when you got home?
V: Well, I just kind of took it easy for a week or two, then they sent us down to Hot Springs, Arkansas for some, you know, they kind of rested us up, and doctors looked at us.

T: A number of POWs were down at that location.

V: All POWS, yes.

T: So how long were you here in Little Falls before you went down to Arkansas?

V: I got home in June, and I think I was home until a little after the Fourth of July.

T: Your folks were both still alive then?

V: Yes.

T: And how many brothers and sisters did you have?

V: I had three brothers.

T: Who was at home when you got home?

V: My youngest brother was home, my oldest brother lived in Milwaukee. My brother older than me, he had been wounded over in France just before I got there. He got wounded early in, well, right after the [Normandy] invasion. July or someplace in there. When I got overseas he was back in England, in a hospital. When I got home he was out at Denver, in Fitzsimmons Hospital.

T: How much did your folks, and your one brother who was at home, how much did they want to know about your POW experience?

V: Not much. They never asked any questions, and I never told them anything, so... (trails off) It was kind of a secret when we got home, you know, nobody mentioned too much. They knew I had been a prisoner, but they never questioned anything, you know.

T: Did your folks ask you, for example, about being a combat soldier, what that was like?

V: Not too much. We didn’t talk about it, so they never bothered to ask about it. (pauses three seconds) I had one cousin here in Little Falls, and he wanted to know quite a bit. He was kind of concerned. We never said much about it.

T: Do you think, with your folks, that was more that they didn’t ask or that you didn’t tell?
V: I think that was a little of both. They never asked and we never talked. So that’s it. Fact is, my boys, they pretty much grew up before they knew I was a prisoner even. My own sons. *(pauses three seconds)* They knew, they knew about me being a prisoner of war, but there was never anything said about it. They never questioned me about it and I never told them.

T: Kids growing up, though, sometimes they ask questions.

V: Yes, but there was never much mention about it. Seems like it was that way with all the POWs. None of them really opened up at all. Fact is, after they got that POW Protocol in 1985, then we got a little psychology, a little treatment and that kind of stuff, and, you know, it helped. You see, the only time, if you got with somebody that’d had the same experience, you would talk about it. Otherwise you wouldn’t.

*(1, B, 335)*

T: And was that the same for you there, after the war?

V: Yes, right. When you found somebody that probably you knew would believe you anyway, because some of those things, you know... *(trails off)* There’s people today that still believe that, POWs, that was the easy way out.

T: Have you heard that from people, that you took the easy way out?

V: Oh yes, I’ve heard that. POWs took the easy way out, classify them all together, they all took the easy way out.

T: How do you respond to something like that?

V: Just ignore it.

T: Isn’t that hard?

V: *(pauses three seconds)* Well, yes, you figure if they don’t know any better, why forget it.

T: It seems interesting that, you get back home from the service, you’ve been away a number of years, it seems like it would be a very difficult thing to not talk about when you’re around family or friends.

V: No. I guess you were just so tickled, so happy to be home that you just kind of forgot about the past. That’s more or less what I wanted to do. Things seemed to be so nice after you got home, and so much of a change, why think about the past?
T: So when did it change for you? Because here we are, talking about it, like it’s nothing for you.

V: I think the big change for all of us was when we joined the POW organization and they had this POW Protocol, they called us in and asked us questions, and we told them our story. That’s when it changed. But that wasn’t until the 1980s, 1984 or 1985, somewhere in there.

T: That’s forty years after.

V: Yes, that’s right. Now I go to schools, a lot of us go around to different places and talk. I couldn’t do that, I wouldn’t have been able to do that.

T: When you say that you wouldn’t have been able to do it, is it –

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

Betty Bigalke joins the conversation.

T: I wanted to ask, when you got back you said the talking about your POW experience wasn’t something that happened right away, with your family, your siblings, even with your own boys as they were growing up. But you said that changed in the 1980s.

V: Right.

T: I’m wondering about your wife. Here’s someone, you’ve been married to Betty since 1948, how much was that a topic of conversation in your own relationship?

V: (to Betty) You can probably answer that.

B: He would get distant, you know, he’d be thinking real distantly but he would never really say anything to me about it.

T: When you were married in 1948, did you know Vernon had been a POW?

B: Yes I did.

T: How much did you know at that point?

B: Well, he told about how they slept out on the ground and different things, and how he had gone through a lot, but you know he just went about his work and making a living. We were so darned busy on the farm that it wasn’t a big subject.

T: Was it something you were curious to know more about, or knew well enough to leave alone?
B: He didn’t really give me too many answers. He was pretty quiet about it.

T: No, I guess I, I was busy making a living. See, we farmed and I worked out and we had four sons and I guess we were both so cotton-picking busy that… *(trails off)*

T: So you knew, but it wasn't something that was, that you talked about at the dinner table.

B: No. No, we never did. But I knew that he had gone through a lot, that it had really hurt him.

T: Vernon himself has mentioned that in the 1980s that things began to change for him as far as being willing to speak. Did you notice that, too?

B: Yes. It was a wonderful group, we’d get together and I could see how much he could, how relieved he was that he could talk about it. And that ex-prisoner of war group is just so wonderful, they seem so close to each other. It’s a lovable group.

T: Do you find with other wives that you have things to talk about?

B: You bet.

T: You compare your experiences?

B: You bet. And we all have had the same...

T: The same in what way?

B: Well, you know, *(pauses three seconds)* distant, sometimes they’re distant, sometimes you get blamed for things that you didn’t do. You know, different things that you know that this comes from being a prisoner of war. And they all had the same experience.

*(2, A, 027)*

T: Do you find, if you talk to wives of prisoners of war of the Japanese, that there is still common ground?

B: It’s about the same—they were all prisoners. And they lost their freedom. I know the Japanese prisoners went through a lot more, but they [POWs of Germans] went through plenty, too. There is no comparison; they’ve all gone through a lot. When you lose your freedom, you lose everything.
T: So it’s been something that, in the last fifteen or twenty years, has been easier for you to talk about with Vernon than it was for, it sounds like, the first thirty or so years.

B: You know, it’s terrible to say, but we were so busy that it just didn’t make much difference one way or the other. In those days we were so busy making a living and supporting our sons and taking care of them.

V: I think another thing, of course, the POWs are in the minority. There isn’t that many of us, so that’s why you don’t get talking about it. There’s so few of us. But when we get together, then we would talk about it, especially now. But, like, we got four of us here in Little Falls, and we’re just a minority, so... (trails off)

T: Well even after the war, in the 1940s and 1950s, you knew that there were other POWs in Little Falls, right?

V: Oh yes.

T: Did you search each other out? Or when you saw each other, was it a subject you talked about?

V: No, well that’s the thing, you know, those people around, you never knew they were POWs until now, until recently. I never knew Reuben Weber [of Little Falls] was a POW, and we went to the same church together for years.

T: So you knew this guy, but you didn’t know he was a POW?

V: Right. I never knew he was a POW. Like John Schumacher [of Little Falls], I knew he was because I worked with him and so on.

T: And Schumacher knew you were as well?

V: Yes.

T: So was that something that, when you saw John, ever came up as a topic of conversation?

V: Not too much. See when I worked over at Camp Ripley he worked out there, so I used to help once in a while in his department there. We’d discuss it a little bit, that we were, but we never really got into anything, you know.

T: As far as talking to school groups, that’s something you say you have done in the past.

V: Oh yes.
T: Do you feel like that’s something you could have done back in the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s?

V: No, I don’t think so. I don’t think I could have done it then. I couldn’t talk about it. (pauses three seconds) It gets kind of hard now sometimes, I get a little emotional, but I can get through it. But before I don’t think I would have, until we got organized as a POW organization.

T: How long have you been a member of American ex-POWs?

(2, A, 054)

V: About 1985 or 1986 we got started. See, I was working at Camp Ripley then.

T: So about twenty years.

V: Right, yes.

T: How has that organization helped you, do you think?

V: Oh, it’s helped me a lot. It kind of helps you, the fact that you can talk a little bit about it and it isn’t such a distant thing. It helps.

B: And you know people believe you.

V: Yes, there’s been times that, they didn’t come right out and tell you, but they made it sound like, boy, you just… (trails off) But I’ve heard people say right out that POWs took the easy way out. Or people said that, just because he was a POW he thinks he should have better, more than anybody else. Which I never give that a thought, you know.

T: Another question, when you got back from the service, 1945, 1946, how much did you deal with dreams or even nightmares from your POW experience?

V: Well, not an awful lot, although I still deal with that some, you know. We lived right close to Camp Ripley there, and they’d get to firing at night sometimes and it would get pretty nerve-racking. So there are still things… (trails off)

B: Flashbacks.

T: If you think about dreams that you’ve had over the years, is it certain images that come back more than once?

V: Yes, there’s things that I remember, that I remember more than others, that do come back. That’s right. I can still see those guys, those German guys, crawling out
of that tank, on fire, after it got hit by an artillery shell. There’s things that... I can still see those two kids in the pillbox there, the ones we had to leave behind.

T: Has this decreased in frequency over the years?

V: Yes, I think it has. Like anything else, you know, you forget it, it kind of wears off. Like losing a loved one, I guess—as the years go by you kind of forget about it. Not forget about it, but it don’t bother you.

T: Last thing I want to ask you is this: what do you think is the most important way being a POW changed you as a person?

V: I guess it changed the fact that, you realize what freedom is, what it is to not lose your freedom. Because you’ve got no control over anything when you’re a prisoner. As far as being a prisoner, like I said before, you couldn’t even control when you had to go to the bathroom. You’re just, you just lose your freedom, and that’s what it amounts to. You do what you’re told, or you’d better do it, and you can’t do what you want to do. No matter how you look at it, you’ve lost it.

(2, A, 085)

T: As a person, Vernon, when you got back, do you think your folks saw in you that you had changed in some way?

V: Oh, I don’t think an awful lot.

B: I think so. When he got back he was so thin, and he was sick for a whole year afterwards. He had dysentery, and it was a tough time for him. And they [his parents] knew it. When he was a prisoner, when he was reported missing in action, his dad, he could hardly stand it. He couldn’t even stand looking at pictures on the wall, he was so upset. Missing in action, you know, it wasn’t an easy time for them. (to Vernon) But they never said anything to you, I suppose.

V: No, not too much. They never asked any questions, I know that.

B: But they knew that you had been through a lot.

T: I remember you said earlier you focused on today and didn’t think about, or didn’t worry about, the next day.

V: Right. I tell you, I feel so sorry for these people today that have people over in Iraq there. And for prisoners, are we going to see them again, are they going to walk through that door, or what’s happening.

B: You don’t know if they’re being tortured, or if they’re living, or wounded, or whatever. It’s a terrible time for the family, and it’s a terrible time for the prisoner
of war, too. But he (to Vernon) does worry now. He worries about a lot of things.

V: Oh, not any more than anybody else. (Betty and Vernon laugh)

T: That’s the last question I have, so on the record Vernon let me thank you again for your time today, and thank you Betty for lunch today.

END OF INTERVIEW