James Fager was born 20 August 1923 in Minneapolis. After high school he entered the US Army Air Corps.

By late 1944, James had completed training stateside as a tail gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress four-engine heavy bomber, and was stationed in England at Polebrook Airfield, with the 8th Air Force, 351st Bomb Group, 509th Bomb Squadron.

While flying his thirteenth mission, on 17 January 1945, James's plane was shot down; the crippled B-17 crash landed in a frozen field near the Dutch-German border. Over the next three and a half months, James spent time at the Dulag Luft interrogation facility, a transit camp by Nuremberg, and on a forced march, before ending up at the overcrowded Moosburg VII-A camp in Bavaria. This camp was liberated on 29 April 1945.

James returned to the United States and was discharged in late 1945. He was married in 1948 (wife Myrna) and the couple had two children. James had a career as a carpenter. He died on Christmas Day 2005, aged 80.
Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is Monday, 28 March 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project; my name is Thomas Saylor. This evening I’m speaking by telephone with Mr. James Fager, to his home is Cross Lake, Minnesota. First, Mr. Fager, on the record this time, thanks very much for taking time this evening to be part of the POW Oral History Project.

Now, you were born in Minneapolis on 20 August, 1923.

J: Right.

T: You were in the US Army Air Corps during World War II. Were you inducted, or were you a volunteer?

J: I enlisted.

T: By late 1944 you were in England, flying from Polebrook Airfield, with the 8th Air Force, 351st Bomb Group, 509th Bomb Squadron. Specifically, from our earlier conversation I learned that you were a tail gunner on a B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft.

J: At Polebrook there I was quartered in (***) Castle. [Polebrook Airfield information at http://www.polebrook.com/history.htm]

T: Mr. Fager, to get the conversation going here, do you remember the first mission that you flew? The first combat mission, after all that training?

J: It’s scary. And the [anti-aircraft] shells would explode below us, wasn’t much of anything, but they explode above us, they sounded ka-BOOM, and they exploded coming down through us.

T: From your perspective sitting in the tail there, which was more dangerous, anti-aircraft shells exploding below or exploding above?

J: Above. They exploded downhill. Although the mission before, if I have my mind right, we had about 150 holes in the ship. And the one that was closest to me come in under my right rear, up behind my back, across my back, went out by my left shoulder and cut the oxygen line that the ball turret was on. I heard that shoooo00000
(escaping air sound) when that air, that oxygen went out of that line. That was a piece of shrapnel.

T: By the end of 1944, I'm wondering how much of a problem German fighter planes were?

J: None.

T: How often did you use your guns there in the tail?

J: I didn’t. I seen a couple of them way downstairs. We’d be up there and I’d see them way down there, on the ground. But none at all around the plane.

T: And you never used your guns?

J: No.

T: This is about the first interview I’ve done with a tail gunner. How does it look, flying everything backwards, in a sense?

J: It takes something to get used to it, because all your conversations you got to think backwards. Because everything on my right is left to everybody else.

T: So if you’re telling someone, “Look out to your left,” you have to reverse everything.

J: That’s right.

T: And you spend the time by yourself back there, don’t you?

J: All by myself. I sit with my legs tucked under, behind me. I was about five [feet] nine [inches], so it was pretty well cramped. But the ball [turret] gunner was a little smaller; he got it worse.

T: Let’s go to 17 January 1945. We know from the conversation before we started taping that that’s the day your plane [aircraft number 42-31384] was downed. Was that mission that day any different than other missions you flew, as far as the target?

J: No, it was more like a milk run [slang: an easy mission]. There was some flak coming, but not anything abnormal.

T: Where was the mission headed that day, do you recall?

J: Somewhere over in eastern Germany, in that area. That’s where we usually went.
T: But you don’t recall the mission being anything out of the ordinary, or more difficult than usual?

J: No.

T: What brought your plane down? Walk us through what happened to the plane.

(1, A, 50)

J: First we lost one engine, then a little while longer we lost another one. And then we lost the third one. We still had that going when we crashed. We’d dropped our bombs where we were to kind of lighten the load.

T: So you were on the way to the target.

J: Yeah.

T: Now those big B-17s can fly without one engine, or even two, can’t they?

J: You can fly anywhere you want to go, too, but not with one, no.

T: So it was losing the third engine that did it.

J: Yeah.

T: Had flak hit the plane?

J: Nope. No, we hadn’t been hit at all that time.

T: Then what happened to the engines?

J: Long life. They were due for an overhaul.

T: Before we started taping you mentioned that your crew had inherited this plane when you arrived over in England.

J: Yeah.

T: So it was need of repair, and the engines simply—

J: Yeah, after so many hours they pull a minor [repair], and after so many more hours they pull a major [repair], and work them over.

T: So there was no flak or anything that hit these engines, they just—

J: Not this trip. They might have been hit before.
T: When was it apparent to you that the plane might not make it back?

J: When we lost that second one [engine], why then we just didn’t have much hope.

T: What was going through your mind then? I mean, you’ve made twelve missions by now, so you’ve been through this before. What were you thinking of?

J: *(chuckles)* Wondering what was going to happen. But the pilot give us the choice of bailing out or staying with him, and we all decided to stay with him.

T: So he said you could get out if you wanted.

J: Yeah. We could’ve bailed out. But we all decided to stay with him. Pilot and co-pilot up in the cockpit, and all the rest of us back in the radio room. And we had our backs up against the bulkhead, and I was the furthest back on one side, whichever. There was a big radio set behind me, and I had my feet up on that. It stopped so quick it ripped that thing loose from the floor, and if I wouldn’t have had my feet on it, it would have come right over us.

T: So you knew a number of minutes ahead of time that the plane was going to go down, and you could brace yourself in the back there.

J: Oh, we had plenty of time to get in there. You know, we were all, two rows there, on each side of the walkway through.

    I had taken my regular shoes along, but I didn’t have them on. But I got them on before we got out of the plane, while we were coming down. I put the air flight boots over them. Well, they took them [the air flight boots] away, so that got all the warmth away from my feet.

T: So what did you have left on your feet then?

J: Just the regular Army GI shoes.

T: Was anybody hurt when the plane crashed?

J: No. We all walked away.

T: Before this particular day, Mr. Fager, before 17 January, how much thought had you given as a young man to the fact that you might become a POW during this war?

J: Well, I don't think I did *(chuckles)*. A young guy, I was going to make it.

T: Not something that crossed your mind then.

J: No.
T: On the ground there, in north Germany near the Dutch border, you’ve got a different situation now. What was going through your mind as you walked away from the plane?

J: Well, I said to myself, do the best I can. Do as you were told to do. The first thing I can really remember is, they marched us into this town, into this jail. They were hollering out, sieben, sieben, sieben [German: seven, seven, seven]. I didn’t know what that meant. It was a cell, and it had a few slats left on the bunk and that’s all there was for a bed.

T: How soon did the Germans actually get to your plane, after you went down?

J: Oh, a couple minutes.

T: So you didn’t have a chance to go anywhere.

J: No.

T: Who arrived, civilians or people in uniform?

J: This one-armed fellow. His arm was off between the wrist and the elbow. He had a pistol.

T: How close was the town that he marched you to?

J: Well, as I recall, pretty near all the German settlements, they were in clusters, and they farmed out around that. We were right near one of them.

T: Do you remember walking more like fifteen minutes to that, or more like two hours?

J: From our plane to that? (chuckles) Oh, ten minutes. We were pretty close to town there.

T: Did Germans in uniform come to this jail to get you?

J: I think they did, the next day. An overnight there.

T: We know from the information on your German prisoner information card [labeled Kriegsgefangenenkartei] that you went to the Dulag Left interrogation facility, and that you arrived there on the twenty-first [of January], which would be four days later. Did you take a train to get there?

(1, A, 100)
J: We went through towns where the railroad tracks were just spiraled up in the air. The one I happened to be on was a passenger car. I’d see a plumbing stack with a bathtub up on the second floor, and that’s all.

T: Were you with all the members of your crew still?

J: Yeah, but it was so mixed up you didn’t know where you were. It wasn’t sitting; it was standing room only.

T: German civilians on there too, then?

J: No. All prisoners.

T: But it was a passenger train you remember.

J: Yeah.

T: At the Dulag Luft facility, were you questioned at all, interrogated we might say?

J: Yes. You know what? They told me more than I knew (chuckles).

T: Did they ask you any questions?

J: I don’t really recall.

T: How many times were you questioned?

J: Just that one time, as I recall. It might have been more, but I don’t remember.

T: We want to try to figure out how many days you might have stayed at that first camp, the place where you were questioned.

J: It don’t seem like it was more than a week or so.

T: Now when you left the Dulag Luft facility, can you say whether you were marching or on a train or truck, some kind of transport?

J: I think we were marching, but I can’t verify it.

T: Okay. Now you remember going to another camp briefly, before you started marching.

J: Right.

T: This other camp location, what can you remember about that place?
J: It was, I think there was only one or two barracks in the compound I was in, but there was several compounds in the there. And there was Russians in there, and they were hauling a lot of their (***), every day.

T: So more than one compound.

J: Yeah.

T: Americans only in your compound?

J: Yeah.

T: And Russians, and maybe others, somewhere else.

J: Yeah. The Russians were the last ones marched out of the camp.

T: In your compound there, what do you remember about the barracks building that you were housed in?

J: They were pretty good sized; a frame building. It was rectangular. There was only one story, but it covered quite a bit of area.

T: Were there bunks inside?

J: Yeah. There was up and below.

T: So there was one above you and one below you, so three high.

J: Yeah. I was alone in the bunk.

T: That was, now I can't say for sure, but that was probably the Nuremberg camp you mentioned being in. It looks like you were there for maybe a month, or two.

J: I tell you, I spent a lot more time walking than I did in any camp.

T: Let me ask about the marching, which took you to Moosburg, camp VII-A. The marching itself, when you left the camp, do you remember most of the men in your compound leaving with you?

J: Yeah. They vacated that compound entirely. I didn't know very many of them.

T: Had you stuck together with any men from your crew?

J: We got separated somewhat, were scattered.

T: And you hadn't been at that camp all that long.
J: We didn’t have time to make friends.

T: On the march, you marched a long way to get to Moosburg. How do you remember the Germans feeding you on this march? What kind of food did they supply?

J: Sawdust bread and dehydrated potato soup.

T: Do you remember them feeding you every day?

J: No. They didn’t each much better than we did, as far as I could see. Once in a great while we got a Red Cross package.

T: The overnights on the march: where do you remember sleeping?

(1, A, 180)

J: Churches, barns, wherever there happened to be a building around. Most of the time we slept inside of a building.

T: The guards that were along here. Were these guys that came from the camp?

J: No, I don’t know where they come from. But they didn’t want to be in this mess any more than we did. They were elderly men, in their fifties. We were just kids (chuckles). They didn’t want to be in that war any more than we did.

T: Was it possible to talk to them at all?

J: Oh yes. If we could understand the language. And every hour we’d stop for a five minute break, they’d throw the gun down in the ditch and walk away and leave it (chuckles). We’d pick it up and hand it to ’em.

T: How did they treat the prisoners marching with you?

J: As far as I can say, the Wehrmacht [German regular army] treated us good, but the SS, look out.

T: So you had experience with the SS?

J: Well, they’d walk through once in a while.

T: This marching column, were you ever strafed by Allied aircraft?

J: No, and I was thinking about that. I don’t know where the guys got a hold of it, but some of those guys got a hold of some rolls of toilet paper [perhaps rolls of
bandages, or other cloth material. The minute there was a blank hill or anything where they could roll out paper, they’d put “POW” on the hill to identify the column. So we were not strafed at any time. Now we were no formal column marching, we were just strolling along.

T: Did you have a person that you walked with, somebody you talked to while you were walking?

J: Not necessarily all the time, no. As far as my crew members, they got separated; I don’t know where they were.

T: Did you spend most of your time walking by yourself, then?

J: Well, there’s thousands of men there, so you couldn’t be alone.

T: What was going through your mind there during the march?

J: Oh, I don’t know, get it over with. We knew it was not going to be long before it was an end. You could see it by the way things were going.

T: What about the weather?

J: I think that’s where I got a lot of my problems, like with frozen feet. If I could have kept my insulated boots, it would have helped. Just the leather show with just cotton socks there was no insulation. But I kept going.

T: You mentioned earlier that things weren’t going well for the Germans. You’re right, of course, but how did you know that?

J: We didn’t see no airplanes, and the German, the elderly soldier, like our guards, was nothing.

T: Marching along there, did you observe men escaping from this column?

J: Oh yeah. The guards, the SS, would just slap them around and bring them back. Otherwise they’d just disappear.

T: Did it ever cross your mind, to try to get away from the column?

J: No, I didn’t, because I figured I was better off in that column than going out there where the SS was.

T: So you figured the column was a better deal.

J: Right.
T: Even with not much food and cold feet.

J: Yeah.

T: You remember that you got to camp VII-A, at Moosburg, and that was your final location, where you were when you were liberated. What memories do you have of that particular camp?

J: I don’t recall too much. It wasn’t much better than anything else I had seen. By the way, we had a lot more military around.

T: How was your health by that time? You’d been a POW for a number of months.

J: Oh, I’d lost a few pounds, but I was still able to get around.

(1, A, 270)

T: What do you remember about the liberation of that camp?

J: Well, Patton came on the outside of this fence to greet the guys. I was out in the compound there somewhere, I wasn’t that close to him. I didn’t bother to go see him.

T: From Moosburg, where were you evacuated to?

J: [Camp] Lucky Strike.

T: At Le Havre, France. You and a lot of other POWs ended up at Lucky Strike, I think.

J: Yeah.

T: At Camp Lucky Strike, did the military do any kind of debriefing about your POW experience?

J: No. All I remember is, we had chicken one day, and turkey the next, and then chicken. As I recall I kept it down but, I don’t know.

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

J: A Liberty boat. It about scared the daylights out of me. Oh, it’s small, and we were packed in there. They didn’t tell us there was going to be any practice or anything. We were down in the hold, and all of a sudden that ship started to shudder and shake, they were testing and I thought it was going to fall apart. (pauses three seconds) Best thing I ever seen is the Statue of Liberty.
T: Did you take a ship over to Europe, too?

J: No, we flew over. We flew a new plane over.

T: When you got back to the States, did the Army have any debriefing for you there, any kind of physical rehabilitation?

J: Not that I remember.

T: When you got back, were your folks both still alive?

J: My father died when I was a POW.

T: And when did you find out that information?

J: When I got to Chicago. I called my aunt, who lived in Chicago.

T: Was your dad older?

J: Yes, he was quite a bit older.

T: So when you got back to Minnesota, it was just your mother.

J: And then my brother, I don’t remember if he was out of the service yet or not.

T: How many siblings did you have?

J: Just the one brother. No sisters.

T: Now when you saw your mom again, how much did she ask you about your POW experience?

J: I don’t recall that she asked anything.

Myrna Fager: I can’t quite picture her really grilling him anyway, she was that type of person that, if you wanted to talk she would have been glad to listen. But I don’t think she would have tried to talk. And in a way maybe that’s too bad, because why he’s forgotten so much.

J: I know I was gun-shy riding in a car, driving in a car. A car backfired alongside of me, and I about let everything go.

T: Also, Mr. Fager, after you were no longer a POW, how often did you have dreams that were about your POW experience?

J: (pauses three seconds) I didn’t. I don’t recall doing it.
T: What line of work did you go into after you got out of the service?

(J, A, 335)

J: First off I was a streetcar operator, and then I went into carpentry work.

T: Did your co-workers know you had been a POW?

J: I could have talked about it, I don’t know.

T: So if somebody asked you, say, Jim, what did you do during the war, you could tell them you were on a B-17 and also a POW?

J: I’d tell them I was a tail gunner.

T: You and Myrna were married what year?


T: Jim, when you and Myrna got married, did she know you had been a POW?

J: Oh yeah. I didn’t talk much about it, but she knew I had been.

T: Myrna, when you married Jim in 1949, how much did you know about his POW experience?

Myrna Fager: Not much. We really didn’t talk about it. I knew he had been one, and I don’t remember how I…I suppose we talked about it at some time or another, but then again, he didn’t say too much about it.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

T: Is that more that you didn’t ask, or that he didn’t tell?

Myrna Fager: I think we just didn’t discuss it. I was always…I was growing up during the war, I graduated in 1946. I went through the war while I was in high school—I was born in 1928—I’m five years younger than Jim.

T: Did you know Jim before he went overseas?

Myrna Fager: No. But I used to follow a lot of what was going on during the war, so in a way now that I think back on it, I’m surprised I didn’t talk more about it or ask him to talk more about it. (pauses three seconds) But we never did until we got into the POW group.
T: Did you feel okay asking about his time as a tail gunner? Was that something different?

Myrna Fager: No, I didn’t really (laughs). I guess we were young and in love. We didn’t talk too much about it.

J: A tail gunner’s life was about three minutes time in actual combat.

T: So for both of you, being a POW wasn’t something that you consciously avoided, it just sounds like it didn’t come up.

Myrna Fager: That’s it.

T: As your two kids were growing up, Jim, how much did they know about your POW experience?

J: Not too much. Not too much at all.

T: Would you say they knew you had been a POW?

J: Oh, I think so.

Myrna Fager: Yeah, I think they did, but they would never talk about it with Jim, either, and I don’t know why. It wasn’t anything that we were ashamed of, by all means. It was a case of, I think we had other things that were more, that we thought were more important.

T: Jim, you did join American Ex-POWs in the late 1980s.

J: Yeah.

T: What drew you to that group? Because you hadn’t really talked about things before that really.

Myrna Fager: I think part of it was that we had the time after we retired to get involved in something like that. I don’t know, I guess we just both got interested in it, and it was since that time that Jim has talked more about it.

T: Myrna, how has American Ex-POWs been good for you, as a spouse?

(1, B, 27)

Myrna Fager: I’ve really learned a lot. I’m an adjutant. Our group [local chapter] is mostly widows and we meet regularly in the summertime, and it’s been a really a good experience, although a lot of the wives knew their husbands during the war, they were probably married then. But even so, it’s been a real good experience.
T: Has talking to other wives been a helpful thing?

Myrna Fager: Yes, it has been.

T: Mr. Fager, when you think about your POW experience, how has the experience changed the kind of person that you were?

J: Like I've told many, quite a few people, I would not want to live through it again, but if I could sell the experience, I would. It's not no fun, but I wouldn't want to give up that experience I had. (pauses three seconds) It's part of my life.

Myrna Fager: And it is an experience that not too many people have. And I'm sure these young fellows, it must have been scary, but they were young and they kind of just passed it off after they got home and were safe. And that's why so often they didn't talk about it; either that or they just wanted to forget it.

T: Well, that's the last question I had, Jim, so let me thank you for your time this evening. And thanks to you too, Myrna, for your input to the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW