Vernon Kruse was born 5 December 1923 in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, one of four children. He grew up in St. Louis Park and graduated from high school there in 1943. One month later, in July 1943, Vern was drafted into the US Army. He completed Basic Training and was schooled as a radio operator, then assigned to 42\textsuperscript{nd} Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, 4\textsuperscript{th} Armored Infantry Division. Vern arrived in Europe following the June 1944 D-Day invasion of France. On 30 August 1944, during an engagement in eastern France, Vern was captured by German forces. After time in transit and some days at XII-A Limburg, Vern was sent to III-C Küstrin, some fifty miles east of Berlin, arriving 30 September 1944.

On 31 January 1945, advancing Soviet forces liberated III-C during a fight for the town. Prisoners of many nationalities were freed. But a German counterattack retook the town, and the camp; while many POWs were recaptured, others now were on their own. With no chance to reach US lines (several hundred miles to the west), liberated US POWs had no choice but to hike on their own through liberated Poland and the Soviet Union to the Black Sea port city of Odessa, more than one thousand miles distance, where an Allied office had been established to deal with cases like this.

Vern tells the story of his unique five-week journey to Odessa in great detail: the challenges, the people. He arrived there on 8 March 1945, and then was transported by ship to Naples, Italy, and then the United States, arriving in Boston in mid-April 1945.

Vern was discharged from service in November 1945. Again a civilian, he got married in 1949 (wife Helen) and helped to raise five children. Vern spent his working career in radio and electronics repair, thirty-five years for Sears Roebuck and Company. He was active many years in the American Ex-POWs organization.

Vern Kruse died in March 2009, aged 85.
Interview Key:
T = Thomas Saylor
V = Vernon Kruse
[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation
(***) = words or phrase unclear
NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

T: Today is 12 February 2005. This is an interview for the Prisoner of War Oral History Project. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today I’m speaking with Mr. Vernon H. Kruse at his home here in Edina, Minnesota. First, Mr. Kruse, on the record, thank you very much for taking time to be part of this project today.

V: You’re welcome. It’s a pleasure.

T: Now, for the record, you were born on December 5, 1923, in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. You had three brothers and no sisters. You grew up in St. Louis Park, graduated from high school 1943, and it was just a month later, I think you said, that you were inducted into the United States Army. July 1943.

V: Correct.

T: You arrived in Europe after the D-Day invasion [of 6 June 1944] and were serving with the 3rd Army, 4th Armored Division, 42nd Cavalry Recon Squadron as a radio repairman during August of 1944. I want to go back to 30 August 1944, Mr. Kruse, because on that day your life changed. You became a prisoner of war. I’m wondering if you can recall the events of that day. How did you go from waking up an American serviceman to becoming a POW of the Germans at the end of the day?

V: We were pulling into a wooded bivouac area, when I noticed an officer wave at me to come over. I had my Jeep, and I told my buddy where to park. I walked over to where a couple of officers were standing. He wanted to know if I would want to deliver a message to another recon outfit. I said, “Yes, why not?” Anyway, the two of us got back in the Jeep. He had given me an envelope, which I hid under the driver’s seat cushion. The officer wanted me to deliver this sealed envelope to the other recon unit. Where was this unit? The officer also had told me how to get to the delivery point. I had to take the next road to our right, running parallel to the one we were on, and go north to a small town near Sedan. It may have been about twenty kilometers to the north—I don’t know for sure because I didn’t know where we were at that moment. Just somewhere near the southwest corner of Luxembourg.

T: Now who is making the trip in the Jeep? Is it just you alone, or are you with somebody else?
V: No. Joe Disalouski was...I probably shouldn't have mentioned his name.

T: Was he your driver?

V: He was considered my driver. It was my Jeep, but he wasn’t always with me. Sometimes there would be an officer with me. But this is getting off the track here. Everybody in a recon outfit rides. There’s no foot soldiers. Everybody rides. The infantry people that we have, they ride in the trucks and half-tracks. Anyway, Joe was my designated driver, I think, for that day. I was going to watch the map.

T: So just the two of you now in this Jeep.

V: Just the two of us. Now, we headed in the direction that we should go, which was in kind of a northwesterly direction up towards Sedan, which is a town up there toward the north end of where France and Luxembourg meet. That’s where the other outfit I was supposed to contact, they were supposed to be there. We got, I don’t know, I suppose two-thirds of the way up there and I stopped at a French farmhouse. Of course, the people that were outside working, they all ran inside. We stopped the vehicle and I yelled out FFI, something to do with the Free French or something, and they came out. I asked them, “Is this the road up to this town that I want to go to?” I had a map I’m showing them, and he said, “Yes. That’s up ahead.” He didn’t really look like a farmer, but I said, “Yes, he can ride along with us.” So the three of us got in the Jeep. I was in the middle. The Frenchman on the right, and my driver on the left. We headed on up towards this town. We stopped outside of town. I don’t know, I suppose a half a block or so. We had just come out of some trees. We had been driving through trees and we were in this clearing. Plowed fields were off to the side, and the town was up ahead of us.

Anyway, here some mortar shells start dropping in on the right side and on the left side of the road. Whomp! Whomp! These old shells would come in. I wondered what was going on. We took a look ahead and we couldn’t see anybody up in the town that would be shooting. We thought this was something from up in the hills. So we drove up into town. All right. We got into town and I looked between...it looked like it was an empty town, but it wasn’t. I looked between the buildings. Here there were German troops. They had seen us coming or somebody radioed ahead. I thought, “Oh, boy! Now what?” We had crossed one road right at the edge of town and we were going up...and at the first road into town I told my buddy, turn to the right at that intersection. That’s how small the town was.

That intersection, it was not a through street. It ended up in a farmyard. So then I thought, oh, golly! Turn around. We’ll have to go out of town the same way we came in. This town is full of Germans. We didn’t want to go further into German territory. There was no road going the other way. So we had to go out the same way we came into this little town. By the time my buddy...well, let’s see. The Frenchman, he asked, can he have the carbine? Meaning the driver’s carbine. So I gave him that gun. I showed him where the safety was and made sure it was loaded.
We went out of that town. We went around that corner, headed back down the way we came in.

(1, A, 68)

T: So you're headed back the same road you came into town on.

V: That's correct. We darned near rolled the vehicle. But anyway, we got down that main street. Had to go about a block, block and a half, and all these Germans had come out from inside the buildings that were there and between the buildings and they were waiting for us. I'm telling you that shooting (voice begins to tremble), that was terrible. I'm sitting in the middle and I'm spraying both sides of the road with my tommy gun. The Frenchman, I don't know if he was shooting or not. And Joe was driving. He started to zigzag, steering with one arm. We're going down grade and starting to zigzag and going across this road at the edge of town and the vehicle spun around, faced back up towards town. We were down in the ditch and it was facing towards town. The Frenchman disappears. As soon as we stopped, he disappeared, with Joe's rifle. Or his carbine.

Anyway, I had run out of ammunition. On the trip out of town my bag of .45 caliber cartridges...they're bolted together, not bolted, but they're taped together so you can turn them over and use them two ways...anyway, I'm out of ammunition and I looked down to Joe. He had laid down alongside the Jeep and I was lying across the seats and the bullets were just going through this radio compartment behind me. I looked down there. He didn't say anything. He just kind of...looking up ahead. I looked down at him again just to ask him again, and I saw a bullet went through his neck. I imagine it went down through his body. I looked and he was hit two, three times. He had already been killed. I couldn't do anything. I didn't know what to do.

I peeked up over the hood of the Jeep and the Germans were coming towards me, and the closest one, I could see he was unscrewing the cap of a potato masher, a grenade. I said, “I've got to give up.” So I took my raincoat and I held it up in the air and I yelled out, “Comrade!” They came over and they searched me. Make sure I didn't have anything on me. The Jeep was full of things. My little souvenirs. A German rifle and German pistol, and they didn't like that. But anyway, they took me prisoner.

T: At that moment, you've got...the Germans have been the enemy the whole time you've been overseas. Suddenly you have the enemy right in front of you.

V: Right.

T: What was that like for you to suddenly have the Germans, the enemy, as close to you as you and I are right now?

V: I wasn't really afraid. They were ordinary guys. I did have a pistol in my back. I remember that. Oh, I'll tell you what. They just had a few quick questions on how to
drive that Jeep. I think somebody there wanted that Jeep. It was kind of interesting. One of their fellows got in first and he didn't know how to work the shift. So they asked me, “Would I mind going back into the Jeep and see if I could move it.” By the way, the engine had been running all this time, and one of their bullets had gone through the oil gauge and the back side of my field jacket was stained with oil.

Anyway, I went back in the Jeep and it would not move. I could not make the vehicle move. I got out to try to figure out what’s the matter here. Well, they had shot the tires to ribbons, so they were just flat, and the wheels were turning inside the tires so it could not move. So then we had to leave the Jeep there. They walked me up into town and to a farmhouse. They took me in there. They wanted to know where the Frenchman was.

T: Was the questioning to you being done in English or in German?

V: Their commanding officer could talk English. I could talk a little bit of German.

T: How many Germans were there?

V: Well, in the barn there that we were in that they were questioning me, I suppose there may have been six or so in there, but the others were outside. This was part of the 11th Panzer Unit. They were outside in tanks that were under cover, I think, in the trees around the area. Because I saw the...

T: That moment, you’ve been captured now. How much thought had you give before that day to what it would be like to be a POW?

V: I never thought about that. You're not going to be a POW. You don't go into combat thinking you're going to be a POW.

T: So it was nothing that you ever thought could happen to you really.

V: No. You live day by day. That’s it. You run into combat. You shoot at the people here and there and other things I could talk about. You live day by day, and being a POW...don't give it any thought. We took prisoners. But you don’t think of yourself being a prisoner.

T: It’s going to happen to someone else?

V: It could happen to anybody. As far as I know I was the first guy captured in my 42nd Cavalry Unit. Yes. I don’t know of anybody else that was captured from my unit. They were wounded and things like that. Things were blowing up. We were strafed by American and German aircraft. We operated the right flank and forward of the 4th Armored Division.

T: Had the Army given you any training on if you're ever captured here's what you're supposed to do?
V: You just gave your name, rank, and serial number, that’s what they tell you. There is no such thing as...nobody ever tells you what to do. You do what you do.

T: So in a sense, you were kind of unprepared and playing this sort of minute by minute here.

V: That’s right. You don’t know where you’re going, what’s going to happen the next day. You don’t know.

T: What kind of questions did the Germans ask you there right in the house there?

V: They asked me what outfit I was with, and I said I was 3rd Army, with [General George S.] Patton’s 3rd Army. We were doing reconnaissance work on the right flank of Patton’s 3rd Army. In fact, we were ahead of the 3rd Army. We were doing recon work. That was our job. A lot of radio work. A lot of radios in our units. Anyway, I was in this building here and this captain, or whatever he was, he was a sharp looking fellow with the boots and the...he was a nice looking fellow. I said, “You look like my dad.”

T: You said that to him?

V: The reason I said that...he was tall and slim and he had a little moustache. Kind of like the Führer [Adolf Hitler] had, and my dad had that. I’ve got a picture of my dad. He’s got that little moustache. I said, “You look just like my dad.” He could talk pretty good English. We had a good talk.

T: Did you feel threatened at any time in that house there? That they might do something to you?

(1, A, 157)

V: I don’t think I was ever threatened that I know of. I have to think back some, but no. Oh, yes. One fellow, a German soldier, came in the house there with two buddies, and he was mad. He came in after I was in there and talking to the German officer. He came in, and he had been shot through the throat. Oh, he wanted to...oh, he wanted to get me. And he had two fellows that held him back. He blamed me for it. Well, I didn’t say I did it. Maybe the Frenchman did it. I don’t know. Maybe the Frenchman was even a German. I don’t know. But I said, I have no idea if I shot him. But anyway, his buddies held him back. He never was allowed to touch me.

T: You saw this guy come in.

V: Oh, yes. He came in through the door. He was shot right through the throat. He couldn’t talk. He was probably shot through the voice box or something. Went right in and out. He was mad. I can’t blame him. I’d be mad too (chuckles).
T: But in a sense, the Germans protected you from one of their own.

V: Oh, yes. I don’t know anybody that has ever beaten me up. Anyway, I got through there and talked to these fellows, and I kind of was surprised that he knew that I was with the 4th Armored Division. But then again, this was a German Panzer Division. I imagine they know as much about what’s going on in the battle as anybody else.

T: Both sides are doing the same recon.

V: They were doing the same thing. Yes. Probably a rear guard protecting their main units.

T: You’re alone now. A lot of guys I talk to are captured with one or more people. You’re captured by yourself. It’s just you, right?

V: I was alone. My buddy was killed. The Frenchman was gone. By the way, when I was in there they had said something about that third person, and I said he was a Frenchman, a civilian. They said if they capture him they’re going to shoot him because he’s not in uniform and he had a weapon. While I was in there I heard a shot. I’m just guessing they may have got him and that they shot him outside. That’s what I think. I’m just guessing.

T: By the laws of war they’d have a right to shoot him.

V: They have a right to shoot a civilian with a weapon. They told me to relax, I’m their prisoner now, and for me the war was over. So anyway, they knew that the Americans were on the way, and they put me on a tank. On a Tiger tank. That was a wicked looking thing. I had never seen a Tiger tank that close up. First bit of combat I really got into, outside of being strafed. So they put me up on the front of the tank and the Germans, the foot soldiers, they got on the outside around the turret and I sat on the assistant driver’s side right over these great big wide tracks. I thought, if I ever slip I’m going to be squashed. That’s where I rode all the way to my first destination. I rode on the outside of the tank over that track, and I’m hanging on for dear life.

T: How long did that transport take to the first camp?

V: You know, I can’t tell you, and it wasn’t a POW camp that I went to. We finally got to where we were going, which was another outfit, a German infantry outfit. We had crossed the river, I remember that. I don’t know for sure which river it was. They put me in a bus, or a big motor home. It belonged to the commanding officer of this particular German outfit that I was with now.

T: To clarify, Mr. Kruse, same day? Next day?
V: This would have been the same day. Later on that same day. They put me on this bus and they said, “Just sit down in there.” Because they had guards outside. It was an officer’s bus. Where he has his meetings with his staff and so forth. He finally came in and he says, “Hello.” He could talk English.

T: Here’s another one who can talk English now.

(1, A, 213)

V: Yes. He could talk very good English. A lot of the Germans could talk good English. He introduced himself, and who was I, and I told him. He said, “You know what? I lived in the United States.” He could talk as good English as you can. I don’t talk very good English. But he could talk very good English. What his rank was I don’t know, but it was pretty good. He had a snazzy uniform. A lot of medals. We sat down and he said, “You don’t happen to have a White Owl cigar on you, do you?” And I said no. He missed those things, because he used to have those all the time in the States.

T: So he was talking about himself to you? About living in the States and...

V: Yes. And he had gone back to Germany and he was called up. He had been in the reserves or something. Anyway, he went back to Germany and he was called back into the service. I wish I knew what rank he was. Everybody...they all...when the Germans greet each other it will be “Heil, Hitler” and then it will be shaking hands. He was just a very nice individual to talk to.

T: So it more of a conversation than an interrogation.

V: It was not an interrogation. They knew as much about me as I knew about the war anyway. Probably more. Especially the officers. Anyway, I stayed there with him that day. He had to leave for a bit and he left me in there, but I walked around in there and went to the back of the bus. There was an open window there. Troops were outside. German infantry. They had a guitar and they played American music for me. I didn’t write all this information down, but I have it somewhere on what they played. Music that I know. And he’d sing it in English.

T: No kidding. So you could see these...

V: I could talk to these guys.

T: Very non-threatening situation here.

V: Yes. They were quite a jovial bunch of guys. I don’t know of any place that I can think of right now where I was threatened. I may sooner or later think about something, but there was about maybe eight guys out there and they just...they sang
a couple of songs and they talked to me in broken English. Anyway, then some American planes came by, and then the German planes, and they had a dogfight overhead. I had been outside with them. They let me outside. The planes were dogfighting and the Germans didn’t want me to get hurt, so they put me around the corner of a building there. I could peek around the corner and I could see the planes up in the sky. They were over the river here. We were overlooking this river. I don’t know what river it is. On a more detailed map I probably could figure out where we might have been. You don’t know all these things at the time, in combat zones. They take you here and they ship you there.

T: How long did the Germans keep you at this location?

V: At that location? Just that one day. I was still the only prisoner. Then I was put on the back end of a pickup truck and we moved along...I stayed on that pickup truck and I was sent to another POW camp—this is also in the state of Luxembourg. It was an old-time dungeon kind of a thing. Big, round stone, maybe a half a block big or something like that. It was all made of stone and mortar. In the middle was a courtyard. It was covered over. In the courtyard was a cement floor, a table, and a couple of chairs. They put me in a cell and they wanted me to get undressed. I got undressed. They wanted all my clothes. Everything except my shorts. They searched that, my clothing, and my billfold. Everything I had. I could see them out there in the middle of this courtyard. They went through everything—checking seams, collars, etc. It got to be late at night and I got tired and I laid down on that cold floor and tried to sleep.

T: No clothes.

V: Just shorts. I just shook all night—no heat—until morning, and I don’t think I really slept much. No blanket, nothing. They woke me up first thing in the morning. They said I could put my clothes back on. They didn’t take any of my money. I had invasion money. They didn’t take any of that. They didn’t take any of my IDs. I don’t know of anything that they kept. They wanted to see if they could find some information.

(1, A, 293)

T: Yes. All your personal stuff, even the money, came back to you.

V: That all came back to me, right. Every kind of money I had, which was British and French invasion money and American money. I had all that in there. They were looking through. They were looking through all the seams in the clothes to see if I had any message or something. Then from there, I went on a truck, and I think some other prisoners were picked up here and there. We were on the road for a period of a few days, during which time we picked up a few other prisoners and ended up with five guys on that truck.
T: All Americans?

V: Yes. These were all American. After I left this officer’s motor home, that first night I slept in a barn. They put me in a barn. I was still the only prisoner, and I was nice and warm in there. But I found a knife in this barn, which I put in my boot. It was part of a World War I mess kit, and I put that knife in my boot and I had enough time in there, I could even sharpen this knife up. I was all by myself in this barn, and I had that knife nice and sharp. To cut meat and so forth.

T: When you arrived at XII-A, let me pose the first question which is, when you come through the gates there, do you remember how that camp appeared to you?

V: I was just going to show you a photograph of the gates and so forth which somebody sent me. Taken after the war, at that time [1945]. It was mostly tents, with wooden floors to keep the rain off.

T: Large tents or small tents?

V: Oh, no. These were quite large. They were like small circus tents. That’s what they were. On a wooden platform.

T: So how many men would you estimate were in each of these tents?

V: I have no figures on it, no idea. There were different tents around four wounds or whatever. I don’t know how many were in my tent. Maybe there was fifty. There might have been one hundred. That’s all very unclear in my mind. All I know is that we went in there and we were checked over. I don’t know if they checked us for wounds or whatever. They took our information and made up our German dog tags there. That’s where I picked up the [POW] dog tags. Also, the POWs were divided up by nationalities, and they were divided up by rank. Privates, from noncoms, from officers. All that was done at this particular camp. When they got enough for a load, a truckload or something like that, they’d send us out. I didn’t go out in a convoy. I went out in an individual truck, when we left XII-A for the train depot.

T: Now was this something that they told you, that in a sense, you’re waiting until we have enough people, then you’re moving on?

V: No. We never knew what was going to happen or when.

T: So you didn't know XII-A was just a transit camp for you.

V: I had no idea. It was a POW camp. I didn’t know if I was going to stay there or what. But all of a sudden...they started with just five of us guys there. No, it was more than that. Because they put us on a train. That was quite a train depot there in that town. I remember—
End of Tape 1, Side A. Side B begins at counter 386.

T: So at XII-A you weren’t sure how long you were going to be there. No one told you.

V: No. I had no idea.

T: Did you see anybody at that camp that you knew?

V: There was nobody that I knew at that camp. No, not that I saw.

T: So nobody from your unit. So in a sense, you were kind of on your own there.

V: I was an individual GI along with all the other hundreds of prisoners that might have been there.

T: Some guys may have known...people from their unit may have known other people. You didn’t know anybody there.

V: I didn’t know anybody. No.

T: When you got your POW tags, did you fill out some information to get those tags? What did you have to do?

V: I don’t know that for sure. How that even took place. There wasn’t that kind of information that they needed on there. They wanted to know who I was, and they assigned me a German serial number and my rank, which I don’t think is on the thing. But that’s what determined where I was going to be sent. I was loaded onto a train at that point. Then we started to go in the direction, through Frankfurt. As we went along, I know there were more people that were picked up here and there. I don’t know where they came from.

T: Were you traveling in boxcars or passenger cars?

V: We were traveling in boxcars. From that camp on, we traveled boxcars all the way across Germany to East Germany. It was in boxcars. Yes.

T: Now, by your notes this was a four day train trip.

V: I believe that was it. Right.

T: What do you remember about the conditions inside the boxcar that you traveled in?
V: We were quite crowded. They had a designation for those cars. I don't know what it was. How many people or how many horses. You could hold eight horses or maybe forty people. I don't know. Something like that.

T: It’s called a forty and eight. Yes.

V: There was no place to sit down. You stood up. All the way. Every once in a while, of course, the trains have to stop and they have to take on water for the boiler. They would let us out. The Germans, they would ride in some of the smaller cars in between the boxcars or they would ride up on top. They would let us all out. If we had to go to the bathroom, we’d go to the bathroom. They’d stop at this water filling thing coming into a town, close to a town, and we’d go out in the fields and do our duty.

T: So you remember during this four day train trip being out of the train from time to time.

V: Yes. Oh, yes. They let us out so that you could go to the bathroom.

T: What was for the bathroom facilities inside the train car?

V: Nothing.

T: No bucket, can, anything you remember?

V: There may have been one. It might have been on the other end. I don't know. I never saw it. There may have been a bucket in there. Probably there was. I won’t say there wasn’t.

T: Did the Germans provide food for you during the train trip?

V: I don’t remember anything about food. I won’t say that there wasn’t any food. But I do not remember food.

T: Was your train ever bombed or strafed by Allied aircraft?

V: We were strafed, but we don’t know by whom. We were inside the train and all of a sudden, man, (makes airplane sounds) you would hear the old bullets hitting the train. It may have been hitting ahead of us or behind us. I don’t know. At least in the boxcar that I was in, I don’t think anybody was hurt. But we were strafed at least once. It could have been twice.

(1, B, 424)

T: What kind of a feeling is that to be strafed?
V: You feel trapped. There’s nothing you can do. It kind of scares you.

You’re standing up all the time. You’re standing all the time. The only window in there is, I think, maybe one on each end of it. There’s a small window up there over your head with some wire over it. You’d get a peek out there, outside, once in a while. That’s the only communications you got with the outside world. But we did stop. Like I say, we did stop in Frankfurt. I don’t know why it rings a bell or why I keep thinking back to that, probably because I had to go to the bathroom like the dickens. Oh, I had to go, and I told my guard, “I’ve got to go to the bathroom.” I sure didn’t want to do that in the middle of town. I said, “Where can I go?” So he took me in the train depot. Down in the basement.

T: Talk about that. You’re in a train depot, and there’s civilians in there, right?

V: Oh, yes. There are civilians all over. He walked me over to the train depot. We weren’t very far from that main building. He took me down the basement. Like any other building it was…it had the urinals. The uprights. I even dribbled a bit. I felt kind of self-conscious about it, because it kind of stains your pants a little bit. I shouldn’t even put that on the tape. You can erase it.

T: You’re talking to another guy, so it’s all right. (both laugh)

V: Anyway, I dribbled a little bit there. Oh, that was a good feeling. In Germany you don’t go to the bathroom outside. They’re very clean over there. In France they stand on the street corners holding their girlfriend’s hand they take a leak. That was just terrible over there. I mean us GIs, we found it hard getting used to that in France. But we got into Germany and by golly, you don’t go out behind some garage or something like that. No, sir. You’re going to do it where people can’t see you.

T: So he takes you, a POW, into this train station and downstairs you go.

V: Yes. He took me in there. I don’t know how long I’d been saving this up. When you have to go, you have to go.

T: There were civilians in there. Did you feel at all threatened by the civilians? Did they yell at you or anything?

V: No. In fact, in that same town we were kind of...what were we in? Were we in a truck, or were we walking? They were walking us down the street. We were a small group yet at that time. There was a lady over there on the side. I happened to look over. Nice looking young lady over there. I don’t know if I smiled at her or whatever I did. I probably gave her a slight nod. She went like that (makes V for victory sign with index finger and middle finger).

T: Made the V for victory sign with her fingers.
V: Yes. She did that. So I thought well, there’s some nice lady there that gave me the V sign. I don’t know if I smiled at her or whatever I did. Yes. The Germans, they never threw things at us or anything like that. I think they found us quite interesting. Most of your German soldiers, I’m not talking Nazis now, but most of these German people, I thought they were quite normal people. They didn’t try to throw things at you and things like that. No.

T: I’m thinking by the time you’re on the train you’ve been a POW for almost a month now. How is your health?

V: As far as I know I was all right.

T: Any kind of illnesses, diarrhea, dysentery, that kind of stuff?

V: No. Some big fellows, they might be hurting for some food, but I wasn’t. I was kind of a lightweight guy and I don’t need that much to stay alive.

T: What was your height and weight when you were in the service?

V: I was 140. I had pneumonia here a year ago and can’t get my weight back. Probably 140. I’ve never really been over 140.

T: And how tall are you? Or how tall were you then?

1, B, 471

V: I’m 5 feet 8 inches now; I was 5 feet 10 inches then. I’m a small build.

T: So this train ride, a lot of you packed into boxcars, standing up, strafed at least once, no food that you remember really being supplied.

V: I don’t remember having any food there. I don’t know what we had on those three or four days or whatever we went across Europe. I don’t know. It doesn’t even…nothing rings a bell. I can’t imagine that they starved us, because I don’t think that they did.

T: But you don’t specifically remember anything.

V: I don’t remember. I do know before we got on the train, when I was on a truck with like five other fellows, I know an officer there asked, “Haben Sie Essen?” [German: Do you have food?]. Had I eaten, or had we eaten? And I told him no. The truck happened to be stopped there on the intersection in this little town with a bakery on the corner, and he had gone in and he got some bread. I don’t know if he paid for it, probably didn’t. But he had like two or three loaves of long, dark bread, and we took that and we broke it up so each one of us got a section of it. I thought that was pretty nice. At least he was wondering if we got anything to eat.
T: The long, skinny bread. That was probably in France then.

V: No, this was in Germany, after leaving XII-A.

T: So four days you were on this train and the weather...it’s not cold yet?

V: Not cold. No, it was not cold then. Not that I can recall. That would have been end of September, and it wouldn’t have been cold. Winter didn’t come until late October or November.

T: And by that time you were in camp III-C.

V: Yes. I’m at III-C. No, it was a decent ride across. There was no snow or anything like that going over to III-C.

T: Being on a train for that long with guys all around you, what did you guys talk about? Here you were on this train for four days. You’ve got someone right next to you. What do you talk about?

V: I’m trying to think. Not much—it was so noisy in there, it was hard to carry on a conversation. They must have taken us off the train at some places where we stopped to fill the boiler [of the steam locomotive]. Then we could talk.

T: Let me ask you about Camp III-C. Camp III-C is where you spent a number of months. You arrived there, by your records, 30 September 1944 and were there through 31 January [1945]. So there we’ve got four months.

V: I thought it was five months. No, that was from when I was captured. That was five months.

T: When you got into Camp III-C there and walked through the gates, describe what you saw. What did that camp look like?

V: Double barbed wire fencing around it. That’s nothing special about that camp. Our American compound was right near the gate. Across from us was where the commanding officer had his office. He was over here and my building was over here. The gate was going out over here to the kitchen. The latrines, of course, they were way on the other end. That all shows nice on that picture I’ve got here. Drawn by somebody else. Give you a rough idea what our compound looked like.

T: When you walked through the gate what did the camp look like to you? Your description of what you saw.

(1, B, 521)
V: It looked like, the place, it was clean and everything. We also saw the other
nationalities, the way that they were dressed. They looked just terrible. They were
Poles, Russians, or French. They could have used some decent clothes or something.
They were in another compounds.

T: Now in your barracks building, just Americans in your barracks?

V: Our compound, which included maybe thirteen buildings or something like that,
they were all Americans.

T: So separated by nationalities here in compounds.

V: That’s right. The Americans, and then there were at least a couple of other
nationalities in there. There may have been Frenchmen in there, I don’t know. I
know that one group, that was a Mafia looking group. I don’t know what they were.
They didn’t...maybe they were Russians or Poles. That could be, because we
couldn’t speak their language.

T: But you could see these people in other compounds.

V: Oh, yes. They would be on another side of a guard walking area. They would be
over there. You couldn’t reach through or anything like that. If you wanted to throw
something you threw it over the top over there. Maybe twelve feet away or
something like that.

T: So your compound, it was separated from the other compounds.

V: That’s right. And there were walkways in between there.

T: How about your barracks, your building?

V: It wasn’t much, but it kept us out of the wind. It’s just like two by fours and
boards on the outside. There was no insulation. No basement. The wind could go
blow underneath them. They were up off the ground.

T: Let me ask you about inside. How many men were in the barracks? How large
were they?

V: I’ve never really figured that out, but I would say there would be like thirty men
to a room. Now, a barracks building may be divided into two or three rooms and
there would be like thirty people in that room, and we slept on two layers—upper
and lower bunk. You sleep on the floor, or you sleep up about that high. High
enough where you could get up for a second layer.

T: Like bunk beds almost.
V: Yes, except they were permanent, made of rough lumber. Bunk beds are all boards. They were divided up, because you could get between them. That’s all in that picture I’m trying to find (looking through papers).

T: So you had this room with about thirty guys and two high you remember sleeping, right?

V: Yes. And one door. And maybe two to four windows or something like that.

T: As a noncommissioned officer, did you have to go on work details at all?

V: No. We were all noncoms. We didn’t have to work [according to the terms of the Geneva POW Convention]. There were some corporals in there, but we were basically all T-4s, sergeants, on up through the top ranking sergeants.

T: Now, without work details that means you’ve got a lot of time on your hands every day, right?

V: Yes.

T: What do you do during the day?

V: Not a whole lot. You go for a walk. Sometime after I got there, some package came through and they came through with some boxing gloves and guys would box outside. I don’t know if there was any such thing as baseball. I don’t recall that. That was basically it. There were some instruments and some guys could play an instrument.

(1, B, 567)

T: So you remember that too.

V: Oh yes, there was a little building there. They would go in there and they’d practice and play instruments and we’d hold little church services in there. It was rough (chuckles). It’s not all tough like they say. Of course, some of them, it probably would be. If you get into a work camp or something like that.

T: Right. But for you, without being on any work details, you had time to kill and things to do that you remember. You had things to do during the day, and you could walk. There were guys that played instruments. Any books that you remember being supplied?

V: Books? I imagine there were books, although I didn’t spend much time reading books. I can’t recall right now, but I’m sure there would have been some. Oh yes, they were at a central location, and we could borrow them from there.
T: How about food? Talk about the food that was supplied by the Germans.

V: In the morning we would get up and we’d go over for our cup of coffee, which was...well, we called it coffee. Ersatz is what they called it. I think it was made from sunflower petals that were dried. Then we didn’t have anything until the noon meal. I don’t know if we had two meals after morning coffee, or not. I think maybe we might have. We’d get a slice of German black bread. Then we would get soup. The soup usually...I don’t know if that was a third meal or if we had that along with the bread. One main meal or two main meals. But it was a soup. Usually it would be like a soybean. Big things like that (makes coin sized circle with thumb and index finger). Yellowish. Almost every other one seemed like it had a bug in it, but we just left them. You couldn’t take those out. You just ate them. They were cooked anyway. Some of them used to kid around there about, well, that’s protein (laughs). So we would eat them. It wasn’t bad when they were in that little soybean, but when they would float around separately in there you’d hesitate. But you eat it.

T: Is that an acquired taste, the bugs? I mean, could you do it right away or did it take a while?

V: You’re a little bit picky maybe the first day, but after that...you can’t taste the bugs anyway. And they’re dead. It’s food. I don’t know what they were. They were probably whatever kind of bugs go into a soybean. Like a little tiny black bug. Like a small fly really is what I kind of think of them as.

T: But you remember seeing those more than once floating around there.

V: (chuckles) Oh, yes. Almost every day I got some soybean soup. Once in a while, like at Christmas time and on special occasions, maybe some weekends, you would get some meat in the soup.

T: So this was not every day, but on occasion.

V: On occasion. Special occasions. Maybe Sundays or something like that. You get a soup and it had meat in it. I think it was horse meat, is what I think it was. It was very stringy. You might get in there and you get a good size piece, and I couldn’t stand it, so I’d sell it for a cigarette or something like that. I just didn’t like the long stringy meat like that. I don’t know why they didn’t chop it up. But they didn’t.

T: So there were some things that you didn’t like and you could trade that.

V: I could. Yes.

T: Was trading something that went on in the camp?

V: I think so. The big fellows, they were always looking for some food to eat. I wasn’t hurting all that much. If I had something to trade, I traded. People would
trade. Some smoked, some didn’t smoke. We’d have Red Cross parcels that would come through.

(1, B, 618)

T: That was my next question. How often do you remember getting those?

V: Not very often. Because we didn’t get them right away. But after we were there...it was not too long before Christmas [that] I think we got our first Red Cross packages over there.

T: So a couple months.

V: I’m just guessing. We didn’t get them at the very first, at the beginning. When we finally got the boxes of Red Cross packages, two would share a box.

T: This was my question. How many guys shared a package?

V: It was two people to a box or a carton. That’s about the size of it.

T: There’s a lot of stuff in there.

V: Yes. There was flour in there, and there was a powdered milk in there. Some kind of treats that wouldn’t spoil. Basic foods that you could go and make your own mixes. You could take the flour and we would make our own pancakes. Before we had the boxes we’d get rutabagas. We’d cut those up and make those up. They looked like pancakes when you put them in the fry pan. We didn’t have a whole lot to eat, but we survived.

T: When you got the Red Cross packages, was trading of things in those packages something that you remember?

V: Some of that was done. I’m trying to think what in the world...I’m sure it was. I can’t think of any particular thing that was traded. But yes, we did that.

T: Were you a smoker at the time?

V: Yes. I did. I started in Basic. Had to be a man, you know (chuckles). So I smoked.

T: By the time you were in prison camp you were a person who was looking to acquire cigarettes, not trade them away.

V: No. I didn’t need them that bad.

T: So if you had them would you trade them?
V: If there was something I wanted, yes. I could get along without them. I didn’t smoke that much.

T: You mentioned building a little stove for cooking. Is that something that each person would do or did you share that with some other guys?

V: I was building one for my particular barracks. Whatever we needed, we could get enough parts from a food pack to build this thing. Two tin can covers fastened together for pulleys. Also, shoe laces were used for belts. The only thing we needed was a wood board for the bottom. We could go underneath the building and cut off a floor support, it was 6 inches by 16 inches, and use that for a base. Then we’d mount the blower on that base.

T: So people who were handy or good at building things were kind of valuable people to have.

V: I think so. A lot of people aren’t handy at things like that. Things like that, I could build one by getting these parts. Also, the barracks, that’s a handy place to get the wood. You have to have wood. When the Germans gave us wood for our stove in there, it’s a pot-bellied stove; we either got a large knot or we got a big piece of coal. That’s not the kind of wood that you can burn in the blower stove. There would be a knot or something like that. So we’d go underneath the buildings when the Germans weren’t watching, and we’d cut slivers off the floor braces to use for fuel in the blower stove.

T: So you had some little pieces of wood for that stove.

(1, B, 673)

V: Yes. They worked the best in there. It burns like a blast furnace. You throw those things in there and that really burns. And it’s dry, too. So we’d go under there and we’d have a knife and could put that in our pockets or in our jacket. Whatever we had. We’d take it back and whoever else had built one of these things, that’s what they’d do.

The buildings that we cut these slivers from were used for entertainment purposes. They were a little higher off the ground than our barracks, so we could get under them easily. Also, no one was living in them. Empty most of the time. People couldn’t hear us cutting the wood underneath there.

We’d go in there and we’d cut this wood up into little slivers. We could get it back in the barracks and we’d just do it about every day or two. When somebody was going to heat something. The thing is, we got into this building after a couple of months with all this cutting underneath there.

Everybody in the different buildings, they had one of these little furnaces. Cutting away. We got in that [entertainment] building and it started to get sort of a bouncy floor in there. It was kind of thin in places.
T: So these things were gradually shrinking in size, because they were being slivered away.

V: That’s right. The floor braces, they were being cut down. Different people would use the same building. You couldn’t get underneath our own barracks building because it was built so close to the ground. You just couldn’t get under there.

T: So you had to be sort of a creative type to find creative solutions to your problems. You needed wood and you had to find wood.

V: I’m kind of that way anyway [creative, handy type]. I’m the son of a carpenter, and I took all the shop classes I could in high school.

T: In your barracks there, you didn’t show up with anybody from your own unit or your own bomber crew as it were. How did you make friends with the people in your own barracks?

V: When I went in there I was in a barracks and they were all strangers to me. I think I mentioned this earlier. I was in this one barracks, I was in there maybe about a month when I saw Jerry. I have the date and everything of when I saw Jerry—it was December 1, 1944. I was going to get my morning coffee. He was leaving. He had gotten his coffee. I looked at him. There’s a guy I just graduated with!

T: The first person’s face that you’ve seen that you recognize.

V: Yes. That’s the only person...well, there was another one, a guy from my outfit by the name of Ryan. He was from my 42nd Cav Recon unit. Anyway, so here’s Jerry. I said, “I’ll get in touch with you.” Then I went to talk to my commanding officer on December 2, and asked him if I could move over to Jerry’s building. We talked for a while, and he said yes. So I packed up my things and moved over to Jerry’s barracks on December 4, 1944. We bunked together. We had one blanket each, so when it started to get cold we could sleep back to back and we’d throw the GI type blankets kind of a thing over the two of us.

T: How about in that first barracks? You were in there for a month now.

V: Possibly a little over two months.

T: How did you make friends with the guys that were in there? You didn’t know them.

V: No, but you make friends. Golly! They are all Americans.

T: How do you do that?
V: How do you make friends? When you’re sleeping with them? I don’t know why you can’t. They’re not your enemies.

T: Does that mean you got along with everybody in your barracks?

V: Everybody. We had to get along. You don’t start fights in there. You don’t want to use up your energy. You get along with them. I can’t remember that there was any problems. For recreation, that’s another thing, we got boxing gloves, and guys that got frustrated, they could go outside and they could fight with the gloves.

T: Now, if you get to know, make friends with guys in your barracks, that means you trust them too? So if you had something valuable, a piece of food, you could leave it on your bunk?

(1, B, 739)

V: We did. But I think there was a certain amount of stealing going on, sure. I think so. You had to fall out for roll call every morning. Somebody from another barracks, he might go in there. You can’t watch the door on your building. There wasn’t that much. What was there to steal, outside of the food, which we only got maybe three Red Cross packages during the time that we were there. Other than that, only the clothes on our back.

T: So you could trust people to a point. You still couldn’t leave anything valuable laying around. A pair of shoes or blanket or cigarettes.

V: No. You didn’t have anything. You wore what was yours. I mean, your bedding is yours. Your pillow. And that’s just straw inside of a container. I don’t even know if we had a pillow. I probably used something else for a pillow. I don’t know what. No, I don’t recall any distrust. If anybody did anything, I think people would get after whoever it was. I think there was a lot of trust there between the guys.

As far as that goes, we got along fine with our guards.

T: Let me ask you about the guards. What kind of people were those Germans?

V: Our guard, I call him Schultz now, because he looked like Schultz on [the 1960s US television program] Hogan’s Heroes. Do you remember big old Schultz?

T: Yes.

V: With the mustache. He was our guard and he comes in to visit, in the barracks. No problem. He comes in and we’d talk. There was a lot...there was no enemy kind of a thing. They were our guards—

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.
T: So the German guard, the guard for your barracks, about how old do you think he was? Older fellow, younger fellow?

V: I would say they were all grandpa age.

T: They looked old to you.

V: Yes. They were gray haired, whitish hair. Your combat troops, they had to be at the front lines, but your guards in the camps, they were all elderly or else they were somewhat disabled or something like that. Their rifles, they were Mausers, but they were long ones. Gee whiz! They were probably World War I Mausers or something. It was kind of comical because in the wintertime those poor guys, those guards, they have to walk the routes outside. And it’s cold there in the winter. I know our guard or the guys that would be walking around there at night, they had straw boots on. You could see the toe part. They looked like straw bales.

T: Big bulky things.

V: Great big. They had to walk kind of like that (moves feet, wide apart) because it’s...it was cold. It was cold out there, and these straw boots were big.

T: That was a cold winter too. It’s cold anyway, but that winter especially was cold.

V: That was one of the coldest winters I’ve ever heard of. So yes, they were nice fellows. I think they kind of liked to come in the cabin a little bit and get out of the wind in the wintertime. We’d have a good time talking to them. Our guard liked to talk about his grandson, who was going to college.

T: Did you observe German guards ever mistreating Americans in your compound?

V: No. I heard that...it could have been done because we had an escape system set up and some of these guys that were recaptured, they may have been beaten or something. I didn’t ever see it. I don’t think they did. I really don’t think that they did. Some guys were shot while they were in the process of escaping. You can shoot a prisoner then.

(2, A, 20)

T: Yes, you can. That’s right. Is escaping something that you actively thought about while you a prisoner?

V: No, I wasn’t thinking about that [trying to escape]. I thought, that’s putting my life in danger and what in the world am I going to do to help the war? Our combat troops are way across Europe over there in France and Luxembourg and I’m over here in on the Polish border. What can I...how can I get there? Who can I trust on the outside?
T: So for you, thinking of escape wasn’t something that really came to mind.

V: No. It’s not anything. There were guys that asked about it. There was a waiting list [to go out for an escape]. That waiting list was something that I wasn’t interested in.

T: A waiting list to be part of the escape thing?

V: To go out for an escape. Because just so many of them could go. Maybe once every few weeks or months, somebody would try to get out. And the Germans would try to figure this thing out. Where did they get out? (pauses three seconds, thinking) I did learn where they went out. We had outhouse pumping trucks that would come in. They were built...they had some sides in it and they had a great big oval tank on them. The wheels were down here, looking at it from behind. But this big tank that they’d fill up, there was a place, if you weren’t too big, you could go in, in this area of the—say that’s the back end; this is the tire, the axle. You could squeeze one in maybe on one side or the other. That’s how they would get out. I had never seen this being done. I knew it was done. I knew when they captured some guys. But that’s how they got them out of our camp. In the outhouse pumper. Take the stuff from the outhouse, and they’d pump it into this thing.

T: But escaping isn’t something that you were really interested in.

V: It’s nothing I was interested in. There wasn’t any chance anyway. I’d be down the list so doggone far because I was in there for only a short while. Four and a half months at the most.

T: And if you get out of the camp and you don’t speak German or whatever, what are you going to do anyway?

V: I could get by, I’m sure. Germans, half of them can speak some English and I can speak some German, so I could communicate with the Germans.

T: Inside the camp there, the war is going on outside. What kind of rumors or hard facts did you have about how the war was going?

V: We had built a radio. It was in another barracks building. In fact, I was a radioman. I putzed around, but I didn’t build one. We bought parts. It didn’t take much of a radio to listen to BBC in England. So we had one barracks that had a radio, which was well hidden.

T: You knew about this radio, but you didn’t operate it.

V: Yes. I didn’t know where it was. We’d get reports. Nightly we’d get our reports. I don’t even know what the radio looked like.
T: How did you get the news? I mean, if the radio was in another barracks, how did that news come to you, Vernon Kruse?

V: We had guys that would go and visit others in our compound. We had a compound. You could go from one building to another building during the daytime. You had free access in your compound. From the night before, maybe the next day when we were out walking around, that news would go from where it was received and we would get that news back in our building.

T: So the map on the back of the door was something you drew yourself.

V: Yes.

T: And as the news came in you could sort of keep track of the front.

V: Where the front lines were. Either the British or the Americans or whatever you’d pick up from BBC London.

T: Now the Germans never saw this map, or did they see it and—

V: I don’t know if they did or not. You would think that if they did they would have ripped it down. But the thing is, when they came in the barracks, that door would open up against the wall. Even in the wintertime they left that door open. I guess was something for the safety of the guard.

T: So when they were in the barracks...

V: That was always on my mind—are they going to see that map? But they would have the door open and I think there might have been a screen on there. But the wood slab door was always open. There was no window in the door. It was a solid wooden door, and it pushed right back flat against the wall. That map was there until the day that we left. I sure wished I would have taken that map when we left.

T: Were there also, in addition to news, were there also rumors about what might happen or...I mean rumors are part of life often times. Did you get those?

V: Rumors? I can’t think of any rumors. I don’t know of any rumors. I think we looked at the facts as they came through.

T: For example, were there rumors about having to leave the camp? The Russians were coming. When we’re going, where we’re going, what’s going to happen?

V: No. Nothing like that. All I know is for, like two to five days before we left you could hear rumbling off in the distance.
T: You could hear the war getting closer.

V: We didn’t know what it was at first. Some dynamite blowing up? But they got closer and closer and then that one day it sounded like artillery off to the northeast of us. When we heard it over there the next day, the Germans decided they better move us out of the camp for one reason or another.

T: So you could hear the war getting closer but nobody talked about what might happen or what’s going to happen or anything like that. You just kind of waited.

V: That’s right. I don’t know anybody that talked about it. It could have been artillery. Who knows what it was. Later, we found out it was tank artillery.

T: You could figure it was the Russians coming, I imagine.

V: We figured it would be the Russians, because it came from the northwest. Our gates out of the camp were over this way, to the south or west (motions with outstretched arm). We could hear the artillery off to the northwest. It was way off and then pretty soon it got off in that direction, north, and we thought they were getting closer. Then that one morning then, I don’t know what it was, the last of January [1945] or whatever that we were going to move out.

T: Your information says [and the historical record confirms that it was] 31 January [1945]. The date aside, what happened that day? Because you’re kind of day by day existence in this POW camp is suddenly very different. You’re leaving, right?

V: Right. We’re moving. We figured that might be why. They had said that we’re going to move towards Berlin. That’s why we moved off to the west [after we left the camp]. The artillery was to the northwest of us, and we were going, our camp gates were to the west. So we were going to go off to the west, and then you’d have to angle down southwest to get to Berlin.

T: Did the Germans give you any kind of advance warning about—

V: No.

T: So it was basically, saddle up and let’s go.

(2, A, 105)

V: No. Nothing. They never said anything about the Russians coming, or we’re going to move. This was the night before that we left. They told us pack up. I think we did our packing. We slept that night and we rolled everything up. I was in the first group that left. Because the gate was right there. They were going to empty those buildings first.
T: What were you carrying with you when you left?

V: I had a backpack with my bedroll in it. I had that little burner thing strapped onto the top and whatever else I had, not a whole lot. You don’t really have anything. Couldn’t carry any mattress—they were just bags of straw. Couldn’t carry any of that kind of stuff outside of your blanket. So whatever I had...

T: Any kind of leftover foodstuffs from a Red Cross package or something like that?

V: Yes, we had leftover foods like that. And my diary was in there. I had mine with me inside that bedroll. Not this one. *(picks up 1945 diary, from after liberation)* This was the bigger one [I had]; my original one was larger. Everybody in the camp had one of those [diary books supplied].

T: Did you get that [original] diary when you went to III-C? Is that where you started writing?

V: Which diary? This one?

T: The original one.

V: The one from the States here that they sent us?

T: Did you get that at Camp III-C?

V: Yes. That was the one. This was presented to you by—it’s mentioned on another piece of paper I’ve got—was sent by the American people to all the POWs.

T: And when you left camp you had that with you.

V: Yes I did.

T: Now you left camp III-C, and not everyone left at once, did they?

V: No. Very few got to leave before we ran into trouble. We got out, probably out of camp to the first town, and we were spread out quite a ways.

T: Whole bunch of you there from your barracks?

V: My barracks was first, and I was the fifth rank back and I was in the middle of the fifth rank.

T: So you’re near the front of the whole group here.

V: Yes, we are. Anyway, my buddy Jerry Jerome was on my left side. I don’t know who was on my right side, but I was in the middle of the column. Here we could see
we were getting up to this town, the first town. I don't know how far we were out of town, possibly I’m guessing maybe one hundred yards or so.

T: You hadn't walked far at all, had you?

V: No. I didn’t even get tired yet. My foot, which was frozen, hadn’t even thawed out yet. We were a couple hundred yards out of town. The road went through a hedgerow. You could see the buildings on the other side of the hedgerow. It was a small town. And we also had a staff car or two, with the camp commander in it and the Germans that we knew. There was one American that had a bad leg, he rode in there with the Germans. They had just got through the hedgerow and all of a sudden, aka boom! Prrrrrrrrt! All the machine guns went off. First they killed all of the Germans that were in those first cars.

T: So the Russians were waiting for them.

V: The Russians. Yes, they were waiting. They didn’t shoot until the staff car or cars got into town. Then they had to do something. The Russians had their tanks on the other side of this hedgerow. They were American medium tanks. Seventy-five millimeter. Then they opened up on the troops with machine guns.

(2, A, 149)

T: The POWs marching.

V: I don’t think that they knew that we were POWs. They opened fire and we had guards along the front of us and we had some alongside of us. Not that many of them. But we had guards. They opened up and as soon as they opened up, why it seems like this column of, I don’t know how wide a narrow country road is, we may have been ten feet wide.

T: As you were marching there.

V: Yes. The ones on my left side went that way, to the south (motions left with outstretched arm), and the ones on my right side went that way, to the north (motions right with outstretched arm). We hit the dirt. I had been walking shoulder to shoulder with my buddy Jerry Jerome. Here’s Jerry—he went off that side of the road, to the south (motions left with outstretched arm). I went off to this side, to the north (motions right with outstretched arm). They were shooting machine guns and artillery, but mostly machine guns. All of these tanks up there. Guys were dropping on the road. Maybe they just hit the ground. Whatever they were doing, they were, some of them got hit. I was running back to the east, next to somebody else, he was bouncing against my shoulder on this side of me (taps left shoulder). He was close enough that our back packs were hitting each other.

T: On your left side.
V: They’re shooting from over there *(motions ahead with outstretched arm)*. So I’m running **that** way *(motions left with outstretched arm)*.

T: You’re running the opposite direction from the shooting.

V: Yes, I’m running back and away from them, to the east, back in the direction of our POW camp. Because there’s a patch of woods back there with a little house in it. It wasn’t much bigger than my garage. Anyway, the guy on my left side...this guy was on my left side. Whoever was shooting at us had me and this guy picked out for a target. They had picked him and me out. Here’s two of those guys that they could shoot at. I hear this crrraaack! The shell went just over our heads and blew up ahead of us. It made a noise like wham **bang**. Then they knew, whoever shot this gun, they figured they were a tad too high; they shot over us. They must have lowered that gun just a little, and fired again. The next shell came down and it hit the ground right **there**! *(motions with hand to left, on the ground, to the outside of his left foot)* Right between us.

T: So right to your left.

V: A 75 millimeter. It blew me for about twenty feet. The explosion cleared the snow off the ground in about a forty foot circle. A 75 millimeter is going to do that to you. What it did to this other guy, I didn’t know. My ears were ringing and I was down on the ground in the snow. There was snow on the ground. As soon as they fired that shell they figured they got us. I figured, it’s safe now to run, because they were still picking off guys around there. Shooting at them.

T: The Russians didn’t know these guys weren’t Germans, it sounds like.

V: It’s hard to say. They did find out, because they pretty much quit shooting. But anyway, they would shoot once in a while and maybe they just pick out Germans. Maybe some that surrendered. So I went to this patch of woods with that little house in it. I thought, maybe Jerry is over there. He wasn’t there. They had a dugout basement where I could go down. A bunch of GIs were in there. I couldn’t find Jerry. I came back upstairs and the shooting had stopped. I thought, well, I’ll go back. I had lost, I had stripped off my backpack when I was shot at.

T: That’s where you lost your stuff?

V: Yes. At that time, I dropped my pack so I could make a quick run over to this house. Then I headed back over to where I figured I was hit, where this big explosion had been, and I found it. It was a big area. It was just cleared of snow. My tracks were going right back into the middle of it, coming from the west side, and just off to the north side of it, here’s a guy that’s still down. And my backpack was over the south side, where I had been blown by the explosion. I had dropped that before I went over to this little house. Anyway, I didn’t pick up my backpack.
because this other guy was down. I thought he might be wounded. He’s down like this on the ground. *(gets on his knees, bent over, head on ground)*

T: On his knees bent over. Head on the ground.

V: He had been hit. I looked. *(voice begins to shake)* I thought it was a friend of mine, a guy by the name of Bill Emge. I thought it was him. I looked at him. He had these deep blue eyes. I thought, “That’s Emge. I’ve got to get him help!” I couldn’t lift him. My feet weren’t all that good. And it would take me forever to drag him back. I figured whoever was shooting at us, they could go get him. So I forgot about my backpack. I went over there to see if they would go and get my buddy there who looks like he’s badly hurt. I thought it was this buddy of mine because of the blue eyes he had. They said, no, you go. Go. Pointing to the west. The Russians, it was a woman tank commander, and there were a few other tanks. They told us GIs to move on. It ended up that pretty soon we got up to fourteen of us POWs, and I’ve got their names in there *(pointing to diary)*. I don’t know what they would have done if I went back, if they would have shot me or what. That’s how that happened. From there on, I was on the trip of my lifetime with thirteen other ex-POWs.

T: And all this happened the same day, right?

V: This was all the same day, and we ended up at that house there that I showed you [on the postcard, a German estate]. At the end of the day we had, I’m estimating, it was maybe thirty kilometers that we walked. And the farther I walked the more sore my leg would get. I think it was thawing out. I didn’t even know I had shrapnel in my left leg. That artillery shell exploding put the shrapnel in there.

T: So all of that happened that same day.

V: That all happened that day, right. And the right foot, that started to hurt and it hurt and I thought, golly—I knew it was frozen or pretty much frozen. It must have been because when I thawed it out walking those thirty kilometers, then it really hurt.

T: So by the end of that day you’re together with fourteen other guys.

V: Right.

T: And in a sense, in the chaos of leaving the camp and then this shelling and shooting you found these guys and at the end of the day you’re in this house and going nowhere, I guess.

V: I’m in this little house that I originally went into. Close to the Russians. From there on our group of fourteen guys, that’s the only ones that were on their own. The guys back of us, they don’t even know that we were with the Russians. They all went, the group behind us and the wounded ones in the fields, the ones that were
not killed, they didn’t even know that we, the fourteen of us, went to the Russians. And the Russians said to us, “Go follow the road to the west, and then to the north, and then to the east.” We were on our own until we got to this place where we stayed for roughly a week, trying to recuperate. There was some food there. We were also a target for Russian and German planes.

T: How close was that house where you stayed for a week, how close was that to where the shooting was?

V: It took us all day to get there. My records say it was twenty-eight to thirty kilometers or so. It was a good distance. It was starting to get late, and we had to find someplace to hole up for the night. It was pretty good refuge. Made mostly of stone and mortar. So we went in there and we ended up staying there for a few days, because there was food there. I think the Russians had shot the two ladies that lived there. I have pictures of them. I think the men folk were off to war. I think they were German. They could have been Polish. I don’t know, whatever [the town of] Küstrin was at that time.

T: German.

V: It was this horse farm and resort that they ran. People went there for recreation, for riding horses. Anyway, the Russians shot them and they remained out there in the pigpen and the pigs were nibbling on them.

(2, A, 264)

T: The German women. The women who were there.

V: Yes. Right. I have their pictures.

T: These fourteen guys you were with, did you know any of them?

V: Yes. These guys were all from my barracks building. Because we were in that first group. And the rest of them, the ones that were behind us, they went back to the main camp.

T: So it depended on where you were in line there.

V: Right.

T: When the shooting started it was the people at the front who scattered and—

V: Right. And some in my own first bunch, my first barracks, like Jerry Jerome, I never saw him again until later on. He went back to the camp.

T: Did he really?
V: Yes. That was part of our first group.

T: And he was standing right next to you when the shooting started.

V: Yes, he was right next to me, and he ended up back in camp. He went back there and most everybody was back there yet. But the local guards, they took off and Jerry went into the office building and he got himself a nice swastika flag, white, black and red. He showed that to me a couple times over the years.

T: Now the fourteen plus you, so fifteen total was it?

V: Fourteen that I count.

T: Taking stock of your situation there at the end of the day, how did you decide what to do? I mean, really, there’s no plan for what’s going on here, right?

V: *(laughing)* You play it day by day, or a couple hours down the line when you want to switch to a different road. Your highways don’t go straight. They may go northeast, southeast, or something like that. I had a map which I found back in Luxembourg which was helpful. This map is what I used to draw the map behind the door back in POW camp, and now it proved helpful in going east to Poland and Russia [then known as the Soviet Union].

T: Did all of you talk about what to do and where to go and maybe—

V: You just go away from the front, for starters.

T: So your plan was just, if the shooting is to the left then you go to the right.

V: Yes. We had decided, I think, pretty much let’s go over towards the Russians. That’s the closest way. To go all the way through Germany was going to be a problem. Most of Germany at that time was still...that’s all enemy country, shall we say? I’m over on the east side there, near the Polish border. The Americans were way over there, just getting out of France.

T: It’s clear you can’t do that, right. So did you talk among yourselves about, how are we going to do this?

V: I think we all did things like that. And I had this little map. So that was kind of handy. I was part of that first group of fourteen guys that went all the way across Poland and down through Russia.

*(2, A, 311 – pause for lunch)*

T: Let’s go back to that house where you stayed for about a week, I guess it is.
V: That’s about it. Seven days or something like that.

T: Here are the fourteen of you there, Americans. You’re thrown together, really, in this situation. You know you want to get away from the front.

V: We’re right in the middle where they’re fighting, right.

T: And it seems like the war follows you. I’m going to go to your diary entry from February 2, 1945. Friday. “Being bombed, shelled and strafed all day by the Germans. Shells have hit the house I’m in and I’ve been shaking like a leaf all day. I still have shrapnel in my leg, but it doesn’t bother me much. One building burned down but GIs escaped to others. We had a good hot cup of coffee before bed and it sure made us feel good after sweating out the strafing all day.” What do you remember about that day?

V: That particular day was bad. Any day can be bad. Maybe I made more entries on that one because of the strafing and so forth. Because they would come in and strafe and fight overhead. They’d shoot the high explosive through the nose of the plane, I think the Germans had that, or the Russians. But they could shoot artillery shells from the aircraft. They would blow up. They would shoot through the stone wall and blow up inside. I don’t know. You lay pretty low. If it was a bad one, more than machine guns, we’d end up going in the basement. Didn’t go in the basement too much, but when the artillery starts going through the house you try to get down through another layer of walls and floor and get out of the shrapnel area. For protection.

T: Were there any other people around besides you ex-POWs at this time?

V: We were the only ones outside of the two German women that were out there in the pigpen. The Russians, I think, shot them and threw them out there.

T: What did you do for food supply when you were there for those days?

V: It’s a day to day thing. We ate pretty good there. We’d find wine in the basement. We’d find some flour. We found beans and we would carry that with us in our pockets. Each day you would find something to eat.

T: Did you find food in that house?

V: Yes, there was food. There was food. No matter where you’d go you’d find some food. Another place down the line we came across another empty POW camp. There the food would be in bins. Like on a farm, you’d keep oats or something in a granary. You’d find beans like in another POW camp.

T: So you learned to scrounge for what you need.
V: Yes. You scrounge for everything. You don’t go in any store and buy anything. Not there in Poland and Russia. You wouldn’t steal, but there were plenty of bombed out houses and you’d find things in there.

T: How do you communicate with people when you don’t speak the language? I mean, German is one thing, now you’ve got Polish and Russian.

V: Polish and Russian. We had a fellow that could talk Polish. I’ve got his name down here. One of our GIs was probably one generation out of Poland.

T: And he could speak Polish?

V: Polish. Yes.

T: That’s a great help.

V: Yes. That made a lot of difference. He could even—

End of Tape 2, Side A. Side B begins at counter 382.

V: —barter with the civilians.

T: How do you barter with people when you don’t speak their language?

V: I’m trying to think. What in the world did we do? I could, if I had an extra undershirt I would reach in here and show them strap of my undershirt for some of those potatoes.

T: So kind of a point to describe system.

V: For trading. Because they had things to trade to us. In Germany, we weren’t there very long, it’s very easy to get along. They have people that can talk some English. I could understand some German. In Poland we had this one guy with us who was Polish. He was a big help in bartering. He was with us all the way down to Inowroclaw. (pauses three seconds) Where did he stay? I think he stayed in Poland. He never did finish the trip with us.

T: I was going to ask you, of the guys who started how many finished that trip to Odessa? How many of you made the whole trip?

V: I can’t say for sure, you know later on some of the other POWs caught up with us. Because we were delayed for like seven days at this mansion. Some others, stragglers or whatever you want to call them, caught up with us. Some of the guys decided to go home by way of Moscow, and they headed up to Moscow. So all of us
didn’t…I don’t know if I mentioned that in here. They probably headed for Moscow to try to go back on a US cargo plane.

T: So the group that starts out breaks up after a while.

V: Somewhat, yes. That’s what happened. I hadn’t kept track of that, but that’s what some of them did. They headed up to fly on these mission to Moscow aircraft, or whatever they were.

T: How did you make your decision, Mr. Kruse, to go to Odessa? You could have made decisions to go other ways, and you didn’t.

V: What made me decide that, I don’t know. It just seemed to be the shortest way to go home. I didn’t know what to expect in Russia. Yes, you get to an airport there, I suppose, and maybe hop an aircraft back. But then again, I don’t like to fly. I still haven’t flown to this day. I probably would have in that situation, but I’d rather head down to where the boats were. So that’s why I’d rather head down to Odessa, to where the ships are. Just something that all of us decided: let’s go to Odessa. There’s no war going on there. There’s no bombing runs and things like that. It just seemed to be a decent way to go. Thinking back on why did we go, other POWs ended up down there. I don’t know where the French came from, if they came from our POW camp or some other camp. But that seemed to be a natural route to go—get down to Odessa. You’re in free country there, and it’s a lot warmer than Moscow.

T: Right. On Tuesday, 6 February 1945 you write the following [in your diary]: “We left the ranch at eleven a.m. and walked til four p.m. Covered twenty-five kilometers. My foot was so sore I could barely hobble. Beside that, I got a few blisters. Went to bed at six p.m. and we’re asleep in no time at all. We feel like men without a country. Afraid of the Jerries [slang: Germans], the Russians and the civilians.” Was it the case that you did fear all those people as you were walking there?

V: Yes, at that point. I don’t know if you’re really that afraid, but you’re concerned. You don’t know who you can trust. We got enough people sleeping together in the same room and we got a certain amount of cover. You’d really be afraid if you were by yourself, but here we were with a little group and we’re sleeping in this building or in this barn or whatever it was. I can’t really think of what in the world we were really afraid of. The thing is, we did not have, we were men without a country. You’re wandering out in the middle of Europe and you’re nobody really. Can’t talk any language real well, except for our Polish GI. He could talk to the Polish people.

(2, B, 432)

T: Right. What kind of impression did the Russian soldiers make on you?
V: We did not trust them.

T: Why not?

V: Because most of them were drunk. At the front lines they were drunk. We went into that one town. We had gone, we went past it on the north side. This one town. We had to turn south and come back into town from the east to the west, and here was a real nice looking young Polish girl laying alongside the road. I suppose she’d been raped or something. I don’t know what killed her. I think she might have been raped. Her dress had been pulled up. You’re just in a country that you don’t know what’s going on with the Russians around anyway. Because they were half ploughed.

One of the guys had said something a Russian didn’t like and he shot at him. He put a bullet right through his ear. He’s going around now with a bandage over his head. Shot this way through the ear. Not into the skull, but it tore his ear all up. You just don’t know what the Russians are going to do. We had moved one place. Maybe I mention it in there, I don’t know.

We had moved into one of the houses, and the Russians came along. They wanted it. So we got kicked out. This was, of course, in the real cold weather. So we burrowed down, there was a little shanty outside that used to keep the horses dry in the rain. Their backs would be out in the snow or rain, but there would be an overhang over the horses’ head and they could feed. I think from both sides. That’s the only cover we had outside. So we slept there. We didn’t freeze anymore, but we were pretty cold that night. They didn’t let us in that building. It was like a two story farmhouse. They didn’t want us in there. So you’re not going to try to start a fight with Russians that are trigger happy.

T: And you’re unarmed, all of you, right?

V: We’re all unarmed, right. We didn’t have a thing. Not that we probably couldn’t have picked up something. Could have picked up knives or sabers and old long guns in that first house that we stayed in, that two story stone building. But we were unarmed. We were POWs and that’s all that we were.

The Russians were just plain wild. I know walking by some there, where this girl was on the ground, we had just gone past that. Went down the road to the town we could see up ahead. Here were some Russians. They were sitting on the fence on the right side of the road. They were sitting there having fun. They were shooting the farm animals there with their pistols. Pow! Pow! They were shooting them. I thought that was so wasteful. They were probably drunk too, if I remember. It’s just weird. Then I talked to other Russians, and they seemed fine.

T: So a real difference in these Russians. Some were okay, and some you wanted to stay away from it sounds like.

V: Yes. They were both ways.
T: It’s interesting how you have this American flag patch on your shirt right now. I’m looking at it, that one you made and kept on your overcoat.

V: Right.

T: You wanted to identify yourself as an American.

V: Right. That’s what I did. Every time that we came across some Russians that were wondering who we were and stuff—they had guns, we’re not afraid but we’re concerned—and I would show them, American (points to patch). I would say, “American.” They understood that. I was the only guy that had that, so I always made sure that I was up there talking to whoever had stopped us. Nobody else had anything like that of our group. I’m even a seamstress.

T: You thought to do that. That’s interesting. Now you took trains a number of times too.

V: Yes.

T: Sometimes you walked, sometimes the trains. What were those train journeys like?

(2, B, 476)

V: Train journeys. At this time, we’re not POWs on foot. We’re riding in boxcars with the doors open usually. It was cold in those things. Really cold. Like I say, we would have…one guy may have a pocketful of beans and things like that and we’d have some other things. Maybe some white beans and somebody else has some black beans and we’d cook those things up. If the train had stopped we’d start some little fire, either outside or maybe even at the big doors that open up, and we’d cook up a pot of beans. We learned how to make beans, because the first pot of beans that we made…we had a saucepan with beans and poured water in it. Man! Man alive! That stuff started to spread all over. They’d throw it most of it out.

T: Because they expand when they get wet.

V: They do. But really, what we ate most of the time…well, it was like beans. We never baked anything. There was no place to bake anything. We would go out in the fields. The earlier it was to getting out of the POW camp and even before I was captured I wasn’t around always for meals. We would go out in the fields and we’d dig potatoes and we’d dig carrots and stuff like that. Even being in a reconnaissance outfit you’re not always back at camp to have anything to eat. So way back then I was learning how to live off the land.

T: So that came in handy here.
V: Yes. Even going back to when I was first a POW before arriving in camp. We were only five guys in the second story of a farmhouse. The German guard, he locked the rest of the guys up in the upstairs door and he asked me to go out with him, and we went out to pick pears and apples. I think I had a helmet liner and I filled that thing up with fruit. He would do the same thing. He'd lean his old rifle against a tree and I would be between him picking stuff and the rifle is over here, but I'm not about to go and take a chance. He may have a buddy up there that's covering us. I'm out there picking fruit with him.

T: You mention in your diary here, speaking of food, that you found better food when you stayed at a Red Cross hotel.

V: Yes. We found one somewhere in Poland. It was a Red Cross place, before [the cities of] Lodz and Warsaw.

T: How did you find that place? By chance?

V: Just happened to be in a town that we went through. What was that Polish name? Inowroclaw, I think it was.

T: Talk about the Red Cross hotel, wherever it was. You stayed there a number of nights.

V: I don't know where that would be. That must have been not too far north of Odessa someplace.

T: Now one night here you say, this is from Tuesday, 20 February 1945: “This was the last night here at the Red Cross hotel. Went to the train station and caught one two hours after we got there. We rode in crowded boxcar all day. Got too stuffy for me so I moved out and rode with the Russians in their day coach. They gave me cigarettes and tobacco and I had a good time with them. They asked me to stay with them overnight as they had a good warm bunk for me.” And it continues, “I slept with the Russians.” So, there were good Russians that you could trust, too, it seems.

V: Yes. They were a happy bunch in there. Very happy bunch. They were all wounded. One guy had been shot through both cheeks of his butt. I think a machine gun. He was a tank driver. As he was climbing out it had to be the Germans that would have opened fire on him, shot him. He said they got him right through the butt. He couldn’t talk good English, but this is what he told me. He was as happy as anybody. He couldn’t sit down. If he did lay down he would have to be on his stomach, and that was kind of hard for him too because of the way he had to straighten out. Those kinds were all full of bandages, but they were a happy go lucky bunch of guys and they treated me real fine in there.

(2, B, 527)
T: How did you communicate with them just by yourself in there?

V: *(laughing)* I really don’t know, but we did. We did. I think probably some of those guys could understand a little bit of English. Otherwise I don’t know how we did it, but we communicated somehow. That’s the only thing I can tell you.

T: And that was a positive experience for you really, being with them that night.

V: Yes. Yes, they were very good. These guys weren’t drunk. Some of them were under medication and they were just all full of bandages. They were going to the hospitals back behind the lines. They were all pretty much shot up.

T: So maybe, in a sense, they were pretty happy to be leaving the front lines.

V: Yes. And I’m an American. I was not a German. We got along fine.

T: You did some bartering and some buying. You start to mention in here buying things for Polish currency and for rubles. How did you come into those...how did you get money?

V: You can get money by selling some extra clothes you’ve got. Say I had an extra undershirt. I know I bartered or sold an undershirt. Because I can get by with one undershirt. Maybe you’d pick up something in a bombed out building that you’d take with you. That’s just how we may have gotten extra clothing.

T: So in a sense, it was find things of value and trade those for something you needed.

V: Yes. I know I had one thing of value which I wish I still had.

T: What’s that?

V: That’s a piece of jewelry that I, in that first mansion that we stayed in, I found a broach. It’s a woman’s pin. It was made of gold and had all of these different stones in it. I’m sure it had diamonds and rubies and all these different stones. They were rich people, the people that lived there. So I took that with me. That disappeared on me after we got into Russia. I had to take a shower, that was after we got to Odessa. I had put all my clothing into my satchel that I carried across Europe and I buried that in the bottom of that satchel. Then we had to strip down to nothing and put it by a chair or by some number or something like that. Then you went into this big room, and I don’t know how many GIs, might have been in there. It might have been thirty, it may have been fifty. There were shower heads all over. We’d be in there nude, and of course the women were in there too. They were all big fat women. They had swimsuits on, but they didn’t fit worth a darn *(laughing)*. They didn’t get us excited, I’ll tell you that.
Anyway, I got out of there. Mostly they washed our backs is what they were after, because we couldn’t even wash ourselves. You can’t wash your own back very well. So they did that real well. They did a good job. Anyway I got back, dried myself off and got into my clothes and picked up my satchel and went to wherever they were going to keep us until we were going to be shipped out and I looked in there after and I thought, “It’s gone! That broach. It’s gone.” And it’s the only place that I could feel that it disappeared because I didn’t leave that satchel anywhere by myself except there. When you would be in that room getting a shower in this hallway, somebody must have gone through everybody’s possessions. That’s what I figured. I’m thinking back at the time trying to figure out where could this have happened. Because that thing was never out of my sight except when I was taking a shower.

(2, B, 581)

T: When you were traveling through Russia, and you traveled through hundreds of miles of the Russian countryside, as a young man from Minnesota, what kind of an impression did Russia make on you? It’s a different world.

V: Very few people. Little towns. Very poor. They’re all poor. All the women, they had babushkas on and wrapped in something. Some kind of a blanket and things like that. They didn’t have much in the way of clothes. A lot of the men had their legs shot off, because they would be sitting on these little wooden platforms with the wheels on the bottom. They’d have to push themselves with their hands. You find a lot of those people at the train depots. They would be begging for whatever was available from civilians or soldiers. Even from the POWs. Although we would almost be begging for stuff. Although we did all right. Some of these people had something to sell and we’d...say if I had an undershirt and I could get six eggs or something like that for that, I might do that. Somebody else had something else. Maybe an extra pair of socks. They’d go and trade that for whatever was available. It might be some vegetable. It had to be something that would not freeze. But mostly it was eggs. It was into winter, so there was a limited amount of the things that they could be selling outside.

T: When you went through little towns or through cities with railway stations, was there evidence that the war had gone through there?

V: Oh, yes. Golly! Some of these towns were just obliterated. Take a big city like Warsaw. Oh, my gosh! And before we even got there, there would be places that you could go through this town, you could probably compare it to Hopkins [Minnesota] a few years ago, before it was apartments and things. It would be kind of like that. All the buildings would be just nothing but rubble. It would extend down into the street. People would throw enough of that stuff aside to give you a place to walk. The villages or the cities.

Warsaw, there was so much rubble there and so much bombing that had been done there over the years. The bridges, there was a number of railroad
bridges, and road bridges for cars. They were bombed out. As soon as they get bombed the workers go to work again, because they've got to have this communications. So things would really get bombed out and the towns, the cities, they would get rubble. When you look at the old newspapers like I've got some around from World War II, just nothing but rubble. People walking around between rubble.

T: And you saw this too when you walked through these towns.

V: Oh, gosh, yes. Rubble, rubble. No tall buildings left. Everything is crumbled down. A spire would be sticking up of a church. It's surprising that some of these churches, how well they might be built or something, because out of a few blocks around, everything is down almost flat and here's a church steeple. That's the way it was. I can remember it quite well.

T: So it was clear the war had been through there and it was still in pretty bad shape.

V: Yes. In Poland. Russia too, I think. Because Poland I know is a very poor country. It's mostly farmland, and Russia would be pretty much the same too. Warsaw of course, that was a large city. But a lot of rubble. A lot of bombing had been done there. I suppose the Germans would have done that.

T: The cities were in bad shape. Let me ask about you: how were your feet doing? How was your health as you go through Poland and Russia?

V: Pretty good. By the time I got, before I got down to Odessa, Russia, my foot no longer hurt and I could get that boot off. I thought about it at first when I started this hike across Europe, I was thinking about that first week, that I should get that boot off. The foot's getting bigger and bigger and I couldn't get the shoe off. I could take the laces completely out.

T: And they wouldn't come off.

(2, B, 647)

V: I couldn't get that boot off, my foot was that big. I thought something here has got to be done. It was throbbing and hurting like the dickens. Finally the ache started to go away and I could walk with that foot rather than hold it up in the air. It was getting back pretty much to normal, and when I got down there to take my shower it was pretty much back down to normal.

T: And the foot with shrapnel, how was that doing?

V: That never gave me any problems. I didn't know the shrapnel was in there until a day or two later there when I went to bed. I had just got to that first mansion and I think I was going to take my boot off and my leg's got blood on it. On my left side. I
looked and here was, it was a pretty good size spot and all swelled up, but it didn’t give me any trouble. It didn’t break the bone or anything in there. The shrapnel was in there. That slowly got better by itself. By the time I got down to Odessa, Russia, a month after liberation, that swelling had gone down, and after that I left it. I just reported it to the authorities when I got down to Odessa. Yes, I’ve got a piece of shrapnel in there. Then my right foot, they looked at that. It had been swelled up from being frozen.

T: When you got to Odessa, were there Americans there?

V: There was an American Consulate there.

T: Did they find you, or did you find them? This consulate.

V: I think we were looking for them, because we heard there was one there.

T: So there was a rumor there was a consulate and you went looking for it.

V: Yes.

T: When you got there, what kind of reception did you get from them? Were they surprised to see you, expecting you? How would you describe how they sort of met you?

V: I can’t even answer that. All I know is we...maybe some others had been there before us. Maybe not Americans. I don’t know. Maybe we were the first Americans there, because we were so close to the eastern German border. There would have been probably some others that would have got there before we did. From north Germany.

T: It’s possible.

V: They were probably released before we were. I don’t have any dates on when all these places were liberated. So there were some other GIs there, but I didn’t talk to them. You stick with your own bunch, your own family, shall we say.

T: And you had a group of guys you were with.

V: Yes. We all stuck together.

T: Did they question you at all there at Odessa about where you had been and what you had been through and who the heck you were?

V: No. No. Nobody ever asked that of me.

T: Nobody ever asked you about the camp or how you got there or—
V: Nobody ever asked me that.

T: So no kind of debriefing at all really about—

V: Nothing like that. There was an officer on board ship when I got on board ship.

T: At Odessa there. As you were leaving.

(2, B, 700)

V: At Odessa they did give us a preliminary check before we got on board ship. Some kind of a health checkup to see how we are. Do we need some immediate attention or something like that? So we got on board ship. Different nationalities were on there. I think there may have been some British, and Americans of course. We had quite a bunch by the time we shipped out of there. We had quite a few Americans that went on board.

T: You stayed at Odessa for a number of days before the ship left.

V: Yes.

T: And then you went across the Black Sea, through the Dardanelles at Istanbul and stopped at Malta on your way to Naples.

V: Yes.

T: Did you get off the ship at all any of those places, Istanbul or Malta?

V: No. We got off at Naples. That’s the first place we got off.

T: Let’s go to Naples. It’s March 25, 1945, and you see someone that you had not seen for several months.

V: Yes, Jerry Jerome, who was in POW camp with me. I lost track of him the day we were liberated and here, two months later now, I ran into Jerry Jerome in Naples. That was quite a reunion. How did he get there?

T: How did he get there?

V: He also went down to Odessa. He got there before I did. I don’t know how that happened, but he got there before I did and hopped on board a ship. That ship went down to Africa, and I don’t know what part of Africa. But that’s where he went, and then he came back across the Mediterranean to Naples and he had got there just about...I don’t know what the difference was in days, and here I ran into him again. The first time since we parted back there near the POW camp.
T: When you first met did you compare stories about what happened to you after we got separated?

V: No. I just asked him, what happened to you? And he said he went down to Odessa, Russia, and got on a boat and then he has the name of his ship and I’ve got the name of my ship. He was on a different ship. He just said his ship went down to wherever it was in Africa. Then we got together again in Naples. It was kind of weird. Here it is hundreds of miles apart, and bump into each other again.

T: Like a needle in a haystack really.

V: Yes. It really is.

End of Tape 2. Tape 3, Side A begins at counter 000.

T: By your notes here, April 11, 1945, your ship docks in Boston. How soon after that, Vern, was it that you got back to Minnesota to see your folks?

V: We didn’t camp any place at all, so within a week or a few days, less than a week, we were on a train returning home. I know Jerry Jerome, his parents were out on the east coast, so he stayed there. They live here in the Park [St. Louis Park, Minnesota], had up to that time. Anyway I didn’t call home. We got our little free donuts and coffee and things like that and I got on a train. We rode back. That had to take at least a couple days. Maybe three days. Going through the mountains. I got all the way back to Fort Snelling before I called home saying that I was out of the POW camp.

T: So your folks didn’t have any word that you were—

V: No. I was missing in action. I’ve got lots of telegrams that the military sent my folks. They were looking to see where I’m at, if I was captured, which they believed, but as far as they knew I was going to be in a POW camp or I was captured. That was all the information they had. Anyway, I went through all that, all the POW camp, I had been writing them letters but my letters were, they were delayed. They would go from where I was at up through Norway, Sweden, or something, and then by boat back, so I was thinking maybe my letters got sunk or something. I got letters from them and I answered them but they never heard from me.

    I called mom at home, from Fort Snelling, and I said, “This is Vern.” (voice begins to tremble) She didn’t believe it. I talked to her. She says [to me], “You wait where you’re at and we’ll come and pick you up.” My dad was at work. He worked at Sears Roebuck at the time, most of the time. But she called him up at Sears, and he got out of Sears right away and came home to pick her up and they went out to Fort Snelling to get me.

T: So your folks came to get you at Fort Snelling.
V: Yes, they did.

T: Both of them? Talk about that.

V: Not much to say (emotionally). I don’t know how my dad could even drive the car, but they came out there. Here I’m standing there at the curb and I heard a car horn beep. Here I had come back to the States; I hadn’t called from out there. I wanted to surprise them.

It was happy. I’m not much of a person for hugging and kissing. I know I shook hands with my dad and I gave mom a hug. They were awfully happy to see me. (pauses three seconds) That was my arrival home.

To me, I had been busy every day. It wasn’t a big thing for me, but they would have been quite concerned all these months not hearing from me. I heard from them, but they didn’t hear anything from me for at least six months. I was missing in action. They would get a lot of letters saying, “He’s still missing. We’re still trying to locate him.” And the German people, I guess, had released letters but the mail somehow got bogged down somewhere.

T: Germany was collapsing. That’s probably what happened.

V: Yes. Things would pile up. The trains were used for military supplies and that sort of thing. So some of these letters came through later. Some of that stuff was returned to them and she gave them to me when I got home. They had sticks of gum that had all dried up in them and so forth.

T: When you saw your folks, and you spent time with them here in St. Louis Park, how much did your folks ask you about your POW experience?

V: They asked me a little bit. I told them what I did, what I had been through. I didn’t get into some of the details that I would with you.

(3, A, 65)

T: Why is that, Vern?

V: I wouldn’t talk to women about some of these things.

T: Were your folks satisfied, do you think, with the answers you gave them or did they push you for more details?

V: I don’t know that they were ever pushy or anything like that. I think they were happy to see me. No matter where I had been. I mean, all these months that they hadn’t known what was happening to me and they keep getting letters saying something should show up pretty soon. Been missing for months here. From the time I was captured until five, six months later.
T: That must have been hard on them.

V: It probably was.

T: So there was some discussion among you and your folks about your POW experience. You told them what they wanted to know without all the gory details, it sounds like.

V: I wouldn’t go into too much gory details, I don’t think.

T: After you were discharged, you worked at Sears Roebuck, here in Minneapolis. Pretty much right away?

V: Yes.

T: The people you worked with at Sears, did they know you had been a POW?

V: I think they did, yes. A number of them learned about it. I worked in the radio department. Repair. I had a couple of different buyers that would come and go. They knew about it. In fact, the fellow that was the first buyer there, Don Nelson, he was in the cavalry and we did a lot of discussing back and forth. He wore the cavalry boots and the britches and all those things. Horse cavalry.

T: People you worked with knew you had been a POW.

V: Yes. Some of the guys that were in the radio shop, they knew I was a POW.

T: Was that ever something that you talked about at work with people you worked with or was it just something they knew about?

V: Back in those early days people didn’t talk much about the war. They really didn’t. You might bring something up to your best buddies, guys that work in the shop with you. But it was not a thing that you discussed very often. People really didn’t find out about it until I was there for years. I don’t think most GIs really discussed their war experiences during those earlier years. I don’t think so.

T: Another thing: after you were a POW, how often did you have dreams or even nightmares about being a POW?

V: It never stopped, really, as far as I know. It’s something you put up with. You have them, but they’re not nightmares. I don’t call them nightmares. Just some dreams that come back once in a while. Nothing that really gave me trouble except... (trails off) Even now days, there will be nights I will be awake for six hours, eight hours. I’ll be there from after the news until the wee hours of the morning. I will just lay there. I still have that now and then. I don’t know why. But I still have that.
I don’t know why. It’s something, part of my life. It’s just been part of my life. I had a lot of experiences in those days, so there’s a lot to remember. A lot of it stays with you.

T: Are there certain images or things that happened to you as a POW that have come back in dreams more than once? That is, things that recur?

(3, A, 107)

V: I’ve been asked that also by people at the Veterans Administration. I can just say yes and no. Things come back. Probably here in the last couple of years I probably thought of it more than I would when I was real active, repairing and being very busy. Now I’m more relaxed. I’m not real tired when I go to bed. I’m up til darned near midnight every night. At least eleven o’clock. I play cards til I go to bed. Yes, things come up. Sometimes I go to bed and I just lay there and I look at the alarm clock and golly, I went to bed three hours ago and I’m still awake. So that still happens now. Maybe that’s why I’m light weight. I don’t know. That stuff never goes away. If it did I wouldn’t be remembering a lot of this. It’s just embedded in my mind.

T: Is it things like January 31, when you were liberated, and all the shooting that day? Are there things like that that you remember more than other things?

V: There are some things that I remember more. Being liberated, I don’t know if that is such a big thing. I really don’t know what might come up more often than others. When you get strafed by your own aircraft and things like that. My day to day living in the service, that doesn’t come up. But the big things, the important things, those will pop up. Maybe one little thing will pop up about when I was captured or liberated or in Europe somewhere. Who knows? It will come up. Other times you just dwell on one thing and it might be all night long. Just on one thing. I don’t know why that would be.

T: Now you met Helen in 1945 at Fort Riley, Kansas, as I understand.

V: Ask her all the dates.

T: (to Helen Kruse, now in room) You were married in 1949, right?

Helen Kruse: That’s right.

T: Vern, how much did Helen know about your POW experience when you got married?

V: Probably not a whole lot. I met her in the service. I don’t know as though I talked about anything really at that time. I can’t remember that. But we had other things to talk about. I don’t know that I really talked all that much about it. I think here in
the last few years she has been learning more about it than I used to tell her in the past. You’d have to get her opinion on things like that. I don’t know about how I was on talking about it to her.

T: Helen, let me ask you then. How much did you know about Vern’s POW experience when you got married in 1949?

Helen Kruse: Hardly anything. Nothing at all. They never talked about it. About their experiences. As a matter of fact, I didn’t find out about a lot of it until about five years ago when he appeared at the [World War II History] Roundtable at Fort Snelling. Things started to come out then. I was shocked to hear all the experiences that he had gone through.

T: When you got married, did you know he had been a POW?

Helen Kruse: Yes. Yes, I knew he was a POW when I met him down at Fort Riley, because I was handling discharge papers. Making up the orders.

T: So you can see.

Helen Kruse: Oh, yes.

T: But the details, when you got married you didn’t really know about.

Helen Kruse: No, absolutely not. No.

T: Vern, back to you. You had five children, and have four now, right?

V: Right.

(3, A, 150)

T: How much did your children know about your POW experience as they were growing up?

V: I feel that they didn’t really know a whole lot about it. I feel the first generation of POWs [children], they are not that much interested in what their parents did. Three of the four now, they listen to this or that, although I don’t think they’re all that interested. My youngest one, he doesn’t really care much about it. I don’t know if they feel guilty about that they weren’t in the service, or what. Their generation has not really been in the war and I have no explanation as to why they don’t have some questions.

T: How about your grandkids? Have they been more interested?
V: They seem to be more interested. I haven’t talk to all of them. I’ve talked to two of them. Neil and Kyle Bakken. One, Kyle, he was over one evening. Maybe had something to do with school. But he had questions. Some good questions. I did the best I could to give him this information. I think the second generation down has more interest in the war than the first generation.

T: Do you find it, you personally, easier to talk to your grandkids than your kids about what you went through?

V: No, I wouldn’t say so. I’d be willing to talk to either one of them. Now in the last couple years or so that we’ve gone up hunting, my son, Mark, has a grandson of mine, Cody, and we go up hunting or fishing or something like that, and he has questions. Now he has read some of the military books and so he now comes out with some questions, some pretty good questions, learning what this term means and that term. I think he has more...the second generation down has more interest than the first generation. That’s what my feeling is. I may be wrong. Another family may be different.

T: Sure. And it’s your individual take on things that we’re after today, nobody else’s. The final thing I have to ask you is this: when you think of Vernon H. Kruse before he was a POW and you think of him after he was a POW, how were those two people different?

V: Before being a POW and after?

T: Yes. How did that experience change you?

V: It hasn’t changed me. I’m pretty much the same. I don’t know. She [Helen] probably might not say that. But I feel I’m somewhat gentle. I don’t think she [Helen] would say that. I mean, I’m not one to swear. Not that I can’t swear, but it doesn’t do me any good. So I don’t know as though it has changed me. I haven’t changed my feeling about the Germans, even though I fought them in combat. They still are ordinary everyday people. Some of them I think over there, I think the youngsters over there, are a little bit better than they are over in this country. Russia, I’m...it’s a little bit weird. I don’t know them, because I don’t understand the people. I don’t understand their language. Frenchmen are a little queer (laughing). I think they are. I call them Frogs from back in the old days. I don’t know. I haven’t changed my ways, I don’t think, in the years. I was in the service and I did my duty.

T: If we were to ask your folks after Vernon H. Kruse was back from the service, we’d say Mr. and Mrs. Kruse, is your son different in any ways? What would they say?

(3, A, 209)
V: That’s a good question. I don’t know what they would say. I think that they would think that I’m pretty much the same guy I was when I was back in school. Just a lot older. And mature, and very thankful that I’m safely home.

T: Do you feel that your POW experience aged you in a way? Made you older than you were? Because you weren’t even twenty-two when you got out of your POW experience. You were twenty-one years old only.

V: I probably maybe matured a little quicker being on my own, or pretty much on my own, for part of a year. A lot of experiences came in there. So I don’t know as though it has really changed me. I think the military is a good place to be. I have a grandson who just joined up here a month or two months ago. I’m proud of him. It’s my eldest daughter’s youngest son. I think he’ll make a good soldier. I hope he does. When he went in, he’s one of these guys that wears his pants way down low. He can’t hardly walk. He’s got about that much room to walk. He signed up and I thought, good, that will make a young man out of him. Because he’s a good looking kid. But he had to stick with that style. That’s what his friends would wear. I’m proud that he’s in. I wish him the best. He’s just in the infantry right now. Where he goes from there, I don’t know.

T: Well, Mr. Kruse, again let me thank you very much for the interview today.

V: You’re welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW