

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
Vernon Bernhagen
Medical Sergeant, U.S. Army, WWII
1995

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Bernhagen, Vernon R., (1921-). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (74 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (74 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Vernon Bernhagen, a Junction City, Wis. native, discusses his service as a line sergeant with the 606th Medical Clearance Company during World War II and his return to his pre-war civilian job. He relates information about basic training at Camp Barkley (Texas), maneuvers training in Louisiana, duties as a map instructor, regional differences encountered in Texas, and boat trip to England on the "West Point." He describes receiving casualties from the front lines at Saint Ló (France) and the Battle of the Bulge, duties as a line sergeant, seeing General Patton, psychological problems of troops, and moving hospitals from one area to another. Bernhagen gives a detailed account of his companies experience in the Battle of the Bulge and subsequent travel up the Rhine. He comments on the treatment of German, French, and Belgian civilians and rumors that German soldiers would shoot medics. He describes being stationed in Germany and the devastation of the cities he passed, VE Day in Munich, and discovery of confiscated art work. Bernhagen comments on being stationed at Dachau, returning to France and camp life there, and preparing to ship out to Japan. He remained in France, and relates the VJ-Day celebration there. He comments on his return to Wisconsin, resuming his pre-war occupation, the housing shortage, and resentment toward those who did not go to war. Also mentioned is using a federal GI housing loan, and joining the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch

Bernhagen (b. 1921), was drafted into the Army on September 22, 1942, and served with the 606th Medical Clearing Company. He achieved the rank of sergeant, and was honorably discharged from service January 10, 1946.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1998.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2001-2002.

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Mark: Today's date is November 7th, 1995. This is Mark VanElls, Archivist, for Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Doing an oral history interview this morning over the telephone with Mr. Vernon Bernhagen, currently of New Berlin, Wisconsin. A veteran of the Second World War European Theatre, good morning.

Bernhagen: Good morning.

Mark: Thanks for taking sometime to talk to me this morning.

Bernhagen: My pleasure.

Mark: Good. I suppose we should start at the top and have you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the Attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Bernhagen: Well, I was born in Junction City, Wisconsin, which is near Stevens Point.

Mark: Okay.

Bernhagen: January 20, 1921. At the time of Pearl Harbor I was working on a high line for Wisconsin Rapids Consolidated Power Company. Shortly after that, I got a draft notice and I was drafted into the service.

Mark: When you got the draft notice, what did you think?

Bernhagen: Well--

Mark: I'm interested in your thoughts on the matter.

Bernhagen: Well, I felt it was an honor to serve my own country. My father had served in World War I and was a veteran of overseas duty in France. I recall so many stories that he told about World War I and he joined the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars and he was very, very proud of his service in World War I. So, I thought it was an honor and a duty to serve my country at that time.

Mark: You had no hesitation about giving up your job or anything like that?

Bernhagen: No, no, not really.

Mark: It was the Depression, after all. I suspect in many cases, jobs were hard to come by.

- Bernhagen: Yeah. But, the company I worked for assured us that anyone drafted would have their job waiting for them when they got back out of service. So, that wasn't too much of a concern at that time.
- Mark: Okay. So, if we could, I'd like to trace your steps into the actual Army itself and your basic training and that sort of thing. I imagine you had to go to an induction center somewhere and get a physical and get on a train and go somewhere. Let's walk through those steps.
- Bernhagen: Yeah, well, we were sent to Milwaukee to the induction center for a physical examination by train and then came back home to Junction City to await further assignment.
- Mark: Which came after how long?
- Bernhagen: Well that was--I was inducted the 22nd of September of '42. I was on active duty, then, on the 6th of October of '42. I entered into the service at Fort Sheridan, Illinois.
- Mark: Is that where you got the uniform and the haircut and all that sort of thing.
- Bernhagen: Yeah, yeah, and yeah. Got the haircut and the uniform and from there we were sent by--in fact there was about 8 or 10 of us fellas from Portage County that were all inducted at the same time. We were all, sent by train to Camp Barkley, Texas.
- Mark: That's where the actual basic training took place?
- Bernhagen: That's where the basic training started.
- Mark: That lasted about how long?
- Bernhagen: Oh--
- Mark: 6 weeks 8 weeks? Do you remember even?
- Bernhagen: Yeah, it lasted quite awhile. Because we were sent after the initial basic training, we were sent to Louisiana on maneuvers. We stayed there for--we were supposed to go back after the first maneuver period but they held us over for another period of maneuvers in Louisiana because they were short medics at that time.
- Mark: So, when it came to getting into being a medic, where was this decision made? Was it at Camp Barkley or--

Bernhagen: Yeah.

Mark: Okay. You had to take some tests or something I would imagine.

Bernhagen: Yeah, I had to take some tests and oh, there was a lot of different regimen that we went through over there. During that time, I had a high enough I.Q. at that time to be sent to a dental school. I went to--while my company was still at Camp Barkley, I was sent to Denver, Colorado, Fitzsimmons General Hospital and there I had about 2 months of training to be a Dental Technician. But I don't know; I just didn't take that much interest in that. So, when I was transferred back to Camp Barkley again, well then, they no longer had a need for a Dental Technician at that time anyway.

Mark: Yeah, probably not.

Bernhagen: So, then I was promoted to a line sergeant. I stayed in that position for the rest of my army career.

Mark: Now, I went to basic training about 40 years later and I remember a lot of screaming and yelling and some fairly strict discipline and that sort of thing. A lot of it was an adjustment to enter that military world. I'm interested in your experiences and of those around you. Was basic training tough? Was discipline tough?

Bernhagen: Yeah, yes, it was very tough. But, I had been pretty much an athlete in high school. I played football, basketball, I was in wrestling and boxing and everything else. After awhile I didn't mind it. I was a physical exercise instructor and I know it was tough and a lot of guys couldn't take it.

Mark: Yeah.

Bernhagen: We used to go on 25 or 30 mile hikes on bivouac with full pack on. It was blistering hot down there in the summer in Texas.

Mark: I've been there in the summer, yeah.

Bernhagen: Of course some of the areas we went into were infested with snakes, rattlesnakes, you know and that kind o stuff which we didn't see too much of before.

Mark: Now, that is the physical but what about the mental or physiological adjustments? Well having to be told what to do all the time and that sort of thing. Did that take a toll on you or those around you?

Bernhagen: No, not really I adjusted to that. I just thought it was part of your duty and I took instructions they taught me to be a map instructor. I taught classes in map reading and directions and stuff like that. I just adjusted to it and it wasn't too difficult for me to deal with that.

Mark: Now, I would imagine that with basic training there is a good mix of people from all across the country is that pretty much the case?

Bernhagen: Oh yeah. About half of our company down there was all men from the south mostly from Alabama and Georgia.

Mark: How did everyone get along with the Yankees and Rebels that sort of thing?

Bernhagen: Well, there were some difficult times but for the most part we got along pretty well. Some of these people from the south had hardly any education at all. They didn't so many of them didn't know their right from there left. I was a drill Sergeant and I had to take and drill these guys on the field you know it was so difficult. Some of these people you would have to put a rock in their left hand and when you said left turn march they went invariably go to the right. But if they had that rock in their hand then they would go left. But some of them were unable to cope with that, a couple of them were just made permanent KP and stuff like that.

Mark: Now, when it came to life in the barracks in basic training how did all that go? Was there any social tension or was there just a lot of joking around or?

Bernhagen: Yeah, there was a lot of joking around. They kept us pretty darn busy all the time you know. There was some joking around of course I don't remember but there were some hard feeling now and then that erupted. But we had some real good people in our company there from the mid-west from Illinois and from Michigan. As far I as I was concerned I got along great with these guys and there was people from the south too that, you know, I like too. They got just as well adjusted as anybody else.

Mark: Okay, so you finished training and where did you go from there?

Bernhagen: After coming back from Louisiana we were sent to Camp Buoy, Texas. There we started getting our equipment ready for over seas boxed everything all up all the equipment. Then we took a long train ride from Texas all the way through the south up through Washington DC some parts of the country that I had never seen before and then into Boston.

Mark: Is that Miles Standish?

- Bernhagen: Yep, Miles Standish is where we left from that was quite an experience too. Getting ready to go over seas you know that training you get about going over the side on the ropes you know.
- Mark: Umm, hum.
- Bernhagen: In case the ship was sunk and they kind of threw a scare into us right off the bat there, because one of our ships was sunk by a Nazi submarine just off the coast of that harbor there.
- Mark: Was that in view or was that something you heard of?
- Bernhagen: No, it was something that we heard of. Not that I saw it myself, no, well it was documented that this ship went down. Where it was hit I don't remember just how many survivors there were. It kind of threw a scare into us and then they told us that we were going to go over seas without any escort. We went over seas with the United States biggest boat at that time. It was during wartime called the West Point and there were over 7000 troops on there. During peacetime it was called the Liner America. It depended on its speed to out wit the submarine attacks we took a southern route over to England. Seven days one day aboard that ship, without any warning to all the troops on board, the marines on the boat there they fired a target out from one of the big guns on there. Then they were going to take target practice but they didn't warn anybody on ship. When this gun went off Oh boy! Everybody on the boat thought they got hit by a torpedo.
- Mark: I can imagine where that would cause some concern there.
- Bernhagen: Oh yeah, there were a few people hurt scrambling up from the lower decks you know. Then the captain apologized later on for not giving us a warning about that but it was a real scare.
- Mark: I'm sure it was. So you landed in England in seven days at Liverpool some where did you tell me?
- Bernhagen: Yeah, we landed at Liverpool.
- Mark: And then you have to unload all that equipment I would imagine.
- Bernhagen: Unloaded all the equipment and then we went by train from there to South Hampton. We stayed in port there for a day, I think it was about two days because they put us on a English boat there to cross the English channel. It was so strange to be eating that English food; they had nothing but bully beef on there. Most of the guys didn't go for that too much and neither did I.

Mark: Not terribly appetizing!

Bernhagen: No, it wasn't.

Mark: Now, that brings up the subject kind of about having contact with the English people. You sampled some of their food, did you like drink some of their beer? Did you get out into the town and look around that sort of thing?

Bernhagen: No, we didn't have an opportunity, the only contact we had with them was watching these stevedores unload the boat. We were a lot of us were standing on deck watching them unload the ship. They were yelling at one another and hollering around and none of could understand what in the world these people were talking about. It was supposed to be English but we the only word that we could understand was; bloody. It was bloody this and bloody that you know. It seemed so strange we were all thought that well we are in England they should speak English but we couldn't understand what in the world them guys were talking about down there. Of course we went on the train and we didn't have no time in England at all. We went from one boat onto a train and then from the train onto another boat. I think we were only in England six or seven days.

Mark: Then you went over to France then?

Bernhagen: Then we went over to Normandy Beach.

Mark: Now this is how long after the D-Day invasion?

Bernhagen: This was in early October, you know D-Day was in June and then we got onto the Normandy beach in early October, I think about the tenth something like that. At that time the fighting was going on at Saint Lowell. We were holding up in the hedge bushes, for several, I don't know a couple of weeks. During that time boy the weather was starting to get worse colder. One of our first casualties I will never forget this as long as I live. Is when we landed on that Normandy beach there they had a GI laying on a stretcher and I looked down at him and my God he looked he was a kid only about 12 or 14 years old. He had both of his legs blown off he had stepped on a land mine that was our first casualty. Oh boy from that point on for the next few weeks everybody was so careful about where they were stepping they were thinking about those land mines.

Mark: I would imagine so. So it was in Normandy that your unit was first involved with casualties then.

- Bernhagen: Yes, not too many at that time. It was just people that were being evacuated from the front.
- Mark: I was going to ask just how close to the front you were? It sounds like you were one or two echelons back?
- Bernhagen: At that time.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Bernhagen: Yeah, but then we moved up to the front there. Everybody, every man, that was capable of driving a vehicle we were assigned to a jeep or a weapons carrier we drove those vehicles up to the front at Saint Lowell. There we were attached to General Paten's Army. From that time on, it was go, go, and go. We were in that Saint Lowell battle area for I don't know it seemed like an awful long time. Maybe it was only a couple of weeks but then we moved. When they advanced we pulled right up with them. We had to set up our medical clearing company wherever it was available.
- Mark: Umm hmmm. What was involved with setting it up and taking it apart and moving it to the front, as it goes on?
- Bernhagen: That was the strange part, because all during our training period we had to set up tents, you know.
- Mark: Umm hmmm.
- Bernhagen: Big tents, for operations for putting people into the hospital to be evacuated back. Over there we hardly ever go to set up a tent. It was where we always were put in some building, a warehouse or a school or anything that was convenient at the time. Why we would have to set up the hospital there. It wasn't really a hospital it was just a clearing company we gave them first aid you know.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Bernhagen: And they were evacuated from that point back.
- Mark: Yeah, so the casualties you received were right off the line is that right?
- Bernhagen: Yeah.
- Mark: I mean after Saint Lowell and after you started to move on you were the front line of the medical echelons going back and back.

- Bernhagen: That is right yeah. We had our own ambulances and the casualties right from the front lines were brought to us first. Then whatever we could do for them we did and those that were severely wounded or injured were evacuated to a General Hospital.
- Mark: So your duties in the clearing company were what exactly?
- Bernhagen: Mostly was a--
- Mark: As a line sergeant--
- Bernhagen: As a line sergeant my duties was--I had a company of about thirty men and my duty was to have them, my men, set up medical beds and all the equipment had to be set up for the doctors that initially looked at these casualties. Mostly after it was setup I didn't have too much to do until we got a call to move out. Then everything had to be boxed up and crated up and my duty was to make sure everything was crated and ready to go on to the trucks and move up to the front.
- Mark: That process took about how long?
- Bernhagen: We were trained to have that done within an hour.
- Mark: Was that possible? I mean were you able to do that?
- Bernhagen: Yeah, for the most part it was. I know in training in Louisiana, the different platoons would contest each other you know at the rate of speed that they could take down a complete clearing company and then move out and have it set up again at the next location. Then as you got into actual combat areas it was all together different. Because you were on the move so much you didn't put up your tents at all. That was one of the major operations was to set up these big tents for operating for the doctors that operated and then they set up with dental clinics and a hospital rehabilitation room you know.
- Mark: Yeah. I was going to ask how often you were moving and how that changed over time? I mean; I would imagine at the time of the Bulge for example; you were moving much less frequently than you would have let's say in November of 44.
- Bernhagen: Yeah, we would sometimes be in a location for maybe a week or two and all of the sudden they would say we are moving out. No matter what, sometimes it would be midnight and they would say "Well we are closing down and everything has to be created up and on the trucks and we are going up." This happened quiet frequently.

- Mark: I'm quite sure it did.
- Bernhagen: As I remember it now, after numerous stops from Saint Lowell, I do remember we were at that Nancy Metts location, up in that area there for quite sometime. That is where I first got to see General Patton.
- Mark: I didn't know you saw Patton. It is kind of off the track a little bit but I am interested anyway but describe the occasion of when you saw Patton and what you thought and how close did you get to him?
- Bernhagen: Well, after we left Saint Lowell I just don't remember the location any more but we had moved over night it was some distance like 20 miles or so maybe more. We were setting up our hospital you know clearing company is what we called it in a vacant warehouse. We were scrambling around getting everything in order there. We were unloading trucks and then up pulls General Patton with this command car of his. It was built like a tank, only it had rubber wheels. He got out of his vehicle and he came over and looked and said a few words to our Major there and immediately got back into that vehicle and away he went and that was the last I saw of him.
- Mark: Now, what was the sort of GI's view of Patton because he is a controversial figure? I mean he was kind of strict but he was inspirational to a lot of people too. So I am interested in your recollections of what people thought of and what you thought personally of Patton?
- Bernhagen: Well, he at that time well, I didn't know much about him you know except that he comes down with these orders you would have to do. Like we had to fix all of our jeeps up for winter you know, we had to kind of put caps over the tops and boy down comes the order from General Patton everything had to be taken off because you had to be able to see approaching aircraft. It was kind of disappointing to the guys in the different platoons like that because they spent a lot of time and did a lot of scavenging to fix up these jeeps for winter. But then everything had to be taken off. Then there were a number of casualties where the Germans would set up wire cable you couldn't see it at all it would be just at the height of where the guy in the jeep would be decapitated if he ran into that. So then every jeep and we had our own motor pool too and every jeep and every vehicle had to have a big iron post welded on to the front bumper that was supposed to stop this wire. We had a few casualties that were decapitated.
- Mark: I'm sure that is something that you would remember.
- Bernhagen: Then that stuff just kind of comes back to you by God maybe that General knows what he is talking about.

- Mark: Yeah. So in terms of the kinds of casualties you were receiving and the volume of them that you were receiving them. I understand that you weren't directly involved with patient care, but from your prospective did you get a sense of what sort of casualties you were getting and how frequently they were coming in and that sort of thing?
- Bernhagen: Well, we would some times we would get a truckload of casualties all at one time. There would be mostly minor ones, bullet wounds, fractures, somebody getting hit by equipment or something like that. There were so many trench foot and frozen feet.
- Mark: I'm sure I suppose in the Bulge particularly?
- Bernhagen: Well yeah, in the Bulge, I would say like 70% of our casualties that were coming into us at that time were GI's with frozen feet and frozen fingers. Mostly it was frozen feet and they would have to cut the combat boots off these guys.
- Mark: Because they would swell up I take it?
- Bernhagen: They would swell right up and no way could you get the boot off.
- Mark: From what you could tell were there very many psychological casualties, or could you tell?
- Bernhagen: Yes, in our outfit alone we had two or three of them right in our company that were. We had one big fellow from Connecticut he was one of the best liked fellows in the company. He was a great big fellow and he just went completely berserk one day.
- Mark: What did he do?
- Bernhagen: He was a truck driver for our company and he used to go back to bring in supplies you know. Food and equipment what ever we needed. He was I think we had three or four truck drivers like that. But this guy got so concerned about getting confused where he was going and the fact that he might get captured by the Germans, he just went completely out of it and nobody could do a thing with him. Our Major thought at first he was a gold bricking and oh boy they got really down on him. We had three or four doctors in the company and they were divided on this guy is he faking it or not?
- Mark: I suppose it is hard to tell yeah.

- Bernhagen: Yeah. But eventually after a week then he got so he would sit down wherever he was. He would be sitting on the steps or on a cot and he would smoke one cigarette after another. He wouldn't go and eat, he wouldn't go to the toilet he would just sit there with his hands on his head. You had to bring his food to him and then he wouldn't eat it. So after I don't know about seven to ten days that this went on and then they finally evacuated him, couldn't help him any more.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Bernhagen: But we had about two other guys too that--one of them could not take the sounds of the shells. The artillery bombardment he just went completely berserk I don't know what happened to him? They sent him back and he never rejoined the company.
- Mark: Those were in your company alone?
- Bernhagen: Yeah that is just in my company.
- Mark: Of the casualties coming back could you get a sense of how many of them may have been physiological?
- Bernhagen: Well, I couldn't really talk about that too much because for my part I really didn't deal with them too much. As much as the medical technicians and surgical technicians did. But yes they--some of them were really down, I don't know if it was the fact that they were wounded or crippled or whatever.
- Mark: So, when it comes to picking up a hospital getting back to that subject a little bit. I'm sure weather had a lot to do with that.
- Bernhagen: Oh yeah!
- Mark: Like as winter came it might it probably was more difficult is that a fair statement?
- Bernhagen: Yeah. Yes that is a fair statement. It just changed everything as far as we were concerned. When we moved up the first thing that one of the officers would look for in the immediate area would be a vacant building. That would be secure enough and capable of performing out operations in. I remember one particular case in which, we used to get a lot of casualties from civilians too. We had in that Metes area or Nancy area I don't recall where, there was a French woman that was standing in the street there and these narrow street and our tanks were moving up. This tank you know how they jerk suddenly from one side to the other, the back end of that tank caught that woman in the buttocks and just sheared off about half of

her buttock just like that! It was like you took a knife and cut it right down. We took her in and they treated her as best they could and then she was evacuated along with our wounded. Later on a day or two later this woman's husband came in and he was really down he said that his wife had passed away mostly from shock. We were really down about that because we didn't think that was really life threatening that she would die from that. But those things happen, a lot of civilian casualties we treated too.

Mark: Did you have much other contact with the local? Did you depend on them for food for example?

Bernhagen: No, they depended mostly on us for food. A lot of them would come in and ask if we had left over food, there was always food left over. It wasn't so much the French people but as we got into Germany that is what I was going to talk about next. We advanced along with Patton up through that area up into Strausburg I think it was around in that area. We crossed the French boarder into Germany.

Mark: This is just after the Bulge?

Bernhagen: No, this is before the Bulge. I tried to think of the name of that town. It was some Stadt you know like Altstadt some thing like that.

Mark: I am sure it's in an official record somewhere.

Bernhagen: Yeah it is. I was going to always find a map of Germany and look that up. But anyway we got into this town and when we started setting up there the town was completely deserted. There wasn't a soul in this town so we started looking around. Everybody was afraid of booby traps every house there the people that had lived there they immediately put everything into the basement all their furniture everything was just helter shelter piled into the basement. Every house was that way. We were in that town for about three or four days, about the second day a real old fellow comes marching out of the woods holding up a white flag. He had oh thirty-five or forty women and children with him. They came out of the woods there and begged us for food and shelter. They were starting to freeze they were without food, water, so we fed them and they were so afraid that we were going to kill them.

Mark: Yeah, because they are the Germans, the enemy.

Bernhagen: They, several of them could speak good English it was broken but you could understand them. They understood that they were going to be killed by us. They were going to be murdered.

Mark: That's what they were told?

Bernhagen: That's what they were told. That was the reason that they all fled. Then after every meal while we were there I think up to five days that we were in that little town. All that while there was heavy artillery fire going both ways. We could hear it whistling over our heads back and forth. During this time they would line up there after when we were fed at, you know, at mess. They would line up and take anything that was left off of the GI's mess kit. Whatever was left he got what that person put in there and then they would automatically have to move out of the line. Sometimes there would be some heavy quarreling going on pushing you know. But they were always I think every GI always left some food in his mess kit for them. They got what ever was left after all the GI's were fed they got what was left. There would be a big scrambling over that too! We had to get MP's in there to keep that down a little bit.

Mark: So, I don't get the impression that there was what you call hatred for the Germans. You were fighting their armies but that sort of thing indicates that there wasn't sort of an extreme hatred or anything like that?

Bernhagen: No.

Mark: There was some sort of compassion?

Bernhagen: Oh, I would say there was a lot of compassion for those people. A lot of them were starving you know they had no food. A lot of them were without shelter, I would say yes, there was a lot of compassion for them.

Mark: Was it different than in France or are France and Belgium pretty much the same way?

Bernhagen: France and Belgium a little bit different. Because a lot of the people as you went through the countryside most all of them people were farmers. They had chickens and they had sheep and animals and I know several times we would be invited into their home you know. They wanted some of our food, in turn they would fry some fresh eggs up for us, oh God it was just like heaven to get some home cooking like that!

Mark: It beats 'C' rations huh?

Bernhagen: Yeah and they in turn oh they relished that K-Rations you know with the chocolate in it and all that stuff.

Mark: Yeah.

Bernhagen: We did that many times with the French and Belgium peoples. They would invite you in and you would trade off your K-Rations, which we

were pretty dam sick of. For a fresh home made meal like that, they didn't have to much either but I do remember that we had these big tins of bacon and they would fry that up for us and oh God did they love that they couldn't get enough of that. We got pulled back out of Germany when that Battle of the Bulge broke out. We had to pack all of our equipment up something like 10:00 at night we had to get ready to move. We didn't know where we were going, we didn't know actually about this Battle of the Bulge at that time. But we had everything I got my platoon all loaded up what ever and all of our boxes. Then we traveled over night in two and half-ton trucks you know under black out conditions. It was cold and we rode all night we didn't even know where we were going. Most of us didn't anyway. The next day late in the afternoon here we get into it and we start hearing the shelling going on. The weather was just horrible it was blowing snow it was foggy it was cold. We pulled back from Germany and went all the way over into Belgium. We were sent there to a city by the name of Arlon, which was about eight kilometers from Bastogne. There we set up our clearing company you know. All the equipment was set up in a building there. Then it really got scary; there was constant bombardment you know artillery tanks rumbling through always. Everything was in a state of confusion there. But we had an old building that we set up in, in that town. It was pretty well battered then too. The city was hit not like Bastogne of course but--

Mark: Bad enough I suppose?

Bernhagen: Bad enough. But then after the second day we found out the Germans had bypassed us. They went between where we were and Bastogne. This is where we started getting the casualties oh my God it was just a steady stream! Like I said most of them was frozen extremities frozen feet, frozen hands, frozen ears, frozen fingers. Most of them were frozen feet because those darned combat boots were just not suited for winter fighting like that. When they were wet, they got cold and then oh it was a horrible sight to see some of these casualties coming in there with feet the toes swollen way up and black and blue and ohhh!

Mark: Was it the most was it the worst in terms of the volume of casualty had seen so far?

Bernhagen: That was the worst, that was the worst. I think the weather caused most of it because when the infantryman's feet got frozen like that he was just useless, he couldn't do nothing. Most all of our casualties were frozen extremities.

Mark: In terms of supplies and that sort of thing, you have this large volume of casualty and as you mentioned you are cut off the Germans had bypassed

you did you have trouble getting bandages and blood that sort of thing?
Were you able to get resupplied some how?

Bernhagen: With that we didn't have too much of a problem with.

Mark: Really!

Bernhagen: We did stock a lot of supplies and our trucks, our motor pull guys were continually going back and forth bringing in supplies, bringing in food and stuff like that. Like I said this one guy went berserk because he thought he was going to wind up behind German lines and be captured.

Mark: Yeah, was it at the Bulge that he went berserk or was it earlier or later than that?

Bernhagen: It was before that happened.

Mark: It was a risky job to say the least!

Bernhagen: Yeah, because you know sometimes they would be sent to the food dump or ammunition dump or whatever. They would come to the a road and the bridges would be blown out, they would have to find there way around on roads that they were not too familiar with. It wasn't all that gravy of a job. For the most part they were all alone you know. Sometimes there would be another guy if we had extra people around then we would sent them along with that particular driver. But then we were in this Alone when this battle was raging on, during all this time by way I should mention some of our casualties were GI's that were shot by other GI's.

Mark: Was that on purpose or by accident?

Bernhagen: By accident. It was so touch and go at that time and they were changing the password you know like when we were back farther they used to change the password every day. Well then as you got closer they would change the password every six hours. Boy when we got into Arlon the password was changed every two hours because the Germans had been infiltrating the lines there. They were really causing a lot of havoc there you couldn't trust anybody there. If you ventured out you better know the password. Because they, the infantrymen were so uneasy and trigger finger happy that if you didn't know the password you were going to get shot.

Mark: And some did obviously!

Bernhagen: And some of them did get shot. We lost one of our men got killed there out of our company.

- Mark: It was a sort of friendly fire incident like that?
- Bernhagen: Yeah, not from friendly fire from enemy fire.
- Mark: Oh, I see that was a rare occurrence then?
- Bernhagen: Yes, that was rare. We weren't supposed to have arms you know as a medic. As word got around that the Germans were shooting medics and anybody and everybody medics included so a lot of us did packs arms then, I know if did. I had a P38 that I have yet to this day that was taken up near Nancy. One of our; I should relate how this happened there. As we were moving up there this railroad train blocked the crossing so this infantry Major or Captain he ordered one of the tanks to come up. The tank came up and he said "Blow it off of the track. Blow it off the road." He opened fire on that train and boy! Everything went flying there. This train this car that he was firing at was all loaded like about a foot high the whole bottom was covered with brand new P-38 new guns. They were all wrapped in cosmoline and paper. This one officer jumped up on there and he says "Oh God look at this!" So we started throwing out these guns before they blew the rest of it off of there. Everybody that was around grabbed a gun.
- Mark: And you still have yours?
- Bernhagen: Oh yeah, I still got mine, yep.
- Mark: So as the Battle of the Bulge progressed then, did you pull back or where you stuck in the pocket?
- Bernhagen: Well, we were stuck right in that pocket. We were stuck right in and then--
- Mark: So eventually you were cut off from other Americans?
- Bernhagen: Yes, for awhile. And then came Christmas Day it was the first real break in the weather that I remember. Christmas Day the sun came out real bright Oh God it was a joy to see that. Then the planes started coming in Oh my God the air was just full all day long. We could hear the bombs and the fighter planes firing at these German tanks and German columns. Then and there everybody felt a lot better then.
- Mark: I'm sure!
- Bernhagen: It felt like hey now we are going back to winning again!

- Mark: Yeah. So what is it like to be cut off like that? Are you so busy that you don't have time to think that you are cut off or is it taxing?
- Bernhagen: It is like you said you are so busy you don't think about that. It's was where we were getting more and more casualties all the time and everybody was just doing there job and not having time to think about that.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Bernhagen: The only thing that you thought about was if you went outside there or got out of the building that you knew that password, that was number one. Like I said earlier every two hours they were changing it and you wanted to be well posted on what that change was.
- Mark: I'm sure! How long until you got relieved finally? The planes started coming in on Christmas day?
- Bernhagen: Yeah.
- Mark: Was it very much longer before you were able to link up with other Americans?
- Bernhagen: Oh yeah, then it was just a day or two. Then more and more, troops more and more infantry started pouring in more tanks and equipment started pouring in. Then we were no longer worried about being isolated you know.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Bernhagen: But a from that time on we moved up along with Patton's army, an armor division. We kept moving up toward the Rhine River. There was still a lot of heavy fighting was going on then and everyday that we had a lot of clear days then the sky was just filled with planes almost all the time. I should relate to you, about the time we saw that it was on that autobahn, that super highway. We came across this thing. And I don't remember exactly where that was but we were on the autobahn and we saw this jet plane. And it was all camouflaged you know in kind of a heavy wooded area and we stopped and looked at that darn thing and said "What in the world how can that thing fly? It doesn't have no propellers!" Then during the next few days we did see this it was quite awhile before the Battle of the Bulge we saw this dog fight going up over in the sky. There would be oh like eight or ten P-51 the Mustangs were trying to get and corner this one plane. All the sudden that plane would go right straight up and he would just take right away from them and this was our fastest plane.

Mark: Yeah.

Bernhagen: Or he would come out of the clouds and go right straight down, you know. They were firing away you could see the burst up there you know. They weren't coming close to this guy.

Mark: Huh.

Bernhagen: It was shortly after that that we discovered that I don't know why they didn't blow that plane up or why they had to leave in such a hurry. Boy the intelligence was so interested to get that plane out of there!

Mark: I bet they were.

Bernhagen: We weren't around long enough to see what happened to it but we were just mystified by that plane. We couldn't figure out how in the world that plane could fly.

Mark: Um I'm sure. So as time went on and as you drove more into Germany more and more did the casualties sort of lighten up? Did the Germany resistance sort of lighten up or did it stay heavy even after you crossed the Rhine?

Bernhagen: Yes the casualty list lightened up considerably as we moved forward then. Well, I don't remember the exact date but we crossed the Rhine at Worms over a pontoon bridge that the engineers had built there. From that time on I don't know we just didn't have too many casualty from there on. From there we wound up in Munich, Germany. We went through I know this one town, Ulm, I never saw such devastation in all those battles, this town was just completely erased. Railroad tracks were sticking up in the air and that is what it was, was a railroad center. It was just complete devastation there. From that city there we wound up in Munich. The day the infantry captured Herman Goering there in Munich.

Mark: Is that right?

Bernhagen: We had one of our casualties then that had been brought in was a German SS Trooper and he had slit his throat from ear to ear and he was still alive! In fact they saved that guy. As I saw him there you could see his heartbeat going beep, beep you know and our medics saved that guy, only he was to be executed later on.

Mark: Yeah. So when VE Day occurred you were in Munich?

Bernhagen: Yeah that was when the war ended there.

Mark: Do you recall the event and peoples reactions to it?

Bernhagen: Well, the natives there I think were mostly overjoyed that it was finally over. We talked to a lot of natives there and a lot of them like I said before they would come in and line up for the food that was left over from the mess. And yeah they oh they would beg and plead and oh boy it was-- as we were stationed in Munich there for awhile I thought of this awhile ago but we went through some of these bombed out buildings. In one big building there they had the roof was blown off of there and down way in the basement was all this artwork. It was all crated up and had a destination to Argentina on there. Some of it was real valuable artwork and treasures that I think the Germans had confiscated from other countries.

Mark: Yeah.

Bernhagen: And this was all crated up in wooden crates and it all had an Argentina destination on there. But oh boy there was a lot of scrambling going on during those days.

Mark: Yeah.

Bernhagen: GI's wanted to get in on the action and we weren't allowed to that is one thing we were I should tell you we weren't allowed to fraternize with the Germans at first.

Mark: Yeah but was that followed?

Bernhagen: Yeah, but that just went out the window after so many days you know. Then we were stationed in a suburb of Germany of Munich its on the tip of my tongue here. It was a big city but it was like you know like West Allis is to Milwaukee.

Mark: Oh Gee's, I don't know is it where the concentration camp was?

Bernhagen: Yeah.

Mark: Dachau?

Bernhagen: That is--we were one of the first units to go over there too!

Mark: Oh is that right?

Bernhagen: That was at Dachau.

Mark: Describe that scene for me if you would?

Bernhagen: Well, that thing there was unbelievable, because as we were motoring over there you know in an open jeep you know this smell from miles away you--we didn't know exactly what it was it was just horrible! Then as we got up to Dachau there were long streams of Russian soldiers. You know walking all scraggly all battered uniforms and cloth wrapped around their heads and their ears and they were all heading back towards Russia. But when we got up to this camp there, Oh God--it was unbelievable! We saw all this atrocity of stacked up bodies the ovens the whole--Oh God it was awful! but our company did not go in there. They had other people going in there to remove--I could never describe that and what came from that camp, even miles before you got there.

Mark: Yeah. Okay so the war is over in Europe?

Bernhagen: Yeah.

Mark: Was there any thought of having to go to Japan?

Bernhagen: Yes there was. From that point on I'm still trying to think of the name of that town that we were there--we were there for about a month after the war ended. Then we got orders to go back into France. We road these darn box cars back in there into France. There they had a camp set up there and there is where we were starting to get ready to go to Japan. We started getting the shots you know for the different diseases Malaria and all that. And we got all new equipment or most of it was new. We started crating that all up in boxes and waiting for orders to go to Marseilles, France and ship right out from Marseilles to the South Pacific. During those days we had German prisoners doing all our work for us.

Mark: Umm huh.

Bernhagen: They did all of our KP, they did wash clothes for the guys they were only too happy to be with us.

Mark: I suppose.

Bernhagen: Rather than be captured by the Russians. They would do anything to please you. They just couldn't do enough for you, you know. During those days that's all we did was play baseball and football in fact we had like some pretty good ball players in our company there. We played two games a week against other companies up to two games a day I should say in the morning and in the afternoon.

Mark: I suppose it kept you guys busy?

- Bernhagen: Yeah, oh yeah. It was before we left, the name of that town was Augsburg.
- Mark: Augsburg I see.
- Bernhagen: Before we left Augsburg we had the privilege of taking out you could sign out a jeep or a weapons carrier and go off into the mountains into the Alps. It's like I said; "All of our work was done by the prisoners then." My buddy and I almost--well this happened, oh a week or two after the war was over, we were going up to Augsburg with a weapons carrier. We were just joy riding, sight seeing and climbing up through the mountains when a damn bullet whistled right in back of my buddies head and he was driving and went right out in front of me. In front of my head it just missed the back of his head and it missed me. It came right through those curtains and out the other side. We reported that right up at the next MP stop and they sent some infantry in there. And then on the way back we stopped there and they had the guy here and they killed him.
- Mark: Was it just some young German or something?
- Bernhagen: Yeah it was a die hard German, a die hard Nazi he just did not want to surrender. But that was one of the closest calls we had and that was after the war was over!
- Mark: Hum that is interesting actually.
- Bernhagen: Yeah.
- Mark: So, when you got the news that the Japanese had surrendered do you recall your reaction to that?
- Bernhagen: Oh there was just joy there was absolute joy, that is the best feeling I ever had in my life.
- Mark: Huh.
- Bernhagen: All of us they had brought in the French wine and Cognac it was a two day celebration. Some of these guys didn't sober up for two days up to a week after that. Oh that was just a joyous occasion when we heard that that second bomb went off and then the war would be over and we would not have to go to Japan the South Pacific.
- Mark: Yeah. Now in this fiftieth anniversary year there has been a lot of controversy about the bomb. In these interviews I like to ask veterans what they thought at the time of it. Do you recall your reaction when you heard about the bomb?

- Bernhagen: I was just so overjoyed I was just so happy I would say that was one of the happiest days of my life. Because I just dreaded thinking about going to the South Pacific yet. When that happened our whole company I say, to a man, was just overjoyed. They were just like the happiest people that you would ever want to meet or see. From that time on it was oh my God we couldn't thank anybody enough for having developed that bomb and dropping it over there and ending that war.
- Mark: Umm okay, so you returned to the US right around Christmas 45 then?
- Bernhagen: Yeah. We left Antwerp Belgium about the 23 of December 45. We got back into the US in the State of Virginia the fort there Virginia Roads or Hampton Roads there?
- Mark: Yeah. Norfolk probably?
- Bernhagen: Yeah, Norfolk, the third of January 1946.
- Mark: Then you came back to Wisconsin?
- Bernhagen: Yep, right back to Wisconsin.
- Mark: So, you are young recently discharged GI and its now time for you to get on with the rest of your life. This is often where a lot of these types of interviews end but I have some questions about post war adjustments and readjustments and that sort of things. After you got discharged what were your priorities in getting your life back on track?
- Bernhagen: Well, my priorities then were to get married and I got married in February. Then I went back to my job at the Power Company.
- Mark: So it was waiting for you?
- Bernhagen: Yes.
- Mark: You had no problem? You just walked into the office and said, "Here, I'm back?"
- Bernhagen: No problems at all. They welcomed me back. The hardest part of that was when I got married was finding a place to live.
- Mark: So, how did you handle that situation?
- Bernhagen: Well we managed to find an apartment there in Stevens Point. My job was in Wisconsin Rapids. We couldn't find a place anywhere in

Wisconsin Rapids so I had to drive back and forth to work of course. There were about five other guys too and we all road together and changed off driving.

Mark: Where these apartments expensive too? I mean besides them being scarce, that could only I imagine drive up the price too?

Bernhagen: Right they jacked the price up. One of the things that really bothered me was when I wanted to get married I wanted to buy a white shirt. I went into the store there in Stevens Point and you couldn't buy a white shirt. Although this one retailer there did have white shirts, they were under the counter and only for his favorite customers.

Mark: I see.

Bernhagen: My brother-in-law then, well he wasn't my brother-in-law then but he, after I had been in there earlier to buy a white shirt but they wouldn't sell me one. They told me they didn't have any. But then he went over there and he was a favorite customer of theirs before he went into the service too. He talked to the guy and he said he wanted a white shirt and he said "Oh yeah sure they are under the counter over there."

Mark: As a veteran, how did that make you feel?

Bernhagen: I didn't feel too good about that.

Mark: Oh yeah.

Bernhagen: I didn't feel too good about that at all.

Mark: There are some veterans that came back and thought that some of the civilians were taking advantage of the situation and that sort of thing. Some don't feel resentful but some do, I'm just trying to get at what you thought about that? I mean is that business or did you feel a little put out by that?

Bernhagen: I was a little put out on that and I was a little put out on a lot of things you know. It seems as though after what we had been through they seemed that a lot of people didn't appreciate that at all. I thought we went through a lot of Hell you know. I felt there should be a lot more praise for what you went through.

Mark: You didn't think you got that?

Bernhagen: No, I didn't get that, no.

- Mark: So when it comes to buying a white shirt or an apartment or something like that these sorts of things often occur after a war with these kinds of shortages. How long was it till these sorts of things started to get better?
- Bernhagen: Oh, about six months to a year, then things started to get much better.
- Mark: Did you eventually purchase a home or anything?
- Bernhagen: Eventually yes I did, I got a GI loan.
- Mark: Yeah that is what I was going to ask.
- Bernhagen: Eventually I came down to work, because my family father and mother had moved to Milwaukee during that time. He went to work and he was a tool and die man and he went to work in a Defense Factory here. Then I eventually got a job with the Power Company down here in Milwaukee. Then I bought my first home under that GI Loan and that's when I started to feel good about being in the service.
- Mark: Now that was the Federal one?
- Bernhagen: Yeah.
- Mark: Because there were some state programs too?
- Bernhagen: There was some what.
- Mark: There were some state programs too, the State of Wisconsin had some loan programs and that sort of thing.
- Bernhagen: I don't remember if mine was a state or federal? I think that was a state, I bought under that GI Loan, the Federal Government Loan program.
- Mark: So, we have covered employment you had no problems there. You had a couple of problems at first finding a place to live and that sort of alleviated itself as well. When it comes to readjustments what sort of emotional and physiological adjustments, did you have any difficulties in that regard?
- Bernhagen: No, I didn't have any, I was just so happy to be home again. No I didn't have any emotional problems at all adjusting.
- Mark: Some veterans tell me that they experience nightmares for months afterwards. That didn't seem to effect you very much?

- Bernhagen: I had thoughts about the things that I had seen over there many times but I just tried to erase those thoughts or the visions of what I see you know. I didn't want to dwell on it in other words.
- Mark: Yeah okay, I just have one last area I want to cover and that involves veteran's organizations and reunions and that sort of thing. Have you ever joined any of the major veterans groups like the Legion or VFW or anything?
- Bernhagen: Yes, I joined the American Legion.
- Mark: At what time? Was it right after the war or was it after you were--?
- Bernhagen: No, it was just a few years ago that I joined it. I should really get into the VFW too because a friend of mine is really after me to get in there too.
- Mark: I'm not the recruiter, I'm just asking the question. What possessed you to join at that particular time?
- Bernhagen: Some friends of mine at the Senior Center one of them was the commander over there and he said, "Gee's why don't you get into the Legion?" and I said, "I think I will." so I joined it.
- Mark: Now the Legion was founded after WWI and they had quite a campaign to get the WWII vets in after the war. You didn't join then but did you give any thought to it at all? Were you just too busy?
- Bernhagen: I thought about it many times, but I don't know why I didn't join. There was no specific reason I can give you, but there were so many things going on all the time. Family raising I had four sons you know!
- Mark: I suppose they were a handful?
- Bernhagen: Yeah. So I was working a part time job with my Dad in addition to my full time job with the Electric Company so I just didn't have much time.
- Mark: It sounds like you stayed busy. As far as reunions have you ever gone to any reunions?
- Bernhagen: No, I haven't.
- Mark: Have you stayed in touch with any people from your clearing company there? That is kind of a small group I would imagine.
- Bernhagen: Yeah, I still get in touch with two people from Portage Co. Every time we go up to Stevens Point and that area I generally get in touch with them and

we talk over the old days in the service there. I have been to several of their weddings and they were down here to mine kids weddings you know.

Mark: Umm huh.

Bernhagen: One of them is a very close friend of mine. That was the one that was he almost got hit after the war was over. He was driving that weapons carriers.

Mark: Yeah.

Bernhagen: Him and I always have a great time together talking over the good old days.

Mark: Well you pretty much exhausted my line of questioning, do you have anything extra you would like to add or did we skip anything?

Bernhagen: I can't think of anything else to add I think we have covered all of it.

Mark: Well, thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

Bernhagen: Thank you, for letting me tell you my point view too.

Mark: Well, it was very interesting actually.

[end of transcript]