

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
GILBERT A. KORTH
30th Infantry Division, Army, World War II
2000

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Korth, Gilbert A., (1924-2002). Oral History Interview, 2000.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 70 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 70 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 70 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Gilbert Korth, a Juneau, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a replacement for Company A, 119th Infantry, 30th Infantry Division in Europe and his experiences as a prisoner of war. He mentions training at Camp Butner (North Carolina) with the 78th Infantry Division and receiving additional training in Wales. He talks about joining the 30th Division at Utah Beach (France) and fighting at St. Lô. He discusses his role as a rifleman, lack of sleep due to having guard duty, being under sniper fire, and the difficulties of hedgerow fighting. He recalls taking cover in a foxhole with a one-star general. Korth touches upon being wounded by a sniper bullet, treatment with penicillin, recovery in Yeovil (England), and reassignment to A Company, 30th Division. He notes the company had an inexperienced sergeant. He describes being taken prisoner after a German tank attack, carrying a fellow wounded prisoner to an aid station, arriving at Stalag 12A (Limberg, Germany), and being transferred to Stalag 2B (Hammerstein, Germany). He comments on the labor performed by the POWs including filling in bomb craters, milking cows on a German farm, and thatching roofs. He describes being assigned duty as an interpreter due to having learned some German in high school. He mentions the different nationalities of the prisoners and relationships with other prisoners and guards. He comments that the guards would club Russian prisoners but not Americans, explaining, "They were afraid of us Americans, in a way." He describes what they had to eat, the cold conditions from sleeping in barns, and getting nerve damage in his feet. He recalls marching out of Germany as the Russian troops approached and finally reaching an "open city" where the prisoners were taken from their German guards. He touches upon his return to the United States to train for invading Japan, having a stranger lend him a car so he could get home, getting married during his two-month leave, and getting discharged. He touches on post-war work as a policeman, helping create an ambulance system, being active in an ex-POW group, and serving on a firing squad with the American Legion.

Biographical Sketch:

Korth (1924-2002) served with the Army's 30th Division in the European theater of World War II. Captured in October of 1944, he was a prisoner of war for six months in Germany before escaping to a liberated town.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2000.

Transcribed by Jeremy Osgood, 2010.

Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2010.

Transcribed Interview:

Jim: Okay. Get that going.

Gilbert: What is that, the sound?

Jim: That's the audio.

Gilbert: Oh, that's the audio.

Jim: We do both.

Gilbert: Oh, you do both?

Woman: Guys, we're leaving for a while. Bye!

Jim: Good luck.

Woman: Thanks.

Jim: Don't talk to strangers.

Gilbert: Stop at the stop signs.

Jim: Talking to Gilbert Korth. 14 July. Year 2000. Okay, Gilbert. When were you born?

Gilbert: I was born August 16th, 1924.

Jim: Where was that?

Gilbert: Oh, it was about halfway between Mayville and Horicon, on a farm. My parents lived on a farm. And then my father did the roadwork around the area with a team of horses. And he got a job here in the highway department. So, when I was about three, four years old, we moved to Juneau. We'd been, I said I lived here all of my life except for my time in the service.

Jim: When did you join the service?

Gilbert: We were sworn in on the 17th of March, 1943. It was, when Pearl Harbor came along I was 17 years old, and I was wondering what was going to happen to me. They were drafting up until age 21. Then, of course, in early 1943 they lowered the age to 18. And there was, I don't know, a couple hundred of us went into the service.

And I, of course, I was one of those that was, didn't have any talents, any schooling, any special trades or anything like that. So they sent us to infantry. We got our infantry basic training in Camp Butner, North Carolina with the 78th Division, Infantry Division. We went through. I said I spent one year, seven months in the United States, and I was overseas exactly one year. From May 14th 1944 till May the 13th 1945. And that one year I got paid 16 dollars.

Jim: Now, when you went overseas you didn't go over with the 78th division, I assume.

Gilbert: No, they took us apart, and we went overseas as replacement. Replacements, I would say. I got on the ship May 13th, 1944. And we spent, this was in Maine. And then we were sent to Wales. Another thing is, I got training in the battalion headquarters. As a rifleman. But then when we got to Wales, then they gave us, well, in between we always had some riflemen training. So we got some more infantry training in Wales.

And then I went over to France. On D-Day I was still in Wales, and I went over to France as a replacement for the 30th Infantry Division. This was National Guard out of, I think it was North Carolina, possibly South Carolina, too. 30th Infantry Division.

Jim: And where were they?

Gilbert: Well, they were on Utah beach, they called it. And then—

Jim: Is that where you caught up with them?

Gilbert: That's where, yeah, we caught up with, in Utah Beach.

Jim: What, in July? Or is it August?

Gilbert: Either late June or early July, I don't remember. It was in that era.

Jim: That 4th division headed toward Cherbourg.

Gilbert: 30th Division. They headed toward St. Lo. And I think the 29th Division, see, they were out of Maryland and, no. 29th Division was Pennsylvania. No, they were out of Maryland and Virginia. They captured St. Lo, France. And then, of course, our division was supposed to lead the thing off of. This, can you shut it off?

Jim: Yes.

Woman: [unintelligible]

Gilbert: Your money?

Woman: [laughs, unintelligible]

Gilbert: What do you want?

Woman: [unintelligible]

Gilbert: What do you need? My wallet is on the desk there. I don't even have it. No, it's on top. Top, right by the telephone. There it is. There's money in there. No, that's change. There's money in the wallet.

Woman: Oh. Where's that?

Gilbert: It's right there. That change purse was on top of it.

Woman: What's in there?

Gilbert: That's change. Quarters and dimes and nickels. But my wallet is, you have your hand on it.

She had a slight stroke, and she can't see.

Now, what were we doing now? Where were we? Oh, I was a replacement.

Jim: Yeah, replacement, just went past St. Lo. You missed that and you went in a different direction.

Gilbert: Yeah, we were supposed to lead the kick-off before St. Lo, but our company commander was killed, and our assistant company commander was wounded. This was the 24th of July and the 25th of July 1944 was the big push off for St. Lo. So, after we lost our company commander and our assistant company commander, we no longer led.

And I was assigned as the ammunition bearer for the Browning, BAR we called it, Browning Automatic Rifle. And I had 240 rounds of ammunition on me.

Jim: That's heavy.

Gilbert: Carrying this stuff all the time. And then of course, in France, you know, it didn't get dark until almost eleven o' clock at night. And I always had guard duty between three and five in the morning. And of course, being up

in the front, you didn't get very much sleep in a week or ten days. So whenever we got four days off, all I would do is sleep.

And I said this one time we got these two replacements in. And they weren't, well, I don't know. Like I said, they didn't know enough to take cover when we were, I think we were bombed, and they didn't know enough to take cover.

That time I was looking for a foxhole to go into, and they were all filled. So, all of a sudden some fella said to me, "Come in with me, son." So, I went in the foxhole with him. And after the bombing and everything was all over with, we got out of this foxhole and I looked, and here was a one-star General. And, course, I heard later, reading in the magazines and stuff that this General, I think his name was Harrison, from the 30th Division, he used to come up to the front with the troops. And I appreciate the fact that he [laughs].

And then, of course, these two replacements that we got didn't know enough to cover. They were killed.

Jim: Didn't have their heads down?

Gilbert: Didn't have, no. Correct. And then there was—

Jim: So how far away were the Germans from this? This was long away, with the big gun, or was it closer to the front?

Gilbert: Well, we were getting up closer to the front, now. See when we had, first we had a sniper that was shooting at us, and we looked up, and there was a church steeple. And we figured that was a sniper up in the church steeple shooting at us. So then we got our artillery observer, that's when I listened to him. He was told that they should supposed to bomb that church. And he'd say "Left wind is" and "Right wind is" and so on. And finally they must have got close enough that the sniper gave up.

So, anyway, this. And then when it came to night, to cover up for the night, of course, we had to dig a foxhole first. And then he said, our artillery observer said, "When do they bring you your blankets?" And we had to say "What blankets?" Cause they never brought us anything. We had to cover up with our raincoats.

And then our division was famous for, the 30th division, if you went to the hospital, you came back, they very seldom put you in the same unit you came out of. I went into the hospital in England, got my first airplane ride across the English Channel, to the 159th General Hospital. And I stayed in there two months.

Jim: Why did you go there?

Gilbert: Well, that's where they'd sent me. Cause I was wounded, I got a bullet wound my left thigh.

Jim: You hadn't told me about that, though.

Gilbert: Oh, okay. We had a tank that was stationed on one of the French hedgerows, I guess they're famous. And it was shooting. Whenever someone would go across the hedgerow, it would shoot at us. And then, our bazooka, so to speak, was damaged by an artillery shell by the Germans. So we wanted to go over to Company K and get a bazooka from them so we could knock out this German tank. Well, they said Company K was on our right. So we got over on our right and there was a sniper. He was sitting in a bunch of bushes, and apparently didn't have, he didn't get up, and he didn't aim to shoot. And he got me right here. Didn't touch a bone, and it came out in the back. Sniper shot. Course, the guys that was with us, it knocked me down, and the guys that was with us, with me, they took care of the sniper.

And then, I said, I went back to the different hospitals. First it was field hospitals and then there was evacuation hospitals. But anyway, I met, that was the only time I met someone that I knew from Wisconsin. I was in the field hospital, and here was a fella that was from Clyman. Just about ten miles south of here. He, see, the Clyman kids in those days, they could either go to Watertown High School, or to Juneau. And the Burnett kids could go either to Horicon or Juneau, and there wasn't any school districts in those years. And so, his brother, John, came to Juneau High School here, but he went to Watertown High School. But I knew him. And I saw him in that hospital, in that field hospital. So that was the only person that I saw that I knew from Wisconsin.

Jim: So when you were shot, then they took you back, and then put you on an ambulance, and then an ambulance to the shore.

Gilbert: To the shore, sure, of France. Yes.

Jim: And then a boat ride across the Channel—

Gilbert: No, no. Airplane ride.

Jim: Airplane ride.

Gilbert: See, the C47s brought ammunition and supplies from England, and took patients back.

Jim: And where was this hospital?

Gilbert: This was Yeovil, England. It was kinda near South Hampton.

Jim: Oh, okay, I know where that is.

Gilbert: It's Y-E-O-V-I-L.

Jim: Lot of patients there?

Gilbert: Oh, yes. Very many patients there.

Jim: So what did they do for your leg?

Gilbert: They treated me with penicillin. Like I said, the penicillin was new. I got a shot of penicillin every four hours. And then, of course, wounded. This compartment held about, I don't know, 22 or 24 patients in each spider, part of the spider. Like this is D or E, I don't remember. And each spider had a letter. And there was quite a few patients in this hospital.

Jim: So you're there how long?

Gilbert: I was there one month in the hospital itself, and then they put us another month in what they call, what do they call it now?

Jim: A rehab unit.

Gilbert: Rehab unit, something like that.

Jim: Go to physical therapy. They may determine that you're fit to go back to duty.

Gilbert: Right, yes. My job was to, everybody had a job. My job was to sweep the dining room in the mess hall after the meal. The noon meal. And then of course we could take either an afternoon pass or an evening pass. And what I did was I took an afternoon pass and I stayed all night. As long as you didn't get in trouble or didn't get involved with the MPs—

Jim: They let it go.

Gilbert: They let it, yeah, nobody questioned you as long as you were back the next morning. So, and then another thing we used to do, of course, the nurses weren't, they were military people, but they didn't get much military training. We used to stand five paces apart and salute the nurses,

because they were officers, of course. And then we'd laugh at the way their salute was.

Jim: Unmilitary.

Gilbert: Yeah. Right, so—

Jim: So, where'd they put you? How'd they get you back to France?

Gilbert: Well, we went back to France across the English Channel on this Leopold boat. We slept on the deck. I slept on the deck all the way across the Channel. Then of course we went back to France. And then—

Jim: Different unit then.

Gilbert: Then they sent me, I was with the L Company, 30th Division. They sent me back to what they called the process center. And they told us, "tomorrow morning you're gonna be in I company." So, okay, tomorrow morning came, and they said, "No. You're gonna be in A Company. A Company was in a bad battle yesterday, and they only got six men left." Or, twelve men left I guess it was. Anyway, six of us, coming out of the hospital joined A Company. And then, of course, we were only, you know, in reserve, cause there was only, well, I think we had twelve men in the company.

And then I wound up with a, of course, I had been up to the front before. And I knew what to expect. And I had a sergeant that wasn't too bright. I was a PFC, Private First Class. And a couple times I guess I had to correct him. He wasn't doing things right.

So then, we were put in reserve all day. And that night our sergeant said that, "Well, there's six guys in the squad. Three of you guys dig a foxhole. The other three, you go into that apartment house there to get us some blankets." So the three of us were sent into this apartment, it was empty, of course—

Jim: Which country? Are you still in France?

Gilbert: This was in France, yes. And, course we, this was a three story apartment house, and we were throwing things down the center. We very seldom found anything, that was our problem. All that was left was the mattresses. And, so, then in the meantime, German counterattack with tanks. And we got out of the buildings, and the tank was shooting over our heads. So we went back into this apartment house, and we were gonna stay there until it got dark. And, of course, when it got dark, the German soldiers came in and got us.

- Jim: You were caught before you even got a chance to do anything.
- Gilbert: Yes. Right.
- Jim: How did that go? You were upstairs in the second floor and all of a sudden, some language you didn't know?
- Gilbert: No, no, we went downstairs. And then, of course, one thing about the German tanks, you couldn't hear them, they were so quiet. Our tanks were [tank engine sound]. But a German tanks were real quiet. And I said, we went downstairs. And we went, we were gonna go out and look for our other guys. And we didn't even know there was a German tank there. And then, of course, it started shooting at us. So then we went back into the house for cover. And the German troops came in and got us. That's how I was captured. And then—
- Jim: They herded you out of the house, into the street.
- Gilbert: Out into the street, right, and we had a—
- Jim: Were there other prisoners there, by that time?
- Gilbert: Yes, there was other prisoners, and there was one that was wounded. And they didn't even give us a litter to carry this wounded, so what we had to do was, we got two logs, and use our jacket arms, in the logs, for a litter, for this wounded fella. And there was four of us. Eight of us, I guess, we changed off carrying this guy. And it kind of disappointed me that they didn't give us anything to help this wounded guy. And then it was about, almost, I would guess around ten or eleven o' clock at night. Somewhere in that vicinity. And about midnight we wound up in the German lazaret or whatever they called it. First-aid station. And we left that wounded fella there.
- Jim: Can you recall what town you were near in France?
- Gilbert: Burtenbach was the name of the town.
- Jim: So, now, you left your wounded man.
- Gilbert: They left their wounded man.
- Jim: And they sent you where?
- Gilbert: Then we went to Achen, and then from there—

- Jim: By walking, or train.
- Gilbert: By train. We went by train to Limburg, Germany. That's in kind of the south west part of Germany. That's Stalag 12A.
- Jim: So, in other words, you had to cross the Rhine to get into Germany.
- Gilbert: Right, right. Yes, right. Okay. Now, then, we went to 12A. And there the American ex-prisoners of war told us. Well, here, I'll show you.
- Jim: No, that's okay. Just tell me.
- Gilbert: They gave us our identification tag. German prisoner of war. And they told us that we had to work, but that we weren't allowed to run any machinery. So then we went from, then, another thing I probably should say is, they had us filling a bomb crater. See, the Germans did everything by rail in those days. And our Air Force bombed one of their railroad tracks, and there was a large crater there. And we were filling that crater in, and all of a sudden the air raid sirens went off. And we took cover. And the bombs came down and, we never went back to this crater we were filling, because someone said another bomb just hit the same place we were filling. So that was it.
- And then, from there they took us, sent us by train to which was then Pomerania, Germany. Hammerstein. We were in Stalag 12A, and Hammerstein was 2B. And it was way in the western part of Germany. And, if you remember your history, Russia took over the Eastern part of Poland, so that Poland took over this Eastern section of Germany. Pomerania.
- Jim: I interviewed a guy that was at 12A.
- Gilbert: 12A?
- Jim: Oh yeah.
- Gilbert: It was kind of a—
- Jim: A police unit.
- Gilbert: Yeah.
- Jim: [unintelligible]
- Gilbert: I was at 12A, and that was the only two Stalags I was in. See, they had Luftpost, that was for Air Force. Air Force and infantry were different. So

then, they sent, that was where they told us, in 2B, we had to work. We had no choice. We had to work. But we weren't allowed to run any machinery.

In the meantime there was five of us fellas who got to know each other. One fella was from Chicago, one was from California, and two were from Connecticut, somewhere in that vicinity. We got to be friendly. So they asked us if any of us wanted to stick together. And we said, "Yes, the five of us would like to stick together." And then they said, "Okay, we're gonna put twenty more, with you, and you're gonna go work on a German farm." And then, of course, they asked for the *dolmetscher*, the German guy did. *Dolmetscher*, I didn't know what that was. It was an interpreter. So I acted as the interpreter.

Jim: With your high school German?

Gilbert: With my high school German. Yes.

Jim: How did that work?

Gilbert: It worked pretty good. And then, yes. They'd come tell me, tell us in the morning what they wanted done. Like, say there was twenty five American prisoners of war there, and there was five Russian. And the Russians were above, upstairs, above us. And then there was, oh, I don't know, four civilian girls that worked there. It was a big farm. They said somewhere in the area of 2500 acres. They had sixty milk cows. And they had nineteen horses.

And then they'd tell me that, well, five had to milk the cows. Had to milk the sixty milk cows. And they milked the better ones at noon. And I had never heard of that before. Then I was mentioning it to some of the people in this area, and they said, "Oh, yeah, we remember they used to do that, the better cows you milked at noon."

Jim: Because?

Gilbert: Because of the milk. They needed the milk. They gave more milk. See, see, they had—

Jim: If they had them at noon, then they didn't do them—

Gilbert: They did them both, they did them morning, noon, and night. Out of the sixty milk cows, there was 45 were the best.

Jim: And they'd be milked three times a day.

Gilbert: And the 45 they milked three times a day, right. And then of course, doing this all by hand, we couldn't all take, you know, you're milking ten or twelve cows, and it takes a while to do that. So we had to change off doing this.

And then, after a while, we had to tell them that the Germans couldn't tell us what to do, according to the military. Geneva Convention, treaty. The German, the prisoners. The guards had to tell us what to do. And that's the way it was. They'd tell me in the morning, well, five had to milk cows, and then two of them had to drive horses, and then of course we thatched some roofs, and they all did all kinds of working.

So we had, of the 25, the ones that I can remember. One was a Mexican. One was a Spaniard. One fella was French Canadian, he could talk with the French prisoners of war. Then we had a fella that was Yugoslavian, he could talk to the Russian prisoners of war. And then, of course, I could talk to the Germans. And then—

Jim: What was your relationship with the farmer who owned this farm? You just had nothing to do with him?

Gilbert: Well, it was, no—

Jim: He stayed out of your way, or how'd that go?

Gilbert: No, he, this was, I don't know if you saw this situation comedy, Hogan's Heroes. Well, this one guy, they called him the Inshpector, he was like Colonel Clink. He wore that long coat, leather coat. And he'd come in the morning and he'd tell us what he wanted done. He was like the boss of the place.

And then, well, like we had. Oh, we did things like, they had manure all in one pile outside of the barn. And they'd load them up in the wagons. They didn't have regular, what we would call manure spreaders. They'd take the board off and then they'd fork it off in piles. And then the girls would come along and they'd spread it.

Jim: But you didn't have anything to do with the farmer who owned that farm?

Gilbert: No, nothing to do with the owner.

Jim: You never saw him?

Gilbert: Never saw him.

Jim: He probably was in the Army.

Gilbert: That could be.

Jim: So you guys really ran the farm all by yourselves, then.

Gilbert: Yeah, pretty well, yes. I said there was two civilian guys. I think German Army, they didn't put anybody in the Army that was over 65, somewhere in that area. But, then there was, the fella that was in charge of the cowbarn [**End of Tape One, Side One**] was real friendly. His name was Paul. I don't remember what his last name was. But he told me a lot. He was telling me about this part of Germany that we were in. He said the growing season was too short for corn. So their main crops were sugar beets, potatoes, and oats. Things like that. They couldn't raise any corn because the growing season was too short.

Jim: This was in Southern Germany or Northern?

Gilbert: Northern Germany. And then one of the fellas and I had to go to a dentist while we were on this farm. And I don't know if I had to go to the dentist or I just went along as the interpreter. But anyway, we could see the Baltic Sea from the dentist's chair. Yes. We had a German guard with us, of course.

Jim: A German civilian dentist?

Gilbert: A civilian, he was a guy, I would guess, about 90 years old.

Jim: Oh, my!

Gilbert: Yeah, it was a real elderly fella.

Jim: Did he fix your friend up?

Gilbert: Yeah, he fixed us up. I think it was just a matter of a filling. He, I said, that was interesting to sit there and see the Baltic Sea. And I said this Paul. And then, when I was reading here a couple years ago, about how our grandfathers, when they came, our grandparents came from Germany, how hard they had it. Because over in Germany they only did one thing, and then I happened to think, well, that they had a thousand chickens on this farm. And I don't know how many pigs they had. But it must have been a hundred or four hundred, somewhere in that area. Because one day they shipped some 42 wagon loads to market. Pigs. Then of course, if they drove horses, that's all they did. And when our grandparents came from Germany and they went on a farm, they had to take care of the chickens, and they had to take care of the pigs, and they had to milk the cows, and they had to drive the horses. So my father-in-law and my wife, my wife

came from Germany when she was five years old in 1929. My father-in-law was one that, he liked horses. All he did over in Germany was take care of horses. And my mother-in-law took care of the chickens. And she—

Jim: You met your wife after the war?

Gilbert: In high school. We were in high school together. We met in high school. She lived on a farm about, oh, the farm was about four miles north of town there. And so, yeah. We were in school.

Jim: So how many days were you a prisoner?

Gilbert: I was a prisoner of war six months. Sixty four. No wait a minute. Yeah.

Jim: From the fall of '44—

Gilbert: From October 10th 1944—

Jim: Until the end of the war.

Gilbert: Yeah. Until the 14th of April.

Jim: Okay. No tell me how it felt when you heard that the war was over. How'd you find that out, and, you know.

Gilbert: Well, I found out the war was over, we were in the middle of the ocean. See we landed in March 13th. So the war was over.

Jim: Why were you on the ocean? You were still a prisoner.

Gilbert: No I wasn't a prisoner when the war was over. See, I'll have to go back a little bit. On February 10th, one morning on this farm they told us we were leaving. And they all paid us off in German money. And then they told us we were leaving, we were going, and they didn't tell us where we were going. So we went in, they took us by wagon to this town called Tassleine(??), and there we met more prisoners of war, and there was a Air Force prisoner of war camp not too far away from us. And there was about, I would guess, two or three hundred of us. They marched us away from the Russian Army. We marched from February 10th until we were liberated on April 14th. And then—

Jim: Right. That's the war I meant. I meant the war in Europe.

Gilbert: The war in Europe, yeah.

- Jim: How did you feel when you found out the Germans had given up?
- Gilbert: Well, we were really glad. To tell you some of the stories. We had, they marched us away. We marched in the area of twenty miles a day. And then there was an Air Force guy with us whenever we saw something, he'd make a song out of it. Kept us entertained. One time we saw about four airplanes that were in a woods. And they were camouflaged. And he started singing "Don't know why there's no fleigers in the sky. Kinda benzene." Like that Lena Horne song, you know. Well benzene, fleigers were airplanes and benzene was gasoline. See the Germans didn't have enough gasoline to fly the airplanes.
- So then we wound up, one of the fellas that was with me, the guy from California, we marched through the town where his father came from. Parchim, Germany. And then we wound up in Salzwedel, Germany. That's where we were liberated. And, first we heard our German guards were leaving us, so we went down through a farmer's field. And all of a sudden we heard shots above us, and here was our guards coming to get us. So then we thought, well, later on that day, that wasn't a very good idea for us to go out in the open to escape.
- So then we went through a German woods. And we wound up in this town called Salzwedel. And here was a policeman was directing traffic there. And our German guards came along, and they were gonna take us back to the camp. And this German policeman says, "No. This town has been declared a free city. The Germans agreed not to protect it, and the Americans have agreed not to bomb it. So it was declared a free city, so you soldiers, German soldiers aren't allowed in here." So they took us to the Police Station—
- Jim: And this was before the Germans quit.
- Gilbert: Before the Germans quit, yes.
- Jim: That's most unusual.
- Gilbert: Yeah.
- Jim: So you were free, sort of.
- Gilbert: Yeah, sort of free. And then they took us—
- Jim: Did the guards talk about Germany giving up sooner? I mean was there any talk, you could understand German. Did you sense they were near the end?

- Gilbert: We had no idea. In fact one of the German guards one time. We had German guards, of course, in this march. Came up to me one day and he says, "Why you make war with Germany?" Knowing, I suppose he knew that I could talk German. And I was probably German ancestry. And, so I thought, how in the heck do I answer that? He's got a rifle, and I don't even have a club. Finally I said to him, "Why you make war with France? Why you make war with Poland? Why you make war with Russia? Why you make war with Austria?" Of course that ended the conversation. So, like I say, we marched through these towns—
- Jim: Was everybody in pretty good shape or not?
- Gilbert: Oh, yeah. Well, they told us that they had, the leader. The German officer that led this parade was on wagon. And those that couldn't march, they put them on the wagon.
- Jim: Oh, that's nice.
- Gilbert: They were afraid of us Americans, in a way. I saw them club the Russian prisoners of war, but they never touched the American prisoners of war. They would club with the rifle butts. So we had, the only thing is, we had to live on about a third of a loaf of bread, and about a third a ring of bologna. That's what they gave us to eat for a week. See, we were on this march for 64 days.
- Jim: Going west.
- Gilbert: Going west, yeah, that's where—
- Jim: No soup?
- Gilbert: Well, occasionally we got some soup, yes.
- Jim: Cabbage?
- Gilbert: Cabbage. And then one time the German guards said that there was a lady that wanted a tree cut down. In front of her house. We volunteered to do that, and she made us some cabbage soup, and was that good! Ooh, boy. Occasionally we had soup, but it was mostly water.
- Jim: So a lot of guys, most everybody lost weight.
- Gilbert: Oh, yes, everybody. And then we had to sleep in barns. And then as a result I had frozen feet. And that was one of the colder winters—
- Jim: Ever.

Gilbert: Ever that they ever had there.

Jim: It froze your feet—

Gilbert: Froze my feet.

Jim: But not severely.

Gilbert: Oh, yes. I have no feeling on the bottom of my feet.

Jim: Since that time?

Gilbert: Yes, I—

Jim: You didn't lose any of your toes, though?

Gilbert: I didn't lose any of the toes. No. The bottom of my feet, though, I don't have any feeling on the bottom. And then, they took, the VA hospital in Madison, they took x-rays of my feet. And they said I have nerve damage in my feet.

Jim: Sure. So, here we are marching and cutting down trees.

Gilbert: Cutting down trees and marching, and wound up in Salzwedel. And then if you look at the Columbus phone directory, there's a lot of people with that name, Salzwedel. Because a lot of people, when they came from Germany, they didn't have a last name, they tell me. So they took the name of the town—

Jim: Where they came from.

Gilbert: Place where they came from, sure. Salzwedel, I always think, I always remember that. Salzwedel part.

Jim: So, what happened there?

Gilbert: Well, then they took us to the police station. And then they, I don't know, the police men left us go. And we wound up in the hotel. In Salzwedel.

Jim: No German guards anymore.

Gilbert: No German guards. We were free.

Jim: Wonderful.

Gilbert: And we wound up in this German hotel. And then we, the next morning we watched, the chefs were making breakfast for the German guests at the hotel. And every time they turned their back one of the GIs would take it off and put theirs on the stove.

Jim: Pretty good eating, then.

Gilbert: Pretty good eating, yeah. And then another thing I would always like to mention is, when we were still up, before I was a prisoner of war we stopped in a little German village for the night. And, I don't remember the name of the village or whatever it was. And we stayed there overnight, dug our trench. Our foxholes.

And the next morning, of course, I always got the three in the morning till five guard duty. So when I got done with guard duty at five o'clock that morning I was interested in getting something to eat. So I walked into a German house, and the thing was empty. And I was tired. So, the bed was there with a mattress, but no blankets, no covers. So then I laid down there, I slept till about seven thirty in the morning. And then I was hungry, so then I thought, well, I better look for something to eat. So I went down in the basement of the house, and here the German couple was that owed the house.

Jim: Hiding.

Gilbert: Hiding, yeah. With their daughter and grandchild. So—

Jim: You probably scared them to death.

Gilbert: Yeah, right. So, then after a while they knew I could talk German, and got a little friendlier. And I had breakfast with them.

Jim: How nice.

Gilbert: I say, you don't realize how much benefit there is to learn another language. So that's why I always tell kids, if you have a chance to learn another, and they're teaching other languages in grade school now. And I had, we had a high school football coach that taught us German. His father, he told us all these stories. His father came from Germany when he was only 19 or 20 years old. And he got to Ellis Island, and the people at Ellis Island asked him what kind of training he had, and what kind of education he had. So he said he didn't have any training or any education, so they looked at him, and they said, "You would make a pretty good Methodist minister." So that's what he did. He got to be a Methodist minister, and they sent him up to Canada, to be a minister up there, and he

went across a frozen lake, and he sunk through, and he got pneumonia and he died.

And his mother was from the Watertown area. And she had a sister that lived in northern Minnesota. They were gonna live with her. And, but he and his brother, they couldn't talk anything but German. And his mother's sister couldn't handle that. They couldn't stay with her, cause she couldn't take that, that all they could talk was German, so they went back there to Watertown. Then he went to Carroll College, he got his diploma, and he came here to Juneau High School as a football couch, and he was a biology and science teacher, and he taught German. And then of course, he wouldn't teach everybody, because some knew German better than he did. I know there was a couple of them.

Say, like my wife. She was born in Germany. She was five years old when she came here. And she always tells of the fact that when they had a Christmas Eve program in the church the pastor always wanted her to sing a German song. But the only thing she wanted to do was learn English. And here she had to sing German. So that didn't go too well. [five second gap in tape]

Jim: Okay. Go.

Gilbert: Okay, we stayed in that German town until there was a group, artillery group came in, captured the town of Salzwedel. They took us over. And they told us, they got trucks. And they shipped us to a town about 25, 30 miles away, that had an airport. No, it wasn't a airport, either. It was kind of a center, you know?

Jim: This is still in Germany, though.

Gilbert: This is still in Germany, yes. And—

Jim: Do you recall what division picked you up?

Gilbert: No, I don't remember what it was. What, artillery or something like that.

Jim: Anyway, they got you to an airfield.

Gilbert: Anyway, they got us to this place, and then they took us from trucks, by trucks to France. What did they call that?

Jim: Lucky Strike.

Gilbert: Lucky Strike, yeah. That's right, you remember that.

Jim: No, I don't remember, but I've heard it so many times. So many POWs.

Gilbert: So many, Camp Lucky Strike.

Jim: Do you remember what town that was in?

Gilbert: No, I don't remember.

Jim: Most of the guys don't.

Gilbert: It was on the shore of France, anyway.

Jim: Yeah, I know where it was.

Gilbert: Then we went across on a liberty ship.

Jim: Back to England.

Gilbert: Back, no, we didn't go back to England. We went back to the United States. They told us we were going back to the United States to train to fight the Japanese.

Jim: Right.

Gilbert: So then, when we got back to home, to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, I, let's see. I guess I got a two hundred dollar temporary pay.

Jim: Cause you hadn't been paid for all this time.

Gilbert: Hadn't paid for a whole year. So then, what did we do. I wound up in, yeah. Fort Sheridan, we were. So I wound up in Chicago with this buddy of mine that was from Chicago, that was a prisoner of war with me. And we spent the night in the night clubs in Chicago.

Overnight, and the next morning, I was in Chicago, so I went to the railroad depot. They were only a couple blocks apart. One went to Watertown. The other one went to Milwaukee. So I went to the one that went to Watertown, that was the one that left first. So I bought my train, and I got to Watertown, and then I got to, oh, then I wound up in a train depot. And then I hired a taxi to take me out of town, to the outskirts of town.

And there wasn't a car moving. It was, like I said, in May of 1945. And the farmers were all out in their fields, getting their fields ready for harvesting, or planting. And finally I got a ride. Highway 26 goes to

Juneau. But Highway 16 goes to Columbus. So they gave me a ride up as far up as 16 and 60.

And there was the Blew Inn. It was a nightclub. So, while I'm standing there waiting for somebody to hitchhike, and there's no traffic. Nothing was moving, so I went, I finally went into this nightclub, this tavern. And I asked for a beer, and he gave me a beer, and I bought a beer, and then he asked me where I was from and where I was going. And I said, well, I was a ex-prisoner of war from Europe, and I was going to Juneau, to my home. But I said, "There's no traffic going out." And he said, "Here's the key for my car." He gave me the keys for his car.

Jim: Isn't that nice!

Gilbert: Yeah, right. And then I says, "Well, what should I do with the keys when I get there?" He says, "Leave them in the car. Park the car right on Main Street. By the bowling alley. And that's, I never could thank him enough for doing that. This, it wound up, that the Blew Inn, this fella, he owned an airplane. And that's how he got, it was a Chinese restaurant. And, of course, you don't know how many times I went back there when he was running this thing, to—

Jim: He ran it a long time?

Gilbert: Right, he ran it. Now, when they widened the highway, they had to move it. So they sold it, and it's out towards Columbus.

Jim: It's still running?

Gilbert: It's still going, yes.

Jim: Does he still run it?

Gilbert: No, he's not alive. But his daughter married a fella that was a dentist in Columbus. In fact her husband just died here a year or so, I think she still lives there, his daughter. And every time I see his daughter I'll say, thank you for—

Jim: Oh, of course. Wasn't that a wonderful thing to do.

Gilbert: Yeah, right. Here's a stranger, he said, "Here's my keys. Take my car."

Jim: That's terrific. So, what awards did you win? You got a purple heart, obviously. And all the theater ribbons.

Gilbert: Here, I got. I got them in a frame.

Jim: Yeah, I see them. I see them over there.

Gilbert: American theater ribbon. Bronze star. No, that isn't it. In the living room, there.

Jim: Oh, in the living room.

Gilbert: Yeah. You can take it off the hook, there. Take it off there. See, there's one with the ribbons, and one with the medals. I don't want to walk here, I'll—

Jim: No, no, you stay put.

Gilbert: There's, you can take them off the wall there. To your left now, to your left. They're right on the wall there. To your right, now, to your right. To your right by the door, right hand side of the door. There you are. That's the one with the medals, and the ribbons are up above.

Jim: I can see what I need to see. Now. Tell me how you got the bronze star.

Gilbert: Well, they sent it to me. Where the heck is that thing. Yeah.

Jim: This stuff that you'll get [unintelligible]

Gilbert: Here it is, right here.

Jim: Okay. I may have to copy this, too. That alright?

Gilbert: Yeah, that's alright.

Jim: Cause I want, citation is on the back, isn't it?

Gilbert: No.

Jim: No. It's separate. That's your hospital appointment. There's usually a statement—

Gilbert: Well, this is what they did. Is everybody that was in combat as an infantryman was awarded the bronze star.

Jim: If they were a POW?

Gilbert: If they were, no, if they were combat infantrymen, they—

Jim: Oh, I see.

Gilbert: They were awarded the bronze star. And then one of our guys, I heard, this fella he was from Indiana, his name was Wisener. We always called him Whitey, I don't remember what his real first name was. But when this German tank was shooting at us, it killed our squad leader, and our assistant squad leader they wounded. But he knocked out this German tank, and he was awarded the silver star, I saw that.

Jim: Yeah. That's a biggie.

Gilbert: That was a biggie, yeah.

Jim: Well, that was nice.

Gilbert: Yeah, it was—

Jim: So, after you got discharged rather promptly then, from Fort Sheridan when you got back, right?

Gilbert: Fort Sheridan they gave us what they called—

Jim: Took your two months leave.

Gilbert: Two months leave, yeah.

Jim: And then you got—

Gilbert: I got married.

Jim: You got married, and then discharged from the service right after?

Gilbert: No, I, they sent me down to, yeah, sent me down to Florida, and from there I went to Fort Rucker, Alabama. There we were training troops that were, that had finished their basic training. Then, after a while, they sent me up to Fort McClellan, Alabama. That was a basic training center.

Jim: And, so you'd get ready to go to Japan.

Gilbert: Yeah, right, right. So, I wound up training these. And I was discharged November 9th.

Jim: And, did you use your GI Bill after you got out of the service.

Gilbert: What I did was, I worked nine years for the Dodge County Highway Department. And then, like I said, they needed four more traffic policemen

with the Sheriff, for the county. So I applied for that and I got it. I did that for 24 years.

Jim: Did you find that good work?

Gilbert: Oh, yeah, that was good work. But I said I was—

Jim: You were a city, or county policeman.

Gilbert: County policeman.

Jim: County. Well, you got to travel, then.

Gilbert: Oh, yeah. And then I got to work with Dane County. Like I said, whenever the boss got a job that he didn't want to do, he had me do it. So then, there was a course over in Madison that trained nurses, policemen, firemen, ambulance drivers. It was a course that they did, and I worked with the Dane County guys. And we had a doctor. I can't remember what his name was, but he was, he officiated at five thousand, or something like that. And it was a school for emergency room nurses—

Jim: EMTs.

Gilbert: EMTs, yeah. I got to do all kinds of things like that. And then there was, see, we didn't have an ambulance service here. I often think of the time when we had a fella that was injured about ten miles from here. And we used the funeral director's hearse—

Jim: Oh, they were the ambulance.

Gilbert: They were the ambulances. And we called for this undertaker down in Ashippun, "You should come and get a patient, take them to the hospital." And he didn't come and he didn't come. And finally the father of the guy that was hurt came there. Boy did he get pissed. Then after, we found out, we called at eight thirty, and he had a body, viewing body until nine o'clock, so he couldn't leave there.

Then, when they started this ambulance business, I got put on the committee of assigning. Like we have 27 fire departments in the country, and then I guess we got 13 or 14 of them that have ambulances. And then, of course, some wanted some area, and some didn't want. Like the town of Portland here, which is the extreme south-west part of the county, didn't have an ambulance or a fire-department. So I talked Waterloo into doing it. And another one we had, town of Elba. That's out Irish township here. Where the Murphys, the Cullins and the O'Rourkes—

Jim: All the Catholics, right?

Gilbert: Right, they lived. We had **[End of Tape One, Side Two]** to talk Columbus. Columbus isn't in our county. And we had, Columbus is taking care of the town of Elba. And then of course we have Beaver Dam, which is a full time fire department. I think they have two ambulances. They take care of a couple townships. Then we have one township that's about a township and a half.

And then every once in a while we get a call, and the ambulances didn't know how to get there. So we'd tell them, "Turn your yard light on." And then in this one case, this guy lived a half a mile or three quarters of a mile off of the main road. So we told him, "You go down and park your car down there and leave your lights on, so the ambulance can find you."

So then, there was, they started this, they went away from the fire numbers. Or, some people still call them fire numbers. But, I got on the committee now for starting this house number system. And then, of course, we had no problem doing that. The biggest problem was to get the road names. It was up to the township to name the roads. And then of course, the numbers start from the south-eastern part of the county, and north and south roads, going north have an N number. And east and west have a west number. W. And I got on that committee. To line that up. So we got ahold of a company that specialized in that. They used aerial photographs from the agricultural.

And that's how they did it, but the only thing I can remember is, what's good about it is, with the old fire number system, we had one number, one farm that never had a number. They went by section number. If you were section 30, you got 300 was your number. Or 312, or whatever it was. Well they forgot to number this one place. We didn't know how to send the fire department.

And it's just like here we've got an odd thing. This is North Fairfield, and what they did is, our Oak Street doesn't go all the way through. But they sent it through on the line. And anything north of the line is North Fairfield, and anything south of the line is South Fairfield. One day the ambulance came here and couldn't find the right place, so I had to tell them where to go.

Jim: Did you join any veterans' organizations?

Gilbert: Oh, veteran's organizations!

Jim: Most of them, you joined?

Gilbert: I got on, belong to the ex-POWs, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the American Legion.

Jim: Are you active in all these groups, or just pay your dues?

Gilbert: We have a group here in ex-POWs, we meet every three months.

Jim: Here?

Gilbert: No. We meet over in West Bend. It's a, see, and Wisconsin had nine groups. And then there's one in Milwaukee, they call it the Barbed Wire. And then we had Clarence Beltmann started this, it's out of West Bend. But what we do is, the members, some of the members are from Fond du Lac, some North Fond du Lac, West Bend. And then, of course, I'm from Juneau here. And we meet in a restaurant called, at Highway 41 and 67, Lomira's, Bublitz's in Lomira.

Jim: Every month?

Gilbert: Every three months.

Jim: That's nice.

Gilbert: See, we only have about, oh we're down to—

Jim: Twenty some?

Gilbert: Twenty one members, yeah.

Jim: In the state, yeah.

Gilbert: No, just our group. The Milwaukee Barbed Wire, that's real big. That's out of Milwaukee.

Jim: Yeah, I've got a list at home, of all the POWs that stayed in Wisconsin.

Gilbert: Then there's one in Janesville.

Jim: So, are there any stories you forgot to tell me?

Gilbert: Oh, uh.

Jim: Should we close this thing off here?

Gilbert: Well, then, I'm not too active in the American Legion—

Jim: Nobody is.

Gilbert: But I am a member of the firing squad. You know that the federal government passed a rule, that every veteran is entitled to a military funeral.

Jim: Right. And flag.

Gilbert: Yeah, and flag. I've been doing this since 1961.

Jim: Oh, that's very nice.

Gilbert: This last winter we had two of them. That were cold. Man it was cold. But we have, well, it takes four, six—

Jim: Six guys.

Gilbert: Six guys to do it. And we always manage to get that many.

Jim: Who's got the guns?

Gilbert: Oh, the American Legion here has the guns, and—

Jim: Does somebody play trumpet?

Gilbert: Well, we have tapes.

Jim: You just use a tape, yeah.

Gilbert: We had a mail carrier from Horicon that used to be the trumpet. But now, he's not available—

Jim: It's too hard to find guys, yeah.

Gilbert: Then we had a fella here that was a farmer. He did it. Well, now he's quit farming and he's working in one of these factories twelve hours a day, so.

Jim: Well, all of us, our age are all dying pretty fast.

Gilbert: Yeah, we aren't lasting.

Jim: Fourteen hundred a day now.

Gilbert: Yeah, that's what they say. In the United States. Fourteen hundred.

Jim: Okay! You did very well. I thank you very much for—

- Gilbert: Are we done?
- Jim: Yep, we're done.
- Gilbert: We're end of the tape?
- Jim: Yeah, I'm gonna get that in a second. See if I can get this straightened around.
- Gilbert: Let's see, I didn't have anything else, did I? No. Just—
- Jim: You're sure now? I'm tearing it down here.
- Gilbert: Just, let me think a little bit here now. Now what was that. I said I been in every church in town here. For these military funerals. I'm Lutheran, but we have a Catholic Church, we have a Methodist Church, we have a United Church of Christ.
- Jim: You're well covered. No matter—
- Gilbert: We have beautiful, yeah. We have a beautiful situation, we have beautiful churches here in this town. First it was the Methodist and the United Brother, and they had to go together. And now they've got problems. They got what did they say? Fifteen active members and forty-five on the book? Well, they've got some people that are interested in it now. They wanted to join the United Church of Christ as a unit, but you know how that goes.
- Jim: That's just trouble.
- Gilbert: No. They'll take them as individuals, but not as a unit. And then of course, there's more churches have problems getting organists, too, now.
- Jim: Yeah, that's true.
- Gilbert: No, I guess I told you about everything.

[End of Interview]