

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
ERNEST STUBER  
90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Army, World War II  
2004

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**Stuber, Ernest “Ernie”**, (1925- ), Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 30 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Ernest Stuber, a Green County, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service with the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Europe. After receiving three deferments for being a cheese maker, Stuber describes being drafted in 1944. He talks about infantry replacement training at Camp Roberts (California), which was cut short by two weeks after American losses at the Battle of the Bulge. He relates being seasick during the voyage to England, passing through Camp Lucky Strike (France), and travelling to the front lines in Germany. Assigned a Browning automatic rifle, his first day of combat was on his twentieth birthday. Stuber describes difficulties the infantry faced: deep snow, frostbite, mud, never changing clothing or shaving, and having to carry all of their own equipment. He explains that the turnover rate in the 90<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was so high that they didn't bother to learn names of replacements or, later, have reunions. Stuber states, “War was hell.” He tells of patrol duty at night and changing passwords every day. Hit by shrapnel in April, he talks about the “million dollar wound” that kept him off the front lines. After V-E Day, Stuber describes transfer to the 1st Infantry Division Military Police and guarding war crime prisoners in Nuremburg (Germany) for six months. He explains that after prisoner Robert Ley committed suicide, there was one guard for every prisoner. He claims it was good duty and recalls collecting signatures from prisoners, including Hermann Göring. Less than a year after being discharged from the Army, Stuber was diagnosed with service-related tuberculosis and discusses spending thirteen months at Lakeview Sanitarium (Madison, Wisconsin). Three years later, he speaks of getting married, having a relapse, and spending eleven months in the brand-new VA Hospital in Madison. He talks about a career driving gravel trucks and volunteering at the VA Hospital. He states that for fifty years following his service he couldn't talk about it, but now he wants young people to know what veterans went through.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Stuber (b.1925) was born in a cheese factory near Brodhead, Wisconsin and grew up in Davis, Illinois. At age eighteen, his family moved to Verona, Wisconsin where he was drafted August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1944. Stuber was wounded on the front lines in Germany and served as a prison guard at the Nuremburg Trials. After his discharge he survived tuberculosis and volunteered over 7500 hours at VA hospitals in Wisconsin. He eventually settled in Verona, Wisconsin. He belongs to the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Military Order of the Purple Heart, and Disabled American Veterans.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2004.

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2010.

**Interview Transcript:**

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum, and today is March 11, 2004. And this is an oral history interview with “Ernie” Stuber, of Verona. And we are in the conference room at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Good afternoon, Ernie, and thanks for agreeing to the interview. You are a veteran of World War II in the U. S. Army. Okay. Can we start off at the beginning? Where and when were you born?

Ernie: I was born January 24, 1925. I was born down in Green County, down by Brodhead. My father was a cheese maker and, of course, I was born in that cheese factory.

John: In the factory?

Ernie: In the factory. And they lived there until I was three years old and then we moved to another factory, in northern Illinois, near Davis. And I was there until I was eighteen years old. Then my father rented another cheese factory and we moved up to Verona, Wisconsin, on March 1, 1943. That was quite a large factory and I had three deferments.

John: Where was that in Verona?

Ernie: Just west of Verona, on Highway 18, halfway between Verona and Mount Horeb. Actually, the new road doesn’t go by there any more but the factory is still standing.

John: Okay.

Ernie: I had three deferments and they had lost so many men, I guess, that cheese makers were no longer receiving any deferments, and I was drafted in January, no, August 25, 1944.

John: Okay. Where did you report in?

Ernie: I went to Milwaukee first and then to Fort Sheridan. And from Fort Sheridan, we were there only three or four days, they put us on a troop train. We had no idea where we were going. We were on that about three or four days and ended up in California, at Camp Roberts, California, which is half way between San Francisco and Los Angeles, right on the coast. Out in the desert. That was the infantry replacement training camp. We were training to go to the Pacific, and on December 16, with the Battle of the Bulge, they had lost so many men during the

Battle of the Bulge, they cut our training by two weeks. We had fifteen weeks of basic training and they shipped us all over to Germany. In fact, they were so hard up they even flew us from California to Chicago. Had five days delay en route. Back to Chicago, on the train to New York, and from there on a troop ship. Originally it was the *Manhattan*, a luxury liner, which was named the *Wakefield*. It was transferred to a troop ship. There was fourteen thousand on that ship. It was no luxury ship when we were on it.

John: I can imagine.

Ernie: And I got seasick almost the day I walked up the ramp. It wasn't too pleasant a trip for me. And we landed in Liverpool, England. Got on the train and went down through England down to Southampton. We got on a smaller boat and it took us across to La Havre, France. There they had camp called Camp Lucky Strike.

John: Oh, yeah, they named the camps after cigarettes.

Ernie: Yes, they did. That was just tents. No buildings, just tents. We were there only a matter of days. They put us on a train and we went to Metz, France, and from there they transferred us to trucks. And took us up to the front lines. And, actually, I started in Belgium, corner of Belgium, Luxembourg, Belgium and then went over to Germany. And the first day of combat was January 24, 1945. That happened to be my twentieth birthday. First day in combat.

John: Wow.

Ernie: And the coldest winter they had, I think, in fifty years. About two feet of snow. And I was one of the larger boys over there so they gave me a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle], which I got to carry. Twenty-one pounds plus the ammo. It was quite a weapon, but it was hard to carry. And from there, I guess all hell broke loose.

John: That was right after the Bulge?

Ernie: Yeah. The Bulge was December 16. And this was really toward the end of the Bulge. The Americans had almost pushed the Germans back to where they originally were located before the Bulge had started.

John: Okay.

Ernie: Yeah, we didn't think we were going to make it through the first night. Actually, the snow was about two feet deep, and cold. Boy, it was awful.

John: You had been through basic training but then suddenly, you were in there? What was that like?

Ernie: You just can't explain it. You talk about green horns, we didn't know anything.

John: Were you put in by individuals or were you put in as a unit? Did you replacements go in as individuals or as a unit?

Ernie: As a unit. Well, no, actually, we probably went in as, I don't know how to really say. Almost every night, or every other night, we'd get replacements, you know. And like I say, we got replacements at night and the next morning they'd either get killed or shot up, wounded, you know. The turnover was so great. I was in the 90th Infantry Division. There were fifty-eight combat divisions in Europe in World War II, and there were about eighteen thousand in a division. And the 90th Infantry Division was number seven for the amount of casualties and wounded. So the 90th didn't have a very good record. There was three thousand, nine hundred and thirty killed and over, I don't know the exact number, over fourteen thousand were wounded. So you see it was almost the whole division.

John: Sure. That's a hundred percent turnover.

Ernie: Actually, we didn't even get to know the man's first name, and he'd be gone. The turnover was so great. They'd talk about having reunions. Well, we don't have any reunions because we didn't know anyone. Actually, there was one that went through with me. We went together. First day in combat we were together. He was from Viroqua. He and I have a reunion. He and I.

John: The two of you.

Ernie: Once a year we get together. He was up there until about the end of February, until he got yellow jaundice, got sick, and he was shipped back to England. I went on a little longer than that. I went on until April 9th was when I got wounded. And the war was over May 8, so I was lucky I didn't have to go back up to the front lines. And people ask me, how did you get wounded and where did you get wounded? All I tell them, I had a million dollar wound. I was lucky. Oh, I was lucky. The next day I might not have been as lucky. It was at noon and we were having a little lunch, our K-rations. In the woods, and a tree burst – artillery came in, and we called them tree bursts, they exploded up in the trees. And a piece of shrapnel hit me in my abdomen, didn't hurt my navel. It went in back here and came out nine inches from where it went in, just under the skin.

John: Oh, wow.

Ernie: Didn't touch any--

John: Oh, you were lucky.

Ernie: Unbelievable. So that was about the end of my service. But, war was hell. I was proud to have served my country, but for fifty years I couldn't hardly talk about it, but I think it's time now for some of these younger people to realize what it was. We never had any heat at night. We slept in the fox holes. We slept in barns or older houses, or down in the basements of the houses. Terrible. Some nights my teeth chattered so bad you couldn't get to sleep. A lot of them had frost bite.

John: How about equipment, clothing, galoshes?

Ernie: We never changed clothes, for weeks. We had the same clothes on all the time. Once in a while we'd get clean socks, but that was about it. We never shaved. If we did shave, we had cold water. We didn't even think about shaving when we were over there. Oh, we were a sad looking sight.

John: Sure. How about food?

Ernie: Food, we had plenty of that. We usually had cold rations, C- or K-rations. Every night we had guard duty. It would be like a perimeter defense, like we used to do for the Indians, and have guards on the outside. Be on guard two and off four. And every night we sent out patrols. The sarge would say he needed three volunteers to go out on patrol: you, you, and you are volunteers.

John: Yeah. You got volunteered. I know that.

Ernie: And every night we had a different password, because when you came back from patrol, they would holler "Halt," they'd hear you coming. And you had to give the password. It would be something like Lucky, and Lucky Strike, or Phillip Morris, every night they changed the password in case the Germans got it. Yeah, we went through first it was snow, and when the snow melted, it was mud.

John: Mud, yeah.

Ernie: It wasn't easy. After the war was over, I didn't have enough points to come home. They used the point system, and I didn't have enough points. The 90th Division, what was left, they came home, and I was transferred to the 1st Infantry Division. And I was put in the MPs [military police]. First to guard regular German prisoner of war camps, which was not too hard. The Germans didn't give us any problems. Once they were let go, I was transferred over to Nuremberg, where they had the war crimes trials.

John: Oh, yeah.

Ernie: I was a guard there for six months.

John: Oh, wow.

Ernie: I was not a guard in the court room. I was a guard in the prison where they were held at night. And weekends.

John: Okay.

Ernie: And before we got there, we had one guard for three Germans, and there was one German, he was called Doctor [Robert] Ley was his name. He sat down on a toilet stool with a seam off of a towel and hung himself. Just in the cell, around the corner, where you couldn't see. He sat down there and hung himself, so after that, they put one on one. I guarded prisoners one on one guards at the prison. It was good duty. We were well taken care of. We were on twenty-four hours. We were in the prison. We had to stay there. And we were on guard two and off four. And of course, a lot of times we didn't have any because they were in the court room. And then we had forty-eight hours off. And in the forty-eight hours, it didn't make any difference what we did. We had no bed check, no reveille, didn't have to do anything.

John: What were the prisoners like?

Ernie: They were very friendly. Very friendly. In fact, I was able to get seven signatures. One of them happened to be Hermann Göring, which, he beat them to the gallows, which everyone knows. He took a capsule just before they came to hang him. I didn't happen to be there for the hanging. I think that was in September or October. I came in June. I doubt whether we would have been able to witness that, anyway.

John: Yeah, you're right. Wow.

Ernie: And, after the war was over and I came home, it still was not over for me. Less than a year after I was discharged, I was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was service connected. Spent thirteen months at the Lakeview Sanitarium which is over across the lake on Northport Drive. Thirteen months that I spent there, and the spot I had on my lungs calcified and I was discharged. I was out for three years and was going with my wife. And we decided to get married. After we got married, I had to go for just a routine x-ray, and six weeks after we were married, they discovered that the ones that had calcified had broken open. So I had to go

back to the hospital. And at that time the VA [Veterans Administration] Hospital here in Madison was brand new. I was the forty-eighth patient in there and I spent eleven months there. So, I spent twenty-two months in the service and I spent twenty-four months in the hospital. And at the VA Hospital, they had this new technique, they were able to operate, and they discovered the drug streptomycin, and I was put on streptomycin and then they were able to go in and take out part of the lung, which they did. I had surgery on January 29, 1952, and I think I spent about twenty-six months or a little more after surgery, because it was brand new. They hadn't started doing that and they didn't know just how, later on they didn't have that long a recovery after surgery. And I was discharged from there and I've had no lung problems since.

John: Great. That's tremendous. What did you do after the service? Did you go back to cheese making?

Ernie: No, I did not. I had a gas route in between times, going back to the VA. After that, after I was discharged from the VA, I was not able to work for about six months, just part time in the hardware store. And I got a soft job, I drove trucks. Gravel trucks. I drove gravel trucks thirty-three years.

John: Who did you drive for? Wingra?

Ernie: No, it was a company in Verona and then they went out of business. I worked there for eighteen years. And fifteen years I worked up at Waunakee. A company named Yahara Materials.

John: Okay.

Ernie: And I retired from there on January 1, 1987. January 3, of 1987, I started volunteering at the VA Hospital. I volunteer out there two days a week, now. I've been doing this for seventeen years.

John: Oh, that's tremendous.

Ernie: I have seven thousand, over seven thousand five hundred hours of volunteer time.

John: That's great.

Ernie: I figured they did a lot for me. So, payback time.

John: Yeah, that is tremendous. A question I try to ask everyone I interview, do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

- Ernie: No, I don't. I was young, probably, what year was that?
- John: '41.
- Ernie: I was fifteen, sixteen years old and it really didn't mean anything to me.
- John: I was six or seven, but I remember.
- Ernie: I guess I remember it, yes.
- John: The one thing I remember was everybody asking, "Where the hell is Pearl Harbor?" When you came out, Ernie, you had the GI Bill. Did you ever use it for anything?
- Ernie: No, I didn't.
- John: Okay. What about vets' organizations? The Legion? Or VFW?
- Ernie: I belong to the Legion, American Legion, VFW, Military Order of the Purple Heart, and the DAV. I belong to four veterans' organizations.
- John: Okay, that's great. Another one I was going to ask but you've already answered it. Whether you go to any reunions. But you two have your private reunions.
- Ernie: Yeah, because, like I say, we don't know anybody. The turn-over was so great.
- John: Yeah, there's an attorney in town, I don't know if you know him. Milo Flatten. He was a nineteen-year-old staff sergeant. He landed, I don't know if he did D-Day. If he didn't do D-Day, it was D-1, or D-2. And he went all the way across. And that is the thing he tells about it. I don't know what outfit he was in, but every third or fourth day going and getting six or seven replacements and bringing them up, and then a couple days later going and getting more. And that was his point. He said he didn't even ask names because they weren't going to be around. Yeah, that's a tremendous story. The, you had almost four months of real hard combat. That was the coldest winter, I thought on record, but in fifty years is still damned cold. Yeah. And was there any break from that? Any relief?
- Ernie: They'd say, yes, we're going back for a couple of days but it seems like if we were back for a day, that would be the most. It would seem that something happened and we had to go back up.
- John: This was northern Germany, wasn't it? Belgium and northern German, as opposed to down south, Austria, Czechoslovakia, down that way? Did you ever meet up

with, well, no, you got wounded before that. I was going to ask you if you ever met up with the Russians.

Ernie: The 90th Infantry Division did. They ended up in Czechoslovakia. That's where they ran into the Russians. But I never did see any Russians.

John: Okay. On a totally different matter, your grandson's name again?

Ernie: Preston. Preston Baker.

John: Okay.

Ernie: I think he wears number six.

John: Okay. My grandson is the goalie, one of the two goalies. Okay, I'll make sure I tell him. That's great. Okay, this is a tremendous story. Anything else you want to get on record?

Ernie: No, I guess not.

John: You were, I won't say fat and happy, but you were at home, you were growing up, working. And then, bang! They came and dragged you off and sent you off to war. Looking back on it, how do you feel about what happened? Your part in it?

Ernie: Well, I don't know. War was hell. It was over with. We are losing men now. At least, over there, in Germany, when the war was over, it was over. We didn't have to worry about, we didn't have to carry any guns because it was over. I don't know of anyone that got killed after the war was over.

John: You mentioned the Browning Automatic Rifle. We had them. I didn't carry one until my big mouth would get me in trouble and then I'd usually do a mile with two of them. That'll teach you to keep your mouth shut, I'll tell you. God, those things were heavy.

Ernie: Twenty-one pounds.

John: Yeah.

Ernie: Oh, a lot of times, if we got into some scrapes, the Germans shooting at us, and we were running, they could almost trail us with the things we would throw away, that we couldn't carry. Everything we had, we had to carry. We were issued gas masks and everything before we went over there. We threw those away the first night because none of the other ones had them, so we just couldn't carry

everything. What we had we had to carry. We didn't have a truck or a tank or anything to carry anything for us. You had to carry our own.

John: Wow, what a remarkable story. A friend of mine, who just passed away, Steven Ambrose, the guy that wrote quite a bit on guys in World War II, and he was giving a talk here. And most of the fellows were saying, in essence, you know, "I didn't do anything much." And he stopped them, and he said, "You guys were giants!" And they kind of looked at him, and he said, "You went out and saved this world!" And they kind of looked funny at him. Even the guys who were never in combat, they were out there, they were gone, away from home, doing their thing whether it was running a laundry or cooking or lugging a BAR. But you did, you saved the world. These stories are so important, because, you know, when they write the books. They are already writing them. They aren't going to mention about your teeth chattering so bad you couldn't sleep. They are going to write about campaigns and generals and Churchill, but the real story is the guys like you.

Ernie: I have a fifteen-year-old grandson. He was a freshman last year, in Verona High School. And last spring, he told the teacher that I was a World War II vet, and they were wondering if I would come over and talk to the class. Well, they had, I think, two classes, and I talked to them about World War II.

John: Oh, great.

Ernie: And after the interview, I got notes back from thirty-seven of the children, and both teachers, saying how they couldn't believe what we went through. And it was very interesting. In fact, the teachers asked me if I would come again this year. And talk to the children, because they just don't realize what war is.

John: And they are never going to hear it.

Ernie: And, like I said, the first fifty years, I don't think I could talk about it. I think now it's time to let some of these young people know what their grandfathers went through.

John: Okay. Listen, I need a release from you, from both of us, I got this on the wrong line. Can I get your, do you go as Michael, or Ernie, on your signature?

Ernie: No, I'm not Michael. Ernest.

John: Oh, where did I get Michael?

Ernie: When you read that Michael, I was wondering where you got it.

John: Okay. If I put the wrong name down, sure, you'll sign it. That is what my dad used to tell me. If you get caught, don't give the right name. Your address, Ernie?

Ernie: 123 North Franklin Street. That's in Verona. 53593.

John: Your phone?

Ernie: 608-845-7530.

John: Okay, if you will take a look, and sign that up there.

**[End of Interview]**