

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
John F. Vierck
U. S. Army, World War II
Europe

2003

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296

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296

Vierck, John F., (1926-), Oral History Interview, 2003

User copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Vierck, a native of Couderay, Wis. discusses his World War II experiences with Company E of the 142nd Infantry, 36th Division serving in Europe; he focuses on his combat experiences and being wounded twice. He talks about serving at Camp Steward (Georgia), trip overseas aboard Isle de France, and the chaos his unit found when they landed at Le Harve (France). At several points in the interview he mentions the disorganization of the military. Vierck touches upon traveling through France as a replacement, sleeping in a hay mow while shells exploded nearby, and learning effective night fighting techniques. Fighting near Ober-Otterbach, he recounts attacking pill boxes with two other men, being wounded in the head, and being carried to safety by surrendering Germans. At a French hospital, he touches upon seeing other men from his unit, rejecting a promotion in an armored division hoping to be discharged, and transfer to the Military Police (MPs) in Bremerhaven (Germany). Vierck describes seeing the destruction of German Cities, his feelings about the treatment of Germans since he had relatives living in Germany, and his disgust toward American troops which looted German homes. He touches upon returning to Camp Kilmer, segregation in the military, difficulty sleeping after the war due to nightmares, and disability claim with the Veterans Administration (VA).

Biographical Sketch

Vierck (1926-) served in Europe during World War II, he was wounded twice and received the Purple Heart. After the war he returned to Wisconsin, working briefly in Milwaukee before settling in Bruce, Wis.

Interviewed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003.

Transcribed by John K. Driscoll, Wisconsin Veterans Museum Volunteer, 2003

Interview Transcript

John: This is John Driscoll, and I am a volunteer with the Wisconsin Veterans Museum. Today is April 10, 2003, and this is an oral history interview with John F. Vierck. John is from Bruce, Wisconsin, and he is a veteran of the United States Army in World War II. The interview is taking place at the Wisconsin Veterans Museum and I'll start off by saying welcome, and thanks a lot for agreeing to the interview.

Vierck: Well, thank you, John. This is another John.

John: Another John. A couple of Johns. Like they say, two Johns, no waiting. John, as a beginning, something about your early life? Where were you born?

Vierck: My early life, which I don't remember, I was born in Chugwater, Wyoming. My dad was of German descent. He came to this country in 1912 from the Baltic, up by Denmark. Flensburg, Germany. He came in 1912 and worked in Iowa. I had other relatives scattered through the country. My dad was--I have--my dad was the first one in his family to, let's say, get away from the Kaiser. They weren't what you call military men. They didn't believe in what the Kaiser was doing.

John: When was this?

Vierck: That was 1912. When he came here. And then he wound up on the Diamond Ranch, in Chugwater, Wyoming, which is now a guest ranch. My wife and I have visited it several times. Great place. At the time when he was there, they were breaking horses for the cavalry, which was stationed in Cheyenne. My dad had told me stories about breaking. He did blacksmithing, also. Breaking horses, and, as I remember it, he said the colonel would come out from Cheyenne and buy the horses from the Diamond Ranch. And then they would bring them in. And it was real interesting for my wife and I the last time we visited, 1991, we happened to run into a woman who knew my dad. And she said, she was ninety-some years old. And she said, "Boy, your dad was the one we called the Big Swede." He looked Swedish, but he was German. He was big. Six foot, and about two hundred pounds. Unbelievable man. Strong. Course, he worked hard all his life. He went into the saw mill business. But they moved from Chugwater, Wyoming, to Lemington, Wisconsin, but we lived, at first, this was 1928. I would be two years old. So you can understand why I don't know--

John: You were born in '26?

Vierck: In '26. March 29, 1926.

John: Okay.

Vierck: So, my dad built a log house probably four miles from the closest school, in kind

of the wilderness at that time. And set up a little saw mill, and went into making lumber and tie cuts, which was in great demand at that time. And I worked as a kid, worked in the mill with him. I actually didn't get started in grade school until I was eight years old. Because I couldn't get to school. It was too far. And at that time, my first grade report card says, "Peter Vierck." And the way they called me Peter was because an aunt had visited me, on my mother's side. And she said I run like a Peter Rabbit. So they called me Peter. But I didn't like the name Peter. So then it went from there, until I got in school to Jack, or in high school, they called me Jackson, I don't know why. But they called me Jackson. A lot of other things, too, but we won't mention them. You know how school guys are.

John: I can imagine.

Vierck: So, I was in, I think I skipped third grade and maybe the fifth. As I look back on it now, it really didn't do me any good, because I didn't like English. I didn't know a noun from a pronoun and I don't to this day. I didn't like it. What I liked, what I succeeded in, was arithmetic, algebra, geometry, I just ate that stuff up. I liked it and it came natural to me. But they had a three year high in Couderay, Wisconsin, and so I went two years. And then the four year high was at Winter, Wisconsin. My dad bought a '39 Ford touring car. '39 Ford, and I would drive that, it was about a twenty-some mile trip to school and back. But I would pick up along the way--I would pick up--they didn't have the school buses in those days like they have today. I would pick up from four to five other kids and drive to school, and back. So, anyway, I took my junior year at Winter, and I had to register for the draft. Well, when you became eighteen, before you became eighteen, a little bit, because--well, that was the 29th of March. Registered for the draft. I got called right away.

John: 29th of March, what?

Vierck: 1944. Got called in. Went down to Milwaukee. Took a physical there. Passed it. I kind of got on the wrong foot with the service right away. I remember, you was interviewed when you passed it by officers, Air Corps, Army, Navy, I don't know if it was an Air Corps officer. Army. It was an army type uniform. I'll never forget. Ranking officer. And he asked me what I wanted to be in. Here is where I get off on the wrong foot. He asked me what I wanted to be, and I said I preferred the Navy. And he asked me why. And I guess I told him something like I have friends. A lot of the guys seventeen were going to the Navy but I was trying to get through high school. So, anyway, what happened there, he listened to me, and he had these stamps in front of him. And that fellow reached over and he grabbed the stamp and he hit my papers, and he said, "You're in the Army!" Big red letters. Well, I was in the Army. So, anyway, I came home. And they put us on a troop train at Hayward, Wisconsin.

John: Let me break there. This was '44? Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day? And what

you were doing?

Vierck: Oh, I definitely do.

John: Can you tell me just a bit what was happening then?

Vierck: Well, I was in school, and the news didn't get around then like it does today. It was delayed, let's say delayed, maybe an aftershock, or something. You know. And, of course, a bad situation. We could see what was coming up. We learned it in school. They told us what was happening. You know, about the evilry that was going on in Germany and Japan. And what have you. Okay, now where do we go from here?

John: Okay, then you were out of Milwaukee. And they put you on a troop train.

Vierck: No, I came back on a bus. The troop train was at Hayward, the county seat. Then down to Fort Sheridan. They screened us in Fort Sheridan. We went through different tests and looked in machines and pulled triggers, and so on, and so forth. And I was picked out of a group of many, many guys because of your eyesight and your coordination, and stuff. And probably fifty, sixty of us got sent to Camp Steward, Georgia. That was a triple-A base. And we were going to school there, learning airplane identification. And it was pretty heavy artillery for someone like me, you know, ninety millimeters and fifty caliber machine guns, to shoot at the airplanes. It wasn't push button, in those days. Everything was set by hand, and stuff like that. But it was hot and dry down there. It was in the summer. It was in June.

John: Is this the first time you had been away from home?

Vierck: Basically, yes. First time.

John: What was that like? Away from home, suddenly you are in with a whole bunch of guys you didn't know.

Vierck: Well, I don't know. I seemed to settle in pretty fast, because there was a few other young guys there that went in at the same time that I knew. I had gone to school with. Young like me, you see. But they pretty soon got weeded out. Some went here and some went there. I don't think any of them went from Fort Sheridan, that I know of. They went to different areas, depending on how their testing came out. But we were taking that training. But before we finished, it was about the start of the Battle of the Bulge. Well, anyway, the Battle of the Bulge was on when I was in Texas. They pulled us out of school and sent us to, I don't even remember the name of the camp in northern Texas. Gave us infantry training. Four weeks. And they gave us a ten day delay. But, wait a minute. That was before we went to Texas. I was out of school, came up. It took longer to travel then. Ten days to get

from Georgia home and down to Texas. I think I spend, maybe, of that time, I stopped in Milwaukee. I had relatives there. I visited them one day. I probably had two days at home. And then back to Texas.

John: Out of the ten? All the rest was travel?

Vierck: Yea. The rest was travel. That was on a troop train, and I think I caught the troop train, I am going to say in Chicago, but I could be mistaken. But I rode the Sioux Line up out of Milwaukee, I know that. But, anyway, then, after we had this four weeks training, in December, they was shipping us overseas. They needed replacements. And they were loading, everything went alphabetically. A, B, C, D, and being a V, they loaded us in the airplanes. I don't even know what the number was. They loaded up the airplanes alphabetically, and when they got down to the end of the alphabet, the planes were full, and they took off. Someplace in Europe, I don't know. But, anyway, overseas. Probably England. They put the rest of us on a troop train and sent us to Baltimore. And we went through some more processing. Stamping our clothes. And then we boarded the world's third largest ship, the *Isle de France*. It was a French luxury liner. They converted it into a troop ship. Okay. I think it was about, I am going to say close to ten days crossing. Maybe not quite that long. We landed at Glasgow, in the northern part, there. It was Glasgow. Boarded a troop train, and went down through England. I don't know if we went through London or not. But down to Liverpool. Where we boarded cruisers and it was a fleet that went across. That wasn't very far across there. It took us quite a while to get across because they went slow. It was quite an experience, you know, because they were watching and listening. They were dropping depth charges to clear, it was mines and stuff like that. We landed at Le Havre. That was an awful sight, because of all of this stuff sticking up out of the water, you know. Boats and what have you. Just chaos.

John: This would have been when in the year?

Vierck: That would have been January, of '45. Then we boarded another troop train at Le Havre and they took us someplace. They never told us exactly where we were going. Everything was kept pretty quiet.

John: No need for you to know, right?

Vierck: Yea. Different than from today. Today they tell you we are going to bomb Bagdad today and what they are going to do. It amazes me. Comparing it with old times. But, anyway, here again there was a split in where you went. Whoever needed replacements is where you went. And then we boarded transports, truck transports. We only traveled in the night. We did travel part of one day, just right out of Paris, and we got strafed. I don't know if, they said it was a German jet. And jets were just coming out then. But, you know, the plane was, I'll never forget, because the convoy stopped and everybody bailed out, and we run. And it

was over with. Zoom! The plane was gone. Then we probably got, oh, within ten miles of the front and got off the trucks. Stayed in an area where they had the heavy artillery set up. Two-forties, they were. Two-forty millimeters. I think that was about the heaviest they had at that time. That I knew of, anyway. But here we were on the way to the front, probably ten miles to the back, I don't know. But we slept in a hay mow, and, boy, when those two-forties would go off, that hay mow would shake. Of course, we, it was a weird feeling. Just a weird feeling.

John: Two-forties were--

Vierck: Two hundred and forties, that would be what. A three or four inch shell, or something?

John: Almost a three incher?

Vierck: Well, ninety millimeters would be a little over three inches.

John: Oh, that is right.

Vierck: That's what we used in the artillery. The two-forties would be a lot bigger.

John: Six inchers? Eight inchers?

Vierck: I really don't know. I didn't get acquainted with that part.

John: I am sure they could rattle a hay mow.

Vierck: But, anyway, we went up close to the front and went in. Guys were separated. Went here. Because the combat outfits would go in and have some combat, have casualties, killed and wounded. They'd withdraw, and we'd replace them. Well, I joined E Company, 142nd Infantry Regiment. I don't even know the name of the town or the place. But the first fighting that I got into was going in in the dark to knock out a machine gun nest and Sergeant Moore, my squad leader, he should have been awarded the biggest medal you could get. I don't think he ever, as far as I know. I met him then in the hospital in Dijon, France, later. But he knew how to save lives and how to fight a war. He told us how to do it. You know, in the dark, when you would attack an emplacement, you would find the low spot in the dark and you would attack the low spot. And as soon as you attacked, I mean, the Germans would shoot up flares, and it would be just like daylight. And, of course, this one particular area that we were in to knock out this machine gun nest, it was probably eighteen of us, maybe. They always send a medic along. I can't remember what else. We were just PFC's and privates, with the squad leader, a staff sergeant. But they had to know that we were in that low spot and they started pumping mortar fire in there. And they were busting, and so far as I know, I don't know if they was hitting any of us. But a shell had landed right between Sergeant

Moore and me and it didn't go off. It was wet there. He gave the command to retreat to get out of there. Of course, we had to get up, and they could see us there. And I think, I am going to say they killed five, four, at least four guys. The assistant squad leader. You didn't get to know the guys that well, you know. The turnover was so fast. You knew them, and you didn't know then. You didn't know where they went. But, anyway, you go back and report to the command post, and get briefed in what went on. And something that was really amazing, we'd sit in a defensive position. There was a little airplane and we nicknamed it "Spare Parts." I don't know what it was. It was called Spare Parts because we'd watch the Germans shoot at it. They'd be shooting at it, and you'd see the bust forty millimeters, and the little plane would be diving around. And, of course, then they would show us the pictures, so we knew what we was going in to.

John: Sure. Reconnaissance, huh?

Vierck: Reconnaissance. But we were staying in some stuff that some previous troops had captured, pillboxes or forts, or stuff like that. They'd bring our mail up to us. You weren't fighting all the time. You'd stand guard, fight, retreat, like that. This one afternoon, nice sunny afternoon, we was sitting there reading our mail. It had just come in. And they started shelling us, the Germans. Jeez, I ran around a tree and ran into one of the guys. We fell down. By the time we got into the fort, there, the bunker, the shelling was over. They didn't hit us. But, anyway, in and out, in and out like that. Some things went on that I don't want to talk about.

John: Sure.

Vierck: But, anyway, we went into Hauggenau Forest. Well, I got wounded at the edge of Hauggenau Forest. We went across, I was with the first wave that went in. It was wave upon wave across the field.

John: Let me get Hauggenau, here.

Vierck: It was a town Hauggenau, and Hauggenau Forest. And, boy, did we take a beating there. E Company came out with I am going to say, I think we came out with sixty guys. Mostly wounded. And I was one of them. Sergeant Moore got wounded along some of me. He got shot through the arm. I had a machine gun bullet, I dove behind a tree. I could hear the bullets hitting into the tree. Their machine guns, they were really fast. Drrrrrrp! Right in front of us, within fifty yards. They let us get that close before they opened up. They knew we were coming. It is like I told Captain Gill when I got injured later, I couldn't understand why they did something like that. And I don't remember just what he said. But I said, we should go in the daylight in that stuff, when they see what is coming, they'd give up. Which they did. When you would see them, they would give up when they saw what they were fighting. You just, you know, we had them so outnumbered. Just unbelievable. So, anyway, I got hit that morning. I got hit alongside of the head

someplace. It took my helmet off. I don't know if it was a potato-masher or what it was. Oh, getting back to this tree I was behind. I had my right foot lined up with the machine gun fire coming from the front there, and a bullet pierced the leather lap over the back of the heel, there. I found this out later. It went in. It felt like it hit me on the side of the leg but it didn't. Because it jarred, like. It went in that piece of leather and came out that far in the heel. That is all it did. But I got wounded a couple of hours later. I lost my helmet. Somebody dove on top of me and my helmet went flying. You know, just chaos. Just unbelievable. But, anyway, I didn't know I was hit until I could feel something running down the side of my face. It was all blood. Sergeant Moore had left already. He had gotten shot through the arm, and he was gone. I went back to the medics and they put a patch over it. It slowed it down for me for a couple of days because they had to re-issue me another M-1. And you could always pick up as many grenades as you wanted, as you could carry. Hook them onto your belt. Well, then we went into a town by the name of Ober-Otterbach, right, the hilly area right below the Siegfried Line. The Germans were dug in there. We weren't going to get into Germany, I found this out later. And, boy, they did a good job of keeping us out, because that is where E Company went down to sixty guys.

John: Out of a normal--

Vierck: Out of a normal, over normal, probably a hundred and eighty, two hundred guys. I think an infantry company is a hundred and forty, if I remember right.

John: Okay.

Vierck: We had captured three pillboxes in a couple of days, up on the hill there. The Germans had trenches running from one box, you know. One box would cover the other one. If you stood up in them, I mean, I don't remember. You kept your head down and peek out once in a while because they would shoot at you. And, of course, we would shoot at them. We had to kill the machine gunner. They had a machine gunner on top of the pillbox. When you would kill him, then they had, what? But you had to get there fast, real fast, because another guy would replace him. They had a ladder inside. Well, we was operating out of one of the pillboxes he had captured. One of their pillboxes, trying to take another one. But I was issued Tucker, Jordan, and Vierck. Always last names. And I was probably the oldest one. I don't know. But anyway, I was still eighteen then. I was issued a black faced watch, so you could read it in the night. A night watch. And we were supposed to attack the pillbox in front of us, probably. At twelve noon sharp, and this was in the morning when we got the orders to make the attack. Well, they were going to attack all over the area, I suppose. I don't know. But, anyway, while we was waiting, at twelve sharp, at noon, in the day, to make the attack, I was carrying a Tommy gun then, .45 caliber Tommy gun. When you got to that pillbox, we had what you call a beehive. Had a pin in it, you would pull the pin

and it gets so hot in there you would have to come out. It got so hot in there. Because you would have to wait for that. But, anyway, it was, I can remember it was five minutes to twelve, I was watching my watch. But, before that happened, I took my shovel out. It was kind of sandy there. And I dug back under the banks so so much of me wasn't exposed. I was always trying to think of where you would have the best position, I guess. But, anyway, one of them, it was either Tucker or Jordan, kind of said something like save your strength, or something like that. And I told him, no, dig deeper. That was in the morning and right there I was the only one dug back. And five minutes to twelve, when I looked at my watch, five minutes before we was to go for it. Try to get the machine gunner and get there. We didn't have to attack. All hell broke loose, you know. I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if it was friendly fire, because we could hear the mortars pumping and the shells breaking, and they were landing all around us there, just wham! wham! Everything went, just blank. I don't know what happened. It was like the air was gone. And when I came to, I couldn't move. I was kind of paralyzed from the waist down. I didn't know if I was, and I kind of scratched around, and then I came up with a lot of blood, you know. And I could see that Tucker and Jordan were both dead. I can remember they were bleeding out of their facial area, probably from concussion. A lot of concussion when something like that breaks. But, anyway, they drug me in the pillbox and cut my clothes off, and stopped my bleeding, and poured a bunch of white stuff over it. And tied me on the stretcher. I wasn't the only one. There was a lot of others. They were being taken care of, all along the line there. And then they called for stretcher bearers to take you out. Firing is instantaneous, and it wasn't instantaneous. Off and on, you know, with these skirmishes going on. They started taking me down through the trench and they couldn't get around, well, the first corner they came to was a sharp corner. Maybe the Germans made it that way for this purpose. They had to lay the stretcher up on the bank. They lay it up on the bank and I don't know what happened to those stretcher bearers. Either they got shot or something happened. And to this day, I'd like to meet those guys. And I think over the Internet, I could probably find them. Five or six German soldiers came over to me with a long stick, and they had a white flag on it, and they were waving it, so they wouldn't get shot at. They picked me up, brought me down into the--I don't know what the town was, but I read later it was Ober-Otterbach, strapped on a Jeep and to the field hospital operation, and blood, and stuff like that. And shipped to Dijon, France, to the general hospital, where I met Sergeant Moore there. He was recuperating.

John: Oh, the Germans brought you in?

Vierck: They brought me down to Ober Otterbach. Well, the war was over for them, and me, too. They wanted no more of that. Yea, it was, when I think about it. They had to know they were beat. And perhaps they were out of ammunition, or something, or didn't want any more of that stuff. Because E Company, that I was in, reading into their history. I have a book on it. It was the last combat, the next

day, that they saw. They got relieved because they were shot up so bad. And they broke through the Line a couple of days later, and crossed the Rhine. The Rhine was kind of down over that hilly country. They crossed the Rhine River into Germany. But, anyway, I was in the hospital, healing up.

John: Where had you been hit this time?

Vierck: In the rear end! That was all that was sticking out. I had a lot of stitching in the back of me, and in my back, and I guess I went through a series, at least a half a dozen operations. I still have a few small pieces of shrapnel in me which I know they are there in the winter. This doctor, at Marshfield Clinic, who performed surgery on my back. It was bothering me. And he said, I said, well, let's take the shrapnel out. And he said, no, that is gristled over and it won't hurt you a bit. But, still yet, I, you know, I felt the effects of it.

John: Let me stop here.

[End of Side A of Tape 1.]

John: You were talking about the Marshfield Clinic and the doctor there. About the shrapnel.

Vierck: Doctor Vanderspech was his name, and he was from Denmark. Danish. I have a son who works at the Marshfield Clinic, and what I did, I was doctoring with the Vets, and this one doctor says to me, you know, I was being bothered, oh, you are imagining it. Well, I wasn't imagining it. Here, I was bleeding out of the hind end and hurting. You are not imagining. So, I quit him right away, and I went to Marshfield, and this Doctor Vanderspech did surgery. I got so I couldn't walk. I had a hard time making it to the bathroom. But then I came out of the operation good and it healed up good, and, boy, I was real tickled. What they did, they carved my spine, the number four curved over like that, and that disc was tipped, and they carved some of the bone out that was pinching the cushion there. They carved some of the bone out on each side and it was good as new again, for a while. But, anyway, let's see. Oh, when I got back from the hospital.

John: Where were you in the hospital at?

Vierck: Dijon, France.

John: That's right. You said that.

Vierck: It was a big set up, there. It was like, oh, gosh, in each ward I think there was fifteen, twenty soldiers. Not a pleasant place to be because some of those guys passed away while we were there. You know, some were wounded quite bad. You know, like shot through the stomach. You didn't have the things we have today.

Although what they did have, when I was in the hospital, penicillin had just come out, about that time. And I was getting a shot of penicillin around the clock for several weeks, every four hours. They'd give me a shot of penicillin. But I remember they left me open. I could look right down through my leg, like this. For quite a while. Before they sewed me up. But I got back to E Company toward the end of June, I guess. Of course, they were using, replacements were coming in. They were using the point system. The guys with the most points were eligible to come home first. You got, I don't remember just how they worked that, but you got so much for a month in the States, so much for overseas, so much for combat. I do know the Purple Heart got five or ten points, and the oak leaf cluster, which is the second time, you get five or ten. I had forty-one points, so I was eligible, but I had to wait, you know, to get back to the States. I didn't want any more of that fighting. The war was on in the Pacific, and they were training for that.

John: Yea.

Vierck: So they, Captain Gill and Sergeant Weingard interviewed me when I got back and they were going to promote me to squad leader. And they train you. And I didn't want that. I'm out of here. So, anyway, they transferred me in to the First Armored, which was stationed in Stuttgart, right out of Stuttgart in some German barracks. They were supposed to come home, but they changed their orders, their orders got changed and they started training for the Pacific there. So, not going home, there. So they transferred me to the Military Police, in Bremerhaven, Germany. And that was a nice snap of duty. I mean, to me it was clean although the country, that place was just blown to bits. You know, at the port. But there you are ready to get on the boat and come home. I still stayed there, worked on the docks, I was a patrolman from the fall till early spring, when I came home.

John: That would have been spring of '46?

Vierck: The war ended in '45. That would be '46. As a matter of fact, I was in the hospital when Roosevelt died.

John: Okay. What was the effect of that? On you and on the guys there?

Vierck: You mean when Roosevelt died? It didn't really seem to have any effect that I recall. It wasn't here not there, I might say. I think the majority of those guys was just trying to get away from it, I would say. They just, I didn't see that much, but what I saw was no good. It was absolutely no good. In any ways. And after the war, these towns that we were in, they were so blown up, and piles of rubble here. It wasn't a pretty sight. Especially, in the back of my mind, and you didn't say this. I had a lot of relatives over there. My uncle Theodore, who was a German pastor in Flenzburg, Germany. I met him after the war. He came to the States. He was a pretty, I don't know what his rank was. He had a good education.

John: Flenzburg. Can you spell that?

Vierck: Flenzburg is up on the Baltic. The town that he preached in was something like Soldcup (?). I'd have to look at a map.

John: I can find it. Up on the Baltic.

Vierck: That is where my dad was born. And I lost relatives on their side. And you didn't talk about that there because when you were over there, you had to be a little low keyed because there was a lot of "You're a so-and-so," and "You're a so-and-so," and "You're a Nazi," and some of the things that bothered me right with the neighbors before I went in the service. My dad was a hard working man. He had a saw mill. He was producing lumber and tie cuts for the United States, and the neighbors were calling him a Nazi. He wasn't no Nazi. He was an American. But they didn't look that way. You were this, or you were that. So, I would say, you had to be something like, who was sit, Teddy Roosevelt? "Walk quiet and carry a big stick." "Watch behind you, sleep with one eye open," or something like that. And just did a lot of praying, and make it through.

John: What was the feeling of the Germans after the war, when you were an MP there? What did the Germans have to say?

Vierck: Well, you weren't supposed to fraternize with them. You weren't supposed to talk although when I was in, they had a currency control on, because there was so much black marketing going on in Paris. Right amongst our quartermasters. Those guys, here is another bitter thing that I had a hard time with. They were sending them up to the front line with us guys. But, what were we going to do with them? They were, you know, stashing money away, sending it home. So they put currency controls on them, and we could send home, I was sending home an allotment, I think, of \$30 a month. I was drawing \$70. Combat pay, I think, was an extra \$10. PFC was another \$4. I was making about \$70. That was a lot of money in those days. Free room and board. You could buy a lot of things with a buck. But, you really didn't get to know the feeling of the people. The towns that I was in, you know, there was really no men there to try to get the feeling out of. They were prisoners of war or gone. The people there, I remember, in Kurtzheim, Germany, where we were stationed, where E Company was stationed, it took over, it was a nice little town. And we took over this real nice home, well, they had taken it over when I got back to my outfit in June. The squad I was in was stationed in that town then. And some of the guys, the woman and her daughter would come in. It was a beautiful home. Nice furniture, and stuff. And they were trashing it. And I didn't like that. But, you had to keep your mouth shut. When she would come there, they would purposely throw darts into the furniture, and stuff. You know, that isn't right. I don't think. But, you know, you had to bite the bullet and be careful because, you know, the saying was, and I sort of doubt this, but the saying was about some of our officers, they, a lot of them died by getting shot in

the back. I can't believe that. I just can't believe that, from what I saw of it. You appreciated having somebody, an American around you. Whether it was an officer or a private.

John: You were there, you were in the field in the winter of '44-'45, and that was the coldest winter on record in Germany. Do you remember being cold?

Vierck: No, not in the area. See, that was, the 36th Division attached to the Seventh Army went up through Italy and then into France, and then into the southeast corner, close to Switzerland. In the hills there, I would say it was just comparable to, not warmer than Wisconsin, where I came from. There was no snow on the ground. No, not where I was. Snow was in the Battle of the Bulge, from talking with a friend of mine who was in it. He got wounded there. He landed there a year ahead of me, he landed at Le Havre. Told me some of the gruesome stories of what happened there. I remember him saying that they got shot just like, just slaughtered until the Germans ran out of ammunition, you know. Establishing a beachhead. Boy, I mean. Your mind would go back, can it be done a different way? But there were some dog-gonned leaders like Hitler and his gang, you know, just murderers.

John: While you were in the field, John, how about food and ammo? Did you have enough?

Vierck: You had all the ammo you needed. More than you needed. We could load out belts up with as many grenades as we could carry. We had, every squad had one or two BAR's with them. That was the automatic Browning. I was carrying that. When I first went in, I was carrying an M-1, and that was a nice rifle. You could shoot nine times every time the Germans shot at you once.

John: Yea. That was a good rifle. I carried an M-1.

Vierck: They learned to respect it. And the food, I never had any problem with the food. Some of the guys, a lot of the guys would complain, yuk! Most of them, I think, was fed better in the service than they was at home. You know, it was this, and it was shit on the shingle, that kind of remarks. It was good food.

John: They got hot food up to you often?

Vierck: Well, no. When we would come off the line, when we would withdraw from the line, quite occasionally we'd get a good hot meal, as much as you want. And then we carried our C-Rations, or K-Rations, whatever. You know, for a week or two days, and then when you'd have some combat, you'd pull off, get fed good, wash up, get dry socks on, something like that. What have you. I never had any complaints the way we were treated. And then the Red Cross was good. This was

after the war before I saw them. You know, they set up in places, there was coffee and cigarettes for the guys, here it is. No, and they treated the service men good, our people did. They had these programs. I remember going to Billy Conn and Joe Lewis. Joe Lewis was the heavyweight champion, he sparred with Billy Conn. They took a bunch of us, I don't remember the place, in Germany. Yea, this was after the war, of course. And we watched them spar. And, of course, then when they got back to the States, Billy Conn and Lewis fought, and Lewis knocked him out. I can't remember.

John: Yea, my grandfather used to spar with Johnny Kilrain, he was the middleweight champ of the world, way back. Before World War I, I think. But he always followed, he knew Billy Conn, he used to tell me about him.

Vierck: And in the training down at Camp Stewart, they call it Fort Stewart now. They changed the name. It is called Fort Stewart. It was Camp Stewart then. We had a boxer. They had these boxing matches in camp, maybe once a week. And there was a young soldier, his name was Schreiber. I think he was welterweight or middleweight champion of the world when he came out of the service. I know his name was Schreiber. Boy, that guy could fight. Of course, you know, in those days, the colored boys had their separate place, and we had our separate place. Those colored boys were good athletes. I tell you, they knew how to march. We'd go out, you know, at parades. Boy, snap! snap! You know, they--you have to give them credit where credit is due. I never had any hard feelings, even for the Jewish people, and I had an incident with my dad that I didn't like. We were making baseball bats and my dad was quite a wood worker. The Vierck family, going back into Germany, were wood workers as far back as you can trace them. And dad would make different things out of wood. He was making baseball bats, and Hank Aaron and Billy Bruten were playing Eau Claire. That was in 19--

John: Hank Aaron and Billy--

Vierck: Hank Aaron and Billy Bruten. They played in Eau Claire, for the Eau Claire Braves. And Andy Cohen, a Jewish boy, a man, was the manager. He came up to my dad's shop there, he wanted to buy in, or something. My dad being a German, you know, he wanted nothing to do with him. He kind of run him out of the shop. I told my dad, something like, you know, they are some of the smartest people in the world. You know who else was a Jew, or Jewish? Jesus!

John: That's right.

Vierck: He was a rabbi. One of the smartest that ever walked the earth. A rabbi. They called him rabbi. You'll find good and bad wherever you go, wherever you look.

John: How did you come back to the States, John?

- Vierck: We were loaded on, there was five hundred of us, on this boat. It was a boat that I understood had worked the Great Lakes. And we took the northern route, on account of those still scattered mines in the Channel, there. And I don't know, oh, we shipped out of Bremerhaven, and we went north and around that point there, and boy, that was a rough ride when we got up in there. I will never forget that. A small boat like that. Jeeze. But you were just happy to be on the way home.
- John: I bet. The North Sea. I spent some time there.
- Vierck: Yea, the North Sea was rough in summer.
- John: It would stand up on its hind legs every so often.
- Vierck: You weren't in World War II, were you?
- John: No, no. My mother and dad were fortunate enough, nice enough, to conceive me so that I was too young for Korea and too old for Viet Nam. I made the Cold War, in between the two. Then, when you got back, did you get out, did you have to do anything when you got back, or did they let you go?
- Vierck: When we landed--
- John: Where did you land?
- Vierck: In Boston. What is the name of that place? Camp Kilmore?
- John: Camp Kilmer? Named after the poet.
- Vierck: And we stayed there a few days, and kind of got, I don't know, briefed or something like that. And then we was disbursed, and I took a troop train to Camp McCoy. Now that is called Fort McCoy. And that is where I mustered out. And what, something kind of strange happened there. You know, I never want to complain about any of my injuries. Fortunate enough to be alive. The Red Cross was, they kind of looked through your record, and they said, you got to file a claim because you been wounded two times. They said, you may need it later on, or something like that. So I did, they filed the claim for me. And I don't think I was home, working in my dad's saw mill, we had a saw mill, working in the saw mill a month and they called me in to Superior, Wisconsin, and examined me. And I have some numb feelings down through my right hip and that, all stitched up and that. They put me on 10% disability, which was, I don't know, \$18 a month. But they would call me in, I think, every three or six months and examine me. Not to Superior, where did I go? I think maybe the Twin Cities. Or was it Milwaukee? I think it was the Twin Cities. Then they put me on a permanent basis. They raised it to 20%, and then later on, as I was going through these operations, and stuff, well, through Bob Stone, he was looking at my service

record, and we was talking about thing, and he said, "We have to increase that." And they called me in and examined me, go through this and go through that, and they put me on 50% disability, is what I'm drawing. Now. 50%. Which is \$800 and some a month, plus \$50 dollars to support my wife. But, now, I was fortunate in some ways because my wife just retired. She is seventy-one. She worked in the bank in Bruce many, many years. And smart enough to stay out of debt, and when we had our family raised, three boys and a girl, then we could save a little. We could save a little money, plus drawing a small, well, I think she draws more Social Security than I do. About \$700 a month.

John: What did you do after you got out, John? Did you go to school? You had the GI Bill, didn't you?

Vierck: Yea, I had the GI Bill, and I started taking a course through the government, my dad had the wood working shop. We were making baseball bats, and I was taking...and it didn't turn out that good, because things were going the way I didn't want them to go, and I wasn't getting along with my dad. I wasn't getting a pay check. And I wanted to get married. I just had to break away. Which I did, and I went into body shop work, and wound up with my own body shop. And I happened to be in a good time. I had, one time I had four guys that I hired, but I kept working them down, because things were, with OSHA they were getting pretty tough, you know, this and that. So just what I could do, I was doing, probably the last...

John: They say, if you think OSHA is a small town in Wisconsin, you are wrong!

Vierck: Well, then I, well, one of the best companies that I run into when I was in the shop was American Family. Our sheriff up there, Charles Ohlman was his name, was the agent. He was elected sheriff, so he couldn't investigate his clients when there was an accident. So he told me, as a matter of fact, I fixed a roll-over for him. It was a Volkswagen. So I ended up buying it. But, anyway, he said, he knew he was going to have to give it up, he said, "You ought to apply for that." So I called Roger Burroughs, the district manager in Eau Claire, and I said that I was interested in it. Well, I wrote the exams, multiple line, and passed it right away. But I didn't care for it. I was with American Family for five years and, boy, there again, I wanted to get out of this night work. I didn't want the night work, I mean. And they want you beating on doors, selling insurance. It wasn't my line. It was somebody else's line. So I quit. I mean, after five years, "Well, this is it, Roger. I'm out of here."

John: Any reunions? Ever get together with the guys?

Vierck: No. I was invited to Texas when they had their fiftieth. This was a Texas outfit, the 36th. And Wilkerson was the name of the organizer. Wilkerson. He called me on the phone.

John: The 36th Division.

Vierck: The 36th Infantry Division. It was Texas. He invited me down. The way he put it, I was the youngest that they knew of at that point, surviving the World War. This was when they had the fiftieth reunion, in Fort Worth - Dallas. They wanted me down there because their records showed I was the youngest surviving at that time, World War II veteran, that had been wounded twice, that was still surviving. And it was kind of funny the way the conversation went. He probably called me three times. I said, well, I kind of put it to him this way, "Send me the roster." You had to register. They wanted to know who was coming. It was about eighty guys. He sent me the roster. I didn't know any of them. The names kind of rang a bell, some of them. But I didn't know then. So, anyway, I told him, "If Sergeant Moore will be there, I'll make it a point to be there." Because I had a lot of respect for that guy. He was one sharp cookie. That is why I am sitting here today.

John: Yep.

Vierck: But, anyway, he wasn't on the roster, and I told him, well, I'm not coming down. I don't want to go down there. He asked me, I don't know if this was five or six years ago, so, why not, or something like that. And I said, "Well," I said, "if I got down into the facts of it and said some of the things that I probably should have said, I'd want somebody to back me up." And he knew what I was talking about. I wasn't about to go down there and get hung. We had, the colonel we had, I'll never forget, Colonel Lynch. Colonel Lynch, and he spoke to us replacements as we went up to the line, and I think he was battle-shocked, or something, because he didn't speak, he screamed at us. I'll never forget, because he was pointing at us, and shouting, "One out of four of you guys will be dead within a month!" Boy, that is a nice report, huh?

John: Sure.

Vierck: But he was pretty right, I think. But the ratio there was more like one killed and four wounded, or something. I don't know just what it was, but a lot more wounded than killed. What was probably hard about that war was, the hardest part was in the Siegfried Line, the Hauggenau Forest, kind of the major skirmishes I was in. When you go by, like Tucker, went right by him. He had been shot. He is laying there dead. Someone you went up to the front with and knew him. It's not a good feeling. And to have, to be three remaining guys in the squad and have two of them get killed. I always wanted to go, when I got back, I put my mind that I would go to the relatives of Tucker or Jordan. They were from the east, someplace. I have it in my book that they have down there. To talk to their relatives about what happened, you know. I know they don't know what happened. Neither one of those, neither Tucker or Jordan, they didn't know they was even hit. It was just that instant. It was just like me, I was pffft! gone. You

know, till I came to. I don't think I, I don't remember ever hurting, either. I don't remember ever really hurting. You know, pain. And no pain. Kind of strange, but a fact.

John: How about after you got out? How about vets organizations? The VFW? The Legion?

Vierck: I joined the American Legion in Couderay. I wasn't there very long. We moved down to Bruce, then. Helped my dad build the shop, the one we made bats in. I joined the Legion, was transferred. But I wasn't happy with it so I just didn't pay my dues, and I quit. It wasn't the type of organization right there, not that they are bad or anything. What it amounted to was drinking and card playing, and I've never been a smoker, never been a drinker. Never will be. And some of the stories some of these guys were talking or bragging about, I just didn't like. I didn't want to hear about that. I didn't want to hear about it.

John: Yea. A lot of the guys I've talked to say that.

Vierck: All the guys, I think the guys that really saw, I'd say the worst of it, they probably won't talk about it. I had a hard time, even, telling anybody about what little I had saw, but like Robert Stone told me, he said, when we got into some, he said, "You should tell people." I said, "I don't know if you should tell people those things." Not all are that good, or pleasant.

John: Yea. Let me flip this thing, here.

[End of Side B of Tape 1.]

John: Yea, a lot of fellows that I have done interviews with have said that, a lot of them said that they didn't have to tell people and a lot of them said they had a real hard time putting this into words.

Vierck: Yea, I can understand that.

John: Because it wasn't a nice thing, yea.

Vierck: I have talked to some grade schools. My two, two of my grandsons go to Californsky Beach, Alaska. And I don't know how they found out that I was up there. I sent some of my stuff up there to my grandsons. They took it to school, and of course, they invited me over to the school. And I was--

John: Where in Alaska?

Vierck: They were in Wasila, is where they lived. But then they got transferred. My son worked for, he's an engineer with the telephone company up there.

John: Some kind of a beach?

Vierck: Californsky. But Californsky Beach is in Soldatna, in the peninsula. They lived in Palmer, then Wasila, and then down to, I kind of worded that wrong.

John: That's okay.

Vierck: And I talked to the kids there. I had sent some of the stuff up there that I had. I don't think it's in that packet down there, but I was carrying my money belt. I had it folded up and my billfold in this. I carry my billfold in this pocket. And some of that shrapnel went through the bill fold, through the folded up money belt, and was sticking out of my leg, five or six inches, like that, on this side.

John: Oh, wow.

Vierck: Like a long sliver sticking through there. But it never hurt, that I can remember. I've been told that stuff is pretty hot, red hot, hot when it hits you. It sterilizes you. But I don't remember. The doctor that operated on me in Dijon, France, was a captain. And he said something about, "You know, you got those big veins running on the inside." That is the way, on here. And he said something like, "If it had hit that vein, you wouldn't be here."

John: Sure.

Vierck: Went alongside of it. But, anyway, it might be in that box. I wouldn't want to leave it here, anyway.

John: One of the things I ask, aftereffects. You had some medical aftereffects. Well, you still have some of that shrapnel is still in there. Anything else? Any other effects?

Vierck: Well, I had problems at night sleeping. I'd wake up sometimes and be in a sweat, or something like that. Kind of dreaming that bad things were happening again. You know, just, maybe when you think back, maybe eighteen, nineteen years old is too young to be on that. It scars you deep. And even older guys shouldn't be. The older guys were smarter. Well, see, these guys were National Guard guys. In Texas. They belonged to the National Guard. And those guys were pretty sharp cookies. They knew how to avoid that stuff, and send you into it.

John: This fellow in town, Milo Flatten, who landed at D-Day and went all the way across, and he as a staff sergeant, like a nineteen year old staff sergeant. And he said he would go to the replacement depot and draw replacements, and he said he got the old guys and the guys with glasses.

Vierck: Yea. Not kids.

John: He said, the kids, he'd be replacing them.

Vierck: Yea, I can understand that.

John: That is a tremendous story. Looking back, it was a bad time. But what is your feeling, it's what, now, fifty years?

Vierck: Almost sixty.

John: Looking back on it, what is your feeling about it? I'm sure you didn't want to go. Nobody wanted to go. But--

Vierck: Well, you had the feeling, I guess, that you had to go. The young guys were doing it. They were enlisting in the Navy, to stay away from the Army. They didn't want to sleep in a foxhole. And I opted for the Navy for that reason. Because I heard that it was a better place, a safe place to be. I'll lay it on the line. But I was trying to get my diploma. Now, here is another thing. This tape here that I, I was presented with an honorary diploma by the school up there. And then they called the veterans in and made the tape that they are making a recording of. Well, when I look back and think of my life, everything kind of falls into place. It happened to be, did you by chance see that Bursett case on TV? The fellow that accidentally shot the woman up by Stanley, in the muzzle loading season?

John: No.

Vierck: They aired it on TV. About a month ago. I knew a close relative of that Bursett. A young fellow. He lives in Chippewa Falls and I can't remember his first name. Real nice looking guy. Well, it was an accident. But he didn't identify his target. He shot when he, he saw a flash of white and he shot. That's not a deer, because it was a flash of white. But anyway, he got acquitted, which I suppose is good. I mean he has got to suffer the rest of his life. But probably the nicest thing, and I am looking back at my life at this time, that ever happened in my life, he was a Bursett, he was a coach at the Bruce High School. Young fellow, at that time. 1971 was the year. He lived right across the street from us, and this was, I am going to say, the second of January, in the night time. His wife came busting in the house, and Jerry, Jerry was right behind her and the house was on fire there, and the two boys, John and Scott, were upstairs. One of them, John, when I carried him out, he was like a dishrag. But those guys, both Gary and Jerry, they panicked, they run to our house. There was no reason they couldn't have gone up there and got them. Either one of them. Because I went in from there and got them out. And of course, the American Legion put on a program for me, and this and that. And I have a nice, this is one of the nicest things, you know, you saved a couple of young lives.

John: That's great.

Vierck: I got a citation from Governor Lucey. Governor Lucey was the governor at this time. A real nice plaque. And it read something like, oh, how did it go? I have it framed at home. That it was an honor to have a citizen like, it was like he was wanting some votes, not that he had to try to get them from me. But anyway, the Legion put on a program for me, and then Lucey did, and it hit the papers, and it made me feel good that I did something good. Not take a life, save a life.

John: Yes. Okay.

Vierck: And, of course, that hit the papers. A picture of my wife and I. Some of that stuff. And it made me feel nice, something like that.

John: Sure. What was it like when you got back? Getting a job. You came back, and you were working for your dad, you said. But what was the world like for a young guy trying to make it on his own back in those days, in the late '40's?

Vierck: Most of the young guys, you know, they came out, you got \$300 when you mustered out at Camp McCoy. We did. You got \$100 the day you left, or when you left, and then you got \$100 two months in a row. A hundred, and a hundred. That was a lot of money in those days. You could live quite a while on \$100. But what happened, a lot of these young guys were heading for cities where there was work, industry, and a friend of mine, he had bugged me when he came home, he'd say, "Come down to Milwaukee." That is where he was from, Milwaukee. "And get a good job that pays." Jobs up there didn't pay, maybe \$1 an hour. Even less than that, maybe. But that was like \$10 an hour would be today, I suppose. Maybe even more. But I got him on that, too. I said, "Bill, you guys who can't make a living around here had to head for the city. I can make a living here." And I did. Made a decent living by, shall we say, grubbing it out, or what have you. Because I was kind of brought up that way. Brought up in the woods. We survived on, my folks and us kids, survived on venison, potatoes, the garden we grew. My mother would can a hundred quarts of blueberries if she could find them. Raspberries. Kept them in the root cellar, and stuff like that. Kind of survived off the land. But it is so different today. It's push buttons. Well, we're kind of spoiled, I think. I would hate to think about what happened. I remember the Depression. I was little, in the '30's. I remember the Depression. Those kids didn't even have overshoes. My mother would wrap gunny sacks around our feet so we could go outside and play, it was so cold. But we didn't realize that we were poor.

John: That's true. They used to say that our Depression lasted until 1945 at our house. We didn't have anything, but we didn't think we were poor.

Vierck: That's right. Absolutely. You didn't know.

John: I remember, the kids would say, ask your mom for a dime to go to a movie. We wouldn't ask our mom for a dime. They'd go to the movie and we'd go do something else.

Vierck: Yea. Well, you know, in my childhood days, in the fall, we'd pick acorns and sell them to a farmer there. We'd wheel them over in a wheel barrow and he'd give us, like a dime. And, boy, can you buy candy with that dime! More than you could eat in a week. That is, if you got to the store. But it was a good life, I think. When I think back to it. We're fortunate to live in this country. Probably the best in the world, that I know of, or have seen.

John: Something a lot of the guys have touched on, you ended up in combat. How did your training prepare you for that? Did it?

Vierck: How did the training? I don't know. You know, I knew how to handle a rifle when I was twelve years old. I was shooting a Springfield .30-06 at deer. So it was no problem for me to handle the M-1. No problem at all. And of course, then, talk amongst the guys when we got to Texas, they had put us on the course there where you shot at targets and they said, "Don't hit that target. They'll make a sniper out of you and snipers don't live long." So, kind of strange things in a way.

John: But when you get there, well, they had taught you right shoulder arms and left shoulder arms, but did your training pay off, or were you pretty much on your own?

Vierck: Well, it paid off, because you learned to respect other people. You had to put trust in somebody. You couldn't just trust yourself.

John: That's true. Okay.

Vierck: You had to bank on someone else. And help somebody else, too. It turned you into a place where you realized you aren't the only one on earth.

John: Well, this is great. This is quite a story. Before we wrap up, anything you want to add to this? Probably the first thing tomorrow, you'll think of about three hundred things, if you are like me.

Vierck: Well, a few, maybe, that I should have said, or shouldn't have said.

John: Don't worry about that.

Vierck: No, as a whole, I don't think there is a better treated soldier in the world than there is the American soldier.

John: I've been looking at the news, and all I can ask is, what in heaven's name do they

have in those packs today?

Vierck: You mean that the soldiers are carrying?

John: Today.

Vierck: Well, a lot of that stuff, I'm sure, is bullet proof stuff. You know, you can see that the helmet is lined with something that probably deflects, and will take some penetrating stuff. Same with the vests and the clothes. But, then, boy, these guys are running with these heavy packs. They have to be in good shape, those guys. They have to be in good shape to do that. Of course, we were, too. You know, when I went in the service, I weighed about a hundred and thirty-five pounds, and when I shipped overseas, I weighed a hundred and seventy.

John: Okay. All right.

Vierck: I mean, they, and you did the calisthenics, and everything was zip-zip-zip, the way it should be, I think.

John: Did I ask you, you haven't stayed in touch with any of the guys that you knew?

Vierck: The only one that I kind of stayed in touch with was a fellow from Minnesota. He was in the squad when I got back. He came in as a replacement. Eldred R. Stocker. And I stopped, my wife and I stopped to see him one time, and they weren't home. They were on vacation. They lived in St. Cloud, Minnesota. But then I wrote to him, and he wrote to me. And then it kind of drifted off there, and then I heard through one of his sons, he worked in St. Cloud, he worked in a refrigerator plant and he got sick from the asbestos, or something, and he passed away. He didn't live too long. He died probably when he was, he wasn't fifty yet when he passed away. He would ride out here and see me. He would ride on his motorcycle. Ann and I stopped out there several times. We went to one of his anniversaries, wedding anniversaries. One of his sons, well, he was in bad shape then. I don't know how they knew that I should know about this. Because we kind of not corresponding any more, and then one of his sons wrote to me, and, boy, we gave it out there right away, to the anniversary. And had a real nice visit.

John: Well, that is tremendous. That is a tremendous story. Let me ask you, I am going to shut this off.

[End of Interview.]