YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War II Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 764

CYRIL VRABEL

Interviewed

by

Douglas Silhanek

on

April 23, 1985

CYRIL A. VRABEL

Cyril Vrabel was born on February 1, 1924 in Ramey, Pennsylvania, the son of Andrew and Josephine Vrabel. The Vrabel family moved to Bessemer, Pennsylvania in the 1920's so that Mr. Vrabel could work in the Bessemer Cement Company. With two brothers and three sisters, Cyril grew up in the small town and graduated from Bessemer High School in 1941. After briefly being employed in the cement factory, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. During World War II he served in England as part of the 303rd bomb group. On his thirtieth mission he was shot down not far from Munich, Germany. He served the remainder of the war as a prisoner.

Upon his return to the States he married and returned to work in the cement plant until his retirement in 1983. He and his wife Sue have raised four children. He is a member of St. Anthony Church and enjoys gardening and stamp collecting in his retirement.

Douglas M. Silhanek

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INTERVIEWEE: CYRIL VRABEL

INTERVIEWER: Douglas Silhanek

SUBJECT: Depression, basic training, Air Corps life, POW's, high school

DATE: April 23, 1985

S: This is an interview with Cyril Vrabel for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Doug Silhanek, at Mr. Vrabel's home, on Tuesday, April 23, 1985, at 7:30 p.m.

Tell me something about your parents and family and what you remember most about them.

V: My family came from the central part of Pennyslvania. My dad was a coal miner from a very early age. He came up with a family of twelve children. He was in a coal mine at the age of fourteen. He lived through many strikes and a few explosions in the mine. Then he decided to come to Bessemer in 1923 to work in a cement plant. His family here in Bessemer had three boys and three girls. He spent all of his working days in the cement plant; plus myself and my two brothers have retired from the cement plant. That was the livelihood of my dad. There were some hard times too during the Depression and into the 1930's. It was pretty tough with six kids.

S: Were they immigrants?

V: My mother was. She came over when she was like three or four years old. My dad was born in Clearfield County.

S: What was school like? What do you remember about school, grade school or high school coming up through Bessemer?

V: I started school in Bessemer. I was five years old when I started. We lived up on First Street. It was a good experience. It was very interesting; I enjoyed it. They had some good teachers, old-time teachers I would say. They lasted for probably thirty, forty years in that school. High school was very

interesting too. It was right in the time of the prewar days. I graduated in 1941, and you know what happened in 1941. The excitement was Army, Navy, or whatever. That was about it. I did get a job before I went into the Army. I worked for about a year and a half in the cement plant. Then I enlisted into the Air Corps.

S: What do you remember about the Depression? Was it particularly hard growing up in a small town through the Depression?

V: Now looking back I can see what my family went through, what my mother and dad went through. At that time I couldn't realize too much. I know I had to run across the field there to Houlotz's farm and bring skim milk home, which he gave us for nothing. We raised chickens and a few hogs. I had to go up there and carry straw for bedding home. There was a program here in town where they gave surplus food, which is reoccurring now. We used to get rice and canned beef. The most I remember there is that we got milk. There was a milk program. We got a pint of milk for each child in the family every day. We had to drink it at school. Then for the weekend we got that kind of milk for everybody. We had to pick it up on Saturday and Sunday. I used to have to go with a little wagon up there to pick all of the milk up for the family. People used to say, "Here comes the milkman." We survived. There was a clothing program with old-fashioned knickers and the long socks and the winter underwear. We got that from the county and all of that state aid. It is coming right back to that now.

It was hard but we had a good time. There were no automobiles and such. I used to run from home in the morning to school, come home for lunch maybe to get a little bowl of soup,and run back up there and run home after school. I took those four trips a day every day. We tried to take a different route all the time.

S: Something different.

V: Something different, yes.

S: What do you remember about the town? What sticks out in your mind growing up or during the Depression about Bessemer or the people?

V: I think my friends then. It was more close-knit. There was no distraction. You had the friends and there was the nucleus there that you depended on and that you played with and that you lived with. I think it was a lot closer then.

S: What would you say would be a good time?

V: A good time was going up to the field there and playing baseball and playing football in the fall and winter sports like sled

riding and maybe going up to the dam or the lake with an old pair of ice skates and building a fire. That was the good time then.

S: Before there wasn't any distraction like you said. Not that there wasn't anything else to do, but that was . . .

V: Yes, you found things to do.

S: Centered around town, though.

V: Yes, just in town. We never got out that much.

S: When did you first realize that America was going to go to war, either Europe or Japan?

V: I graduated in 1941. I would say reading current events. Our P.O.D. [Problems of Democracy] professor was very strict on maybe us reading Life magazine and Time. Current events was a thing with him. Probably about in 1940 we could see a buildup of some storm clouds coming up in the horizon.

S: How about for you? What was the mood of the town like when the war broke out?

V: Everyone was for going in and helping preserve our way of life. There were no conscientious objectives like during the Vietnam War with protesters and that. It was just the direct opposite. Everyone seemed to say, "All right. Let's get going and get the job done. Get it going." We had quite a few from Bessemer in the armed forces.

S: Why do you think that was that way? Do you think the people felt there was a particular threat?

V: I would say, yes. I don't know how to put this. As far as the media was concerned I don't think it was like now where you knew everything that was really happening. You get news today, the second after it happens it is on the television. I think it was a lot of political motivation then. I know when the president would come on, everyone would drop off everything and listen to President Roosevelt. They took him for his word one hundred percent. He asked for help then, and I really think he got it.

S: Do you think he motivated?

V: Yes.

S: How about yourself now when you personally knew you were going to go? Was it the draft?

V: No. When I was a little kid, I always had airplanes on my mind. I wanted to get into some type of flying. I used to make model airplanes. I had scores of them. I used to fly them with that rubber band propeller to try to make them go. I wanted to get into the flying end of the Army, so I enlisted in the Aviation Cadet program. They were relaxed qualifications at that time. Before 1940 you had to be a college graduate to get into the air cadet program, but they relaxed the standards and they were taking anyone qualified physically. It was an altitude test program, so I got into that program.

S: You graduated in 1941. Would that have been in the summer?

V: No. In 1942 I enlisted in the reserves, Air Corps Reserves. Then they called me in 1943 in the spring.

S: What was that like for you to leave home when you knew you were going?

V: I more or less was looking forward to getting into that program, but I know the family was, not reluctant, but they didn't want to see the boys go. I know my mother and dad had three sons, and eventually they were all going to get in it. I was the first. I took my basic in Miami Beach. It was a really nice thing then. My mother and sister came down to Pittsburgh with me and waved good-bye. I took a train down to Miami and that was my induction into the Air Corps.

S: What was that training like? What do you remember?

V: The training, just the fundamentals. You were in the Army. Then it started getting a little bit more academic I would say. After that I went into what they called the college program. I went to the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. I spent a year down there in college taking up meteorology. I did some flying, basic flying. It was mostly school.

S: Were they choosing something for you or were you allowed to pick?

V: No. This was more or less a basic program for everybody. I was into the flying end of it. We were being trained eventually for pilot training. After we left the University of Arkansas, we went to San Antonio, Texas for preflight training.

S: When would this be?

V: Spring of 1943. Then down there in the air cadets we had the GI [Government Issue] haircuts. We went through a month or so there of training. The physicals were out of this world. I had a little bit of an eye problem, and they tested me and tested me. I think I took like four days with just eye exams. They decided that I couldn't go any further on the eye exam. I couldn't

correct it. I had what they called esophoria, probably more or less how you probably saw double when the altitude and oxygen supply were less when flying. I got washed out as they say.

S: Were you disappointed at that?

V: Yes, I was. It broke my heart. Eventually the class that I was in graduated P-51 pilots. I would have given my right arm for that. I went into a program of communications. I got back into flying again.

S: You still wanted to get back into flying.

V: I wanted to get back in. I took some more exams. I went into pressure chambers to prove that my eyes weren't bad and all this and that. I went to these decompression chambers maybe five or six different times to altitudes of maybe 40,000 or 50,000 feet equivalent. I passed it pretty good. I came out of that. I had a couple of interviews and a couple more tests, altitude tests. The examiners said that they were going to put me back on flying. I said, "In what way?" He said, "We are going to send you to communication school. Then we are going to send you to gunnery school." So I went to communication school. I was a radio operator.

S: Where was that at?

V: At Sioux Falls Army Air Base, South Dakota. Then they shipped me down to Yuma, Arizona to take some gunnery. Then I was an aviator operator gunner in a B-17. I was back in flying again.

S: We are at the end of 1943 now. Are we in the fall yet?

V: Yes, we are going into the fall and maybe the first part of 1944.

S: What are you thinking now? Is there one way or another? Are you thinking that you are going to Japan or you are going to the Pacific or you are going to Germany?

V: There was no way of knowing then, but once we got in to more or less some overseas training, we almost figured out that we were going to go to B-17's. After gunnery school I came home on a ten day delay en route and I ended up in Salt Lake City and Kearney, Nebraska and then we were briefed on flying over to England. We were going to take some new ships over. Then something happened; that fell through. They put us on a train and shipped us from Kearney, Nebraska to New Jersey and we took a boat over to England in 1944. That was in the summer.

S: How about D day? Where were you?

V: On D day I was still in the United States.

S: Was that a surprise to you?

V: Yes.

S: Did you pretty much know? Was the word out that we were going to invade?

V: We knew there was something coming up because the way they were . . . There was a massive exodus of people from the United States. Ports were filled. We knew there was something coming up.

Right after D day I was shipped overseas with our crew. We were replacements for the 8th Air Force, and we landed up in Scotland. Then I took some more training there, some more or less British blind landing and radio instructions again. I was assigned to the 303rd bomb group in England and started flying my missions there in July. I had thirty missions. On our thirtieth mission we had an accident. We were shot down over Germany.

S: What were most of those missions like? Were they all about the same?

V: No. There were some easy ones called milk runs. You went in. We had some missions into Belgium and into the Ruhr Valley that weren't too bad then. Later on we started penetrating into Germany a little further like Berlin and down toward the southern part of Germany toward Munich. Those were pretty rough.

S: What was it like the first time you went? Do you remember the first time you knew you were going on a mission?

V: I think it was a lot of just anxiety. You wanted to go, but still, yet, there was a risk there. The first mission I think I more or less welcomed it rather than getting it under my hat and that was it, and being just what you would call a green horn, keeping your mouth shut, looking at the veterans and what they were saying. Then we became veterans.

S: Were you confident in what you could do? Did you think you could defend with fire?

V: Yes, we had a good team. Yes, we had a real good team. that was what it took. In fact two of our crew members couldn't take it. They more or less resigned. They were assigned to some other outfit,MP's [Military Police] or that. We didn't want that weak link; we wanted everyone to be strong, and we were young. I was just twenty years old. I think the pilot was in his late twenties and he was the oldest guy on the plane. We had a good team.

S: What were all of the missions like? You said all of the places

you went. Were they the objective of the missions?

V: We bombed steel; we bombed railroad yards; we bombed synthetic oil; we bombed transportation highways and ball bearing factories, more or less anything that was helping out the war effort in Germany.

S: Before you had the accident was there any mission that you really screwed up or one that was particularly successful?

V: We got a presidential citation for the bombing of Schweinfurt; that was the ball bearing factory. I think we sent up a full force. I don't know how many planes, but I think sixty-four bombers went down over that Schweinfurt factory with ten men in a plane. They probably were all lost. That was a mission that I think I remember. Probably the last one was the most important, the one in my mind.

S: Tell me about that one.

V: We were flying to bomb the I.J. Farbin synthetic oil factories in Merseburg which was down toward Munich. This was our second mission in there. This was a mission that we were all just afraid of because of the first one. We had something like 700 or 800 antiaircraft guns protecting this oil. We flew into that barrage of flak. You would look out maybe ten, twenty miles and they would send up a barrage maybe 500, 600, maybe 1,000 feet thick, just a big pillar of smoke. You flew into it. You just prayed to God that one of those didn't have your name on it.

When we went in there the second time, it was just really heavy and there were no fighters. Our wing man got hit by some anti-aircraft, some flak, and he more or less winged over and hit our plane, our wing. We started going down; we lost a lot of altitude. I don't know if God was with us, but they could pull the plane out. It was hit pretty bad.

S: What were you thinking when it was going down? Were you working?

V: I was working just before that, more or less trying to get some bomb reports and that. After that my mind just went blank. It was just self-preservation after that. They pulled the plane out; the pilot and the copilot and the engineer pulled the plane out. We were hit pretty bad. In fact we lost formation and we started gaining altitude. We had one engine out. We were flying straight through Germany all alone, no escort. We called for escort. There were four or five P-51's that came in and they were attacked by some FW-190's. They took off and that left us all alone. They just blew us right out of the sky. We all bailed out.

S: Where were you when you bailed out?

V: Near Hannover, Germany. We made it almost halfway through. The other half wasn't too successful.

S: When you bailed out, were you all together?

V: No. There were two of us, me and the waist gunner. More or less I bailed out at the waist and he did too. We landed within a half of a mile of each other. We bailed out at probably around 30,000 feet. They got both of us. I saw him running. They captured him. I spilled the air out of my chute and unhooked the harness and I started running. I heard some shots being fired. I just raised my hands and that was it.

S: What was that feeling like?

V: I will tell you what; it was desolation. I was all alone. Nobody was there to help you. They took us up into a small village then. We were shown off. The home guard was showing us off. Some of the people showed compassion. There were a few women there who brought some water to us. I tried to leave my chute in the field. They made me wrap it all up and carry it. I had to carry my own chute up to this little village. I would say there were maybe thirty, forty homes there.

S: Did you ever see the other guys again?

V: Yes. We got together. The waist gunner and I were near. They marched us into another town and we met the bombardier and my pilot. They got them and the pilot was injured pretty bad. The engineer had a twenty millimeter explode in the upper gun turret and he had most of his leg shot out. Eventually they repatriated him. The pilot landed and he landed on one foot and threw his whole hip joint out of place. We had to carry him on a stretcher with the Germans and we had to carry him to a hospital. Without any anesthetic they put that hip back in place. I was the aide man on that. I had access to some morphine. I was shooting him with morphine to try to get his pain to shut off a little bit. It wouldn't help. We held him down on a concrete floor and they popped that hip back in. He yelled and screamed. We were so fed up with everything that we were getting on each other's nerves more or less. I know what he was going through. He is on disability today.

S: Did any of the Germans speak English?

V: Yes, there were a few. The one thing I remember is that they put us in a barn. There was a young kid who came up. He was maybe twelve years old. He came up and said, "American flyers." I said, "Yes, American flyers." He said, "I'm speaking English." I said, "Yes, you are speaking English." He said, "Can you understand me?" We were the first ones, people who spoke English, that he talked to. He learned it in school. He wanted to do things for us. The guards wouldn't allow it.

We wanted some matches and some cigarettes and that. He was real happy that he could speak with someone who understood him. I recall that.

The guards could speak some. When we went in to the prison camp as such, they had the interrogation units in the prison camp, officers who were fluent in English. In fact I met one. He interrogated me. He said that he knew the railroad from Cleveland through New Castle to Pittsburgh. He traveled. He was in the United States. He was educated here and then he went back and was caught up in the war.

S: What was that like going to the camp? Where was the camp and what do you remember?

V: We went to what they called a dulag luft; it's a camp for flyers. From Hannover they shipped us to Frankfurt; that was Frankfurt on the Rhine. They called it a dulag luft, which was an interrogation center. They tried to more or less get everything out of you. They tried to break you down. It wasn't anything real cruel or anything like that. I spent six or seven days in solitary. They would get you out, interrogate you, put you back in. Everyone went through that.

S: What did you tell them? What did they ask?

V: Name, rank, and serial number. They asked what group you were from, what kind of bombs you used, and who was your commanding officer. Even if you would have told them some of that, I don't think it would have hurt anything because there was nothing secret. I just kept doing the same thing until I was released. If you didn't tell them anything, then after six or seven days, we all met in one, big hall. We were all together again.

S: Any rough stuff? Did they ever try to rough you up or threaten you?

V: We got roughed up from civilians over there. They marched us. They used to march us right through towns. We walked a lot. Instead of going out through the outskirts of a town, like in Frankfurt they marched us right down through Frankfurt. There was all this rubble; it was bombed. It was just a pile of brick. They marched us right down the main street and the civilians would have umbrellas and they would start hitting us over the head and stuff like that. They were showing us off; they captured us. I didn't see anything real cruel other than food shortage. We saw a lot of lean days. Everyone was on a strict diet.

S: What was the solitary like?

V: Solitary was a room probably six or seven feet wide and maybe eight or nine feet long with one door and a window way up. It

was a frosted window and there was just a bunk with a straw mattress. Then when you had to go relieve yourself, you had to flip a flag on the inside and the guard would see the flag and he would come and get you. Only one could go at a time, and they kept everyone apart. Then the food that they put in . . . There was a little tray like in the door and they threw it in there.

S: What kind of food? What did they give you?

V: Real brown bread. Mostly for those seven days it was brown bread and soup, sort of like a wedding soup, but there was no meat in it; there was just broth and greens. Then there was the bread and water. That was it.

S: Taking you to the main prison then, what was life like? Were there a lot of soldiers there?

V: Yes. I went from this dulag luft to another camp in Giessen, Germany. Then this was just more or less a dispatch area where they congregated all of the prisoners and decided what other permanent camp he was going to go to. I spent about a month there. It wasn't too bad. We had a room with eight guys. There was not much to do other than we would play some cards.

S: What was a typical day?

V: A typical day was you would get up in the morning. They would rouse you.

S: Early?

V: Yes, about 7:00 they would get you out into the main compound and take roll call. That would last maybe an hour. Then you would go back in and you would get something to eat, get your bread and some oleo and what they called ersats coffee. It tasted like burnt wood, water poured over burnt wood. Then you would just spend the day in the room. If there was an air raid, we had to go into air raid shelters. Then we would go back to the mess hall and maybe we would get some more black bread. That was a typical day. Lights out were early and then they would lock the doors.

S: Were you allowed to get anything other than the Red Cross stuff, newspapers?

V: No, it was all controlled, and very, very few Red Cross articles. In fact this place was good for us as far as Red Cross with the food and that. In fact I didn't see too much after that. From Giessen we shipped up through Germany into a permanent camp which was near Barth, Germany called Pomerania. This was eventually in the Russian zone.

S: Where are we now, what time period?

V: We are in December of 1944. I was shot down November 22, 1944. We are looking at the latter part of 1944 and the first part of 1945.

S: Around the Bulge then?

V: Yes. We did get the prisoners from the Bulge. We were shipped into Barth, Germany. There must have been 30,000 Air Corps prisoners. There were four, big compounds in this camp and I would say maybe close to 5,000 or 6,000 flyers in each compound. We had a commanding officer at each compound and we had an allied commander of the whole camp. There were two aces , Lieutenant Colonel Gobresky from Oil City; he was my compound commander, and I knew him personally. Then the whole camp commander was Colonel Zempky. They were two flying aces who were prisoners.

It was just more or less repetition of the other camps but in a large scale I would say. There were more people there. We had barracks that were built on stilts like posts. The dogs would be running underneath at night. Then we had twelve prisoners in each room. We had triple bunk beds. We had a very efficient organization there. We had the fuel committeeman; we had more or less a cook. They rationed the food out. We had a person, the head of each one of these, in the room itself, and then within the whole barracks we had the organization. It was very efficient.

S: Cooperate?

V: Yes. You didn't dare to try to go against one of your own buddies.

S: How about escape? Did anybody ever talk about escape or present you with a plan or you had a plan?

V: No. There was talk. We used to get a secret news--flimsy sheet, they would call it--about every week. It would secretly be passed. We would get news. I guess they probably had a radio someplace. They would get BBC, British Broadcasting news and bulletins. There could have been some plans for escape there, but it only was more or less for a select few, maybe some of the old-timers and that, but I never heard of any plans.

S: How about when the new guys . . . As you were in and the new people came in, did you always ask them how the war was going when they came in? Did they inform you as to how we were doing?

V: Probably the most important time, as you mentioned before, was the Bulge. About two weeks later after the Battle of the Bulge, they were taking in prisoners. We were like an Air Corps prison camp. We were at what they called a stalag luft.

At the time of the Bulge I guess there wasn't enough room for them to go to the other prison camps and they were bringing them into ours. They were coming in. Everyone was so down-hearted. Seeing all of these people coming in, they were just as low as they could be as far as morale. We thought it was going to last a long time yet. We really thought it was. We were very, very demoralized at that time.

S: As the war was winding down, were you seeing evidence in the camp that there were possibly food shortages among the Germans or fuel where it was affecting the camps?

V: Not really. There were some bomb strikes nearby. We had the feeling that things just had to have been getting better because "We were the greatest" more or less. Then we got those flimsy news reports coming through. It said that it was turning. We could see a little bit different attitude as far as the Germans and the guards. In fact they just evacuated the whole camp as far as the German personnel toward the end. We got up one morning and there were no Germans around. The machine gun towers were all vacated; there was nobody around.

S: How was that? Did somebody wake up first and say, "There is nobody here; let's go,"?

V: Yes, there was nobody there. Here is where the organization took place now. We were under strict military orders from our superiors. You had to stay there. We were in a Russian zone, the predetermined zone, and the Americans stopped. They couldn't come any further east. The Russians were coming. We had to wait on the Russians to come up the coast from Stetine, Germany and up through the coast to Barth, Germany to evacuate us. There were a lot of anxieties there wondering what they were going to do with us, if we were going to be going through the same things that the Germans put us through.

We got orders from our superiors. We started tearing down the barbed wire fences and the towers. We made it look less like a prison camp than it was. We went out. We had orders not to go into town because there might be booby traps. There was a nice bay that came in there. It was a beautiful place other than what it was used for. There was a bay coming right down into camp. They had fishing nets there; there were some boats left. Boy, we really caught some fish. We ate a lot of fish. We ate a lot of horse meat before and like with that soup, maybe some barley, but, boy, when we got the fish, everyone was building fires outside. We had makeshift fires and we barbecued the fish out there. It was almost like a T-bone steak.

S: More like a smorgasbord. Did the Russians liberate you then?

V: Yes, they came in. It was peaceful. They told us that what they said was what you obeyed because they were our superiors

then. They made us clean the camp up some more. Some were riding horses when they came in. They didn't come in with tanks and that. It was just the walking troops and some of the shock troops came in. Our officers said that if the Russians saw anything that they wanted just to give it to them and don't fight them in anyway. They negotiated with our . . .

S: What do you remember about the Russians? What kind of emotions . . . Were you just glad to be free? Were you really concerned?

V: We were glad to be free, but we had some anxious moments. We thought that we were going to get marched out of there, not knowing where. In fact we were told to get ready to go, just take the clothes on your back and something to keep warm and that was it. This was in the latter part of April now, but it wasn't too warm. We were pretty far north. In fact it was more or less across from Sweden. We were all ready. We got all of the bread and sliced it up and divvied it out, all of the rations that we shared it all and all alike, and we waited for four or five days until all of the plans were set. They agreed that they were going to fly some B-17's into the airport at Barth, Germany.

S: Theirs or Americans?

V: B-17's.

S: Ours?

V: Our planes. They agreed to let our planes come in and evacuate us. We marched about five miles to the airstrip there. We were still dubious until we got on that plane and started heading out. The planes were bombers, but they were stripped down. We just sat in there. I don't know how many went in each plane, but they evacuated the whole camp and flew us into France then.

S: Were you able to get word home?

V: I sent prisoner of war letters home,not knowing if they got them. In fact I never heard from my parents until I got back onto Clyde Street after all of that time. They were getting my letters. In fact we were allowed to send short wave messages like "I am a prisoner of war in Germany. I am okay," just something like that. It was received. They had monitoring stations here in the United States.

At that time when we were in a camp, we gave our name and address. Everyone did. There was no name, rank, and serial number as such. You could not give some secret information if you knew any, but the home address. Mom got the message from a woman in New Jersey that she had received my message so she was relaying it to her. They already got notified that I was a prisoner of war, but then

this came later on. They got all of my letters. I never got anything from home. I never received a letter or postcard or package or anything like that.

S: When you went to France then, how did everything go. The war was over.

V: The war was over.

S: How did it wind down for you then going home?

V: When we got to France, the first thing they did was march us into a delousing station. We stripped down. They had these big shower rooms. You stripped down out there. They gave you a big bar of this GI soap. We got in there, maybe twenty, thirty guys at a time, and scrubbed down and deloused. We lined up--back in the Army routine again--and waited. We spent a day there in tents. Then we got shipped to Camp Lucky Strike. They named all of these camps liberated prisoner of war camps. They had Camp Lucky Strike, Camp Chesterfield, Camp Phillip Morris.

S: In France?

V: In France. Tent cities, I mean as far as you could see there were tents. It was just made for the returning POW's [Prisoner of War]. They had these field kitchens with the steam cookers and that, and that was the way we lived there until we had enough boats or ships to take us back. I think we went through Rhiemes, France to the harbor there and we got on the boats and came back.

S: What did you come back on? Did you come back on one of the ocean liners?

V: No. It wasn't a big one. In fact I was fortunate. I had an injury and I was in the hospital unit on this boat. It was heaven. They took care of us. I thought I was in heaven compared to what I went through before I got into that hospital unit on the boat. I spent the time coming back in the hospital.

S: When you were going home, did you know if you were being discharged or were you still going to be in the Army for a while? How did they work that for you?

V: I think maybe I got discharged really quick because of the point system. They had a point system. We got back. We landed in Newport News. Then we were taken to Fort Dix, New Jersey. It was more or less a debriefing thing trying to get your records straightened up. Then they gave me a sixty day leave. I came in from Fort Dix on a bus. I went to Philadelphia and then to Pittsburgh on a bus. From Pittsburgh I got the train into Mahoningtown, Pennsylvania depot. When I got into Mahoningtown depot, I called up my mother.

S: They didn't know anything?

V: They didn't know anything. I didn't know if anyone had passed on or what. I said, "I'm at Mahoningtown."

S: What was that like?

V: Andy, my younger brother, was just a young whippersnapper when I left for the Air Corps. He came down with my dad's car. My dad and mom didn't come down. He came down. I was waiting there in the train station. I think it was the P&LE [Pittsubrgh & Lake Erie] right in Mahoningtown. He probably grew a foot since I saw him. The first thing he said, "Cyril, do you want to drive?" I said, "No. You drive." We came home. I asked him everything coming up from Mahoningtown to Bessemer about the family and all. That was it.

S: How about when you got home? Was there anything special, a party?

V: No. They wanted to do everything for me. They wanted to fix me everything to eat, but I couldn't eat. I had a shrunken stomach. I had a big appetite, but there was no room for it. I know mom and dad wanted to give me everything. I couldn't do it. It was a good reunion.

S: How about the Army then? Did you go back after the sixty days to finish up?

V: I had to go back. I ended up where I started from in Miami again. They gave me a ninety day leave in Miami, Miami Beach, beautiful. I wasn't married then. I was going with my wife-to-be. In fact a lot of the guys who married when they got home went down there. It was the ninety days on the government.

S: On their honeymoon, yes.

V: It was terrific. There was golfing, deep-sea fishing, everything furnished, meals, lodging in the hotel, and all for ninety days. I went through a lot of physicals there. I had dysentery real bad in Germany. They were following this. After ninety days the records were all fouled up. I had abundant points, but I ended up at Lockburn Air Base in Columbus. They assigned me to an office there working for the officer's club. It was pretty nice. They were paying me flight pay, base pay,plus flight pay for working for the officers, so it wasn't too bad. I was getting anxious. Finally the records got straightened up and they put me on a base to Patterson Field in Dayton. That was where I was sent. I went into the hospital there for a couple of weeks and got some things taken care of. Then I got discharged from there. I went back to Columbus and shed all of my Army clothes. I went and bought a new suit, shirt, tie, shoes, and a nice camel, tan coat. This was like in November now. I came home that way. I walked down the street,

and I had my Army gear in this little gym bag. I was walking down the street as a civilian.

S: Then from there, back to the plant?

V: I took some time off, November, December, January, February. I think I went back to the plant in March. My time was still accumulated. From there I got married in 1945 and raised four kids.

S: When you started back to work, what was the mood of the town compared to what it was like in the beginning when you left? Was that special?

V: Not necessarily, maybe more than the Vietnam veteran. I really pitied those guys; they took a beating. We were more or less heroes. It was some time after I was discharged when I got back. The mood, things were winding down as far as the work; let's get back to work and get married.

S: Yes, start all over.

V: Start all over again. There were no big celebrations or anything like that.

S: Anything that you left out that you want to add, anything that you remember?

V: No.

S: Was the service good for you other than the experience?

V: Yes. I wouldn't have traded it. I wouldn't go through it for one million dollars or I wouldn't exchange it for one million dollars like they say. I met a lot of friends in there. In fact I was probably closer to some of those, like in my crew, than with some people in town here maybe. Other than that it has been a long time. May 4th, it is going to be forty years now for me when I was liberated. That was 1945.

S: Does it feel like yesterday?

V: Yes, definitely. I always said that when I came home, on that day, I would remember November 1944. I said I would remember it and celebrate it, and May in 1945, I was going to celebrate, but I never did.

S: When you were in the POW camp, what did you miss about home? Was there something that stands out in your mind?

V: Not knowing what tomorrow was going to be like. A lot of times it was very touchy. In fact we were put in boxcars. You saw the Holocaust and you saw those little cattle cars. I

traveled from Giessen to Barth, Germany. It took us about four or five days. We had four or five guards on half of the car and maybe twenty, twenty-five prisoners on the other half. When we would go into maybe the outskirts of some town or maybe the city, there would be air raid sirens blowing and the guards would jump out and lock the door. We were there and we could hear the car jump because of the bombs hitting. We were lying on straw; boy, you didn't hear any straw crack, not knowing maybe what tomorrow, if there was going to be a tomorrow during some of those days, and hungry. I knew what hunger was. I never was hungry after that. People say that they are hungry, but they weren't hungry. Boy, I was hungry. I tried to explain later on about being hungry. You just feel like you want something to eat. I knew what real hunger was. Most of the guys there were down to maybe 110 to 120 pounds. Instead of weighing 170 or 165, they were down to 130, 125. I think I was about 120 pounds.

S: Did you ever have a reunion, the guys from the crew? Did you keep in contact?

V: My pilot lives up here in Brookfied, Ohio. We keep in touch and visit each other, Christmas cards and stuff like that. We planned a reunion. My engineer, who I told you was repatriated, called me up. He is from Minden, Louisiana. We were talking about visiting. Everyone has their own ways. It is hard to get together after all, after forty years. In fact, it is hard to get the family together, but it would be nice to get together.

S: Anything else that you can remember?

V: That is about all.

END OF INTERVIEW