

## The Vermont Folklife Center



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### Prisoners of War: A Story of Four American Soldiers

#### Introduction : Gregory L. Sharrow

In December of 1944 with the Allies closing in on the German heartland, Hitler had a desperate plan to save the Third Reich. He believed that a massive assault on Canadian, British, and American forces advancing from the west would prove so demoralizing that the Allies would seek a separate peace, leaving only the Russian army on the eastern front. On December 16 the Germans unleashed an offensive that would become the most brutal battle of the European war, known then and ever after as the Battle of the Bulge. This is the story of four men who survived that terrible battle and were captured and imprisoned for the remainder of the war.

#### #1 Cliff Austin

I was ice fishing with a good friend of mine, Fred Ringer, down at Basin Harbor Club, out on the ice in a shanty. Felt the need to excuse myself from the fish shanty for a moment. Went out of the fish shanty. And it was blowing, the snow was blowing terrible, terrible, and it was snowing, in addition to that. But, anyway, did my nature call and then, in the distance, I spotted a guy trying to run and he would fall down and then he would run and then he would fall down. He had on what appeared to be tattered clothing and an overcoat that was ripped in shreds and so on and so forth. And he kept getting closer and closer. And all of a sudden I saw myself trying to run when our German guards would hustle us along with rifle butts and bayonets and, "Rasch Rasch " Which I guess meant, "Hurry Hurry " And then if you would fall, if you would fall down, you didn't stay down too long because you knew that if you couldn't keep up you would be shot. And so I saw myself in that tattered clothing. I saw myself falling and getting up and falling and getting up. And I started crying. And I went inside of the shanty and Fred said, "My God, what's the matter?" And I said, "I gotta go home. I gotta go home now "

**#2: Harrison Burney**

When you're high and you're half drunk or drunk, you don't pay no attention too much, you know? And for ten years after I got out of the Guards I was nothing but a drunk. It took ten years for me to wake up and get back to my senses, but I guess—I mean, we all went through the same stuff, except, you know, the prison camp, and none of them was in prison camp, but some of 'em were wounded and they had stories to tell, too, to their kids and their family. But I didn't have no stories to tell. I just kept my mouth shut and drank and drank. That was my crutch: liquor. I was just a plain hobo drunk.

**#3: Robert Norton**

I spent my twenty-first birthday locked up in a railroad car, going across Germany. And the age twenty-one, twenty-first birthday was a big thing in those days because that's when you got the right to vote. I couldn't vote in the election of 1944, for example, I was too young. Yeah, we were kids, acted like kids. Even the officers tended to be kids.

**#4: Cliff Austin**

We were told that we were going to be relieving the Second Division and they were gonna leave their howitzers in place, they were gonna leave their huts in place, and so forth. They're gonna go some other place and you guys are gonna occupy their area and aren't you lucky because this is a very, very quiet sector for people's first encounter in battle. It's perfect because its, occasionally some harassing fire, like the Germans will send some shells over on you guys occasionally, but nothing real bad. Very, very quiet, very quiet sector. And it was getting near Christmas and we were kinda, we were kinda happy about that, but it turned out to be anything but a quiet sector. Right?

**#5: Bill Busier**

Lo and behold, as we were walking up, the other platoon from the 2nd Division is coming down, they're carrying everything, all their tripods, mortar bases, the whole bit. And ours are all way back, ten miles back in the woods. So we got up on the front line with nothing to fight with. One bandoleer of rifle ammunition, machine gun barrels with no base plate for the mortars. Nothing

**#6: Cliff Austin**

During the night we were able to hear the very distinctive clickety-clack of army tanks. I guess it's the {bogies} in the tracks hitting together. And we knew something was going on out there and it sounded like it was getting closer and closer. And then the shells started coming in. And many wounded and many, many killed. And the mortar fire started coming in and we were able to see not

only tanks, but foot soldiers. And the command came to, one of us at a time, get back to the battery position, where we could get into foxholes and do a better job of maybe defending the position. And so my turn came and a combination of running and fall on the ground and keep going on your knees and your elbows, and a whole lot of mortar fire coming in. Never got a chance to use a knife on anyone or a bayonet, but it was that close.

#### **#7: Harrison Burney**

When we were going up, I could hear tanks to our right and I told the lieutenant, I says, "Them are German tanks and they're going past us " And I had the men right there with me, my outfit. He says, "Shut your damn mouth " He says, "What are you trying to do, scare the men?" I said, "Lieutenant, call headquarters, battalion headquarters, and let 'em know what's happening." I said, "You're gonna get cut off down there on the Mageret." Well, he wouldn't do it, so they did, they cut 'em off and the rest of the team that was in Mageret almost got wiped out

#### **#8: Bill Busier**

All of a sudden we were told to pull back, to hold the line and we have fighting behind us. You know, we're trying to tell: how did they get there? And they didn't break through the line to get there, they were already there. So it was really a mass confusion. It was the worst screwed up mess I ever saw. They just were about blowing us apart.

#### **#9: Harrison Burney**

During the fire fight my platoon leader and my platoon sergeant took off And I was the ranking NCO and so I had to take the platoon over and I knew that we couldn't at there long, so I formed the men up and we started back north, towards our other team, up in Noville, so I just kept the men going up a valley like and there were thick woods. And we got almost into Noville, on a high ridge. It was like a amphitheater, a big valley like--and we almost got there, but we didn't make it. We got into a fire fight and I had two men wounded and we're out of ammunition and we hadn't eaten nothing since the nineteenth, and that was the twenty-first, and the men were getting tired and hungry and we didn't have no ammunition to fight with, so we hollered, "Comrade " [LAUGHS.] We gave up. We probably shouldn't of, we should have been like the colonel—what was the name of it? The Alamo there? We should of been him, but I didn't feel like sacrificing my men for—'cause there was no use to it. I mean, we didn't have nothing to fight with What were we gonna fight with, our fists, against all those machine guns and grenades and everything. So I wanted to save my men. My men come first.

**#10: Robert Norton**

Out of ammunition. We were surrounded in the woods and we were just cut off into some segments. Some of the segments made it into Bastogne and some did not, and I was part of the group that did not. And so on December 20, 1944, we were prisoners of war. The sergeant came out of the woods under a white flag. I didn't make the decision. I don't know if it was a decision I would have made or not, but, at any rate, the Germans were expecting us.

**#11: Bill Busier**

I was against it. I didn't want to stop. And I remember, when the order came down to destroy our weapons—in other words, smash 'em, whatever you could do to them—and I carried an M-1 rifle—and I remember, right to this day, I think it's one of the saddest times in my life, it seemed like, because, you know, everything I'd gone through since I joined the Army and I was on a ship that sank in the Pacific before that, you know, and I'd lived through this and that, and all the maneuvers and the hard work, and to think it ended up like that. And so, when I was smashing my rifle against the big tree, I can recall, I remember the tears were rolling down my cheeks and I, you know, it looked as if I was a baby, but it just, I just couldn't believe it.

**#12: Cliff Austin**

Ray Greginon, he and I stuck pretty close together. We were about all that each other had and we ended up into a bombed-out house, in the basement of this house, and not knowing what else we were going to do. We did not have any ammunition left and why we didn't throw the rifle down, I'll never know, but we kept hold of the rifles and got inside of this building. And the tanks were all over the place and the troops, German troops, all over the place, so we smashed our rifles the best we could against the wall of the, against the wall of the cellar. And the next sequence of events is we heard this pretty loud voice, "Hallo " And we didn't say, "Hallo," back. It was nice and dark where we were and, but, anyway, the next thing that happened, a burst of fire from a burp gun, which, I guess, fires more rapidly than a machine gun, and this guy was spraying the wall of this cellar where we were, so that incentivized us to say, "Hallo " Very, very, very quickly. I was pretty young, a pretty young guy, and by that time I guess I must have been nineteen, could have been twenty, but one of the things that has always stayed with me, this single German soldier, younger than I was, and here he was capturing two guys and he was a very, very young kid and it appeared like he'd be pretty scared; very, very scared.

So he motioned us out and we certainly obeyed [LAUGHING.] Joined the group of other POW's that were being assembled, went through the searches, and the first things they took was our guns, knives; the second thing they took was our overshoes. They really liked those overshoes we were wearing. [LAUGHING.]

If you didn't give them the overshoes, then your mom would collect a ten thousand dollars worth of insurance. I did not see a person shot, but I heard the shot and saw the person fall. And the word was that he had refused to give a German guard his overshoes. I had a Catholic rosary that my mom had given me and I took it out of my pocket. They said empty your pockets, or whatever the word was. I couldn't understand them, they couldn't understand us, but they did a lot of gesturing and so forth. And I got the rosary out and he tore it apart, spit on it, tore it apart and spit on it again, and ground it into the snow like that. And did the same thing to a little prayer book that I had. And then he started going through the photographs that I had and I was able to understand—he would point and I would say, "Mother." "Ya, ya, Mother." [LAUGHS.] And father. And he would tear them up. And then got to, I said, "Girlfriend." And he, "Ya, Fraulein" "Fräulein" Or something like that. And he let me keep that. And a strange, strange, strange guy. And this wasn't the young kid that appeared scared, it was a—some of 'em were SS troopers who were pretty heartless people.

### **#13: Harrison Burney**

They started asking questions to some of the privates and I hollered, "Name, rank, and serial number" And this sergeant come up with a rifle and he whacked Boy, he hit me in the side of the face. It loosened up my teeth Well, the men knew what I said, anyways. When they were interrogated, that's all they gave 'em was name, rank, and serial number. They tried everything, interrogation. They took me into this major and he interrogated me and asked me all kinds of questions and I just kept saying my name, rank, and serial number. And he was getting peeved, a little bit peeved. Pretty soon he says, he said something to the guy that was setting there and the guy went out and he come back in and he had a great big plate full of the—oh, best looking food they was. And we were—we were hungry I know we were, all of us. If they'd played the same trick to the other guys, they looked at it and probably drooled. And he says, "You help me and I'll take good care of you." I says, "Yeh," to myself. And then he started asking questions again and I said name, rank, and serial number. He got peeved and he picked up the plate and dumped it right in this wastepaper basket. [LAUGHS] And then he says, told the guy, he said take me back to where I come from, in my pen

### **#14: Robert Norton**

I ended up in a schoolhouse in a Belgian town and the man who did the interrogation was actually a sergeant and he put on kind of an act, you know, sort of a tough Nazi. The only time I ever saw a German that was like those in the movies. And he was putting on an act. Because I saw him, you know, elsewhere, you know, and he was quite different. [LAUGHING] The Germans did, of course, brutal things, as we know. I'm not saying that they didn't. And our treatment as prisoners of war was hellish because we didn't have enough to eat

and the conditions were very, very crowded, but, as individuals, they were quite unlike they had been depicted in the movies.

**#15: Bill Busier**

Honest to God, I never saw a tougher looking soldier in my life. He had a light machine gun cradled in his arm and he looked like he'd gotten in a terrible fight. His face was slashed. And I thought he was gonna shoot us all right there. And, luckily, I think now, a German officer appeared and they were talking in German. Of course, I didn't know what they were saying. And then that calmed everything down. So then they just got us together and started marching us East, we started walking into Germany.

**#16: Robert Norton**

We got into one of these long, long lines, spreading all the way across Western Germany. I believe that they took as many as twenty thousand prisoners, from fifteen to twenty thousand prisoners. We may have lost twenty thousand men killed, twenty thousand men wounded, and twenty thousand captured.

**#17: Harrison Burney**

Christmas Day it cleared up. Just like it is now—beautiful sky, only it was cold and the snow was deep. [BACKGROUND SOUND OF PEOPLE MARCHING.] And we come across this big bridge into open field, open country, farm country, and this German officer was in a VW, Volkswagen Bug, and he was stuck up in the yard and he couldn't get out, and he was a high-ranking officer. And the guards, the German guards made some of us go down and push him up to the main road. In the meantime, way above us was a squadron of P-47's, our planes, and when they saw us marching and they seen us push that car out, they must of thought we were Germans, you know, so they come down and they started dropping anti-personnel bombs and strafing us with machine guns. And 101st Airborne was with us and some of 'em still had their vest, that orange vest that they have for signaling, and they had that on and they went out into the deep snow and tried to run around, making U.S.A. And the planes are still coming.

**#18: Bill Busier**

We were three days marching in the snow and then at night we'd end up in some town or something, in a park area, and we just laid down in the snow and cuddled up, and the next day continue on. And, finally, the third day we ended up in some—it was an old factory building and we did get inside for the night. I remember, they came around and gave us—I'll never forget that—it was a hunk of black bread and I think we had, it was called, probably, a butter, but it didn't take like it, it tasted like grease. I took a bite of it, you know, and it was really sour, terrible. But I remember, at the time, I won't say, but I said it: "Before I eat

this s---, I'll die." [LAUGHS] But, I'll tell you, later on I wished I had that hunk of bread that I threw away.

### **#19: Cliff Austin**

There were seventy-two of us on this railroad boxcar that was designed for forty people, or eight horses, and they were just pushing us into this boxcar, even though there was no more room. And no lights, no nothing. No bathroom facilities, nothing. I think it was about five days was my longest period on one of the damn things. And we licked frost off of the inside of the boxcar for moisture. Some guys, smarter than we were, were able to get some of the German kids to throw snowballs at them and they used that for moisture when, occasionally, they would open up the door—not let us out or anything, but just open a door. Christmas Eve we were singing Christmas carols to keep each other's spirits up. One of the songs is, I'll Be Home for Christmas. We tried that one, but we couldn't quite get through it. It kind of—throat constricted and so forth. But we sang all the rest of 'em, or all the rest of 'em, and that seemed to somehow help. And during one of the lulls, all of a sudden, a voice came out of nowhere, with a Vermont twang even worse than mine: "Is there anybody from Vermont on this car?" And, gee, that was just like something from heaven, to hear that, and I said, "Yeah. Geez, yeah. I'm Cliff Austin. I live in Vergennes. I used to live in Vergennes." And he said, "My name is Howard Bailey and I live in Morrisville." So, no lights on, but somehow everybody didn't mind if we stepped on their toes, and he held his hand up in the air and I kept feeling for a hand that was up in the air, and I finally got a hold of him, and we talked, I guess, all night long. And I'll never forget how comforting it seemed, just that little bit of connection. Didn't know each other, but we were both from this tiny state of Vermont. And he knew a family named Stygles and I went to school with a kid by the name of Stygles and we dearly hoped that somehow it would be the same people.

### **#20: Robert Norton**

See, you're in a different world and you don't know what's gonna happen, you don't want to think about what's gonna happen, and you know that you may never come back, but you don't dwell on that. At least, I didn't. You're sort of in a nether—so I was in kind of a nether, nether world. It's a very difficult, grayish world.

### **#21: Harrison Burney**

I was, even when I was leading my men, like in Bastogne, when we was in Longvilly there, I tried to act so brave, you know, but inside of me I was just churning, ready to vomit any time like it would happen, you know? But I tried to act, for my men, so that they'd, you know, keep their courage, but I was scared. And I was just like you, you know? But I tried to control it for their sake.

**#22: Harrison Burney**

Well, one boy was sick and this SS sergeant, he had charge of us all. And the boy couldn't get up, he was so sick. And the sergeant kept after him, yelling at him, and the boy just couldn't get up, and he took his Luger out and just shot the boy, right in the bin and they carried him out. That's all they cared about the people. I mean, they had them—those SS troopers, they, most of those sergeants were fanatics, anyways, you know. But I learned to keep my mouth shut and keep my nose clean and watch and listen and not say nothing. That's the first thing you'll do, you know, you'll learn because, if you talk, you never know who's next to you that was planted there, you know. I've seen some of the guys, 'cause they always had a pack of cigarettes in their pocket. And we never had cigarettes. We'd get a butt that Germans would flip at us and we'd pick up a butt or something, but if you saw somebody with a pack of cigarettes, you knew that they were getting them cigarettes from some place, for something.

**#23: Cliff Austin**

It seemed to me like a melting pot of the whole world, all kinds of nationalities there, Stalag 4-B. And once each day we were allowed to intermingle with the Russians and with the British, I recall, and others I didn't know, and it was almost like a big flea market or something. If you had anything at all that you wanted to trade for something to eat, you'd hold it up—your wristwatch, your ring, or a cigarette. Man Cigarettes could of bought our way right out of the whole country, if we'd a had a carton of cigarettes.

**#24: Harrison Burney**

The black bread was anywheres from thirty to fifty percent sawdust for a filler. And there's not much nourishment in sawdust, so we kept losing and losing and losing. And when they made us work on the railroad, we were so weak that it took more people to carry a tie or a rail than you had room enough to move, 'cause we were so weak. We couldn't pick up nothing.

**#25: Bill Busier**

It would take about half to three-quarters of an hour to cut the loaf of bread. It was like a big ceremony, you know. We'd all be sitting up on the top bunk and the bread was there and he would take the knife and scratch, try to divide it up, and then somebody's say, "Well, that slice is bigger than this." You know, it was just something to like pass the time. You know, not so much for greed, but—so, finally, he'd get it marked and slice it. And even amongst ourselves, we put a card on each slice. Whatever slice was there, that was yours. So, you know, of course, you had twenty-four hours a day, you know, to do nothing and talk about food and, you know, what you were gonna have if you ever got back home, and so forth.

**#26: Cliff Austin**

Louie Baca and myself had never known each other, but we kind of clung together on the march and in the boxcars and so forth. And Louie and I had not eaten in at least a couple of days. We got into the British barracks and the British were old-timers at this business. Some of 'em had been captured way back since Dunkirk. [LAUGHING.] And on our way out--it was nice and warm in there and they were in pretty good shape, these guys, because they'd been receiving parcels from home and so forth. And Louie and I had worn out our welcome, we had an idea, and we were on our way out and there was a garbage pail at the entrance, exit of their building. And Louie and I were eating their potato peelings from the garbage pail and a British guy came out and knocked the potato peelings out of our hands and said, "Don't ever let these Germans see you acting like animals and that's what you're acting like right here. Don't ever let 'em see you doing that." So Louie said, "But we're hungry and we haven't eaten in a couple of days." "I know you haven't, but don't ever let 'em catch you doing anything like that."

**#27: Harrison Burney**

I picked up stuff and eat, you'd shudder. It would make you vomit. But I knew that if I didn't, I was gonna die, you know? I even dug out potato peelings out of a manure pile and then took 'em in the place and everybody had a little fire going and we'd take a tin can and put the potato peelings in and kind of heat 'em up, you know? And eat 'em. And they come right off from a stinking manure pile. Nobody knows what starving to death is, unless you were starving, 'cause you say, "Oh, I wouldn't eat that for nothing." Well, you will. Women was nothing on your mind. Nobody ever thought of women 'cause your body wouldn't, wasn't up to it, anyway. Cigarettes and food was all you thought about. I had one of my men, he just give up. He was from a rich family and he never wanted for nothing, 'cause I had met his father and mother, they'd come to Fort Benning and he introduced me to them. And you could tell how he was brought up 'cause his mother was cuddling him all the time. And, well, of course, the mother loved the kid, you know? But he didn't have enough hard time in him to cope with it. He'd rather die, as to cope with it. And I'd go out on work details and I'd steal, every chance I got, I'd steal something that I could get my hands on and I'd bring it back to him. And I figured maybe that'd entice him to eat, but he wouldn't do it. He wouldn't. I took a chance of getting shot for stealing, 'cause if they ever catch you with something that you're not supposed to have, they don't ask no questions, they just push you to the side and shoot you. So, but no matter what I did, it didn't—I tried to make him mad. I called him a coward, and I did everything to him to make him, you know, want to fight back, but it didn't work. He just died. He was a good kid, too.

**#28: Bill Busier**

The day before the fighting started on the Bulge, I had just put on clean socks and new underwear. 'Course, we had winter underwear. And I was wearing the same things, my shoes never came off, better than three and a half months later. There was no way to wash, shower, nothing. The only liquid we got was that morning so-called coffee. It was, I don't know what it was made, chicory or what, and we would pool that together to just wash our hands and use it to, 'cause it was hot, and somebody had a razor to shave, in order to try to shave, but we had no facilities for washing—even drinking water. The only liquid we got was that and the soup.

### **#29: Cliff Austin**

We called it nickabana. Our legs would swell and—legs would swell, the hands would swell, arms would start to swell, and if your swelling would get anywhere in the trunk of your body, you were dead meat then. [LAUGHS.] And that happened to quite a number of the guys. Howard, I shook hands with him at the gate, with a promise that if he got out of this damn thing he'd see my folks, and if I made it and he didn't, I would return the favor. And we were told by our guards that they were taking guys that were the sickest of us to a hospital, but it wasn't a hospital, it was a barn, just a place to die. And that's where Howard went. So when I returned home, one of the first things I did was to call his home. And I don't remember whether it was his wife or his mom that I spoke with. And I got into the subject very, very gingerly--I was with Howard Bailey during World War Two. And she said, "Well, do you want to speak with him?" [LAUGHS.] Isn't that something? And I said, "Well, I should say so." [LAUGHING.]

### **#30: Robert Norton**

There was a blanket factory. I worked in the blanket factory and it was there that the head of the, one of the heads of the factory said, "My son is a prisoner of war in Ohio and he's being treated very well. I want to thank you." [LAUGHS] Occasionally, a German would slip an apple in my pocket, but we were hungry all the time. You dream about food at night and it's a profound experience, like thirst. And I can't describe it to you, except that it's on your mind all the time. It's a real torment.

### **#31: Cliff Austin**

Three of our guys attempted an escape. They were caught within a mile of where we were held—roasting potatoes, of all things—in a valley and each one of 'em had been shot directly in the back of the head, which appeared to us that it was at close range. They asked for volunteers to go out and bring these three guys back and I wasn't one of the volunteers, but Jim Benkert, down in Philadelphia, was. And the bodies were brought back, left at the camp gate for three days, I guess it was, with a sort of a message to us that this is what

happens if you try to escape. And it was raining, even though it was wintertime, it was raining, and I was one of the guys that went out and tried to cover the bodies, kept trying to cover the bodies up, out of respect, and I got roughed up pretty badly for that.

### **#32: Harrison Burney**

Now, the old-timers, what they called the Home Guard, they weren't so bad, but you take these fanatic kids, fourteen, fifteen years old? I hated to have them guard us, 'cause you just look at 'em cross-eyed and they'd shoot you. I mean, they wouldn't put up with nothing I couldn't stand to have them around me. And when I lived in Rutland, I was just a little kid, we moved from a farm down to Rutland and I used to get up early in the morning and go to the Rutland Herald and I'd get a bundle of papers and I'd stand on the street corner and I'd sell my papers. Well, this big guy come along with his bundle of papers. He'd knocked the hell out of me, drive me off the corner, and take over, and I had to go to another corner. Get knocked off that one, go to another one. And I was raised that way, you know? I just knew what hard times was. And I went to bed many a times hungry Nothing to eat So all that bringing up helped me I could take it. And I did, I took it good.

### **#33: Robert Norton**

The soldiers of those days were much more religious, too, than they are today. And I had a little New Testament and people were religious and people did have religious faith. I don't know if that, how true that is today. America was a very religious country then and if you could go back, you would know that immediately. It was a different country.

### **#34: Harrison Burney**

If you didn't pray continually, you'd turn into an animal. Your mind would overpower you and you would actually—a man can turn into an animal, 'cause I saw it happen. They'd steal from each other, if they had anything. A German, a German would do it on purpose and he'd flip a cigarette, you know, and those guys would dive onto that cigarette and they'd get into fights. And, actually, they didn't have much strength, but enough to, you know, to hurt each other and they'd fight and fight over a cigarette butt. But if you'd had any bringing up at all, you know, and knew what the Bible was and knew what God was and you prayed to Him, and He'd give you strength. That's the only thing I can say that brought me out of that.

### **#35: Bill Busier**

[ARTILLERY-LIKE SOUND IN BACKGROUND, MUTED.] We could hear the artillery in the distance and word came down through Eisenhower, or whatever, the French brought it in, that we was to stay safe, stay sane, and, you know, any

of the POW's, so we heard that they were gonna move us out and we didn't want to get on the road, so when it came our turn to go, they hollered at us, of course, we all just, we were falling out, we were laying in the mud, and the guards were coming along and they were poking us with their bayonet. In German, I don't know, they were hollering at us to get up and we just were lying there. And so finally the colonel that was in charge of the POW camp, he said, evidently said, "Back to the barracks" That night they all left. We, with a few fellas, went up into the barracks where the Germans were and they had some rifles in there and we had armed guards of our own, wouldn't let the Americans out of the area we were in, it was fenced in. And the Russians, and they were going into town, they were raping women, stealing sheep and they had 'em out in that fenced-in area—they were trying to cook 'em with their wool on 'em and everything. Oh, geez, it was terrible. So we did that and that afternoon a tank from the Seventh Armored came right through the gate at the prison. And there's one thing, you know, and I get really aggravated with, when I see these people that want to burn the flag and do those things. And all I could say to them, if I could talk to them: I just would like to have you be in a POW camp, starving, and see how you'd feel when a tank came through the front gate with the American flag flying. Then you would know what a flag means. You don't know. You see it here, you don't think anything of it, but go through that. The tears will run down your cheeks and your heart will race and you never would have a feeling like that in your life. Never Never.

### **#36: Harrison Burney**

One little boy, a young boy, he run to the gate and a tank, British tank come through and knocked the gate down, and then another tank behind him come and the guy, the tank commander was on top and he reached down and got a case of rations that they had and he took that case and he threw it down to that boy. And they found that boy dead. They say his stomach wasn't fit to take hard food and he just guzzled so much it just killed him. It's like a drunk guzzling a fifth of liquor down him and kill him. That's the way that food did to that poor little boy. And the officers told us that don't give, or he told his men, don't give these prisoners nothing. And they gave us a hot tea and crumpets, to start with, and we said, "We don't food like that. We want food." But they wouldn't give it, 'cause they knew what was the best for us.

### **#37: Robert Norton**

We were gotten out of Germany by plane. I had my first plane ride. The railroads were all wrecked, you see. And we landed in America on June 21, 1945, went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, and at that moment I didn't know whether my parents were alive or dead. Or even where they lived. Because they were going to move. And so I simply, in fear and trepidation, picked up the phone and heard my mother's voice.

**#38: Cliff Austin**

Arrived here in Vergennes, got off from the bus and kissed the pavement there, in front of what is now O'Brien's Hair Salon. Walked down Maple Street and waved to Clessie Hawkins, who was the first person I saw, and continued on up Green Street, up here to the corner, with my barracks bag slung over my shoulder. I walked into the house. My mom and dad were the only ones that were there. And, anyway, a whole lot of hugging and kissing and "Thank God," and I think we stayed up most of the night just talking, but my mom and dad were very considerate, they were bringing me up to date, instead of me bringing them up to date. [LAUGHS]

**#39: Harrison Burney**

When I got back to Camp Lucky Strike, they took me into a major and there was a intelligence officer and I went through a debriefing with him. And after I got through—it took four hours—and after I got done, he says, "You know, Sergeant?" I says, "What's that?" He says, "You're a disgrace to your uniform and your country for getting yourself captured, and your men." Well, I gave up on everything after that. I just—it was a helluva blow, you know? It was like he took a—I wouldn't of hurt so bad if he'd took a bayonet and stuck right through me But that son-of-a-sea-crook, if I could of, if I could of ever met him after that, I'd let him find out what war was all about. He probably never left that desk He didn't know what war was, I'll bet, or he wouldn't of never made that statement. I was so happy You don't know the feeling after coming out of prison camp and how beautiful it felt. Everybody I loved everybody The seventh of May, when the end of the war come, I was in a Belgian town and those people, there was hugging and we'd all—you know, we were just so happy, we loved everybody. And then I get to Camp Lucky Strike and that guy dropped me down, you know? That was a heck of a feeling

**#40: Cliff Austin**

Something about my face bothered me, also. Some of the guys would call it that scared, POW look. It's a haunting, vacant look in a guy's eyes. It looks like a person is helpless, hopeless. The first time I saw myself in a mirror, I broke down crying.

**#41: Robert Norton**

When I came home, I could see my father's hair had turned much whiter. They had gotten a telegram that I was missing and that was a great strain. And everybody in the neighborhood could see—see, in those days, they delivered Western Unions to the door and everybody dreaded when the Western Union man would come around, during the war. People had service flags in the windows. And if you saw a Western Union man stop in front of a house,

everybody on the street held their breath, 'cause it wasn't going to be good news. And the Western Union man said, "It could be worse." Of course, he had read the telegram.

**#42: Bill Busier**

I never told anyone. You know, at home or—my mother, of course, knew, but, I mean, even, I never even told my friends about anything. No I was ashamed. It was—you know, it was like I gave up and I shouldn't of, I should have fought 'til I died, I guess, or something. I mean, I didn't want people to think I was like a coward and I didn't fight. Even my wife didn't know. I've never told her yet. I never told her anything.

**#43: Harrison Burney**

One of my men that got wounded, he called me, and the company commander says, "You got a phone call, Sarge." And I went in and he spoke to me and I guess I did, I turned white, 'cause I'd figured he'd died, you know, in prison camp, 'cause he was shot up pretty bad. But he didn't, he lived and he was stationed down to Fort Knox, too. So we got together and we went up to his place in West Virginia and I met his cousin and later on I married her. And I lived down in West Virginia ten years before I come back here to live. I worked in the coal mines down there, but for ten years, working on those coal mines, every time I got out, I was drunk. I spent all my money for drinks.

**#44: Cliff Austin**

And there would be times when I would just disappear off from the job, walk out into the warehouse, wanting to be alone. Sit down and cry. Shake like a leaf. Eventually, get a hold of myself, wipe my eyes, and go back to the bench, where I was an electronic assembler. [LAUGHS] An electronic assembler has got to have pretty steady hands—none of this business. But I was able to control when I had to, the trembling.

**#45: Harrison Burney**

I joined the Guards and I stayed in the Guards 'til 1980. I was sixty years old. And watching those men and thinking what they were training for, I didn't want 'em to make the same mistakes that I made, so we trained and trained and trained. And I think that's what turned me around, watching those kids and wanting to help 'em. And so I straightened out, I got my ranks back and come up to a First Sergeant and I felt, you know, like I was worth something after that. If I could just save one of those men that I trained, my life was worth it. You know?

**#46: Robert Norton**

I've read a lot of books in German about the war. Quite a different perspective. They'll remind us that we did a lot of bad things, but our cause was the moral one. I mean, they talk about these atrocities in Iraq. What in the world these people, they have no idea about war and it makes nations do things that are horrible and the people, part of the problem here is extreme naiveté on the part of the Americans today. I think it's a horrible thing they mistreated the Iraqi prisoners and they should get to the bottom of it, but I wasn't at all surprised, you know, because these things happen.

#### **#47: Cliff Austin**

The guy that I was born and brought up with in Vergennes was in the 8th Air Force, I guess. I hadn't seen him in quite some time. He walked into the McDonald's, a couple of cups of coffee, and were walking towards our table and I recognized this guy there with his wife, and glad to see him and introduced Louie to him, and mentioned Louie and I were together in a slave labor camp in occupied Poland during World War Two. And this guy came back at me just like that and he says, "Well, I wouldn't brag about that." And I walked out of the place. Well, my friend followed me out and he said, "I just remembered what I said, Cliff, and I want to apologize. I didn't mean what I said." I said, "You said it." And then I said something pretty bad to him. I said, "I wouldn't brag about being in the 8th Air Force and going over Germany and dropping bombs and then being able to go back to England at night and go out with those English girls and drink that wine and sleep in a warm, clean bed " And that wasn't very nice of me to say that, but I guess I had to attack him because he had hurt me pretty badly, and my friend, also.

#### **#48: Harrison Burney**

You're wondering all the time: should I have done that? Couldn't I have done better or couldn't I have stayed there like the Alamo and let it all in? Was I a coward for surrendering and surrendering my men? Was that guy right? You know? You think about all these things. I could sit out there on the porch and get to thinking back, you know? Just thinking about it, I'll go to bed at night and I'll have these flashbacks and nightmares. I've talked to men that, when we was going to these reunions, and talking with them guys, a lot of times they can, you know, they can help you. And that's why I like to visit with 'em when I had the chance.

#### **#49: Bill Busier**

Now Brax down there. He's in terrible shape. He just kind of shuffles along and really needs somebody to kind of put his hand on his belt, you know, as he walks and everything and gets in a wheelchair. So when I met him down there in Connecticut, which I went down there really for, to go to the gambling, but really to go to see him. It was an easy way to go and they picked me up. And he said,

“Let’s go over to the gambling place.” He wanted to show me around. And he got the wheelchair out and I pushed him all around in that place. It felt so good. [MUTED BACKGROUND SOUND OF ARTILLERY FIRE.] You know, like, like we’re—well, you might say, blood brothers or—it’s entirely different than just knowing someone and, you know? Yeah, it’s—and it’ll never go away, I’m sure. Yeah, ‘til we’re all gone. No.

### **#51: Robert Norton**

One time I looked at the little prison camp I was in. I was all alone. And I walked up and I put my hand on it. I had to do that. I know that people that go to concentration camps, they have that same experience, having had experiences much, much more horrible, but they have to go back. A lot of people go back to Auschwitz and—but I had to put my hand on the side of the building. As something, as a—I just can’t explain that, but I think somebody who had the experience I had would understand immediately.

### **#52: Cliff Austin**

Here comes a tank lumbering around the corner of the building on Main Street and the distinctive clickety-clackety, clickety-clack of the treads on the bottom of a tank, and then, all of a sudden, it came around the corner and I’ll be damned if that exact second two planes come over in the missing man formation, jets. I grabbed a hold of Elden and to this day I still don’t know whether I was trying to save him or whether I was trying to push him the hell out of my way, but I spilled coffee all over him, his coffee. [LAUGHS.] Just as jumpy as I ever was. What makes me so goddamn quick-tempered with those I love most. Yeah. It bothers me that I have been less of a husband, been less of a father than I wish I had been. Will I ever get over this whatever it is? But I’m getting there [LAUGHS.] [CROWS CAWING]

### **#53: Harrison Burney**

They kept begging me. They said, “Dad,” they said, “well, you’re getting old and when you die all those things are gonna be gone forever. We won’t know nothing about it.” So I figured, well, I’m doing this for her and the kids. And I did I made ‘em each the story of it and put it in a folder and give it to ‘em all, so they can either take care of it or they can destroy it. It’s up to them, but I did my part. [BACKGROUND: MUTED VOICES, CROWS CAWING]

### **Conclusion: Gregory L. Sharrow**

The men whose stories we’ve just heard are Cliff Austin, Robert Norton, Harrison Burney and William Busier. This program was produced by Erica Heilman and Gregory Sharrow for the Vermont Folklife Center of Middlebury, Vermont. It was engineered by Scott Halvorsen Gillette. Research for this program was done by

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