

Robert Lee Horton

*422 Regiment
106th Infantry Division
Berga POW Camp
Stalag 9C at Bad Sulza Sax We Mer*

Memorial Day is, and should be, a day on which we commemorate and honor the memory of those Americans who gave their lives in the service of country. For the last 142 years, Americans have paid homage to those who gave the last full measure of devotion. While many of those who have sacrificed their lives did so in battles on the land, on the sea and in the air, some have died slow and tortuous deaths, under mysterious and horrendous circumstances. This is the story of Private Robert L. Horton of Laurens County, Georgia.

Robert Lee Horton, a younger son of Wash and Maggie Horton, was born in Laurens County on August 24, 1924. Robert grew up on his father's farm and attended the local school when he wasn't busy doing his chores around the house and in the fields.

Horton enlisted in the United States Army sometime shortly after his eighteenth birthday. He was assigned to the **422nd Infantry Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division** at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. After training in Tennessee and Indiana, the 422nd left from Boston and arrived in England just in time for Thanksgiving. Horton's regiment arrived in France on December 6, 1944.

For the previous six months, the Allied forces had made steady progress in their march toward the German capital in Berlin. Ten days after the Division arrived in France, all Hell broke loose. The division was positioned at the Schnee Eifel salient near Schonberg, Belgium. All was relative quiet in Ardennes Forest. Early, and unexpectedly, on the morning of December 16, 1944, a massive German force broke through the American line. Jim Cram, of Co. E of the 422nd, remembered "They got us surrounded on top of a hill. They had tanks on top of the hill firing down on us and 90,000 Germans coming at us."

By the end of the next day, the 422nd and 423rd regiments were surrounded. Colonels Descheneaux and Cavender realized that further resistance was futile and could result in total annihilation of their men. After two days of negotiations with German commanders, the Americans surrendered in the largest mass surrender of US troops in the Eastern Theater of Operations. The captured were taken to POW camps at Stalag XIIA and Stalag IXB.

Three hundred and fifty of approximately two thousand prisoners were assigned to a prison camp at Berga, a mining center in Germany. The prisoners arrived in Berga on a train from Bad Orb just before Valentine's Day, but their new quarters would be worse than they already experienced. The men were brought in to help the thousand or so political prisoners already in the town digging tunnels for some unknown military reason.

Prisoner Gerald Daub noted, "The air was just totally filled with stone dust. Everything coated with it, including your lungs filled with it. And we had no bathing facilities, so you can picture that, after a day or two, we just looked like cement statues walking around."

Some historians believe that the POWs at Berga were selected because they were Jewish or simply looked as if they may be Jewish. In reality, eighty, or less than a quarter of the prisoners, were Jewish. There were some 120-130 captives who were branded as "trouble makers" for failing to follow orders or violators of camp rules. The rest of the compliment of prisoners needed for the operation of the mines were randomly selected from other camps.

Atrocities were common. In comparison to POW camps in the South Pacific, German camps were generally considered less barbaric. Such was not the case with the Nazi camp at Berga. To prevent escapes at night, prisoners were stripped of their clothes, which were stored in an adjoining building, and placed two to a bunk bed stacked three high, with little or no heat on the coldest of nights. Threats were constant and often brutal. The prisoners were frequently forced to stand in the bitter elements with little clothing for long hours.

In an average week, each prisoner received about a hundred grams of bread a week. This hard crusty black ration was not your normal piece of sandwich bread, but was often made with a saw dust filler. Tea, boiled with weeds and shrubs, was highly coveted. If the prisoners were lucky, their soup was made with rotten potatoes and turnips. The usual soup de jour. was made with cats and even rats, according to Anthony Acevedo, a medic with the 275th Infantry regiment.

To pass the time, the prisoners often dreamed and talked of their favorite foods and what each would eat for their first meal when they got back to their homes. In his book, *"Given Up For Dead"*, Flint Whitlock wrote, *"Some recall that, from different parts of the barracks, intermingled with the moans and hacking coughs and nightmare shrieks, came the soft sounds of crying."*

Private Robert Lee Horton died on April 2, 1945, in Stalag 9C at Bad Sulza Sax We Mer, succumbing to the diseases, bed bug bites, cold temperatures and malnutrition which typified the daily life at Berga. He was only a twenty-year-old kid. In the latter part of the day, the prisoners at Berga could hear the sound of artillery and small arms fire in the vicinity. It was clear that some offensive action was underway to free them from their torment. The guards came in, rounded up everyone who could walk, and forced the men to march away from the camp toward the mountains.

Along the trek, some 77 prisoners died. Those who survived, remembered the horror of the rotting corpses of political prisoners, including women and children, who had been slaughtered by the desperate Germans. On April 23, 1945, the surviving POWs were liberated. In comparison with the Malmedy Massacre, the deaths at Berga and along the march were the most atrocious acts of barbarism perpetrated upon American prisoners in Europe.

Robert Lee Horton nearly lived to breathe the air of freedom. So when you pass by the grave yard of Mt. Zion Baptist Church next to Southwest Laurens Elementary School, remember that lying there is a man who died for all of us and for the generations to come. It is only fitting that on this Memorial Day, we celebrate his dedication and the dedication of hundreds of thousands of Americans who given the last full measure of devotion to our nation. May God bless their souls.



Page last revised

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