

Peter Iosso
422nd Regiment
106th Infantry Division

Peter Iosso of New Providence attends reunion of WW II POWs

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NEW PROVIDENCE -- Peter Iosso and his wife Rhoda moved to New Providence in 1956. But 11 years before he purchased that first Cape Cod in the borough, he was the resident of a very different kind of shelter: a German prisoner of war camp called **Stalag 9 B**.

Last month, Mr. Iosso relived some of his war-era experiences, at a reunion of World War II-era American ex-POWs who gathered at the RosenCentre Hotel in Orlando, Fl. Of 350 men who had been imprisoned in Berga-Stalag 9B outside Frankfurt, Germany, 22 attended the reunion. Only six, including Mr. Iosso, remain of the POWs who had been sent to the slave labor camp at Berga at Elb.



BASIC TRAINING -- Peter Iosso of New Providence had the ebullience of an 18-year-old, during his 14 weeks of basic training at Camp Wheeler, Georgia, during the winter of 1944. He was a resident of Newark when he was drafted by the U.S. Army.

Mr. Iosso's wartime saga began in the winter of 1943-44, three months after his 18th birthday, when he was drafted, and left his native Newark for basic training in Camp Wheeler, Georgia. "I had about 14 weeks basic training as an infantry replacement," he recalls. But he wasn't sent overseas immediately because in the spring of 1944 the Army was not sending 18-year-old soldiers overseas, where they might take part in the invasion.

Instead, he was assigned to the **106th Infantry Division in Camp Atterbury, Indiana.** "It was a hot summer and we trained so hard that most of us were looking forward to going to battle," Mr. Iosso said. They had their wish in October when they were sent overseas on the sister ship of the Lusitania -- the Aquitania. "It was an old ship but a big ship. It carried a good part of our division," he said.

Mr. Iosso turned 19 years old on Oct. 25, 1944, as he crossed the Atlantic. After a three-day leave in London and a delay in southern England, the division crossed the channel and set up camp in northern France. "It rained every day. Our equipment and clothes and shoes were soaking wet. Our socks became wet in no time flat. In that wet condition, with those wet shoes and uniforms, we boarded trucks and finally got on the line on Dec. 10, in northern Belgium, in the Ardennes Forest.



A SMALL REUNION -- This spring, Peter Iosso of New Providence attended a June reunion of American ex-POWs, at the RosenCentre Hotel in Orlando, Florida. He joined a small group of remaining World War II service men who survived the slave labor camp at Berga on Elb, Germany.

"We were told by the departing Second Division soldiers that there was nothing doing really on that front -- maybe some artillery action, but there was no combat. And so we were prepared to just hold the line," he said.

Mr. Iosso, a light machine gunner in the 4th platoon of the **422nd regiment of the 106th Division**, was assigned eight hours a day to a hut made of logs. "On the night of the 15th of December I was headed back to that emplacement -- and I woke up the next morning lying in the snow with a bloody chin. Maybe a piece of shrapnel clipped me on the chin and knocked me out, or a shell nearby knocked me unconscious," he surmises. He tried to get up but his feet had frostbite. He made it back to sick call on Dec. 16 as the shelling began the Battle of the Bulge.

"I found myself retreating with the company headquarters people, apart from my outfit, and also separated from my gear, all I had was the clothes on my back." Mr. Iosso recalls. He was captured along with that company headquarters group.

"I was captured the 18th or 19th of December. We were marched to a railroad station. We were packed in railroad cars. We were about 60 to a railroad car, no facilities, we used helmets for toilets. We arrived at Stalag 9B outside of Frankfurt. We were the first American soldiers in that stalag," he said.

They arrived on Christmas day and each group of 4-6 men received a loaf of bread and soup. "We had a cup of soup and a piece of bread to last us for a day, and this was the routine. Our thoughts were about food. We stood around our triple decker beds, two to a bed, and maybe one stove in the whole big building. We were in a kind of barracks building. And we talked a lot about food. That was our obsession."

Mr. Iosso suspects he may have caused trouble for himself when he spoke out against a fellow soldier who was serving as a middle man to provide black market cigarettes for POW's in return for watches, wedding rings and other valuables. Some POW's were trading their meager bread allowance "in other words, their lives for a cigarette," Mr. Iosso said.

Mr. Iosso accused the man of taking advantage of his buddies. He suspects the man turned him in as a trouble maker because on February 8 Mr. Iosso was assigned to a slave labor camp building an underground factory, along with about 80 Jewish-American soldiers, some troublemakers and maybe prisoners chosen at random.

"The 350 of us were supposed to relieve political prisoners, European Jews mainly," Mr. Iosso said. "Well, when we arrived there we saw these political prisoners and they were like zombies. They were very thin, in their pajama-like outfits."

The POW's had the job of picking up pieces of rock. They worked 12-hour shifts, 10 men to a hole, with a conscripted German laborer in charge. The American soldiers assisted him with a pneumatic drill to make holes in the rock for dynamite. After the explosion they went back into the holes to pick up the rock.

"We got a loaf of bread, usually about six men to a loaf," along with a cup of soup, Mr. Iosso said. "We cut our pieces of bread in half, half again, half again in minute pieces. We ate those minute pieces of bread very slowly to make them last. We would spend an hour

eating that piece of bread. Then we went to bed and in short order we were awakened by lice nibbling on us, sucking our blood.

"We worked about three weeks, maybe four weeks without a day off. About the middle of March, men started dying," Mr. Iosso said. "We lost up to three men a night there at Berga on the Elster River."

About April 1 the survivors were marched away from Berga, "On the road we started losing more men, up to six a night. We would go to sleep and six men would not wake up."

The survivors marched 15-30 kilometers a day until, on April 23, they were liberated by the 11th Armored Division. "The night of the 22nd we went to sleep in this barn with the noise of gunfire quite audible. And in the morning, the gunfire sounded closer and more frequent.

"We were alone, a few of us in the back of the barn. We took the planks apart -- we could see tanks coming toward us. We rushed to greet the liberators."

At the time of his liberation, Mr. Iosso weighed 90 pounds.

After the war, the 20-year-old Peter Iosso went back to his factory job in Newark and completed high school under a veterans education program. "I was able to do better than two years of high school work in 24 weeks. I got A's in every subject. My life was my studies," he said.

He attended Montclair State Teachers College; spent a year abroad in Strasbourg, France, and returned to Montclair State where he met his future wife, Rhoda Thomson. They were married in 1952. Mr. Iosso did his graduate work at the University of Wisconsin and eventually landed a job at Columbia High School in South Orange-Maplewood. He retired 30 years later.

Mr. Iosso and his wife, Rhoda had five boys. Christian attended Johns Hopkins University and is a minister today. Keith attended Princeton and works in the computer field. Colin, also a Princeton graduate, is a neurologist practicing in Texas. Ken, a graduate of Macalester College in Minnesota, works as an aide to the county executive of Ramsey County, Minnesota. Claude is the media director for the City of Bellevue, a suburb of Seattle.

Mr. Iosso became a widower in 2000, when Rhoda Iosso died of ovarian cancer. Following that, Mr. Iosso reports that he met a "wonderful widow, Marion Condemi," whom he married in 2004.

Residents of New Providence might recall Peter Iosso, the political candidate. He ran as a Democrat for Borough Council three times, but said "I was in the wrong party".

Of the 350 American servicemen from Stalag 9B who arrived at the slave labor camp at Berga on the Elster River in February of 1945, Peter Iosso figures that 80 died in the camp, and 100 more on the April marches. Today, 20 remain. Peter Iosso is one of these.

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