

John A. Kemper
423/L
106th Infantry Division

SOLDIER'S STORY

WWII VET ESCAPED FROM GERMAN PRISON CAMP

BELLBROOK - Give Army veteran **Jack Kemper** the chance to reminisce about his involvement in one of the most pivotal battles of World War II, and he'll spin stories for hours. A 90-minute documentary that aired recently on WPTD-TV, Channel 16, and WPTO-TV, Channel 14, gave the 77-year-old Bellbrook man a chance to do just that.

Kemper, as a member of the **106th Infantry Division**, was among those captured at the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944 and forced into slave labor in the Berga prison camp in central Germany. The POW experiences of those soldiers were the focus of Berga: Soldiers of Another War, the documentary by Charles Guggenheim, which aired in late May and this month. It featured interviews with U.S. soldiers captured during the German offensive and sent to the camp, a satellite of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Guggenheim, who was a part of the 106th Infantry sent to fight at the Bulge, interviewed more than 100 survivors for the documentary, said officials at Guggenheim Productions Inc. in Washington. **Kemper** was not interviewed, but has seen the film. He is thought to be one of two Berga camp survivors living in Ohio.

The other lives in Canton, Guggenheim Productions said.

Kemper was a tall, 19-year-old private first class when he was captured. He documented his experiences in a journal and sent postcards from Bad Orb, the first prison camp he was sent to, to his parents in Cincinnati. His mother, Marie, was a homemaker, and his father, Al, was a Western Union office manager. **Kemper** and his younger sister, Jean, grew up in the Queen City. He graduated from Purcell High School in 1943 and enlisted at 17.

Kemper and the rest of the soldiers in the 106th knew their situation was hopeless when they saw a U.S. major captured on the hood of a Jeep driven by Nazis.

'We were put into the line at the Battle of the Bulge,' **Kemper** said. 'Eventually our unit was surrounded by German troops . . . company commander surrendered the company. . . . At that time, I was hoping that he would surrender. We all felt our position was pretty dire.'

After putting their weapons in a pile, the soldiers were forced to march for one day before spending three days on a boxcar headed for Bad Orb. There, **Kemper** and his fellow soldiers were assigned to barracks where they slept on straw mats, two to a bunk. When they were allowed to eat, there were six men to one loaf of bread.

` Within a few days, the only conversations that went on was about food and what they liked to eat,' **Kemper** said.

Kemper couldn't remember how long they were at Bad Orb, but remembered the motive behind the Nazis bringing them there.

` They were trying to separate the Jews and put them all in one barracks,' he said. Although **Kemper** is not Jewish, he was taken with the soldiers of Jewish descent because the Germans needed to fill a quota at Berga. There were 350 soldiers who were sent to Berga. While there, they were sent a mile from camp and made to help the Germans dig at least seven tunnels by drilling holes and packing them with explosives.

"They were going to build an underground plant that couldn't be bombed," **Kemper** said. The soldiers were forced to work 12 hours a day. They had every other Sunday off.

Some of the Jewish people taken to Buchenwald as a result of the Holocaust were also working in the tunnels, **Kemper** said.

The German soldiers and civilians who supervised the work would use sticks to beat the soldiers and Holocaust victims they didn't like or thought didn't work fast enough.

"I was hit a couple of times with a stick. I wasn't working fast enough, hard enough," **Kemper** said. "They would knock a guy down if they didn't like him. They were brutal. They didn't care. We weren't people to them."

The soldiers were also losing weight because they weren't eating properly.

"Everybody was getting thinner and thinner," said **Kemper**, who weighed about 130 pounds before his capture and 90 pounds after.

"You kept thinking about how long it was going to be before you get out of this mess," he said, recalling what was on the minds of his fellow soldiers when they weren't longing for a break from work.

As for his thoughts, **Kemper** said, "Just to try to survive and get out of there . . . I was trying to take care of myself. Survive myself."

Kemper never saw anyone killed at the camp, but said he was aware that some soldiers were shot to death. There were a couple of failed escape attempts, said **Kemper**, momentarily forgetting about his successful escape.

On April 10, the Germans started marching their captives away from Berga because the Americans were coming, **Kemper** said. During the march, known as the Death March, **Kemper** and fellow soldier Lawrence Gillette ducked into the woods and hid in a barn for two days.

` We got to talking. I said I think we can get out of this thing. It looked doable,' **Kemper** said. "We sort of went cross country to this farm."

The older couple who lived there had a Polish man working for them. "He took us to the barn and covered us up with hay. He was a good friend to us," **Kemper** said. "So much went on in a short time. I wish I was able to thank them."

The day they were rescued, **Kemper** and Gillette saw an American tank and ran toward it. The tank turned its gun toward them as a precaution.

"We were just so happy to see them," **Kemper** said. "I guess we looked so bad and decrepit. We started yelling, 'We're Americans! We're Americans!' "

Kemper believes they would not have survived had they tried to escape earlier because Berga was fenced in and German guards had barracks outside the fence.

Kemper said that at the end of the war, 70 of the 350 soldiers who went to Berga died, most during the Death March.

"The rest of the guys in the march got liberated within a few days" after he and Gillette were rescued, **Kemper** said.

On April 23, 1945, advance units of the 11th Armored Division discovered the soldiers who had been in the Death March. The German guards fled. The GIs ran and crawled toward their liberators, according to Guggenheim Productions.

After returning stateside, **Kemper** left the Army in December 1945. By the time he got out, the war was over in Europe. There was never a time when he thought he wouldn't make it out of captivity.

` I did pray a lot. I did a lot more praying when I was a prisoner,' he said.

Kemper will talk about his experience if you ask him, but he hasn't let his past keep him from living.

` I had nightmares. I would always dream about being captured again. That's the worst thing that could happen to me,' he said.

The retired chemical engineer with General Motors married his wife, Jean, in 1950 in Cincinnati. He was 25 and she was 22 when they met while taking a night course at the University of Cincinnati. Shortly after, they moved to Dayton. The Kempers have two daughters, Joyce of Celina and Janet of Germantown; and two sons, Jim of Athens and Joe of Florida; and four grandchildren.

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Comments by his Grand-daughter, Melissa A Kemper, 02/2008

My grandfather was captured during the Battle of the Bulge, and then sent to the prison camp Berga in Germany. He remained in the camp from his capture in December until April, when the prisoners were lead on a march later known as the Death March. At that point he and Lawrence Gillette, another soldier from the 423rd/L, managed to escape. They hid in a barn until the American troops arrived.

He now lives in Dayton, Ohio

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