

Robert Widdicombe

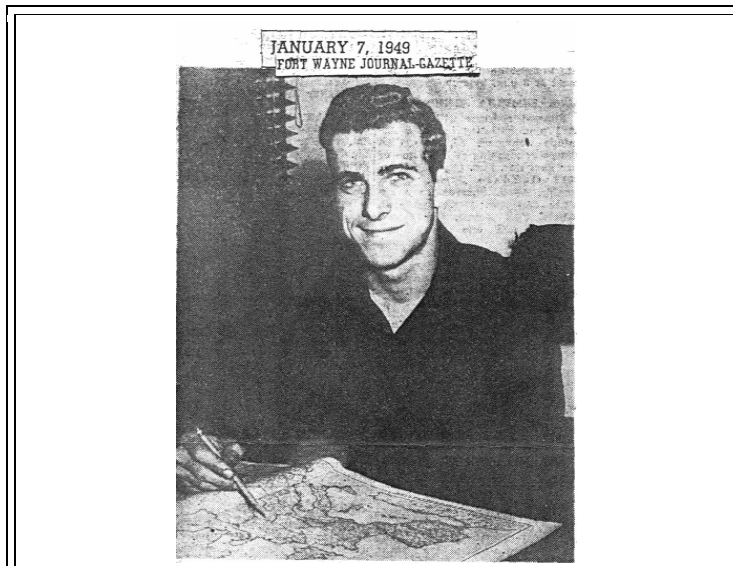
*Company I, Third Battalion
423rd Infantry Regiment
106th Infantry Division
Browning Automatic Rifleman, 3rd squad, 1st platoon*

See also James Mills Diary - Slaughter House 5

January 7, 1949
Fort Wayne, Indiana Journal Gazette

Recalls War Horror - Wants To Meet Pals From Nazi Slave Camp

By Tom R. Gilliam



Seeks Survivors - Robert Widdicombe, Auburn, a survivor of the infamous slave labor camp at Berga-Am-Elster, Germany, points out the location of the camp on a map in the Journal-Gazette library. Widdicombe, an ex-GI is trying to locate other survivors for the camp. He believes that not more than 25 or 30 of the men that were there survived to return to their homes.

Bob Widdicombe doesn't look a hero.

He looks like a rather ordinary, healthy young American, who has never been far from home.

But he's not. He is a survivor of the infamous German forced labor camp, Berga-Am-Elster. He is drawing practically 100 percent disability for injuries and ill-treatment suffered there. And he is carrying on his day-to-day work with never a complaint.

Survivor of combat, imprisonment, forced labor, beatings and cruelty, malnutrition and a death march that compares to the march on Bataan, he still isn't bitter. He doesn't

particularly like "le Boche," but he doesn't have a deep, embittered hate. Which is remarkable.

Calls at Office

This story started Thursday afternoon when Robert Widdicombe, Auburn, ex-private first class in a United States Army, ex-prisoner-of-war captured by the Wehrmacht, walked into the office of the Journal-Gazette.

He didn't intend to bring in a story. He only came in for information. His story started many months before – but the immediate cause of his trip here came from a small news item in the Journal-Gazette of December 19, 1948.

That story told of the attempts by 25 survivors of Berga-Am-Elster to get a retrial of two Nazi labor camp commanders who escaped death when their sentences were commuted.

Then, bit-by-bit, Widdicombe's story came out.

In 1943 Bob Widdicombe was 17 years old when he graduated from Auburn High School. He made arrangements for entering the Army's Specialized Training Program and then worked for a couple of months at the Fort Wayne Works fo the International Harvester Company before he was called to duty.

He started out with the ASTP with plans to attend Officers Candidate School at Ft. Benning, Ga.

Those plans never materialized. Instead the Army suddenly found itself with a shortage of fighting men – a shortage of infantry soldiers.

In a short time he found himself assigned to the [106th "Golden Lion" Infantry Division](#). Further assigned to Company I of the Third Battalion of the 423rd Infantry Regiment, he became the Browning Automatic Rifleman in the third squad of the first platoon stationed at [Camp Atterbury](#).

Cheltenham, England, came – then Le Havre, France, the long ride to the front – and his division was committed in the vicinity of St. Vith.

It was quiet, Pfc Widdicombe and his BAR even volunteered for two night patrols to break the monotony.

Then, on December 17, the Wehrmacht struck. Poised in the Ardennes under cover of bitter Winter weather, moving at night, Hitler and his legions were making their last desperate bid to prolong` the German state for 1,000 years.

Smashed Defenses

They smashed through the flimsy defenses. Before the 106th had time to recoil and strike back it was surrounded and cut off. Units were separated. Heavily superior German armored units constantly hammered at the defenders.

Pfc. Widdicombe stuck with his company, fighting for four days and nights, with only the ammunition in their belts, living on the rations in their packs, the water in their canteens.

The night of the fourth day the weary group dug in for another period of counter-attack and defense, against great odds. German snipers harassed the beleaguered force. The radio began to chatter. It was the word to "destroy all weapons, all secret papers, prepare to surrender." Vehicles were long gone, out of gas.

They wrapped gun barrels around trees, threw away activator springs, firing pins, broke stocks. Then they sat down and waited. Five minutes later they were the prisoners of the Wehrmacht guaranteed decent treatment under the Geneva Convention.

Decent At First

It was fairly decent for the first few days. The first day they marched—no interrogation, no dividing of officers and men. They didn't even take their combat jackets or other clothes from them as happened to many prisoners. Widdicombe was still wearing the uniform he left England in - the barracks bags with the extra uniforms arrived the day before the breakthrough—and he wore that uniform for five months.

Then they were loaded in boxcars. They spent nine days in them - including Christmas, 1944. They were unloaded at Bad Orb, Germany, near Frankfurt-on-Main, at Stalag 9-B. A month later the nightmare really began in earnest.

Along with about 400 other American GI's he was shipped out to a forced labor camp at Berga-Am-Elster.

Forced Labor

Forced labor. Just that. The Jerries were getting desperate. Uncle Sam and John Bull were closing in. The flights of 1,000 - 2,000 - 2,500 bombers daily were increasing. The center of the Fatherland was being struck. Transportation lines were being wrecked. Communications were at a stand still. And worst of all, the factories and industrial might of Germany were slowly being obliterated from the face of the earth.

So the superman decided to go underground. They decided to put their ball-bearing factories, their plane-assembly lines, their arsenals, underground where Allied bombers could not reach them. The problem was - where to get the labor. That was an easy one. There were thousands and thousands of slave laborers in Germany - Russians, Poles, Jews of all nationalities, Czechs, French and others. But the number of jobs took more than they thought - and the time was drawing close - the Russians on the East - the Americans and British on the West - the pincer was closing.

So the elite soldiers looked the other way - and the slave legion heads began picking prisoners of war. There were 20,000 Russians, Poles and Jews in the camp - and 400 GI's.

Worked Long Hours

They worked from daylight to dark - seven days a week. They were on a starvation diet - one liter of grass soup (about a pint), one-sixth to one-eighths of a loaf of bread each day, and a cup of tea. No water. The men ate from steel helmets. Shaved with mused used blades, usually in the cup of tea.

They were working deep in the side of a mountain on scaffoldings in a mine shaft. One GI was struck in the back by a falling beam. He lay in the mine all day. That night they carried

him back to the barracks and the next day were forced to carry him back to work – where he died a few hours later.

“Beating up and killing prisoners was common-place,” Widdicombe commented. “Slappings were an hourly occurrence. They had no fancy tortures or refinements. They just starved us until we couldn’t get up – then they left us lay until we died.”

The invading troops were coming too close. So the Jerries decided they’d better get the GI’s out. They started a forced march away from the camp, over the Ore Mountains. An average of 10 men a day died during the 14-days it took to get to Hof, Germany.

On that day, Widdicombe and his best friend hid in a haystack along the way.

It sounds simple from then on. The next morning they began walking toward the West. French prisoners of war who worked on farms were permitted to move freely on the roads, and they were taken for them and never questioned. A French group was feeding them when a German guard found them. He took them to a German town. And thee they were taken over by civilians, given the run of the town, and from advantage point at the City Hall, watched the German Army retreating.

Town Liberated

When the 90th “T & O” Division liberated the town, they even told them what houses German soldiers had gone in and come out as civilians.

The story winds up fast. Widdicombe and his buddy were evacuated to a field hospital, flown to a general hospital at LeMans, France. Then he began the long, tortuous road to recovery. Finally, after suffering paralysis of his legs and arms from a Vitamin B deficiency, he was well-enough to bring home. More months at the Nichols General Hospital for nerve cases at Louisville, Kentucky, and he was discharged. He was awarded a 100 percent disability pension, later reduced, now being increased because of dead nerves. He periodically shows positive and then negative on tuberculosis tests.

Bib Widdicombe got married last year to Carolyn Cooper of Auburn. He got a five-month sick leave from his job at Salisbury Axle Division of the Dana Corporation and went west to try and cure the TB. While in Pasadena, California, he began a college course.

Remembers Names

He remembers Irwin Metz and Ludwig Merz, the camp commanders at Berga-Am-Elster quite well. Metz got his sentence commuted to life imprisonment – Merz, his chief flunky, was cut to five years. Widdicombe had no printable comment on this.

“But I would like to contact some of those fellows who were in Berga with me,” he said. “I’ve never seen any of them since I left Germany.”

It isn’t a pretty story. But it’s a story of guts and determination – a story that other American young men have lived and are living today – a story that points the way to a better world, a world where men must learn to live with each other – or die.

In a letter to James Mills, July 5, 1988

Dear Jim,

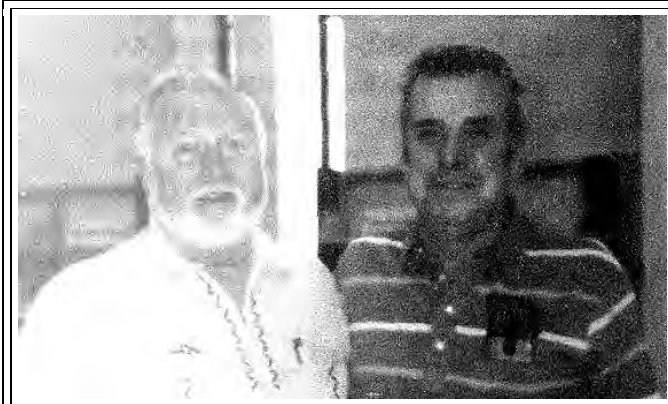
It was a joy to receive your phone call last week. I've thought many times about you and others that were in the Company, although I must confess that many names escape me. Of course, I couldn't forget you because of the things we did together. Especially that last couple of weeks after we went on the line and I can't forget you and that guitar and the hours you spent trying to learn how to play. How could I forget that you burned it. That should have been a day of celebration.

Seriously Jim, I'm so glad you made it and that things are and have been going well for you. I'm looking forward to the day we can get together. I can't for the life of me remember Chipman or Shipman. I did get a letter from John "Mouse" Hoag in December of 1945. He did say that Duff (Duffy) was okay and that Wilkens (He was one of our Sgts ?) had married that little gal he had in England. And that Hoster was his best man. As far as the officers were concerned, he said that he saw Collins at Lucky Strike and that he was okay. But said that Capt. Moe was bad off, and that Blodgett and Sellare were ok.

I got a letter from Delphos Howard in Lima, Ohio who said he remembers me as the BAR man. I sure can't place him. Does that name hit home with you ?

You remember that I mentioned the 106th Division Association. I joined today and am enclosing a copy of the letter and app. that I received. Maybe you will want to join too.

Well, Jim, keep in touch. If you hear anything, keep me posted. I'll do the same and let's not wait too long to get together.



John Mills (left) and Bob Widdicombe met in 1991 for the first time since the December 1944, Battle of the Bulge. Bob was a BAR man and Jim was the assistant BAR man, in Company I, 423rd Regiment, 106th Division. Both became POW's. Bob was born 25 September 1925 and died 9 December 1994.

Contributed by James Mills