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My Story as a Prisoner of Germany

I found myself alone on the Siegfried Line, separated from my unit. I had hoped that our troop's would return to their positions and then I would join them. I dared not move for I didn't know what direction they had gone and I did know that I was surrounded by mine fields I hid for over two days in a bunker and ate a can of C rations. I soon found that they were not returning and that the Jerries were making continuous raids on the dead both German and American who lay on the battle field. They picked up the blanket that covered me and looked beneath but gave me up for dead. After two days of this, I decided to make a break for it.

I didn't get far before I was spotted and then and there, I thought I was one more American "missing in action" but luck was with me. Usually, a lone soldier met death rather than the trouble of taking them to a prison camp miles away. I was marched to the C.P. and two days later, marched on to join 975 other prisoners who were camped in a churchyard west of Waxweiler. It was noon on Wednesday, Dec. 20th, when I joined the others in the churchyard and what food I had had between Sunday and Wednesday was a can of C-rations that I managed to find, and a few other crackers which had been given to me while I was in the German C.P. Here in the churchyard, we were given a third of a loaf of German bread, which is ersatz brown bread. There is no way to describe it.

It was good to join a group of Americans but I don't think any of us were under any illusion about what was going to happen. I still had about a pack and a half of cigarettes, and these I gave to the other Americans who accepted them with a beastly joy. They had spent three days in the dungeon (see story in Stars and Stripes - April 22) and I was so happy to see them that I would have given them anything I had. Little was I to know that these were the last cigarettes - I was to have in over two months. The few crackers I still had in my pocket were split and shared by the others.

Then we marched into Waxweiler where we slept in another churchyard. You could hardly call it sleep since we sat up in the pews but even so, I was fortunate since I got inside of the church. There were so many of us that we could not possibly get into the church and so some spent the night outdoors in the snow and damp of zero weather. On these marches, there was no laughter. Not a smile, not a joke for there was nothing to smile at and nothing but hunger and weakness was in our minds.

We were not as yet prisoners of war and so the rules which usually applied to prisoners did not apply to us. Orders were given that if anyone tried to escape, twenty men would be shot. This penalty was too great and no one dared to risk the lives of so many others.

The next morning, we had another "shake down" and they must have collected at least fifty thousand dollars from us. It took four men to carry it.

There were, of course, no sanitary facilities in the church and the men used their helmets as stools and left them in the church vestibule, simply because no one was permitted to

go outside to relieve himself. The next morning, we waited for two hours while a detail of ours cleaned it up.

We marched for about 30 kilometers (18 miles) that day. No food or water had been given to us since the day before we had reached Waxweiler and we were weak. I had an overcoat but I was too weak to carry it so I changed it for the wool cap which my buddy had. When we got to the city, a railroad city, we were herded into two small rooms, each the size of one of ours - 30' by 30'. There were almost a thousand of us and of course, there wasn't room for all of us in those two rooms. Some again had to sleep outside but I was lucky and found myself among the first in one room. There were so many of us that we slept standing up, crouched over and lying on top of one another. And again we weren't fed.

It is surprising that so few fell out during this first part of the march. It was probably due to the strength of the men before they had been captured. At every stream we got water in our helmets, we drank it - polluted or not. It was the only water we got.

The Germans had a system of lying to us. Word would come out that we were about to march 10 kilometers and then we would march twice that much. It seemed to me that they must have marched us in a circular route - it might have been to show the people of the smaller villages that the Germans had captured some prisoners and to prove the success of the "Great German Army".

This was the third day we had marched and still no food but today we did get some food - little enough for the size of our group - it was 20 loaves of bread and two buckets of marmalade. When it was divided between all of us - it amounted to a piece of German bread about the size of a cigarette pack.

Then the march started on again - supposedly about two miles but in reality about 15 kilometers - and finally we reached Gerolstein. This was December 22nd. It was rumored that this was our destination but it was filled with two thousand other prisoners and it was here that we were fed. We were given a third of a loaf of bread and told that it was to last us for the rest of the march. We didn't know how far the rest of the march was and we were so hungry that temptation overcame us and we gobbled it all up. Then we could only hope that the march wasn't going to be too long.

There always seemed to be a lot of confusion about our transferal from place to place. This time, we marched out of town about two miles, then halted for about ten minutes, turned around and returned. Then we found ourselves herded into box cars. These box cars were small - about half the size of American ones and sixty men went into each one. These box cars had been used to carry cattle and horses and the straw was in the same condition that it had been left in. There we were, packed in so tightly in the most foul and stench that human beings ever stayed in. We tried to sleep but again there was no room to stretch out - not once throughout the whole march had we had room to stretch out and relax.

Traveling by box car - no matter which way you went was slow moving every few miles, the tracks would be "kaput" and we would be sided off in one direction, or merely enforced to wait until repairs could take place. While we were in the box cars, we were not without information and rumor. The car had a small window at one end and a German speaking prisoner watched and passed along whatever he saw. Sometimes, while we

were waiting, he would chatter with the guards and try to find out where we were going or what was happening. Rumor is a great thing and it gave us something to think of besides the gnawing pain in our stomachs.

On December 24th, our train was strafed. The planes had attacked the city nearest us and we were also strafed. In our excitement, we forced our way out of the cars in a state of panic. We all got together and pushed on the door, and the latch broke. However, that didn't last either as it wasn't long before our planes left and we were herded back into the box cars by the guards who, to enforce their haste, had fired shots into the air.

It had been a long time since we had foods and water. We had a meager piece of bread on the day before and for two days we had no water. When we marched along the road, water was procured by the helmet method from the streams near where we marched but when you were cooped up in a box car, there was no water.

Christmas still meant something to most of us - regardless of everything that had happened, we still remembered the day and what it stood for. And this was the day before Christmas - and that night, we were fed. It was just as if God hadn't forgotten us. Our supper was meat and bread - a can of meat and a loaf of bread for every six of us. Scanty though it was, there wasn't a man there who didn't appreciate it more than any Christmas present he had ever received before. It was life over death - and we were near the balancing point of the two.

That morning, Christmas Day, we marched into Bad Orb, **Stalag IX B**. Here we were separated into groups - the non-coms and the privates and once more we were searched. This time they hunted especially for any medications that we might have with us - especially wound tablets.

At noon, we got our first hot meal - helmet full of greens - similar to spinach and Turnip tops. Our barracks were covered with straw and that is where we slept. Here we learned that our daily ration was to consist of a sixth of a loaf of bread a day and a small pat of margarine, the greens and four or five potatoes. The coffee was meted out morning and night but it was used more often to wash than to drink.

On Dec. 26th, a new batch of prisoners joined us - mostly officers and at this point the prisoners totaled about three thousand. Here we were registered, or supposedly so and allowed to take a soapless shower. This was the only shower I had until four months later just before I was liberated.

At Bad Orb, we set up our own hospital, with doctors and medics but we had no medications, and all they could offer was a bed with a warm room. The greens affected our systems to such an extent that about two weeks after we arrived, forty percent of us had diarrhea.

We had details for the various housekeeping jobs to be done around the camp but outside of that, we weren't forced to do any regular work. We were allowed to write cards and letters but these all had to go through German censorship and the amount of information which went on the cards was meager. We never knew how many were sent but my mother got only one of the five or six which I sent her while I was here. I was there from the 25th of December until February 8th.

We used to amuse or torture ourselves with weird recipes. The main dish voted as the Army's best, was hot cakes and french toast. I didn't realize we had so many cooks, so many volunteers for KP, and so many future restaurant and hamburger joint owners.

Cigarettes were being traded for food, money or anything else that would help. At one time, one cigarette would bring 400 francs (\$8.00).

I remember clearly that morning of January 28th. "Blue Sunday" we called it. Instead of being awakened at the usual hour (0630), we were awakened at (0800), marched to an assembly area within the camp along with all of the other fellow prisoners. There were a number of strange faces among us. SS troops, armed with rifles, grenades, machine guns emplaced and what have you. After standing knee-deep in snow, we learned that one of the guards, making his regular tour of duty in the kitchen, found two GIs who had broken in to see what they could find. We were told that one of them took a hatchet and struck the guard eleven times in the back of the head. We were warned that until these men were turned in by us, we would neither eat nor would we receive any wood for fuel. Finally, late that afternoon, a pair of bloody boots and field jacket led to the identity of these two. They were immediately taken away "to be tried" as the Jerries put it. Of course, we never saw them again. As for the guard, we never learned whether he died or not, nor did we care, for that matter. We had soup that night.

February 1st was the next eventful day. The Servs in the camp had been kind enough to make a gift of about 100 Red Cross packages which was probably the most welcome thing that could have happened to us at the time. Although there were four men to a package (package normally intended for one, or possibly two men) it meant more to us than anything that had happened prior to this time. Many barracks spent that entire night singing, praying, giving thanks, crying, laughing. It was certainly a day of rejoicing. The policy, however, was to open all cans to prevent taking a box with you if you decided to escape. That meant that it had to be consumed within a couple of days. We had no trouble there. Many of the boys became ill, but as one said, "I had a lot of fun getting sick" at least.

February 4th was the next day of importance. We had heard bombs dropping nearby for the past two or three weeks. On this day, just past noon, we heard the roar of fighter planes overhead, and then the chatter of machine guns. It seemed that a couple of Nazi fighters decided to attack our planes, and of all places they chose to fight directly above our camp. Barracks were strafed, everyone hit the floor, at least three Americans, fifteen French, and about fifteen Russians were killed, and many times that number were wounded.

On February 6th, we learned that a small group of us were leaving, and were told that we would be followed by the rest of the men eventually. We were told that there was an ample supply of Red Cross packages at this camp that we were going to, and that conditions would be much better than at Bad Orb. After all, it wouldn't take a heck of a lot to beat Bad Orb, we thought.

Finally, on February 8th, 350 of us marched to the railroad station and after waiting around for a couple of hours, boarded the box cars - 55 in each. There we sat for twenty-four hours without moving. We had been given a half loaf of bread and a third of a can of meat before we left, so we knew that it would be quite a trip because, by this time, we knew that when we were given that much bread and meat, it had to last us for at least

three days and maybe more. Well, it was intended for that length of time. Three days later, we were given four-fifths of a loaf of bread and about a pound of liverwurst. They always seemed to figure our rations out to the crumb, never giving us a little more than we were supposed to get - always a little less. On February 13th we reached **Berger** (Elster) which is in the Breslau, Leipzig and Dresden area, approximately 75 kilometers from the Czech border. Fortunately, we made the trip without mishap - no bombings, no deaths - just a little weary from being cramped and lack of water. (None was supplied, although they did give us coffee on two occasions.)

We marched about two or three kilometers to our new home, and found that it was only recently completed. It looked similar to some of our one-story barracks, but was divided into six rooms about thirty feet square. We had triple deck bunks, two in each bunk. Sixty men were quartered in each room. They gave us new blankets, new ticks, new pans and cups (our first mess gear) and things looked pretty good. We were told that we would go to work in a day or so, but that didn't sound too bad, as our rations had increased to a quarter of a loaf of bread a day, the usual 25 grams of margarine, and some other "extra" as we called it, every day. This "extra" was usually a thin slice of some kind of tasteless bologna, or marmalade or cottage cheese. About two tablespoonfuls was the usual ration. Also we would get our soup at noon and coffee in the morning and at night.

WE GO TO WORK...

On the morning of February 15th, we were told to be ready at 1300 that day to go to work. We were marched to the River Elster (about two kilometers away) and there we stood wondering just what was in store for us. It didn't take us long to find out as we were put to work immediately. Our job?...well, it goes something like this...There was a huge hill (almost a mountain) along the river, in which they were tunneling. About twenty tunnels had been started. They were approximately fifteen feet wide, twenty feet high and some were about fifty to seventy-five feet in depth. Each of these tunnels had four or five German miners... Men who had been at Aachen when the Yanks took over. A hard slate rock formed the mountain. The miners would drill holes into this slate (about two inches in diameter and six to eight feet in depth), pack them with dynamite and blast. This caused a pile of debris that had to be loaded into small railroad cars, then pushed outside about 100 feet, then dumped along the bank of the river.

They gave us shovels, and we went to work. Some of the rocks were 100-pounders and it would take two and three of us to pick them up and throw them into the cars. We were surprised that we would work that first day until ten at night in order to put in our eight hours. As a result of the drilling, a heavy dust would fill the tunnel constantly. This I believe was responsible for a lot of pneumonia cases that followed. We were broken down into three work groups. One group worked from 0600 to 1400. We worked from 1400 to 2200 and the third group worked on the outside from 0800 to 1700. Their job was to carry rails, air pipes, etc. Working with us were 1000 political prisoners - Czechs, Poles, Russians, etc. Those same people that were so brutally massacred at Buchenwald, Lublin, and Dachau. They impressed me greatly. The living dead... "Zombies", we called them. Their walk, their actions seemed mechanical. Every now and then you would hear a scream and you would see one of the Heinies beating them unmercifully. Little did I realize that we, too, within a very short time would assume the same appearance.

As time went on, our days at the mines became more and more unbearable. We had to supply a certain number of workers for this project and many of the fellows were actually

too sick, to walk. However, they were pulled out of bed and forced to go to work. Some would fall out on the way to work but they made us carry them. Others would pass out while working but we weren't allowed to help them, we would have to let them lay there until they regained consciousness. Many were hurt by falling rocks, or perhaps, a scaffold that would fall. All of us had bruises on our hands where we had been picking up these rocks and sharp edges would cut our hands. We were always under constant pressure from the German workers. It seemed that the entire project was given a time limit, and as a result, we were forced to work that much harder, hardly a day passed that at least one of us did not take a beating with a rubber hose, or a shovel, or a pick handle. As a matter of fact, I'll never forget the beating I took one night. It was about 8 P.M. and the superintendent, a strapping six-footer, was making his usual rounds. He happened to stop in at our tunnel (Tunnel #5) and wasn't quite satisfied with the way I was handling the shovel. He grabbed the shovel from me, hit me over the head with the handle, knocked me down on the rocks with his fist. I got up, and he hit me again and again and again. A friend of mine, standing helplessly by, said he counted eight blows to my head, and I hit the ground no less than six times. Luckily, I came out of it with only a bloody nose, a sore jaw and a nice big shiner. After beating me, he took off his belt and said that next time he would hit me with that. Then he went off mumbling about "American swine - - air raids killing our women and children, etc". This beating wasn't unusual; however, as it happened to one of my buddies the night before and it happened to another the following night. It seemed that they were all brutally insane, and had been dishing this out to the slaves all along; that we were, perhaps, more deserving of these beatings, because of our air raids. Incidentally, they had, a damn healthy respect for, these raids !!

They gave us one day a month off, but our one and only day was spent out in the snow, our clothes being marked to indicate that we were prisoners of war. This process took three hours and could have been completed in half the time, inside.

We were never told just what the purpose of this huge project was, but it was, evidently, the foundation for some underground factory. Time went on, each day becoming weaker and weaker. After Goebbels made his famous speech about "more work and less food", our rations were cut to a fifth of a loaf of bread, instead of the usual quarter. At this time, we were given a new "Commando Fuehrer" (Group Leader)...A typical Heinie sergeant who definitely believed in military courtesy, sanitation, etc. He immediately set aside one of the rooms in the barracks as a hospital but he overlooked one small "detail"...No medications, no doctors. This turned out to be a "death house" instead of a hospital.

We made frequent complaints about the beatings at the mines, and were finally promised that we would be given better treatment. Just another Jerry promise - another Jerry lie... they continued to mistreat us, many of the boys escaped during the blackouts (the mines were blacked out during the air raids). To counteract these escapes, we were forced to turn in our shoes and trousers every night before we went to bed. In the morning, after about three hours sleep, we would go after them. This was a typical Nazi trick. As a matter of fact, everything they did and every way in which they did it, was nothing short of spite.

By this time, our morale was low. Laughter was at a premium, Rumors were plentiful (and usually food ones, too) but the grim realization of the present faced us constantly. Our death toll was something like fifteen now...All of us were sick, irritable, and an occasional scrap between a couple of the fellows delighted the Jerries.

We had a great deal of trouble with body lice...Kept you awake all night. Drinking water was always scarce. A few of us managed to keep some Halizone tablets and purified the water but soon these ran out.

On March 21st, we moved to another "new home". It was just across the river. Same type barracks and it was here that we were met by a Red Cross truck that brought down some packages. This was, of course, the best news that we had for some time. However, this was Wednesday, and the packages were withheld until Saturday night. The following week-end was Easter and our work at the mines terminated. It seems that someone (whoever it may have been) finally saw the light and realized that the work at the mines was too much for us. However, small groups were formed, and we found ourselves cutting wood, hauling rails, or similar work which we termed as "light work" in comparison to what we had been through. In spite of this change, men were still dying at the rate of one and two each day. Two escapees were brought in dead. The guards claimed that they had attempted to escape after being recaptured. The Jerries provided pine caskets, and grave details were active. We tried to give them a decent burial, if at all possible. It seemed as though the younger fellows, the eighteen to twenty year olds were going faster than the older fellows. The two escapees were buried without a coffin. It seems that there was a law in Germany that any one shot, would be buried without a coffin.

"THE DEATH MARCH"

On April 5th, or thereabout, we were told that we were going to a new spot... that we would work on farms, live with farmers, etc. and we were told this place was about 20 kilometers away...Lies, and more lies. We were given Red Cross packages (four to a package) to be used as our rations for the march. We marched 25 kilometers the first day...45 the second,35 the third, 30 the fourth and then we had a rest. During the march, we were given only one tenth of a loaf of bread each day supplemented by the Red Cross package. Men were dying at the rate of five and six each day...Malnutrition, dysentery, cholera, were the chief causes, although there was actually no one along who could competently determine the cause of these deaths. We had a few medics with us who were doing the best they could, but without medication, or food, it was impossible to save these boys. A record was being kept by one of the boys, and I certainly hope that this information has reached the proper authorities by this time. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to notify anyone just who died, where they were buried, and any other pertinent data that means so much to those who will suffer.

During our stay at the barn, that is, during our "rest", our ration consisted of a tenth of a loaf of bread each day, and occasionally a 12-ounce cup of barley soup that was generously offered by the farmer in whose barn we were quartered. This was just outside of Hof, and for three days, we saw our bombers go over the city, drop their bombs and we held our breath until they cleared the flak that was extremely heavy. Finally, when they learned that the Yanks were a mere 10 kilometers away from the city of Hof, we were on the march again. We marched for five more days staying just ahead of our troops, The death rate continued, and burial details were left behind to take care of these men.

Finally, on the afternoon of the 17th of April, we started out again, after a rest that morning, and for the first time, we had no count. Up until this time, they would count us three or four times a day. But, on this day, it seemed as though they just didn't care. Realizing this, I decided to make a break and dropped out. The guard came up and kicked

me, tried to make me get up, but I lay there complaining that I was sick. As a matter of fact, the entire column was beginning to straggle. I slipped into the woods, met three of my fellow prisoners and we made our way to a farmhouse. Here we told that we were Americans, that we were prisoners and had been left behind because we could not continue with the march. They gave us bread and butter, cider and a few potatoes and told us that we must go. They seemed to expect the Yanks in a couple of days which accounted for their generosity. We walked a little further back into the village from which the march originated. Here, we were met by a civilian on a bicycle, who asked us a thousand questions. I could speak some German and tried to explain, so he took us to a French prison camp. Here, the French were happy to see us and gave us cigarettes. We exchanged greetings and then were taken to the Chief of Police's house. Here the chief was over friendly... offered us hot water for washing, and had his wife prepare some hot soup and coffee for us. We were told that we would be moved to an Itali, a work camp within the city but would not be required to work.

The next morning (our group of four had grown to 17 by now), we were taken to the compound, given hot showers (the first since December), razor blades, clean clothes and plenty to eat...that is plenty of soup, potatoes and a little meat. We were told that all we had to do was to keep our place clean, we were free for the rest of the time. Some of the boys would visit the village, the people there anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Yanks, asking questions like, "Will they shoot us?? What will they do to my children?"

Finally, the night of the 20th of April, the 90th Division came through. What a night !!

A tanker, one Joe Mustretti, of Brockton, Mass., gave me a 5 in 1 ration and bottle of Champagne...I hope you're listening, Joe,... thanks a million.

While in Paris, after liberation, I learned that the remainder of the group were liberated by a task force of the 90th Infantry.

My weight on Liberation Day was 102 lbs. Normally, I weigh 185 lbs. Everyone of us had lost from 40 to 80 lbs.

It's all like a bad dream, but it's all over now...thank God.

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Deceased 10/16/1945