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REMINISCENCES OF THE LABOR CAMP AT GEROLSTEIN GERMANY

I was with Company C, 290th Infantry, 75th Division and was captured on Christmas Eve 1944 at Belle Hale, Belgium, just below Manhay. Our 75th Division was between the 84th Infantry Division and the 82nd Airborne Division as blocking forces against LTC Peiper's drive to the Meuse River in the Battle of the Bulge. LTC Peiper led advanced elements of the German 1st SS Panzer Division, I was captured by the German 2nd SS Panzer Division which was parallel to the 1st Panzer Division but below it.

As I was marched eastward after my capture, each day we were joined by additional POWs. One day we were joined by a US Air Corps officer in a flying suit. We were suspicious of him, thinking that he was a German agent, so no one would talk to him. During one of the rests he tore the electric heating wires from the soles of his flying suit, because the wires were cutting into the soles of his feet. He explained that when he bailed out of his bomber, his boots got ripped off. He must have sensed our suspicion of him, so he broke the ice during the next break by saying "Boy. I'd give my left nut for a Camel!" We then knew that he was a bone-fide American because we could not conceive a German agent using those words! When we got to the Arbeit Kommando (work camp) at Gerolstein, Germany, he was separated from us, and we never saw him again.

I remember many things about Gerolstein. We were housed in a former parts warehouse which had wooden bins 4 or 5 tiers high. Two POWs slept in each bin, and the bins extended on all of the walls of the building. Other POWs slept on the straw-covered dirt floor. We were fed a slice of bread and a bowl of watery soup once a day. We relieved ourselves outside in the woods. and obtained water from a small stream. We were sent out to work at night, usually in groups of 99 EM POWs with an NCO POW and two German guards. We filled in bomb craters on the railroad, dug out cars from collapsed houses, or sawed wood for a German Army field bread bakery.

Just before I got to Gerolstein, a German Sgt named Eisenhower, who was in charge of sending out the work crews, shot and killed an American POW, PFC Edwin Reed, when Reed did not come out of his wall bunk to fall out for night work. Casselman Orr, an ex-POW from the 325th Glider Inf Regt, 82nd Airborne Div, wrote to me that he was there and was trying to explain to Sgt Eisenhower that Reed was sick and had worked the night before, when Sgt Eisenhower suddenly drew his pistol and fired at Reed. Reed bled to death.

Many times I watched that SOB Sgt Eisenhower purposely grind out his cigarette butt in the snow with the heel of his boots in the daytime so that the waiting American POWs could not retrieve anything to smoke. I preferred the other German sergeant, a shorter and stouter man, who was more pleasant to us. He took a liking to me because he thought that my surname was funny, and he laughed every time that he pronounced it. (Schnecken in German means snake, spiral, twist, helix, and there are Danish twisted breakfast rolls which are called Schnecken.) He would sometimes send me to the better work detail sawing wood for the German Army field bread bakery where we could get extra bread to eat, instead of the work detail on the railroad.

But I spent many a night working on the railroad, filling in bomb craters. We managed to use the picks and shovels incorrectly, so that their wooden handles cracked and broke. Soon we had only about 8 to 10 tools for the work detail of 99 EMs and 1 NCO, but the Germans still insisted on sending out the same sized work crews

Once on the railroad detail, a fellow POW gave me his Zippo lighter and asked me to ask one of the German guards to fill it with fluid from a tank car that we had passed on the way to the work site. I warned him that the German guard might simply keep the lighter, but the US POW said that he would take the chance. I approached a guard and pointed to the tank car up the track about 2 mile away, and I asked him to fill up the lighter. That guard actually walked to that tank car, opened its side valve, held the opened lighter in one hand in the fluid, shut the valve, closed the lighter, and then walked back and returned the lighter to me. Another time a German guard, with my help, traded bread to a POW for the POW's silver ID bracelet. The German guard wanted to give a birthday present to someone in his family.

Another time one of the German guards at the railroad work site approached me to tell me that he knew that we POWs were weak and could not work hard. He asked me to tell the other POWs to work diligently when his sergeant or officer came around, because if they criticized him, then he would have to come down on us. Otherwise he did not press us to work hard because of our weakened condition. It was a futile request in a way, because with only about 10 working implements, the other 90 POWs stood around and watched and froze.

One American POW snuck out of the work group on the way to the railroad work site and into a house, which he proceeded to ransack. He found a loaf of bread and jar of some spread. When the work detail passed by early in the morning on the way back to the barracks, he snuck back into the group. During the day at the barracks he then sold for 100 francs military script (\$2.00) a thin slice of bread thinly covered with the spread. He sold about \$200 worth, and he still had about half of the food left. That night while he slept, someone stole the remaining bread and spread that he had saved for himself, and no one would confess.

We had chronic diarrhea (dysentery) at Gerolstein, so often we had to go outside of the barracks building to relieve ourselves in the snow. One day as I passed the barn building behind the barracks, I saw them lead a large Belgian (Clydesdale-sized) horse into the barn. I did not think that was unusual because it was a barn. But when I returned back to the barracks, I saw a rivulet of blood running under the closed barn doors onto the snow-covered ground. Then I realized that the kitchen was in that barn, and that we'd probably have horsemeat in our soup! Later that afternoon I had to go outside again to relieve myself, and when I passed the barn I saw and heard an American M/SGT POW say to the cook that he came for soup for the NCOs and Officer POWs (who were in a room of their own in the barracks building). I then saw that M/Sgt ladle out most of the horsemeat from the soup tureen and into his pail. If I had a gun then I would have shot that M/Sgt, because he was not sacrificing and suffering equally with us EMs. The top NCOs sat on their duffs and ate better while we EMs worked hard and starved. I was ashamed for what that American M/Sgt represented in the US Army.

One day they came around to the barracks and asked for a volunteer who could speak German. I learned early on never to volunteer for any detail in the Army, but my fellow POWs egged me on, because there was extra food promised to the volunteer. I

volunteered, and the German sergeant took me to the quarters of the camp commander, a German Oberst (colonel). He was studying a German book which described the American Civil War of 1861-65, and he proceeded to ask me about slavery and why Great Britain sided with the South in the Civil War. I answered as best as I could, but then he turned to the current war and he asked me why the United States declared war against Germany, since Russia was our common enemy. I explained that when Japan attacked the United States, Germany declared war on the United States in accordance with the Axis Treaty. Our declaration of war against Germany followed the German declaration of war against the United States. He evidently did not like my factual answer because he called for his orderly and ordered him to take me back to the barracks. I did NOT receive any extra ration of food for that volunteer mission.

A group of us were marched away from Gerolstein on or about February 2, 1945. We marched through the town of Mayen to the city of Koblenz on the Rhine River. There we were loaded into boxcars (60 to 80 to a car) so that we could not all sit down, and with a bucket in the corner to relieve ourselves into. That night (February 5, 1945) while we were in the railroad marshalling yards near Koblenz, it suddenly became bright as daylight outside from flares dropped by British Pathfinder bombers. Then the bombs from the following British: bombers started falling and exploding. We frantically tried to claw our way out of those boxcars as they swayed to and fro from the bomb concussions. Although we were not able to get out of those boxcars, miraculously no POW was hurt! We rode in those boxcars across the Rhine River the next day, February 6, 1945, to Stalag XIIA at Limburg, Germany on the Lahn River.

See Stalag XII-A for the rest of his story.



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