

Robert William Chaudoin
423rd Regiment, Company D
106th Infantry Division



Obituary -- Muscatine Journal -- October 6, 1997:

MUSCATINE - Robert William Chaudoin, 79, of 409 W. Fifth St., died Friday, Oct. 3, 1997, at Muscatine General Hospital.

A memorial Mass will be at 10 a.m., Tuesday, at the St. Mathias Catholic church, 215 W. Eighth St. Burial will be at the Muscatine Memorial Park Cemetery.

Visitation is from 4 to 8 p.m. tonight at the Ralph J. Wittich-Riley-Freers Funeral Home. A rosary will be recited by the family at 8 p.m. Memorials may be made to St. Mathias Church.

Mr. Chaudoin was born on Nov. 30, 1917, in Muscatine, the son of Bertram L. and Frances Plessy Chaudoin. He married Kathleen Noll on June 6, 1946, at the St. Mary Catholic Church, in Muscatine.

He was a U. S. Army veteran of World War II.

His membership included - St. Mathias Church, Knights of Columbus, Elks Lodge No. 304, Moose Lodge No. 388, Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, and Prisoners of War, Quad City Chapter.

He retired in 1982, following 30 years of employment at Alcoa.

Survivors include his wife, Kathleen; three daughters, Mrs. Garry (Judy A.) Lee of Muscatine, Mrs. John E. (Mary F.) Wagner of Rockville, Md., and Sheila Chaudoin, of Muscatine; five grandchildren, Mrs. Mark (Sandra) Place of Sumter, S.C., Suzanne Lee, with the Peace Corps in Bulgaria; Mrs. Erik (Victoria) Bertling, of Winter Park, Fla., and Lisa Wagner and Robert Wagner, both of Rockville; one great-granddaughter, Mallory Place of Sumter; and two sisters Betty Dye of LaGrange, Ill., and Jean Fisher of Howell, Mich.

He was preceded in death by his parents, three brothers, three sisters and one grandson."

I also saw on your website that you have a area for articles, diaries etc. I am also including an article I wrote of my fathers' experience during the war. If you want to include that on your site, that would be great. Please feel free to edit it if you do decide to use it.

Sgt. Robert W. Chaudoin, serial number 37111472, entered service on January 3rd, 1942 at the age of 24. Prior to this time he had served in the Civilian Conservation Corp about 1937 through 1939. He was sent to Camp Roberts in California for three weeks basic training where he was promoted to corporal and was made an instructor at the Infantry Replacement Center. In August of 1943, he was transferred to Camp Blanding, in Florida as an instructor at the rank of sergeant. After one month, he was transferred to Camp McCoy in Wisconsin and finally on to Camp Atterbury in Indiana as a member of the 106th Infantry Division of the Army also known as the Golden Lion. He was placed into company D of the 423rd Regiment before going overseas in September, 1944. In England the whole division was split up. Sgt. Chaudoin's company landed at Le Havre, France in October, 1944. By the 1st of December he was on the front line.

Before Bob left for overseas he visited home one more time and stopped to see the Pastor of St. Mathias, Father Hannon. The priest asked him if he had ever gotten baptized and Bob said "No". The priest immediately called in his assistant and told him to take Bob over to the church and get him baptized and confirmed before he left for Europe.

Chaudoin and his company landed at Le Havre via the North Sea or Dover Strait. They traveled on a small ship in rough waters. He became seasick and threw up. Nearing Le Havre, they had to jump overboard into an LST (tank transport) to land on the beach head. After walking through a farmer's field, they set up camp in the late afternoon. They were bivouacked at the farmhouse for two weeks but were told not to go near the farmhouse. At this point, Chaudoin was made a squad leader with eight men under him (one gunner, two assistant gunners, and five ammunition carriers).

After the two weeks of bivouacking, they were transferred on the Red Ball Express to the front lines in Belgium. Before being transferred, the chaplain for the 106th held a Mass, and the soldiers were given absolution. From there, they walked to the front and replaced the Second Division. Once on the front, they were kept busy by digging fox holes and

trenches. Chaudoin replaced a soldier who manned a machine gun. Just as the change occurred, the soldier barely made it to the trench before being shot in the foot. Sgt. Chaudoin manned the gun for a rotation of four hours on and two hours off. The company commander, at the time, was Captain Clark, who was killed from a direct hit.

The Battle of the Bulge was in full swing. During the night of December 18th near St. Vith, Belgium, there was considerable activity and vehicular movement in the German rear areas. More troops were re-enforcing those already attacking St. Vith. After midnight, there was constant patrols and counter-patrols on both sides. Chaudoin recalled that a Lieutenant told him he needed to accompany him back to field headquarters which he did. They returned to their unit only to find all their men had been killed or were wounded and dying. The Lieutenant yelled for him to run, they turned and ran right into a group of German soldiers. The officer told Chaudoin to lay down his gun. As they were lead away by the Germans, he could hear the wounded calling for help and some calling his name. Chaudoin carried these sounds with him for the rest of his life, feeling shame that he wasn't with them when they were over run by the Germans and shame that he couldn't help them when they needed him most. Chaudoin and 20 others were captured and force marched into enemy lines.

Sgt. Chaudoin had slit a hole into the lining of his flak jacket and dropped in his high school graduation ring and two silver dollars that he had carried with him into battle. The Germans never found these items. He also had approximately nine dollars in French currency, which the Germans took. They gave him a receipt for the money which he turned in after the liberation and was refunded its equivalent in American dollars. That was all the money he had until he reached California.

The captives were marched to Prum, Germany about 15 miles from St. Vith where they stayed overnight in a bombed out school house. They were then marched on to Gerolstein the next day and arrived in the late afternoon. There they were finally given a meal which consisted of cheese, crackers and water. They were not fed at all during the first two days of capture.

At Gerolstein which was 30 miles east of the German border the captives were loaded onto train cars called '40 and 8's (cars were large enough to hold 40 horses and 8 men). About 60 men were piled into each train cars. They were forced to sleep almost on top of each other. They were pretty much wall to wall with POW's. It was December 21st or 22nd, 1944. The train took them into Frankfurt where they were forced to stay in the cars while the British air force bombed the railway station on Christmas Eve. Sgt. Chaudoin said he remembers some of the men were becoming claustrophobic and panicked while they were being bombed. They tried to get out of the train cars and run into the station to escape being killed. But the Germans were in the train station and opened fire on anyone trying to get off the train killing many of them.

Sgt. Chaudoin arrived at POW camp Stalag 9B (Bad Orb, Germany) on or about December 26th. He was interrogated by a German officer who was a graduate of the University of Wisconsin. One other German soldier had graduated from the University of Illinois. He was told that the Germans had known when the 106th left the states, when they had arrived in England and when they had been placed on the front lines. They therefore knew who green and untried troops were and that's where they would strike.

They were finally given some more food. Not everyone had mess kits so Sgt. Chaudoin shared his helmet with another soldier and they ate out of it. They couldn't eat all that was given to them because their stomachs had already begun to shrink. Food consisted of watery soup sometimes made of grass, ersatz bread, cheese and a coffee substitute. They weren't given any shaving equipment, so Chaudoin borrowed a scissors and used cold water to trim his beard. After about a month he was transferred to Stalag 9A near Ziegenhain, German.

At Ziegenhain he was given black crusty bread and potato soup to eat. Chaudoin found a piece of metal and tried to hone it into a knife to cut the bread and therefore be able to save it for later, otherwise it just crumbled into nothing. But in trying this, his hand slipped slicing the fingers on his left hand. There was no medic or dispensary at Ziegenhain so the German guards took him into the nearby town where there was a tailor who proceeded to stitch him up. Years later he still bore the scar on his fingers.

Sgt. Chaudoin refused to work for the Germans in the fields and therefore he didn't receive a lot of rations like other prisoners who chose to work on the nearby farms. The prisoners who worked got their Red Cross packages and lots of food. These POW's seemed to have all they wanted to eat including candy and lots of cigarettes which they traded for other privileges. Chaudoin weighed in at 210 pounds when he entered the service. He lost over 60 pounds during his three months imprisonment.

The camp at Ziegenhain was surrounded by rows of barbed fence. The barracks were long with high ceilings. About eighty men were assigned to each barrack which had rows of double bunks to accommodate the prisoners. Sgt. Chaudoin shared a bunk with another prisoner in order to keep warm as they were issued very thin blankets. It was so cold that most of the prisoners suffered from frostbite. There were separated buildings for latrines but no bathing facilities. Prisoners were given one blanket but no change of clothing at all. While in camp Chaudoin suffered from dysentery and malnutrition. One nice sunny day, he prisoners spent the day in the sun leaning against the barracks sometimes playing cards, but mostly listening for news from the underground. He told of one story of just going into the barracks to get out of the cold and his bunk mate (a gunner from his company) was lying in the top bunk. They were talking when a British plane flew over strafing the camp. The guy on the bunk had just gotten down when bullets from the plane came straight through the roof and riddled the bunk this POW had just vacated, splitting the post down the middle to the floor.

The Germans were getting beat up on the Russian front and they knew it was just a matter of time before the Allies pushed further into Germany, so they pulled all their trained soldiers off of POW duty and shifted them to the Russian front. This left mostly old men or non combat troops to guard the POW camp in Ziegenhain. A regular army colonel was assigned as commandant of the camp.

The Germans knew that the Allies were approaching, so they decided to move the prisoners to another camp. The ranking American prisoner, a colonel of the 101st airborne, quietly told the other POW's to "drop like flies and to tell the Germans they were too weak to be moved". Some of the POW's jumped into the latrine trenches to escape being put on transports. The elderly guards knew it was useless to try and force the prisoners to evacuate the camp. They threw down their rifles and gave up to the advancing Americans. Sgt. Chaudoin was very weak but was able to walk to the

evacuation truck that was to take them to freedom. He was liberated on March 26th, 1945.

After liberation by the American 1st, he was taken to a place called Camp Lucky Strike and offered a big meal of chicken, potatoes and gravy and all kinds of food, but he was unable to eat much of it because his stomach had shrunk so much. The POW's were then taken into Giessen, Germany and then flown into Le Havre, France and put on board a liberty ship after being issued new clothing. The ship took the POW's into South Hampton, England. He was disinfected and given powdered eggs to eat. On the way back to the United States, crossing the Atlantic and about a week into the journey they heard that President Roosevelt had died. They disembarked in New York and were taken to a Red Cross area. They were put in debriefing and asked about next of kin and where they wanted their final destination area to be. Chaudoin decided on going to California to see his sister in Los Angeles. He was immediately put on a train that took him to his sister.

After returning to the states, Chaudoin was issued a sixty day rehabilitation furlough which he spent with family. At the end of the furlough, he returned to Santa Barbara, California, and then sent onto Ft. Warren, Wyoming where he was stationed and discharged from the army one month later. Chaudoin had wanted to stay in the army but was given no choice in the matter and was honorably discharged. Chaudoin took this to mean he had failed in his mission by being captured and was fit for continued duty in the Army. He was given \$99 for being a POW, that was all the pay he received for service to his country and suffering the indignities while being a POW.

For the most part Sgt. Chaudoin felt he was treated in a fairly decent and fair manner by the Germans. But he also spoke little about his experiences until a few years before his death. Whenever asked he would just get a vacant look on his face and stare off into space. He joined a local group of American Prisoners of War in Davenport, Iowa receiving monthly issues of a newsletter. There were many times while reading articles in the newsletter he would just start crying and all he would say is that it triggered a response in him. He suffered for many years by believing he had not protected the young recruits under his charge. Many nights he would thrash around in bed as if he was fighting someone and then he would yell out. It wasn't until 1994 when being honored during the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge and his participation in World War II that he told some of the stories related here. He truly felt he had failed his squad by not being there when they were attacked. He carried these feelings with him for close to 50 years. It was only at this party when he heard others tell their stories from World War II veterans and what they went through and heard them say he was not responsible for the deaths of his squad members that he finally made peace with himself.

For his service during World War II, Chaudoin received the following medals and ribbons:

Marksmanship Ribbon

30 caliber water cooled machine gun

81mm Mortar

Good Conduct

American Campaign Medal

European, Africa, Middle Eastern Campaign Medal

Bronze Star for meritorious service

World War II Medal

Prisoner of War Medal

Source: daughter Sheila Chaudoin, 6/2009



Page last revised

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