Ervin Szpek

Company I, 3rd Battalion
423rd Regiment
106th Infantry Division

ERVIN SZPEK
Milwaukee Wisconsin 53215

MY SERVICE MEMOIRS: from The Battle of the Bulge to a P.O.W. in Dresden as told to Ervin E. Szpek Jr.

Ervin Szpek 36-836-922
Corporal
Army of the United States of America
Company I, 3rd Battalion, 423rd Regiment,
106th Infantry Division - The Golden Lions
BAR Gunner, First Platoon, 1st Squad
Former Prisoner of War

Member

106th Infantry Division Association
American Ex Prisoner of War
Veterans of Foreign Wars
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Dedicated to the Golden Lions of the 106th Infantry Division
and to my fellow ex-POWs of Slaughterhouse 5

Acknowledgments

To the following fellow prisoners at **Slaughterhouse 5**:

A special thanks to my friend, James M. Mills, who served with me in the same platoon. Although we were in different squads we shared similar experiences from the Bulge to Dresden. After meeting Jim at 106th reunions he was gracious to give me a copy of his service diary. His well-organized diary and knack for details served as an invaluable guide. It is worth noting that Tim's diary was quoted extensively in the book "A Blood-Dimmed Tide" by Gerald Astor.

To Gordon B. Zicker who saved one of my cartoons that I drew while at "Slaughterhouse 5." 1 thank him for keeping it all these years and for sending me a copy of it for my story.

To Norwood Frye and George Bloomingburg for sharing memories.

To Mrs. Joseph Topicz for sharing her husband's experiences, due to his lengthy illness. Our thoughts and prayers are with you, Joseph.

To Frank Idzikowski, my son-in-law and Vietnam veteran for his assistance in providing a historical overview, which follows my memoirs. After almost 50 years some of the events tend to appear a bit fuzzy. Frank's knowledge of World War II military history helped to organize my thoughts and the events. His suggestions of "A Blood-Dimmed Tide", "Death of a Division" by Charles Whiting, "A Time For Trumpets" by Charles MacDonald, "Dresden 1945: The Devil's

Tinderbox" by Alexander McKee and "The Destruction of Dresden" by David Irving that gave perspective to my experiences.

"The Cub of the Golden Lion - Passes in Review" by the 106th Infantry Division Association is an excellent collection of individual and unit stories as well as those from a German point of view on the history of the 106th in the Bulge.

Many thanks to my son, Ervin E. Szpek, Jr., for the hours spent researching details, organizing my recollections, putting them down on paper, contacting fellow soldiers and for his persistence in prodding me to remember what I had forgotten, or at times, chose not to remember.

Service Background:

Ervin Szpek
Army Serial Number 36-836-922
18 years old 8/17/25
Home address at time of induction: 315 Burnham Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
Entered active service: 12/20/43 -- 11/10/45
Took basic training of 17 weeks at Camp Landing, Florida: 12/20/43 -- 4/15/44

Assigned April 15, 1944 to the 106th Infantry Division, 423rd Regiment, Company I, 1st Platoon, 1st Squad that was stationed at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. I was assigned as a BAR gunner and trained in M-1 rifle, carbine, .30 caliber machine gun, .45 caliber pistol, Bangalore Torpedo, flame thrower, plastic explosives, hand and rifle grenades.

Left Camp Atterbury October 9, 1944 for Camp Myles Standish near Boston, Massachusetts, arriving on 10/11/44. On 10/16/44 shipped from New York on the Queen Elizabeth and arrived in Glasgow, Scotland on 10/22/44. Sent to Chelfenham, England on 11/24/44 for advance training and billeted at a race track. It was here while on a 3 day pass that I saw an area hit by V-2 rockets. I returned to camp after only one day. At night the area was under a blackout with nothing to do, especially if you weren't a drinker. On 11/29/44 crossed the gW 1Q_ English Channel on a LST from South Hampton to LeHarve, France. Crossed into Belgium on 12/10/44 spending a night in tents in a mud field during a rainstorm. Later moved up to the front lines in the Ardennes in the area of St. Vith, Belgium.

I. The Battle of the Bulge

Company I of the 423rd Regiment, 106th infantry division was deployed to the front lines where the war seemed to come to a standstill. We were told that we were going to hold a quiet zone and replace troops who had pushed the stubborn Germans into a tough defensive position along the old Siegfried line. On the way to the front I remember passing through a town, perhaps St. Vith, where a seasoned G.I. told us "the war is over - go home." The daily routine became one of guard duty since most of the activity was to take place north and south of us in an attempt to flank the Germans.

The front lines were a natural barrier into Germany. The terrain was some of the roughest in Northern Europe. The lines were about 70 miles long with our division spread thin over 20 of them. The area was a series of small mountain ranges called Eifels (the name for the Celtic goddess of water). The River Our was also a part of the barrier.

I didn't know it at the time but we were on top of the Schnee Eifel (Snow Eifel), a mountain range with an attitude of about 2300 feet. To the east of us was a valley with a mountain range where on the opposite side the Germans were dug in. The area had many winding and narrow roads, streams and fire breaks in the pine woods.

Later I learned the three regiments of the 106th were thinly spread along the Schnee Eifel with dangerous gaps between the units. The 422nd was north of us, ours, the 423rd in the center and the 424th to the south of us. The

gap between us and the 422nd was a road near the German village of Bleialf which ran west into Belgium. These and other gaps proved to be the paths the Germans grabbed quickly in order to get behind us.

The 106th was commanded by Major General Alan Jones, the 423rd Regiment - Colonel Charles C. Cavender, 3rd Battalion - Lieutenant Colonel Earl F. Klink, Company I - Captain Wayne J. Moe with Lt. Collins as company executive officer, the 1st Platoon - 2nd Lt. Blodgett and the 1st Squad - Sgt. Gallager.

The dugouts on the lines were underground and made of logs covered over with dirt. There were bunks and a stove in each. Some had phones for communication although mine didn't. Between the dugouts were chest-high trenches. The troops that we replaced had the area booby trapped with grenades and tin cans strung on wire to pickup German patrols.

From the dugouts we reported enemy movement and artillery fire. I recall one night when there was much noise and lights from equipment moving. This was strange for an area that was supposed to be a quiet zone.

Occasionally there was an exchange of sniper fire, although I was not involved in those incidents. I recall hearing Lt. Blodgett order us not to fire until we "see the whites of their eyes." Patrols were sent out as well, however, I never was a member of one. One patrol led by Lt. Blodgett with Pvt. Mills and others came close to dummy gun placements of the Germans but returned after being spotted and drawing fire.

We obviously were being watched closely. Our mess area was located near a fire break. One day I was with my squad waiting to get into the chow line, when the line stretched into a fire break a German tank on the opposite ridge quickly moved into a fire break as well and opened fire. It made a mess of our mess. Thereafter we were careful about open areas.

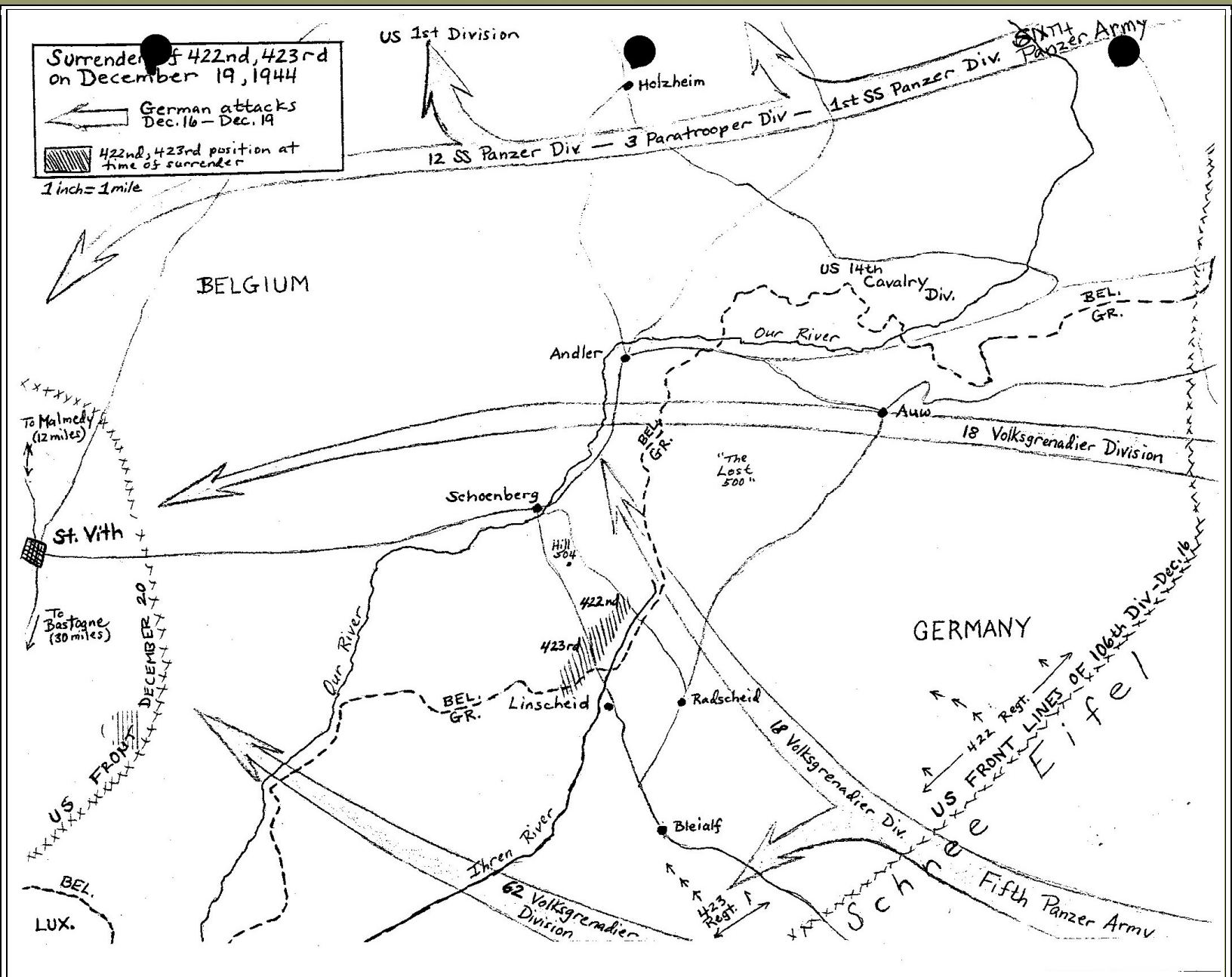
From our position we could see V-1 missiles launched overhead. They seemed to travel slow and low. I could even read the letters on them. They made an odd sputtering sound like an old Ford in desperate need of a tune-up.

On December 16, 1944 at 5: 30 a.m. I awoke to a deafening artillery barrage. The noise of the "Scream'n Meemies" was a frightening shrill. The morning darkness was broken by the bursts of flares. We were told to stay put in our dugouts and prepare for an attack on our right flank. In the distance, especially to the south where the 424th held, the artillery fire seemed to go on the longest.

In the afternoon our rear mortar squad came under attack by a German fighter but was shot down by a British Spitfire. I did not witness this but did see a USAAF P-38 or P-47 shoot down a German ME 109.

Word from a patrol made it apparent that the 424th was pulling back - leaving our right flank open. We were to hold our lines and wait for reinforcements as the first day ended. The next day was more of the same. We waited for the Germans to come across the valley yet we could tell from the noise that the fighting was going on behind us.

In the morning on December 18th we were brought together and told that we would have to pull back (I assume to the area of the CP at St. Vith) and fight our way out. Our instructions were to take only what was needed so that we could travel quickly. I had my BAR, ammo and K-rations, leaving behind my overcoat and duffel bag on a common pile.



As we headed down we started to see the effects of the German barrage - our rear support of tanks and artillery destroyed. It seemed to me that they knew exactly where everything was.

Word spread that our company had its first casualty. Sammy Pate was shot in the head near a fire break. He was our Physical Instructor.

All day long we seemed to be under fire by the waiting Germans. In the woods it was difficult to know what was going on with the exception of your immediate area. It was also easy to get separated and lost in the confusion. Lost individuals and units joined up with whomever they ran into. The woods were a place of fatal error as I later found out. There was friendly fire by units - mistaken as the Germans. Fortunately, our company was not one of these. .

When we got out of the woods onto the road between Bleialf, Germany and Schoenberg, Belgium we were met by heavy artillery fire from .88 from anti-aircraft guns. Forced back into the woods we were then assaulted with tree bursts - timed explosions above the trees that rained down on us.

We were instructed to dig in as darkness set in around us. I was cold and uncomfortable sleeping in the snow. We were all worried about what the next day would bring.

Our breakfast of K-rations on the morning of December 19th was interrupted by tree bursts. The orders came down for the regiment to take the town of Schoenberg by using the same road we were driven from the previous day. Supposedly a relief column would be working at reaching us from the opposite side of the town. Again we were met by fire at the road. Intense fire could be heard at a distant hill where one of the companies of our battalion was suffering many casualties.

Some of our platoon was already on the road when a German tank came around a bend
followed by soldiers. I was on the edge of the woods when we opened fire. I fired my BAR at it, which like everything else we had, was useless. The tank panned and then fired round after round. One shot tore a chunk away from the hill just below me. Another ripped open the ground under the tree I was behind. Several of us were injured from shrapnel. I got a piece in the hand between two fingers. The tank then opened up with its powerful machine guns. We couldn't stay there. We had nothing to stop them - no bazookas or anti-tank weapons. Back into the woods of Hill 504 we went. At this point I noticed we had men from other units. Everything was a mess. Our platoon had only the ammunition we carried. I have heard in later years that some guys were down to their last rounds.

About 5:00 p.m. we were given orders to destroy our weapons. Most of us were shocked and surprised since our company had taken few casualties. I read later that Lt. Collins, our executive officer, questioned Captain Moe as to whether this was a result of an act of panic. Yet, orders were orders. I broke my BAR against a tree and scattered the ammunition in the snow. Minutes later Germans of the 18th Volksgrenadier Division were among us asking for dead and wounded. (Recently at a reunion I spoke to Lt. Blodgett of our company. He was one of many in the 106th who broke away individually or in groups only to be captured later. He said what angered him more than the capture was that while marching as a prisoner, he ran into his jeep being used by the Germans.)

We were rounded up and marched out. The Germans had plenty of artillery and tanks waiting for us on the roads below Schnee Eifel. The more I saw the more I thought we never had a chance up there. It was all a well-devised trap.

As we joined other prisoners we formed a long column that headed into Germany. Our captors would take whatever they wanted, especially watches, cigarettes, boots and coats. I didn't have any of these and so wasn't bothered. Some of the guys cut up their boots so that they couldn't be used.

That first day as a prisoner ended. We marched until nightfall and slept in a field - no food or water, only snow to eat.

The following day was more of the same. We came across one of our tanks that had been destroyed. Next to it was an ambulance. The soldier on the stretcher was dead, along with two medics who were carrying him. All were missing their socks and shoes. It was quite an ordinary sight to see the Germans with our equipment, from boots to tanks. I was surprised to see how old and beat much of their equipment was. By the end of the war resourcefulness was an art for them.

I saw other frozen casualties and there were rumors that the Germans were executing prisoners. We were worried. (This proved to be true. There were cases of our guys being rounded up and shot. The most publicized was the

Massacre at Malmedy. It was there that 85 out of a group of 120 US prisoners were marched into the woods and executed by the SS. Fortunately some survived and the incident became a prolonged issue of the war crimes.)

During one of the days of marching we passed a launch area for V-1 Buzz Bombs and
saw a Messerschmitt 262 - one of the earliest jets. It was faster than anything I had ever seen.

Again we marched until dark and slept in a barnyard. The following morning we arrived at a rail station and received food for the first time. Our meal was a piece of bread, with sawdust as an ingredient and a bowl of watered down turnip soup although I've been told by Jim Mills that it was Kohlrabi (cabbage), which would be the staple of our diet for months to come.

- Reflections -

It wasn't until after the war that the significance of where I was became apparent. The defeat of the 106th Division was the greatest U.S. defeat in Europe. The surrender was only exceeded by Bataan in the Pacific and during the Civil War. Of the 16,000 green troops in the division 4,000 got out and the rest killed, missing and mostly captured (somewhere between 7,000 - 8,000). Not only were we green troops but the leadership was inexperienced as well. Mistakes, indecision, lack of quick response - spread from the top command down to us. The division was spread too thin over a "Ghost Front," a quiet zone. No one expected the Germans to try an offensive. I read that even Montgomery bet Eisenhower the war would be over by Christmas. The Germans were all too familiar with the rough terrain. They had attacked through the Ardennes successfully before. The worst winter in a quarter of a century didn't help the matter either.

The Belgians in the area acted friendly to us but all along they assisted the Germans. The Germans also wore our uniforms, enabling them to report our positions. Where was our intelligence? I've always been puzzled by this. Ours seemed to be sleeping while the Germans knew everything.

The situation amounted to us being trapped behind German lines without the equipment to break out. We were ordered from the CP to hold our front positions for two days expecting a counterattack of reinforcements and an airdrop of supplies.

This never happened. The 7th Armor Division's attempt to get to us turned into a fight for their own survival. Eventually they remained and defended St. Vith which was itself abandoned. Air support was grounded by bad weather during the critical early days of the offensive. Confusion among the leadership at the CP kept the airdrop grounded as well.

Communication to the two trapped regiments was often broken, when messages did make it through they were delayed and obsolete. Eventually it must have become clear to the commanders of the 422nd and 423rd that they were on there own and would have to break out. Perhaps we should have pulled back sooner, as did the 424th. There has been criticism that the regimental commanders were derelict in duty and surrendered prematurely. Our regimental commander Col. Cavender was even shunned in prison camp. I feel he made the right decision. Many of us were already low on ammunition and had little or nothing that was effective against tanks and artillery. There was no hint of outside help, in fact there was none on the way. Casualties were mounting and the Germans had us in an ideal spot. Cavender did the right thing. Had he continued the losses would certainly have been staggering. I came home and wasn't another marker in a European cemetery. I'm thankful for the tough choice he made.

Some units and individuals from our regiment joined up with other stragglers on another hill nearby. They became known as the "Lost 500" . They too became surrounded and outnumbered by a force well equipped with artillery. The Germans even worked on their minds by hanging loudspeakers on the trees. Through a truce their commander

recognized the slaughter that awaited. Like our commander he gave his men a chance to live. Two days after us they became "Kriegsgefangeners," German for prisoners of war or 'kriegies' as many of us referred to ourselves.

There were instances afterwards where some of the guys from the 106th caught heat from other soldiers because of the unit's surrender. Some, I heard, even removed their Golden Lion unit insignia to avoid future ridicule. All I know is whenever I'm asked who were you with, the response is "you were the guys who were wiped out."

When looking back at the 106th in the Battle of the Bulge we still helped to slow down the offensive. We still were something the Germans had to deal with. Our effort tied up units that could have struck elsewhere and extend the bulge. Perhaps we bought a little time for some of the others.

The 106th wasn't the only division caught in the confusion. Others were overrun and pulled back in an unorganized way. We just had the unfortunate stroke of luck to be spread thin in a quiet area where nothing was supposed to happen.

It's easy to write and criticize if you were never there. I was there, saw what really happened and am lucky and thankful to have survived.

II. Dresden

A train pulled in the rail yard and we were loaded in boxcars for what would become a miserable journey covering 400 miles across Germany and lasting more than a week. The Germans didn't give a damn about us, so we were packed in. This made sleeping nearly impossible. Occasionally we made stops to add and drop off boxcars. At times we were given water and a piece of bread and allowed to relieve ourselves.

I remember Christmas Eve locked in the boxcar on some unknown rail siding. We were singing Christmas carols when air raid sirens blared. Soon everything lit up from bombs exploding from an Allied strike. Most of the bombing appeared to be directed at nearby buildings. Still we felt trapped as the boxcar rocked and was showered with dirt and debris.

A guard ran along the track unlocking boxcars and told us that there was a bomb shelter across the open area adjacent to the tracks. Our group decided to stay put. Later when the raid ended we heard that fifteen of our guys were killed trying to reach the shelter. One screaming in pain asking to be put out of his misery had lost an arm and both legs.

For four or five days we remained in this rail yard, probably waiting for the damage to be repaired. Cars were then switched and we began to move on. The following day the train stopped in the middle of a Kohlrabi field. In the distance stood **Stalag IX-B** at Mulberg. It looked Like a fortress with barbed wire, a buffer area and an outer perimeter also of barbed wire. There were numerous machine gun towers. We slept in the snow outside the Stalag that night.

Upon entering the compound we were instructed to pile our helmets at the gate. We were ordered to strip off our clothes, line up to give our names and serial numbers. I recall one of the British soldiers working this detail. He told us to give him watches and valuables so that the Germans wouldn't get them. I had none to worry about. We were given a shot in the arm, P.O.W. dog tags and a set of used clothing. Some of us got British uniforms. I don't remember mine just that all had diamonds or triangles painted on the back of the jacket and front of the legs. This was the P.Q.W. symbol and probably a good mark for the tower guards to aim at. We were a sorry looking bunch.

Separated into groups we were bunked in barracks with existing P.O.W.s, many of who were there since the beginning of the war. Our group was put in with British prisoners who made up the majority. There were many Russian prisoners

in another compound. Basically they were being starved to death. The Germans had no respect for Russians, considering them subhuman.

We received an enthusiastic welcome. The British shared the little food they had. They were eager for news on the progress of the war since much rumor was floating around since the winter offensive.

Knowing a fair amount of Polish, myself and another who spoke fluently, befriended some Polish P.O.W.s. They shared fruit cake or something of the kind with us.

The Germans allowed us to write a postcard home. We were told to mention our rank, serial number, that we were alive and a personal note. They also instructed us that these would be censored. Any mention of the war would result in the card not being forwarded.

At **Stalag IV-B** we were given daily work duties. Mine was to peel Kohlrabi, some of which I could eat. I recall the British being very organized and resourceful. They remained very military, even down to their walk. I'm certain this played a part in our surviving the strain of prison life. One night they put on a play. I don't know what we watched. Perhaps it was "Cinderella" that Kurt Vonnegut Jr. mentioned in "Slaughterhouse Five" as he, too, spent a short time at IV-B after the Bulge.

After a few days the new P.O.W.s were being sent to other work camps like farms and mines. Recently I spoke to some guys at a reunion who said these places weren't too bad to sit out the war. Unfortunately, I was one of a hundred sent on to nearby Dresden, Germany to work at Kommando 557. At 19 years old, I believe Jim Mills and myself were the youngest of the group.

We lived in a **Slaughterhouse No. 5** later to become known as 'Slaughterhouse Five' by one of our group, the future novelist Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I would have been fortunate to have been kept at IV-B or sent to another camp. Nothing could have prepared us for what would happen to Dresden.

The slaughterhouse was actually two buildings surrounded by high brick walls. Curving behind the complex was the Elbe River. To the front or south were a couple of sports stadiums and the huge Friedrichstadt hospital. I remember the sight of nurses pushing black buggies. We would say "that's the place where they're making babies." We were divided into two groups and housed in the basements of the buildings. Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. spoke German and served as our interpreter.

Dresden had a massive slave labor force and we became part of it. We were divided into a variety of work groups, sizes determined by the job. Some worked at a bakery or a factory that made vitamins for pregnancy or it could have been baby formula, I don't recall. My first job was loading acetylene tanks each day. I never knew what they were using them for or why so many were needed.

Nearby was a Hitler Youth camp of "snotty smart-asses." Our wake up call at daybreak was a cocky little Hitler Youth whom we referred to as 'Junior.' Each morning we would be counted and fed breakfast - a cup of coffee. Jim Mills says it was Ersatz.' It might have tasted like coffee. We worked until dusk and then returned to the slaughterhouse for a typical meal of a piece of bread (rationed out by the gram, 200 grams seems to stick in my mind), a bowl of broth-like soup and a cup of Ersatz. Once in a while there was something different, probably Kohlrabi. We never saw a Red Cross package. All of us were losing weight. We were always hungry.

Our sleeping area had a stove although I can't recall many times we had wood for it. We used straw for mattresses but had nothing else. There was a faucet for water and a drum for a toilet. Often we were sick.

In the evenings there was very little to do. Somehow I had pencils and scrap paper. A lot of the guys would make up menus - an odd way to keep your mind off of hunger. I would draw cartoons, adding a little humor to our bleak situation. I recall one cartoon of the German sergeant in charge of the guards. He spoke English and had a patch over one eye. He was a character right out of a movie. One day he saw the cartoon and actually got a chuckle out of it. Another cartoon depicted our toilet situation - a drum with two wooden slats across the top for the seat. It was crude and stunk up the sleeping area. By now, because of our starvation diet, most of us had developed diarrhea. I guess the cartoon depicted some bathroom humor with one of us sitting on the drum. (To my surprise the cartoon showed up at a recent reunion after almost 50 years. Gordon B. Zicker saved it, hoping to meet the person again who drew it. I signed it for him. He says he is going to give it to a VA post or museum - if they'll accept it.) I never kept any for myself. The guys always grabbed them up - maybe a little something to help get through the days.

The first detail for Jim and some of the others was to clear rubble from apartments and a grocery store damaged by a Christmas bombing directed at the rail lines. This was an omen of things to come.

Dresden was virtually untouched by the war up to this point- an open city. It was called the 'Florence of the Elbe' because of the buildings, bridges and churches in the old town area called the 'Altstadt.' Supposedly nothing of military nature was produced there and it had no military importance except for hospitals and transportation routes. Still, some argued that everything plays a part in the war effort. The city boasted a beautiful zoo, large parks and a famous circus. More than anything Dresden was known for the arts. It was home to renown collections in the many galleries and for centuries a center of music in its rich theatres. And of course there was porcelain that was synonymous with Dresden.

Like the city, I think many of the Germans were untouched by the war since they thought they were still winning. Our guards had little respect for us, often calling us 'Chicago Gangsters.'

One of our greatest dangers was plundering. We were warned that if caught stealing we would be shot. There were signs all over warning the slave labor of the seriousness of the matter. I heard of a time in Jim's work detail where they all came close to being shot because something had disappeared. Still, we always looked for a morsel to grab but with extreme caution.

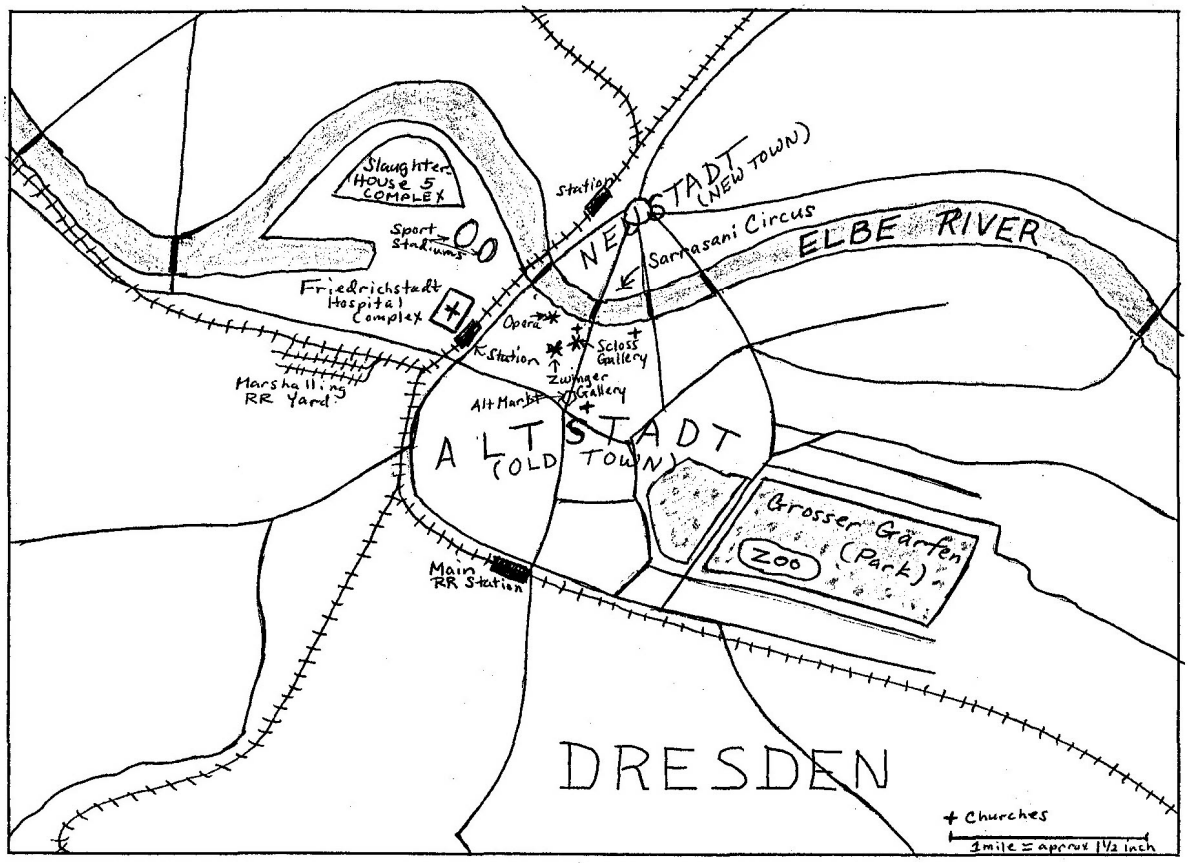
At this time my hand became worse from the shrapnel injury. It was infected and my whole arm would throb at night. I was taken to a doctor who froze my hand with a spray, jabbed where the wound was and drained fluid. It was fine after that.

Often at night air raid sirens would sound as a precaution. However the planes passed over on the way to somewhere else, Berlin perhaps. One day while outside on work detail planes dropped flyers warning the Germans to stop using the rail lines.

On February 13, 1945, the sirens went off for real. It was late, around 10:00 p.m. The guards took us outside of the slaughterhouse and then back inside through another door that led to a subbasement. It was a few levels below the street and constructed as if carved into rock Soon the bombing started. Everything shook, even far below where we were. You could feel as the hits got closer. The blockbusters were the worst. We wondered if one would find us directly.

After the bombing stopped we went outside. The entire city glowed in bright red flames that rose high into the sky. Most of the windows of the slaughterhouse were blown out. We went back to bed but a few hours later the sirens went off again and the bombing resumed, this time it seemed closer. Again we were taken into the shelter. The slaughterhouse took a hit damaging some stairs we used. I remember seeing cracks form in the thick walls of the building. Also hit were the refrigeration rooms that were full of meat. When the bombing stopped the guards brought a farm wagon for us to load the meat. We started to hide some of it in our jackets. The situation got out of control until an officer fired his pistol. We all could have been shot, but you become desperate when starved. When the

wagon was full we pushed it through the burning city. The scene was horrible. Fires were everywhere with relief crews trying to control them. Nothing appeared to have escaped the raid.



We went up a hill to the outskirts of the city and entered a prison camp for British South Africans called a'lager.' The P.O.W.s, like the ones at N-B, were glad to see us and get fresh news. Most were captured in the North African Campaigns, three years in the past. They shared what could be spared. We had to double up in the upper and lower bunk arrangements. There was no bedding - just the bare boards. And the toilet was the familiar drum with slats.

The next morning, February 14,1945 we were marched back into town. The widespread fires were still out of control and would last for a week. Residents were lined along cleared areas of the streets. They watched us pass and some yelled threats. I'm sure they blamed us - I understood why. I remember the stares of the children.

It was hard to recognize where you were - nothing but heaps of rubble and shells of buildings. The dead were everywhere. The scenes of dead babies and children was especially hard to forget. I couldn't believe anyone survived, including ourselves. Yet, I remember seeing people coming out of all of the destruction. The German sergeant with the eye patch lost his parents that night. The bombing was far from over. I guess the intention was to get every last one of us.

Some of us had to go into burning buildings to retrieve possessions for the Germans. I don't recall having to do this or even what I did that morning. We were led past the slaughterhouse to the large park where the zoo was located. It took some severe hits during the night. Most of the animals were killed or badly wounded and had to be shot. I later read of stories of elephants hurled from their moats, a favorite chimp wandering with its hands blown off and a dying polar bear covering up her cubs. Eventually all were shot since there was no food or shelter for them. Those that

escaped died in the winter. We did come across a loose llama that some of us chased, caught and intended to eat until the guards made us release it.

It was around noon when the sky filled with approaching bombers. There was no warning. The sirens were probably destroyed. I saw vapor trails, the bomb doors open and then the raining of incendiaries or fire bombs. They were narrow and about a couple of feet long, wiggling in clusters as they fell. We ran for cover to a gully near the river and could hear the whistling of the bombs all around us. I recall some of us saying to the pilots above, "missed, we're going to have to turn you in." The fire bombs differed from the high explosives in that they didn't explode on contact. They were time-delayed to explode into flames in something like 30-seconds after impact. There were all kinds of stories of the residents throwing them out of houses before they detonated. There were supposed to have been more than a half a million dropped on Dresden - probably one for everyone.

Afterwards we went back on work details. Some went back to the slaughterhouse to pull out meat as the place burned. I was put on the massive and gruesome job of clearing rubble and pulling out bodies. This would go on everyday for the rest of the month of March and part of April. The city had few air raid shelters and so basements were used instead. A whole tunnel system was dug between basements. There was no equipment for this work - just our hands and sometimes a shovel. Bodies and body parts were often just a charred black mass. Those that weren't burned were discolored blue and bloated to twice there size. As the days went by you could tell by the smell that a body was near. We took the bodies to disposal sites where they were stacked in piles and lime put on them. Survivors were often at these sites looking for answers about a loved one. Most could never be identified. There couldn't have been enough survivors.

For a time mass graves were used. Eventually the bodies were disposed of with fuel and flame-throwers since I'm certain there was fear of an epidemic.

I never came upon a survivor when removing rubble.

After a long day of this we washed our hands in lime water (all the months of captivity I don't recall taking a shower - it was too cold anyway). Each night we returned to the lager with the South Africans, although it seems one time we were marched to the outskirts and slept in a barn by an inn. By now the British were no longer friendly. They thought we were careless and unmilitary. We were considered a threat to some of their escape plans, which would get them into hot water with the SS. Realistically, where could they have gone as deep as we were in Germany. Still I think they didn't like the possibility of getting punished along with us for something we did.

The conditions of the lager deteriorated and food was even in shorter supply. We all were sick and had diarrhea. We began to resemble walking skeletons with ribs showing and faces sunken. Each morning we were counted although we would step in and out of lines to foul up the count for the guards. This would waste some time that would have been spent in the rubble piles.

The guards seemed to change their attitude after the bombing. We used to tell some of them that if they didn't behave they'd be sent to the Russians - something they genuinely feared especially since the Russians were closing in on the eastern part of Germany. Still they were rats - pushing us in our weakened condition. I remember a tall, thin guard always yelling "work, work ... get up, get going lousy gangsters" - some in German, some in English.

While cleaning out basements of casualties we would keep an eye out for food. Some found cans and jars of food. Once I found some dried fruit in some burned lockers. The one-eyed sergeant would ask us if we found any jewelry for him. This was the last thing that I cared about. One rubble pile turned up a wine cellar. I had some sweet tasting light beer - I think. That was the first alcohol I had in my life. Some of the guys in our detail got pretty drunk, especially with a starved system. One of the men was really out of it and was taken back in a wheelbarrow shielded by us.

Ironically, after all of this destruction the Germans were still serious about plundering. Word spread that the SS caught a P.O.W. stealing. Jim Mills wrote that it was Michael D. Palaia of our Company I. Two of our men were made to attend the short trial and dig his grave. According to Mills one was Joseph Topicz and the other I read somewhere was Kurt Vonnegut Jr. I had heard Palaia was in his forties. He was shot by a firing squad. The Germans were cruel, yet their prisoners were treated well in the states. Many never wanted to return after the war.

Afterwards we were careful for a while. The guards searched us after work details. On one detail a group of us were cleaning the rubble of a large garage. There were all kinds of machine parts. Others have said it was machine gun parts. The Germans had a hole dug and buried it all with a bulldozer. Why even bother unless they were trying to hide something. Another time I worked on the sandbagging of a building for officers. In one building there was a lab of some sort. There were many cages with the remains of rabbits.

Remnants of vials and test tubes were everywhere, not broken but melted. I don't know what the lab was for, perhaps for the hospital or factory that produced formula/vitamins. Other times I worked clearing roads. Dresden was a key hub of transportation with rail lines and main roads connecting to other large cities.

During one work detail I got some hot oil in my shoe and burned the top of my foot. A doctor at a makeshift hospital put a salve on it and wrapped it in crepe paper. I limped for a few days using one shoe but still had to work. Another time some of us stayed in the hospital suffering from Yellow Jaundice. I was given cod liver oil, I assume because of all the vitamins. In the cot next to me was a P.O.W. who was very sick, thin and weak. This guy could really draw and so we got to know each other. We talked quite a bit. I awoke one morning and noticed he was already stiff He had died early in the night. Some orderlies covered him and took him away. It was pitiful to see him go this way. After the war I was contacted by his parents. They had questions about his death. I didn't know what to tell them or what they needed to hear. It was just sad.

Word went around one day that the city was to be bombed again. I recall seeing two B-17's shot down. Parachutes came out of one but the other crashed with the crew. Later an airman was marched past us. He was young and tough looking with all of the equipment that he wore. Someone said "he won't be going home for supper tonight."

During the bombing of the rail station I hid in a coal bin with others including our guards. One time all of us came under fire by a USAAF fighter while crossing over piles of rubble. We couldn't believe our own guys were trying to get us. Fortunately he missed.

Something that struck me as strange was the walls that seemed to be in the yards of the residential areas. We figured the people were probably not too friendly to each other.

Serb guards began to look after us. I'm sure every German soldier was needed to defend against the Russian advance. The Serbs treated us much better. I think they realized that the war was coming to an end and so wanted to keep on good terms with the Allies. There was a young Serb with a large old gun, like a musket. We joked that he'd probably shoot himself the way he held it.

The Serbs took us to the nearby village of Helensdorf along with the South Africans. We stayed for two weeks in a wooden church with a balcony. In the distance we could hear the rapid fire of Russian Artillery, especially at night. Our nightmare in Dresden ended, but now, like everyone, we feared the uncertainty that came with the advancing Russians.

I checked into some of the facts on the fire-bombing of Dresden. It was staggering and horrifying. It was part of the RAF Bombing Command's strategy known as 'terror bombing' which was designed to break the German's will to fight. Dresden had no military importance other than the hospitals and transportation lines. It had little antiaircraft defenses and fighter support. The bombing of Dresden was the deadliest show of air power in World War II. 1,299 bombers (527 of the USAAF) dropped 2,400 tons of heavy explosives and 1,500 tons of fire bombs.

The initial attack on February 13th was by the RAF from 10:00 to 10:25 p.m. by 244 Lancaster bombers with support by Mosquitoes that marked the area by the stadiums near the slaughterhouse. This directed the master bomber to drop its load further ahead at the old town or Alstadt. The rest followed creating a huge inferno that served as an easy marker for the second attack of 529 Lancasters three hours later on February 14th 1:22 - 1:54 a.m.

The fire lit the sky at 4 miles up where the bombers were. With the right conditions a Tire Storm' developed -- a fire tornado that pulled in everything and ripped buildings apart. Oxygen would be sucked into the storm, and victims, even in underground shelters, would suffocate. The heat was said to reach 3,000 degrees in the old town, enough to melt glass, metals and even some stonework. Thousands would disappear from the flames and others would perish from the concussion of heavy explosives that would collapse lungs and rupture organs.

The third attack was at 12:15 -12:25 p.m. in the daytime on February 14th when the terrified survivors crawled out of the rubble. 317 B-17 Flying Fortresses were aiming for the new town areas escorted by more than a hundred Mustang fighters that came low under the smoke to strafe targets. Many were killed in areas where refugees gathered.

A fourth main attack came on another daytime raid by the USAAF on February 15th. It composed of 211 B-17s supported by a mass of Mustangs. The target was the important bridges that were all intact despite the previous bombings. The city burned for a week. The flames and smoke were visible more than a hundred miles away. Other smaller raids followed in an un-relentless pounding.

Dresden wasn't the only city bombed during these days. Others in the area like Chemnitz and Leipzig were hit but they were military targets.

No one will know the real death count of Dresden. The city had a population of 450,000 that could have been doubled at the time with the influx of refugees from other cities and the slave labor. Every household was required to take in a couple of displaced Germans.

Casualties were estimated from a low of under 20,000 by the British, to 135,000 by the Germans and 250,000 by the Russians as postwar propaganda. It is possible that more perished at Dresden than the atomic drops on Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Most died in the first two night raids by the RAF. No one will know for sure since the fire storm consumed all evidence.

Why was Dresden bombed? The combined Allied air power was supposed to hit eastern strategic cities at the request of the Russians. Some say Churchill wanted the Russians to see the true power of the RAF. Dresden was untouched and therefore a perfect target to prove a point. The terror tactic eventually was stopped. The U.S. and Britain realized that Germany would have to be governed. Destroyed cities would only complicate the rebuilding process.

News of Dresden was suppressed. After the war when I mentioned it, virtually nothing was known. I suspect no one wanted to take the blame and so kept a lid on it. Only years after the war did the truth begin to leak. Interviews with airmen noted that they suspected something strange at the time. At briefings they were misled on Dresden. Some were told it was a heavily defended military site while others were told it held a Panzer division. Many carried guilt after the raids.

To put it simply, it was just cruel revenge. Was it right? I don't know. When has there ever been a war that was kind and thoughtful?

III. In Search Of American Lines

At Helensdorf our Serb guards seemed to ease off. I'm sure the Russians were on their minds. One time they let us go into the nearby fields where we tried picking dandelions to cook for food. It didn't work too well or taste good for that matter.

One day in front of the church we watched a wagon loaded with supplies overturn. Soon refugees swarmed it and everything was gone.

The Serbs had us go south on a road towards Chemnitz that they heard had been taken by the Americans. They would rather surrender to them than fall into the hands of the Russians.

The roads were jammed with everyone- Germans, including soldiers, P.O.W.s from many countries and slave laborers from all over Europe. Everyone wanted to get to Allied lines, especially American lines. When we came to a hilltop and looked down it was a startling sight. It seemed that whole cities were on the move with everything that could be carried. On road sides there were gypsy-like camps. Where would they all eat?

It was easy to get separated in the exodus. Sometimes our guards would disappear and we were on our own. A German sergeant who had overseen our group gave me his P-38 Luger pistol and black leather holster and just left. I threw away the bullets and hid it. One would get separated at times and then later meet up down the road. The group I was with had British P.O.W.s and a Frenchman whom we naturally called "Frenchy.

Sometime later a group of about a dozen Russian planes dove down and strafed the sea of people with rapid fire. We ran and hid along a hillside. I couldn't believe it that now the Russians were trying to get us. Still there were many German soldiers mixed in with the masses. The planes returned and dropped bombs in a wooded area. I could feel the concussion of the explosion since I was in an open area.

When we got closer to Chemnitz the word spread that the city was held by the Russians. We turned back and headed in the direction of Helensdorf. News spread that the war would end at midnight. It was May 7th. That evening we came to a barn and spent the night with other P.O.W.s from our group who straggled in.

The next morning we went into Helensdorf and then headed south to Aussig, Czechoslovakia, now called Usti. There were many planes in the air but no attacks. We didn't know it but indeed the war had ended. It was May 8th, the Russians entered Dresden. The war may have ended but these were still dangerous times. Later a Russian convoy passed. We just stepped aside and they didn't bother us. It's no wonder why everyone feared them. They were a rough looking bunch. Many of the trucks had accordion or concertina players on them.

Towards the end of the day we came to Aussig, Czechoslovakia. I recall going past an area of abandoned German equipment and vehicles. Everything was for the taking. I looked inside one car and saw maps all over the place. The Russians had taken the city. There were white flags of surrender hanging from nearly every building. You didn't know if the Russians would kiss or kill you.

At a French hospital we were told to go to a 5 story building where our P.O.W.s were staying. It was a bombed out paint factory. Some of the steps were missing but we got to the top floor. At night we slept on top of the desks in the offices. The windows were blown out and so we could hear the Russians all night. There was music, drinking and gunfire out and so we could hear the Russians all night. There was music, drinking and gunfire directed at collaborators. I saw a man on a bike shot in the back and left to die in the street. The Russians were rough on the people especially the women. It was a dangerous night. We were hungry but didn't dare to venture out.

The next morning some of the British made arrangements for a train. We packed into a couple of passenger cars. The rest of the train was loaded with refugees. The Russians stopped the train a short while later because of a holdout in Prague. In the distance artillery could be heard pounding away.

We headed on foot again in search of our lines. We were hungry, as always, and I remember hearing that some of the guys got into trouble for stealing chickens at a farm. Around this time a Russian soldier shot a bull for us and paid the owner with an I.O.U. The bull was quickly cut up while it was still alive and shared. My piece was still warm when I got it, I saved it and cooked it later.

Passing through villages we came across a farm taken over by Russians. They made us come inside and sat us down for a big meal of meat and bread until we were full. For some reason blueberry dessert still sticks in my mind. We were given directions to Pilsen, Czechoslovakia. Close to there we came upon a wonderful sight - an American M.P. ! We had traveled by foot over a hundred miles to safety. We told him that we were P.O.W.s. It was hard to tell by our uniforms. We were instructed to catch a nearby train that would take us to our lines. The British were directed to theirs as well.

Shortly we came upon our soldiers and were taken to a building where we got a hot meal. The next day we were on a DC-3 to Camp Lucky Strike in France. We got our first shower, a delousing and some new clothes.

There we slept in tents and were given meal tickets. They had to monitor us so we wouldn't eat ourselves to death. It was intended to bring us gradually back to health. I still was hungry and just never seemed to get full.

At Lucky Strike we were offered a three day pass to Paris. I didn't take it, or care - I just wanted to go home.

I couldn't believe it but I ran into a friend from my neighborhood. He too was a prisoner but had escaped. I still had my German pistol. However, one day some airmen talked me out of it for $3 00. It was a beauty but that was a lot of money. But to this day, I regret selling it.

A few weeks later I got my wish. We were put on the Liberty ship 'Admiral Benson' for the ocean crossing. In the states we went through a debriefing and were given a 21 day furlough to go home with orders to report to Fort Sam Houston, Texas at a rehab center.

It was on a train to Texas when I heard the news that Japan surrendered. The war was over. At Sam Houston we took it easy and gradually got our health back. I hung out with Jim Mills and others. I remember a picture we had taken dressed as cowboys with a third guy. Years later I ran into him playing baseball in Milwaukee. He pitched and beat us pretty bad.

Finally I was sent to Fort Knox, Kentucky. The camp commander assembled everyone in a meeting hall to encourage us to reenlist. I declined, was dismissed and my Army days were over. Some months later, I reconsidered. I was at the enlisting office but had to return home because I forgot some of the papers. My sisters talked me out of it.
I saw more war than I ever could have imagined. There's nothing good about it. After the experience nothing ever seemed as difficult or worrisome.

Ervin Szpek returned to civilian life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he is enjoying retirement after many years at American Motors. Recently, he celebrated his 40th Anniversary with wife Dolores, 6 children and 8 grandchildren with another due shortly from Russia. Ery spends his spare time traveling, taking in the movies, watching minor league games and occasionally doing a little drawing. He looks forward to reunions of the 106th - a time to see old pals again.

"We must have had a lucky rabbit foot all the time and didn't know it.
How else could we have made it out?

Shadows of Slaughterhouse Five chronicles the story of 150 American POWs captured in the Battle of the Bulge and eventually caught up in one of the greatest tragedies of World War II – the firebombing of Dresden. This collection includes oral histories, previously unpublished memoirs, and letters from home and from the front that together tell their compelling story in their own words. From simple hometown beginnings through the awakenings of military life in basic training, from assignment on the supposed "quiet zone" in Belgium to the unexpected Battle of the Bulge, from forced march and entrainment to eventual assignment on work details in Dresden – the "Florence of the Elbe," to the inferno of Dresden on February 13-14, 1945, and the gruesome work details to follow, the individual and collective recollections and reflections of these 150 young men, the men housed in the famed Slaughterhouse Five, reveal a very personal side of war and the struggle for survival. Yet repatriation did not bring closure to this chapter of their young lives for like shadows their memories would forever be part of them.

Today more than sixty years after the firebombing of Dresden, the statue of a steer wishing health and happiness to the citizens of Dresden still stands at the entrance to the public slaughterhouse, a silent witness to the maelstrom that descended upon Dresden and this group of 150 American POWs housed within. Now after more than 60 years of silence for most of these men, Kurt Vonnegut's fellow POWs tell their story of Slaughterhouse Five, in their words as they saw it – dog face young soldiers assured that the war was soon to be over!

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