Carrel Boylan

106th Infantry Division
Stalag IV-B (4-B)

February 27, 2006 - History from a dresser drawer

For five decades, Carrel Boylan kept his weathered World War II diary in a dresser drawer in Vancouver.

He seldom shared the story of his six months as a prisoner of war in Germany from 1944 to 1945.

But, a few months ago, the 85-year-old veteran of the war in France, Belgium and Germany handed the handwritten notebook to his 43-year-old daughter Beky and asked her to transcribe it. As she typed, she discovered a treasure trove of war history she wanted her dad to share.

So Boylan agreed. Blind in one eye and recovering from glaucoma, two detached retinas and painful hammertoes on his left foot, he sat down at his dining room table in Walnut Grove with Beky and Anna, his wife of 57 years, and talked about his POW days.

"I went through the war, and I never shot anybody," said Boylan, the father of 10. "And I never got shot. I had an awful lot of mortar rounds land so close I could see 'em. But I never got hurt. So I came out even."

War made him appreciate others, even the enemy, he said. "Over there, you see these dead people with so much mud and dirt on 'em, you couldn't tell which army they were in, but you always felt sorry. Because if he was German, he had people at home worrying about him, too."

Boylan spent his prison days crammed standing up for days in rail cars, shivering in notorious Stalag IV-B near Dresden, digging up clay in the snow at a brick factory near Wittenberg south of Berlin, and marching back and forth across southern Germany.

It was while the German guards were pushing their prisoners around Germany, avoiding the advancing Russians and Americans that Boylan hit upon the idea of keeping a diary.

It happened as he slept one night in the "Adolph Hitler School." He found a little blank notebook and a fountain pen and carefully penned the story of his prison life, first using ink and then switching to fruit juice when his ink ran out and he could get the juice.

The result is a warm, upbeat saga of longing for more bread, for turnips and more blankets.

His misadventure as a POW had a bad beginning.

"I was in the worst division in the Army," he said, recalling a lieutenant who told him to dump his tent and warm GI overcoat when 4 inches of snow fell in Belgium. "Forget 'em, we're going to war," the lieutenant said.

"I was sorry about that for a long time," he said.

When they were captured in the snow, the Germans gave Boylan a thin Belgian-issue overcoat, but he endured. "We knew the war was almost over," he said, "so we just hung on."

He was a long way from Corvallis, Ore., where as a young third-year Oregon State University engineering student serving in the Reserve Officer's Training Corps, he was called to active duty in 1943. He grew up in Madras and Bend in Central Oregon, with two sisters and a brother. He was the son of Bert C. Boylan, district attorney for Jefferson County and then Deschutes County.

"We were too late for the invasion in Europe by the time we got there," he said, describing training around the United States followed by a sea voyage first to Scotland, then England and France.

He didn't get a chance to fight much once he got to Europe as a private in the infantry. Three days after arriving at the front, and two days of bombardment by German artillery as they lay in the mud, he and his 106th Infantry Division unit were taken prisoner somewhere in Germany on Dec. 19, 1944. They were near Belgium and the Battle of the Bulge, where the rest of the soldiers of the 106th were fighting, and for many of them, dying.

"They wanted us to go in as a sucker outfit to get the Germans to come back," he said. "And they did. We were very successful at that, but all we had was rifles and they had cannons and trench mortars and the whole bit, so all they had to do was stay out of rifle range and shoot at us, so we didn't do too well. We got captured."

The Americans had no choice but die or surrender. So they buried their rifles, threw away their ammunition, and raised their hands.

"Da var is ofer for you," he recalled a German soldier telling him.

"But it wasn't," Boylan said.

The Americans first were marched for several days, 35 miles a day, with only a few biscuits and water. They were packed onto trains, 60 men to a boxcar "with a foot of horse manure on the floor." It was impossible for them all to sit down at once, and they were let out of the cars only once a day.

"Christmas Eve, by the light of a candle, we had church service," he wrote later in his little book. "Read parts of the Bible and sang what songs we knew." Each man was issued one-sixth of a loaf of bread to last two days.

On Christmas Day, "The sky was red from the allied bombings."

The Allies dropped bombs within 100 yards of their boxcar. "Our car rocked about, and crowded up and locked-in, we were plenty scared," he wrote. "Everyone was suddenly

very religious no foolin'!" A couple of GIs were killed nearby. The Germans said the bombs hit the bakery so the prisoners got no bread.

Finally, they arrived at Stalag 4B, between Leipzig and Dresden. The camp held up to 16,000 men, many of whom had been there for years. There were prisoners from all over the world Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, Russia, China, Italy, Denmark, Brazil and the Middle East, he said.

By the time Boylan arrived, late in the war, 4B didn't have supplies to keep prisoners for more than a few days. They were introduced to a thin turnip and potato soup called "skilley," which was the staple of their diet after that. They were moved first to a brickyard where they dug clay until their fingers froze. A German guard cheated Boylan out of $84 he had won shooting craps on the way to war with troops on the great ship Queen Elizabeth.

But the prisoners also got more food: coffee, occasional jam, margarine, beef, pork, cheese and pudding. They received Red Cross parcels with cigarettes that kindly German guards traded for more bread and potatoes.

"There was never any water," he said. "You had coffee and that was it."

Boylan's right heel was rubbed raw and got infected. The only medicine was hot soapy water. An infection spread to his groin where an egg-sized abscess formed. German doctors drained it, and it healed.

By spring, it was clear the war was ending, and the Germans marched the prisoners relentlessly to keep them out of the line of fire.

Finally, the guards marched them to the American lines and let them go, hoping to surrender themselves to the Americans rather than to the more brutal Russian troops. Boylan's weight had dropped from 140 to less than 100 pounds. His hair and beard were long and stringy.

"Then we were just walking down the road, and a GI Jeep came along," he recalled. The Americans fed them "a real GI meal, stew, real coffee and plenty of cigarettes and chocolate bars."

Before long, Boylan's weight rose to 112. The ex-POWs passed through several allied camps. On May 12, they were in Camp Lucky Strike near LeHavre, France, where Boylan personally met Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who "asked us what the hell we were doing, and we said 'nothing.'" He ordered them sent home. In June, they boarded a Liberty Ship for a rough seven-day ride over the ocean in stormy weather. Boylan didn't get seasick and now warmly remembers the glow of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor.

"We were home, and the lights were on. They were off when we left, even on the statue, to protect the city from German bombers," he said.

By the end of 1945, Boylan was at Camp Adair near Corvallis, Ore., issuing shoes to soldiers. Then he was shipped to Fort Meade, Md., where he was released from the Army

as a corporal. He went back to Corvallis and put the war behind him, starting up a career as a civil engineer that lasted 40 years, including 20 years' work for the city of Vancouver.

He and Anna married on Oct. 17, 1948, in Bend, Ore. They have lived in Clark County for 52 years. Anna worked as a registered nurse at several Vancouver nursing facilities.

The Boylans had nine other children besides Beky Rod, Brad, Ralph, Boni, Bruce, Noel, Aaron, Andy and Conrad. They also have 21 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

"We didn't want to have a big family," Boylan joked.

And, no, he didn't spend much time thinking about the war once he came home. Didn't join veterans organizations. Didn't go to war anniversary observances. Just tucked the diary away under his socks. It wasn't that important once the war was over, he found.

"I was busy," he said.

Did you know?

At the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, the green troops of the 106th Infantry Division caught the full force of the German offensive on Dec. 16, 1944.

The casualty list for the 106th Infantry Division: 416 men killed in action, 1,246 wounded and 7,001 missing in action. More than 60 percent of the division's personnel were killed, wounded or captured.

Among the division soldiers listed as missing was a 23-year-old private from Bend, Ore., Carrel Boylan, who became a German prisoner for six months. The retired civil engineer and his wife, Anna, have raised eight sons and two daughters in Vancouver over the past 52 years.

DEAN BAKER, The Columbian - Vancouver,WA,USA