

Paul T. MacElwee

422/C

Stalag IV-B (4-B) & KDO Middledeutsch Steel plant

The Flag and I

I felt as though I had emerged from an abyss into a world of sunshine. At first, I stared unbelievably, and then I snapped to attention and saluted. I held that position for a minute (60 seconds can be an awfully long time on some occasions) as a thrill coursed through my body. My eyes became clouded by tears and I felt an emotion I had never before experienced. I was looking at an American Flag for the first time in half a year.

The surprise of seeing the flag almost stunned me at first, because it was just about the last thing I expected to find in a German prisoner of war camp. A British banner was waving in the breeze also, and it was flanked by flags of Russia and France, But I only had eyes for Old Glory.

The unexpected and happy incident occurred the day some 20,000 other prisoners of war and I at **Stalag IV-B**, near Muhlberg, on the River Elbe, were liberated by Russian forces. Our camp, consisting of American, British, Russian and French "P. W.'s", was freed early one morning, in May, 1945, when Marshall Zhukov's troops swept down from Berlin to the north.

I was searching through the camp for wood to build a fire by which I planned to prepare my liberation day dinner -- fried chicken. A Texas friend and I obtained the chicken from a Russian prisoner who acquired it when he looted a farm near the camp shortly after we were liberated. We were watering at the mouth from the expectation of having our first real meal in many months.

My search carried me toward the main prison gate, through which our triumphant Russian liberators entered only a few hours earlier. As I walked around a corner, the unexpected sight of the American flag, flying over the camp's entrance, drew my attention like a giant electric magnet attracts metal. Later, I learned the Russian troops raised the Allied flags minutes after entering the camp and putting the Nazi guards to flight.

The day was bleak, overcast and dreary as most of our days were in prison camp. It seemed that the sun never shined, and it was as though we lived in a darkened world. Many prisoners were depressed because of this atmosphere, and it was a rare occasion when a "Yank", "Limey", or some other PW smiled.

But the sight of Old Glory flying in the breeze changed all that. Suddenly the sun seemed to shine and the world no longer appeared darkened. The dismal and dingy buildings in which the war prisoners lived lost their ugliness. It no longer mattered that my clothing was tattered and dirty, and my craving for food, brought on by months of starvation, seemed to vanish. The cold and bleak surroundings took on a new glow, and an electrifying sensation ran up and down my spine. I felt warm all over.

I completed my salute, but my eyes did not leave the flag. For five minutes, perhaps 10, I continued to gaze at Old Glory. And when I finally tore myself away to return to my barracks and tell my comrades the happy news, there was a life-giving spring in my stride and a song in my heart. I felt that I had never been so close to home as I was then.



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James D. West
www.IndianaMilitary.org

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