Francis X. "Kelly" Parkinson
Company B, 423rd Regiment
106th Infantry Division

The great escape: WWII veteran talks about life in POW camp

By Wes Franklin
Francis "Kelly" Parkinson points to the barracks he lived in while confined in a German prisoner of war camp during World War II and depicted in the colored drawing above. The drawing was made by a fellow POW at the camp.

Staff Sgt. Francis "Kelly" Parkinson uttered a quiet expletive and figured he was probably a goner.

No one in his battalion of the **106th Infantry Division** was anywhere close to being prepared for the sight that lay before them as they topped a rise that foggy winter morning in rural Belgium. Waiting quietly in the meadow below were row after row of German Panzer tanks, lined up track-to-track and all aiming at Parkinson and the rest of the GIs.

Armed with only their M-1 Garands and a few Browning Automatic Rifles, the U.S. battalion had no artillery or air support.

The Nazis fired up their Panzers and let the Americans have it.

It was tank versus rifle.

"I knew something was very wrong with this picture," Parkinson related many decades later.

Parkinson survived German tanks, internment in a prisoner of war camp and, later, a daring escape to tell his story last week to a gathering of the Ozarks Property Rights Congress, Far Southwest Chapter, at a former one-room schoolhouse in Bethpage, McDonald County.

Today, Parkinson lives in Bella Vista, Ark. But in December 1944 he was straight from the tough streets of Chicago.

Three days before stumbling headlong into the German Panzers, Parkinson and the other men of the 106th Division had been shelled out of their pre-existing bunkers in the Schnee Eifel sector, as the Germans let loose an offensive later known as the Battle of the Bulge.

By the morning of Dec. 19, 1944 Parkinson and his buddies had gone three days without food or water, and the battalion's withdrawal was beginning to turn into one mass mob movement of exhausted men.

Most of the officers and soldiers in the unit lacked field combat experience and so no scouts were sent forward to sound off warnings in case of enemy presence.

"We were green, just as green as grass," Parkinson said.

The battalion was more or less following a wagon rut through the snowy Belgian countryside when it topped a hill and walked square into the waiting enemy tanks.

After a short, desperate show of resistance, Parkinson's entire battalion surrendered.

The American prisoners were marched 21 miles and herded into stock pens where they spent the night hugging the rails of the pens so as not to get sucked into the muck.

Early the next morning, the GIs were prodded into train boxcars for the trip to Germany and confinement in POW camps.

"It was 60 guys with diarrhea locked into one boxcar for six days — wow," Parkinson said.

And they still hadn't eaten anything but snow, the nitrogen in which having caused the loose
bowels.

On the second or third day of the miserable journey, Parkinson heard the hum of an airplane over the rattle of the rails, and it seemed to be diving in closer.

Then bullets came piercing through the wooden sides of the cars. Men started screaming.

The Allied pilot didn't know that the Nazi train was carrying POWs because the cars weren't marked on top like they were supposed to be. He made two passes and strafed the train from front to rear on both sides before knocking out the engine.

In his own boxcar, three back from the coal car, Parkinson had managed not to get hit. Others weren't so lucky.

"About six guys caught it — bingo," he said, snapping his fingers. "But there was nothing we could do for them."

Parkinson finally arrived at what would be his home for the next several months — **Stalag IV-B**, located just east of the Elbe River and about 30 miles north of Dresden, Germany.

Covering 75 acres, the POW camp was one of the largest in Germany during World War II.

When Parkinson arrived with the rest of the 7,500 American prisoners, there were already about 11,000 Allied soldiers of all nationalities confined there.

"If you want to imagine what the Tower of Babel sounded like, that's what it was," Parkinson said. "There were about 10 different languages being spoken there."

He soon got a feel of things.

Though the Germans fed most of the prisoners (excepting the Russians) on a more or less regular basis, by that stage of the war it was mostly thin soup and morsels of bad bread.

After the D-Day invasion the previous June, Red Cross packages only trickled into the camp, as the Allies relentlessly bombed German trains.

To supplement their meager rations, the prisoners horded what aid packages made it through and developed an actual market system. Gold rings and watches and cigarettes were the currency.

"Tobacco was number 1," Parkinson said. "Money didn't mean a thing. You might as well use it as rolling paper."

Even tobacco became scarce after a time and Parkinson, a heavy pipe smoker, began lighting up English tea that came inside the British Red Cross packets.

"Between the garbage the Germans were feeding us and the Red Cross packages, it wasn't too bad," Parkinson said. "Still, if you wanted to lose weight, being there (in the camp) was a good way to do it. We were subsisting, but that was about it."

Parkinson became pals with many of the British prisoners who had been captured the year before in the failed Market Garden campaign, as they played cribbage, a game he happened to enjoy. He also liked their dispositions.

And so he settled into his circumstances. The Germans assembled the prisoners early each morning for a head count and the rest of the day Parkinson spent exercising and playing cribbage with the English troops.

Parkinson and the other POWs got one cold shower a month, during which time they also scrubbed out their uniforms.

No one was sent to the camp infirmary unless they were very bad off. The Russians didn't receive any medical treatment whatsoever.

One day ran into another, every day the same as the one before. The endless boredom could be deceiving, however.

"It was survival, period — there's no other word to use for it," Parkinson stated. "If you let down your guard, you had it, you bought the farm."

As winter turned into spring, the prisoners nightly picked up the BBC on carefully hidden radios. It didn't take a genius to figure out the Allies were winning the war. And getting closer to the camp.

One day in April, Parkinson was playing cribbage with some British soldiers around a table in one of the barracks when he heard a sound he recognized: The buzz of an American fighter plane.

Based on his last experience with "friendly planes," he should have been wary.

The American pilot opened up with his machine guns on the enclosed camp, making no less than three passes and criss-crossing it with deadly fire.

Parkinson's English cribbage partner, sitting directly across from him, caught a bullet square in the middle of his back.

"He never knew what hit him," Parkinson said. "He was just across the table from me. How lucky can you be, huh? After that, everyone hated Americans. And all because some punk kid in an airplane wanted to shoot at something."

Six days later, Parkinson heard a commotion in the courtyard. He stepped out of his barracks and witnessed the French prisoners running down the street shouting "Liberté! Liberté!"

"The 'Frogs' were going nuts," he said.

Someone told him the war in Europe was over. Sure enough, he looked up and there were no Germans in the guard towers. The French and prisoners of other nationalities rushed to one of the camp's gates and tried to break it down. Parkinson eased back into his barracks.

"When the mob is going one way, you just go another and you'll be a lot better off," Parkinson said. "I figured 'let the Frogs get shot.'"

Then three Russian soldiers came riding up bareback on horses. The French were still pushing against the front gate when the Russians dismounted. Parkinson peaked outside just in time to see the Soviets fire their submachine guns over the heads of the prisoners.

"That scared everybody," Parkinson said. "We didn't know what was happening."

A truckload of Russians pulled up and piled out. Entering the camp, the Soviets took armed positions on the guard towers, pointing their machine guns at the POWs below.

"I said wait a minute — they're on our side and the war is over. What the hell is going on here?

Are we at war with Russia?" Parkinson recalled.

The next morning, a long convoy of U.S. army trucks pulled up in front of the camp to transport the American prisoners out. But the Russians wouldn't let them go. The trucks returned empty to the American lines.

Almost a week later, the Soviets trucked the American POWs, Parkinson included, to another confinement camp in Reese, Germany.

"I was getting touchy, getting pretty stir crazy, after spending months inside a prison

camp and now this," Parkinson said. "I'm no hero — I'm Joe Chicken — but this was surviving time."

After several days he noticed that one truck pulled into the camp daily, loaded down with Red Cross packages that were covered by a canvas. When the truck unloaded, the canvas would simply be left in the bed of the truck. Where the truck normally parked, one side of it was always out of sight from the nearest guard tower. Parkinson saw his chance.

The next morning, he took it.

"I told the boys 'adios! Wish me luck!' and I sauntered on down to the truck," he related.

Making sure none of the Russian guards were looking, he put his foot in the stirrup on the side of the truck and hauled himself over into the bed, quickly slipping unnoticed under the tarp. A surprise was waiting.

"There were six other guys under there!" Parkinson laughed. "One of them whispered to me 'you son of a b****, if we get caught I'm going to kill you!"

Parkinson said he was praying as the truck drove toward the gate, asking for a little Divine help in getting the vehicle out of the Soviet camp. Maybe someone was listening. The truck pulled out of the gate without raising any suspicion about its new cargo and eventually rolled right through to the American lines.

Parkinson was now free after more than five months confinement as a prisoner of war under both the Germans and the Russians.

About two weeks later, the rest of the Americans were released by the Soviets, who may have initially thought the U.S. Army would drive right in and invade Russia after defeating Nazi Germany.

How Parkinson finally got back to the States, via some adventurous shenanigans, is another story in itself.

But, for him personally, nothing probably tops the one just told. Because one great escape is enough for any man.

"It was an adventure," Parkinson sighed.

Wes Franklin, Neosho Daily News - Neosho,MO,USA