Carl A. Schrieter

422 INF/HQ
Stalag IV-B (4-B)

AN INTERVIEW BY DAVID VENDITTA Of The Morning Call

THE STORY SO FAR:

Schuylkill County native Carl A. Schroeter, a son of German immigrants, is on a cold march after being taken prisoner during the Battle of the Bulge. He has been rifle-smacked to the ground by a murderous German guard after trying to throw potatoes to starving Jews in a camp.

My father told me before I left, "If you ever get into trouble, use what German you have and talk as loudly as you possibly can." I barked at the guard in German. "Soldier, can you not see that these people are hungry? When was the last time they were fed? These people have nothing?' Very sarcastically I said to him, "Do what you want."

The German told me to get back in line, but I couldn't get up. Two POWs came over and they helped me up and put my arms around their necks so I could walk.

We got to the camp at Luckenwalde, south of Berlin, about five days later. A man came in and said he represented the German Red Cross and asked if we had any complaints. We told him that we were very, very hungry. He said, "There will be a man in here tomorrow, he will take care of you!

The next day, sure enough, a man came in, an ex-paratrooper of the German air force. You will never believe who that man was. He was the German boxer, Max Schmeling. He said in perfect English that there are warehouses full of American Red Cross parcels. "I will see that those parcels start coming to you." I read in a book where trucks came the following week or two weeks later bringing the parcels. I never seen a truck but I seen big wagons coming in.
You know what was in those parcels? There was a 1-pound can of Canadian bacon, a 1-pound can of powdered milk. There was something that the American people did not have at that time, American instant coffee. There was toilet tissue. But the most important thing in there was worth a pot of gold -- five packs of American cigarettes.

When we went out on wood detail - I was only out twice to pick wood in the forest - the forest was about 4 miles away from our camp. There were 14 men. We pushed and pulled that wagon and filled it up with wood.

The guard would look the other way when German civilians came to swap food for our cigarettes - I smoked, but very little. For one pack of cigarettes, you could get two loaves of bread. To satisfy that guard, each of us would give him a cigarette, so he got 14 cigarettes that day. When we came out, we were searched by the forest warden, and we also gave hm a cigarette. He also turned his back if we had some kind of contraband, like a knife.

Half of the lumber in that wagon was given to the officer's compounds, and the other we would divide up between ourselves.

We had no heat in our barracks, and we did not use the wood from the forest for heat. We used it for our kriegie stoves (from Kriegdgefargener, or POW.) We bought planks from the people that came in from the woods - we gave them cigarettes. We used the planks to make the base of the stoves. We made little burners out of the cans we got from the parcels. We burned the wood to heat the burners. We could make soup from our Canadian bacon and our potatoes.

The Germans gave us three little potatoes a day, a piece of bread and a cup of ersatz coffee. Once in a while we got a plate of soup. It was made from horses that were strafed by aircraft.

There were 500 men in my barracks. We had bunk beds. Two of us would sleep side by side in one bunk, sharing the body heat. The Germans did not give blankets to everybody, but I was lucky because I still had my overcoat. It acted like a blanket. The fella in the bunk next to us, if there were some of my overcoat leftover, he'd pull it over to try to get some heat on his own body. We went to bed fully clothed. The only thing I took off was my shoes.

Our barracks had pipes running through the center which had sprays coming out and there was a long trough, and the water ran into the trough that carried it away. When we had wash-up time, the water only came on about 15 seconds, and you had to do all the washing that you possibly could do. After a few minutes the water came on again so we could rinse off. Our toilet facilities were outside. We had a large brick building and we were allowed to go there only in daylight. At night, we had buckets to use. Some fellas used their helmets.

Eight o'clock, the lights went out. Nobody was allowed outside, because the spotlights would come on and they'd run the spotlights between the barracks. When it was just starting to get daylight, we got up and went out for a roll call. Always there were three guards that came out with us, one in the front, one between the second row and the third row and one guard in the rear.

To pass the time, we used to go together and sit down and talk, and we'd make up menus of what we were going to eat when we came home. We talked about our families, My parents were still living, and I had four brothers. But most of the time we had nothing to do but try to stay warm. It was 20 below zero outside and 19.5 below on the inside. We stayed in bed.

We had a secret radio, made in the camp by people who knew how to assemble them, but I never seen it and never knew where it was. A man would come into our barracks every day between 10 o'clock in the morning and 4 in the afternoon. Two men from the group would go off with him and he would give them the news. We knew where all the troops were. We didn't have any maps and stuff but we could follow where the Americans, English and Russians all had been. The messages came either from London or North Africa by radio and we picked them up.

We did not try to escape. We knew we were close to the end of the war.

On the 20th day of April 1945, when we went out for the roll call, we could hear explosions in the distance - artillery shells or rockets. We knew that the end of the war was coming for us. Around 10 or 11 o'clock that morning, all these Germans assembled together and marched out of the camp in military order, made a right-hand turn, went down towards Luckenwalde and toward where the fighting was. Only the older Germans remained.

There was no roll call that night because there were no lights anymore, as the power was knocked out. We all congregated in the middle of the barracks. If there would be a shell hitting the barracks, we'd be protecting each other with ourselves. I don't know of any shells or bullets hitting our camp. An artillery shell or mortar did explode in the southern end of the camp up near the fence. Nobody was hurt from that.

Around 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning there was a great deal of commotion in the camp, so we went out to find out what was going on, and here the Russians came in with trucks and were pulling all the barbed-wire fences down. After that, we were allowed to do what we wanted to. I and another man decided to go over to the camp commander's house, which was about 50 yards away from our camp. We did not boldly walk in because we did not know if he was in there and he would fire at us. But nobody was there.

Laying on the floor of his bedroom was his pistol, his holster, his belt, his armband with a swastika. I took the pistol and the armband - later I found it was an armband that officials of Hitler's Brown Shirts wore when young Nazis were tested for a sports badge.

We came back to the camp and a fella said, "You want to see something spectacular, go into the first Russian barracks." We went over there and we opened the door and I could not believe what I was seeing. It was a scene from the Bible. A sergeant said he was a member of the Russian Orthodox Church in America and he said, "What you are looking at are the Wise Men looking for the birthplace of Jesus Christ."

The Russian prisoners had made that structure out of tin cams they'd taken from the trash - they'd opened the cans up. It was an oblong sheet 20 feet wide that went from one side of the barracks to the other, and it was fastened to the ceiling They had somehow made different colors from discarded clothing and worked it onto the tins - the bark of a tree was brown, the leaves were green, robes were lighter than gold.

Suddenly there was shouting from our barracks. I said, "We're being called," and we went back over.

The Russians were our boss. They started us walking— it was April 22— and I thought we might have been going to Luckenwalde and getting on a train to Greece and put on board a ship to go back home. That was not so. We walked about 12 miles and came to a town called Jueterbog There was a building three stories high, and we were told to go in there. Then we were told "Assemble outside, there's an American officer and an English officer, they want to talk to you." They said, "Get back to Luckenwalde. Tomorrow there will be an American convoy coming to pick you up"

The next day, I got on the first truck and I was lucky. There were a lot of people who didn't get on because there were not enough trucks.

We crossed the Elbe River at Magdeburg and were taken farther west to Hildesheim, a big German air force base now under American control We were examined there, we got new clothing, we were deloused. I was weighed - I'd gone from 161 pounds to 91 pounds. At Luckenwalde, when I'd laid flat in my bunk, I could take my two fingers and press down on my stomach and feel my spinal column.

I told the officers about our being frostbitten and I had a bad infection behind my left ear He said, "We're going to put you on a plane," and we were flown by C-47 to Rouen, France. We were put on a hospital train and moved to Camp Lucky Strike, France, where all the prisoners of war were taken. I was taken to a room where they operated on the back of my ear.
We were put in a tent One day an officer came in and said, "There's a gentleman out here who'd like to say hello to you people." The man came in. It was Gen. Dwight Eisenhower. He stood in front of every one of us. He took my hand and said, "Soldier, how do you feel?" I said, "I feel great I feel like I'm back in civilization with normal people. He said, "I guess I know where you would like to be, Next week, you will be on a ship going home."

Sure enough, I was transferred down to Le Havre, France. We were put on the (liberty ship] Lucretia Moat and pulled in to Cardiff, Wales. to get ballast. From there we sailed home.

At Fort Bragg, N.C, l met man who was a POW at the same Camp l was at. It was November 1945. He said, "Let's go in town." We were on a wide pavement almost in the center of Fayetteville, and coming up was an African-American man. He stepped off the pavement and I said to him, "Why did you get on the street?" He said, "I have to because we are being watched. If I get on that pavement with you, they will find my body hanging from a tree outside of this here town."

"You mean to say that I went to Germany to fight for these people over there and you can't walk up here with me?"

The fellow that was with me was from Easton MD and he said, "Carl, let us go. We will only get this man in trouble. And we left.

Epilogue

The Battle of the Bulge lasted until Jan. 25, 1945. Nazi Germany had caused a bulge to the Allied lines but did not break them. Ultimately, Adolf Hitler's troops were driven back toward their homeland, but at a fearful cost - 19,246 Americans dead and more than 23,000 captured.

Sehroeter served with Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 422nd Infantry Regiment. That unit and another

regiment of the 106th Infantry Division were encircled by the Germans near Schoenberg, Belgium, in the opening days of the battle and forced to surrender.

Schroeter said his family did not know he was alive until he sent them a telegram from Camp Lucky Strike on the French coast in June 1945. They'd only gotten an Army telegram Jan. 12 saying he was missing in action.

On February 16, 1946 Schroeter married his sweetheart, Violet Derwanz, at Calvary Baptist Church in Bethlehem. He had visited her in Bethleham in the fall of 1944, just before he left for Europe. "What are you doing here?"" she said. 'I came to marry you:' She declined, saying they must wait until he returned from the war. Curt and Violet had a daughter, Jennifer Hero, and a son, Glade, and two grand-children. Violet, a knitter for slipcover maker Sure Fit in Bethlehem for many years, died in 2009. "I miss her" Schroeter said. "I wait for the day when Christ will say, 'Carl, you can come home.' and he will reunite us."

A National Guardsman with the 213th Antiaircraft Artillery Gun Battalion in Allentown, Schroeter went on active duty during the Korean war and served at Camp Stewart, Ga., as a SSgt.

He worked in a blast furnace at Bethlehem Steel, became a welder and was a trustee and shop foreman in the union, Steelworkers Local 2598. He retired as a blast furnace supervisor 33 years ago.

He is a member of the Lehigh Valley Chapter, Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, and the Honorary First Defenders, and a participant in the Lehigh Valley Veterans History project, Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge and the Honorary First Defenders, and a participant in the Lehigh Volley Veterans History Project.

"I love my county more than anybody will ever know," said Schroeter, who is 80 and lives in Bethlehem Township.