Cleo C. Thornley

590th Field Artillery Battery C
106th Infantry Division
Stalag IV-B

Daddy"s Story

In 1936 when my dad (Cleo Thornley) was 18 years old he hitchhiked from Soper, Oklahoma to Ardmore, Oklahoma, where he joined the Army. He served until his enlistment was up in 1939. In 1940 he re-enlisted in the Army.

[When the war broke out after his reenlistment he was assigned to a training cadre. At Camp Forrest Tennessee they would train batch after batch of new recruits who then shipped out to theaters of war. In the fall of 1944 he was assigned to an outfit that was shipping out to Europe. It included many 18 year old draftees -- Daddy said they were just kids.]

He was a member of the **106th Division, 590th Field Artillery Battery C** that was stationed in Belgium in December, 1944. Before he was a POW he tells of an incident that occurred.

His company was in Belgium and their battery got caught in a pincers movement. [This was the German offensive that broke the Allied lines. Daddy said the 106th was had just just taken up position in the Ardennes, was out of shape from the voyage to Europe and several weeks spent in England. Inexperienced troops, stretched very thin. He and Al (see below) were reminiscing about 15 years ago and said they thought Mr. Roosevelt sent Hitler a letter and saying "attack here" with a big arrow pointing right at the 106th] In a convoy they tried to get back through the line down in a valley. Alphonse Iannuzzi, one of the soldiers, was driving a weapons carrier with machine guns. German

planes made a pass and started strafing them. The battery commander told everyone to take cover. Everyone got in a ditch except Al. He started shooting at a plane with a 50 caliber machine gun – he hit a plane and it went down. (He told me they moved around for several days trying to get through the Germans and join up with American forces. They covered some ground more than once. One time they were forced to leave some artillery pieces that were stuck in mud. They removed the firing pins. Later on they were back and the ground was frozen so they pulled the guns out and put the pins back in. All this fighting took place in a mountainous forest in the snow. He said the trees would explode when the shells started landing around them. In general, he thought their commanders were lost and confused during this time, perhaps due to poor communication.)

Following are a few of Daddy's memories about his capture and treatment at the hands of the Germans. Here is how it all began.

It was December, 1944, and it was cold and snowy. The American's camp position on the side of a mountain was being shelled with bombs by the German army. The commanding officer of the American troops told everyone to take cover and that they were "on their own." Some of the Americans ran to the top of the mountain. Below they could see the Germans rummaging the camp they had just fled.

Germans soon began shelling the mountaintop where the Americans had fled. The shelling went on for three or four days. After a time, two German soldiers with white flags on their rifles headed up toward the American soldiers and entered their camp. The Germans told them they were completely surrounded with no way out. They could surrender and be treated fairly or they could stay on the mountaintop and the Germans would "blow the mountain top off" and they would be killed. An American major called the non-commissioned officers together and let them make the decision to surrender or stay. Daddy was one of those men. All who wanted to surrender were told to raise their hands – all hands were raised. [I remember Daddy saying this major had his shoulder all shot up and, for himself, the major would have preferred to fight to the death.]

The prisoners were told to lay down their rifles and go down the mountain where they were lined up and searched as they stood in the snow. They were put in trucks and sent to the railroad where they were put in cattle cars. No food or water was given to them for five days and nights. It was very cold, but the cars had hay in them that the prisoners used to stay warm. When the train stopped the Americans would sneak out of the cattle cars and get a handful of snow to quench their thirst.

They traveled a distance on the train and then U.S. bombs (planes) began strafing it. On one occasion the man lying between Daddy and Alphonse was hit – the shells exploded his head. The Germans made Daddy and Alphonse carry the dead man from the train. Guards made the prisoners get out of the train and form the words P O W with their bodies in the snow. When the American pilots saw this, they tipped their wings and left the train alone. The prisoners traveled in the boxcars five days and nights. [A few men took their boots off on the train -- a mistake because they often couldn't get their feet back into the boots.]

After unloading from the train the prisoners were sent to a prison camp about 13 miles from the Russian front. [He sent my aunt a Red Cross postcard from **Stalag IV B**, but said they were actually in the camp for just a few days.] They could hear the Russians

shelling the enemy. The prisoners were given orders to get in a column and march. There were 4 to 5 prisoners across as they went down the road. Later this march was referred to as the "Death March." [See The Horror of the German Death March.] About 1,500 men started out, but only 400-500 finished it. Following are some things Daddy remembers about that march.

They walked all day and bedded down at night on German farms. The farmers lived close together with their fields out away from their villages. The prisoners would stay in barns. Sometimes they stayed in the same place up to two days. There were no regularly scheduled meals – they were fed when food was available. Mostly they had turnip soup, split pea soup, and boiled potatoes. One time a package of honey that had turned to sugar was given to them. The sergeant only let them have a little at a time because he was afraid it would make them sick if they ate too much.

[The Germans told them not to drink from streams (to avoid disease) and at least once shot and killed a man who did so. They all lost weight and strength. Daddy and two other guys escaped at least once. One of the other escapees spoke German and they hoped to make it to the American lines. They were captured by farmers with pitchforks a few days later -- trying to steal a chicken -- and put in a cage in the village. The village kids gave them onions to eat and he said they were glad to get them and sat there in the cage eating onions with tears streaming down their faces. He always said he didn't blame the German people for this because they didn't have much to eat either by then. They ended up with a bunch of French POWs who were being given more to eat than the Americans were, but in a few days they met up with their old outfit and fell back in with their friends. One time they stopped near a hilltop and a couple of guys decided to slip out of sight over the hill. They said it was just a short way and they could run over the hill before the guards saw them. Al said he didn't believe they could run and, of course they no longer had the strength to do more than walk. Nevertheless, those two started walking away. The German guards called for them to stop but they kept walking. They called again and then shot them.]

Once when they were marching Alphonse broke out of the line to get a turnip from a pile of turnips. A guard saw him and started punching him in the belly with his rifle barrel and told him to get back in line. Alphonse took the gun from the guard and was going to shoot him. Daddy got out of line and told Alphonse to put the gun down and get back in line or the Germans would kill him. The guard started yelling for help and other guards came running. Daddy got Alphonse back in line where other prisoners moved him to the middle and back of the line. The German guards looked for Alphonse but couldn't find him. Everything calmed down and the march continued.

One night Daddy and one of his buddies, Eddie Nelson, slept in a pigpen loading chute. Daddy told Eddie that one day he wanted to tell his grandchildren about sleeping there. The farmers fed their pigs boiled, chunked potatoes. The prisoners would clean out the grinders and eat what they could find left over – many times eating soured potatoes. They grabbed turnips from the field whenever they could as they marched along.

Ten days before they were liberated Eddie said he wasn't going to march anymore. Daddy and some others tried to get Eddie to come with them, but he was weak and sick. His friends had already been carrying him. They told him that he would be killed and never see his family or home again, but they couldn't get Eddie to change his

mind. They left him in a bombed out brick factory and marched out. Daddy was certain the Germans would kill Eddie.

One night they were marched to an old barn. The next morning when they awoke there were no guards around them. The prisoners sat for a while not knowing exactly what to do. [Al said he didn't know what happened to the guards, but he was pretty sure POWs killed some of the guard dogs who had helped make their lives a living hell.] They heard the sound of American planes overhead shelling German strongholds near them. They stepped out to see a Jeep coming up the road with an American lieutenant and a driver. The lieutenant told the prisoners to stay where they were, and a truck would soon pick them up. The "Death March" was over.

Soon trucks took the prisoners to a camp where the Red Cross helped them. On their liberation day Daddy said the first news he heard was that a killer tornado had hit Antlers, Oklahoma (his hometown) and 80 people had been killed. The other news he heard was that Franklin D. Roosevelt had died of a heart attack that day. It was Friday, April 13, 1945.

All covered with lice, the prisoners were told to strip off their clothes and run through a chemical that was sprayed on them – afterward they were given new clothes. [While marching across Germany, Daddy said they would take any opportunity to pick lice out of each other's clothes and hair. Said they would hide in linings and seams and were just awful.] Daddy and one of his friends decided to run through the spray again because they still had lice. The guard saw them, but they told him they still had lice. So, they took off their new clothes (which were then thrown away) and ran through the spray again. [As I heard it, they went through the lice tent 4 or 5 times before someone convinced them that they really were lice free.] During his time as a prisoner Daddy's weight dropped from 165 pounds to 111 pounds – both of his feet had been frostbitten.

Daddy was flown to France where he stayed for two or three weeks. He was shipped back to the States on the USS George Washington. It took 14 days to get home (it only took 7 days on ship when he was sent over). Interestingly, this ship had been captured from Germany in WWI and refurbished to be a U. S. troop ship.

Upon arrival Daddy was sent to Ft. Smith, Arkansas for a while. He then had a 60 or 90 day furlough with his family in Muleshoe, Texas. He reported back to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for reassignment after furlough where he stayed two or three weeks. Later he was given orders to go to El Paso where he was placed in charge of German prisoners. How ironic! [I asked him if he was tempted to treat those POWs badly. He said he didn't much like that job, but he knew his duty and treated them the way he was expected to. He made the point that they were well trained and knew what was expected of them and did it.]

The former POW's were told not to mention anything about what they had experienced at the hands of the Germans to anyone – not even family members. Why? Daddy does not know, but thinks perhaps the government did not want the American public to know how the prisoners had been treated. Whatever the reason, Daddy followed orders. My parents had been married several years before my Mother knew he had been a prisoner of war. Because they did not receive counseling and were told not to talk about their

experiences many of these veterans experienced great difficulty in trying to resume a normal life.

The end.

Difficulties notwithstanding, an incredible number of these men did go on to lead very successful lives, raising families and becoming productive citizens. Daddy was one of them. So was Al Iannuzzi. So was Ed Nelson, as it turned out. In the early nineties Daddy found out that Ed was alive and living in California. The guards had just left him in the brick factory and he had been found and liberated earlier than the rest of them.

Daddy raised 2 daughters, spoiled his two grandchildren in the best possible way, and lived long enough to enjoy three great-grandchildren. The last couple of years were not easy for him as he struggled to overcome the effects of age and injury. He spent three of the last 6 weeks in the hospital – in three separate hospitalizations – and was sometimes understandably confused as to where he was and even when it was. Sometimes he was driving a Buick or eying a Cadillac, pulling in at a truck stop to buy a dollar's worth of gas; there were afternoons when he was fishing in Oklahoma or going to visit his fishing buddies or hunting pals; he was always concerned about my Mother's whereabouts and sometimes talked to his brothers; but mercifully, as far as I could tell, he was never back in Belgium and Germany reliving the hell he endured in the winter of 1944-45.

He was an outstanding man, a good citizen, a great father. I will always love him and miss him, and am deeply grateful for the times (good and bad) we shared and all the things he taught me, one of which was how to drive a nail. "Hit it like you live" he would say. "Hit it like you live.*" Live hard, work hard, play hard. Whatever you do in life, do it like you live -- hard. That's my philosophy, one I got from my Daddy.

Source: http://www.leftinalabama.com/diary/4164/a-good-life-lived-hard