COMBAT AND POW EXPERIENCES OF

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introduction

Before my first wife, Nancy, died, she insisted that I assemble all my army, college, and Boy Scout awards and medals and frame them for our kids and grandkids. When I finally got around to doing that, it was apparent that the project was incomplete without the story to go with it. After thinking about it for 10 years or so and after retiring, I finally wrote a first draft in 1994. My memories of events, times and places had failed by then so I went back to material I had saved from *1945* when I got home from Europe.

I was given a 60-day leave when I returned home from WWII, which was spent mostly in talking to other veterans who had also returned home. The editor of the local paper, John McGaughey, a WWI Veteran, hung out with us and listened to our experiences. We weren't aware at the time, but he went back to his office everyday and wrote about what he had heard us telling each other regarding the war. A month or so later, he asked each of us to come by his office to read what he had written about us. I was amazed at how accurately he had recorded our stories and I made very few corrections to what he had written about me.

I had carried a small shirt pocket notepad in which I kept a calendar of important dates and names of places, people, and addresses. I still have that notepad along with the Albany News article, a long letter I wrote to my brother Gus, relating some of my personal experiences, plus numerous books and magazine articles. With these items, and keeping in touch with at least 15 to 20 former members of various army and veterans organizations, it has allowed me to write what I believe is an accurate account of my \VWII experiences. It has been read and checked by eight or nine of my former platoon members and all have said they agree with what I have written. A former classmate form Albany, Robert W. Wylie, who became head of the English Department of Amarillo College, read it and made numerous suggestions for grammatical and readability improvements for which I am very grateful. I owe a huge debt to my three daughters, Becky, Betsy and Lee, for patiently typing and retyping this entire story many times.

I have added a postscript to tell about a 2500-mile, two week return trip to Germany, France, and Belgium, in May, 1999. This trip took us back over most of the territory we traveled in 1944-1945. Two maps are included: the first covers our combat area before and during the Battle of the Bulge; the second shows locations of POW camps and the general routes we followed between combat, capture, and travel by rail and forced marches to my point of escape.

COMBAT AND POW EXPERIENCES

I graduated as a Second Lieutenant (2nd Lt.) from the Infantry Officers Candidate School (OCS) at Ft. Benning, GA., June 20, 1944, less than 3 weeks past my 20th birthday and reported to the 106th Division at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. There I was assigned to Company A, (Co. A), 423rd Infantry, under the command of Captain Donald W. Naumann. I was placed in charge of the third platoon for about one month and then moved to the first platoon which I commanded until the time of my capture Dec. 19,

1944, during the Battle of the Bulge in Germany. I trained my platoon for combat and selected and promoted four of the eight Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) in the platoon. I was proud of the entire platoon and believe that we acquitted our short combat life with honor, courage, enthusiasm, and numerous acts of bravery.

Our regiment departed from New York City on October 17, 1944, aboard the Queen Elizabeth and landed in Glasgow, Scotland, five days later. My platoon was chosen to stay with and act as guards on the Queen Elizabeth for a week while many, many tons of equipment, war material, and food (the number of beef and pork carcasses alone looked like enough meat to feed an army for months) were off-loaded. Seeing all the food aboard the ship caused a lot of comments from my men because most had complained about the quantity and quality of the food they had been served. Meals were provided only twice per day by the British crew on our Atlantic crossing. Also, there were a lot of gripes about crowded conditions on the ship. The enlisted men were double loaded, meaning that there was one narrow and closely spaced bunk for every two men, so the men had to sleep in shifts; one slept while the other had to be above decks. I and fourteen other 2nd Lts. shared one of the largest staterooms on the ship. It had a private bath room with a bidet, a new word for my vocabulary.

During our week of guard duty we were “restricted to the barracks”, barracks being an old school gym with cots to sleep on and almost nothing else to do but sleep during off-duty hours. This was irksome because we missed an opportunity to see Glasgow, which I presume is a great old city.

We were glad when the unloading guard duty was over but disappointed again when, at the end of a work day, we were driven to a railroad depot and loaded on a train. We then traveled south across Scotland and most of England to an old English manor, or castle. The castle, called Stow on the Wold, is a short distance from Cheltenham, a small city near the coastline about 100 miles generally west of London. We had all hoped to be able to see a lot of the country along the way, but almost the entire trip was after dark, so we saw almost nothing. I guess we weren’t there as tourists! But we did see a lot of the countryside around Cheltenham, because for five weeks we did practically nothing but hike 15-20 miles almost every other day. During that time, we were issued combat boots and had to break them in on the long marches. I had a platoon with many blisters and sore feet!

When we arrived at Stow on the Wold, I found that all 1St Lts. and higher had been assigned to rooms in the castle. However, the 2nd Lts. and all enlisted men were assigned to Quonset type steel buildings with a small coal burning stove in the middle and a small bathroom at one end. About 10 or 12 of us occupied each building. It didn’t take long for us 2nd Lts. to figure out that we had been assigned almost all the responsible jobs in the camp: training, officers of the day, officers of the guard, supply officer, mess officer, duty officers, and such. The other officers were staying indoors out of the cold rain and sleet, and we were doing all the work.

For the first couple of weeks, everyone was restricted to the post and we sat around wondering why that was necessary. Another 2nd. Lt., Don Houseman, from Dallas, and I decided we wanted to see London on the coming weekend, so we did some swapping of duties with some of our 2nd. Lt. friends. On Friday afternoon, we walked past the gate guards, saluted the officer in charge (another 2nd. Lt.) and walked a few blocks to the highway to London, hung out our thumbs and caught a ride, and arrived in London before dark. We found and checked in to the closest Red Cross lodging to Piccadilly Circus

and then set out to see London. I think we saw it all before late Sunday in time to catch a train back to Cheltenham and Stow on the Wold. We saw Big Ben, Parliament, Westminster Abbey, Tower of London, crown jewels, Buckingham Palace, London Bridge, and St. Paul's Cathedral with its big unexploded bomb that had been dropped by the German Air Force a long time before (the British considered it a miracle that it had penetrated at least four floors without detonating).

We attended a church service in the basement of St. Paul's on Sunday morning and heard an air raid siren. All *25-5* 0 people attending the service promptly dropped to the floor and hid under pews. Don and I looked at each other and wondered what to do since we didn't hear any planes flying over. We didn't wait long. A tremendous blast shook the building. We found out later that it was a V-2 rocket the Germans had launched with what I think was a 2000 pound bomb, and it landed just a few blocks away from us.

After lunch on Sunday, we saw a first class theater play, "Arsenic and Old Lace," which included a tea during intermission. We were on the train for Cheltenham on schedule and I'm sure we were never missed while we were AWOL. (I hope the Statue of Limitations on AWOLs expired years ago!)

Among all the extra duties I was assigned were battalion mess officer and training officer. I actually enjoyed being mess officer and knowing the cooks. I didn't mind the work and it let me get to know a lot of other officers, NCOs, and men in our 1st Battalion. All the experiences seemed to help. I was really flattered when Capt. Naumann told me as we crossed the English Channel that he had recommended me for promotion to 1st Lt., even though our regimental commander, Col. C.C. Cavender had turned it down because of insufficient time in grade (minimum of six months; I had about five months).

We crossed the English Channel (a very rough trip with lots of sea sickness) and landed at Le Harve, France, on December 1. We moved inland by trucks and camped out in pup tents for a week until the rest of the division arrived, then the "Red Ball Express" drove us about 250 miles across France, December 8-10, to near the front lines.

The week in France was miserable, cold and wet, and our meals were cold C- and K-rations; we were all elated when our kitchen trucks finally caught up with us and fed us a hot pancake and eggs breakfast just before we loaded on trucks for our trip to the front lines and combat. Our mess sergeant, Staff Sergeant (S/Sgt.) Minkowitz, and his capable crew of cooks had never looked better to me!

I recall France as being a dreary place with the ruins of recent battles all along the route. But I didn't see any rebuilding activities. Everyone waved, smiled, and held out their hands; all seemed to be waiting for help.

Our "Red Ball Express" was made up of 6X6, 2 1/2 ton trucks with wooden folding benches along each side of a truck bed which was covered with a canvas shell to protect the troops from weather. There was little protection from the cold, and it was surprising to me that we didn't have a truck load of frozen hands and feet during the trip. But I developed another problem: as we approached our destination, my driver heard artillery explosions in the distance and decided he didn't want to go any farther. I finally convinced him that he was either going to drive us to our destination with the rest of the convoy, or else he was going to be left and I'd drive the rest of the way while he'd have to walk. I was determined that he was not going to make us walk the last five or ten miles!

On December 10, each organization's leaders were met by the corresponding leaders from the 2nd Division. Thus, I met with the platoon leader of the 1st Platoon of Co. A of the 38th Infantry Regiment that our 423rd Infantry Regiment was replacing. He gave me a personal tour of his platoon position and described the fields of fire, anti-personnel minefield locations and each of the bunkers and fox holes my platoon would take over. I got the small concrete pill box he had occupied and he was good enough to leave me a kerosene lantern so I'd be able to read and censor my platoon's outgoing mail in all the spare time I would soon have in abundance. Everyone I had talked to in the 2nd Division told me what a quiet sector we were going to occupy - no one could start a serious fight in this weather or terrain. How wrong they were!

The 106th Division replaced the 2nd Division so they could begin an attack north of us. We took their positions man-for-man, platoon-for-platoon, on December 11. As they moved out, we moved into their vacated positions. In most cases, they took all their extra ammunition, food supplies, squad heaters and cookers, kerosene lanterns, (with their extra kerosene, a commodity which was really hard to find). They also took their phones, and other hard-to-come-by items that they would probably toss when they began their attack. Our most critical shortage, it later developed, was that we, at least on the platoon/squad level, had no maps. With the low hanging clouds, fog, snow and sleet, the sun seldom broke through and, except for our compasses, we had no sense of direction. Without maps, we had been dropped into Germany without knowing where we were. This became critical exactly one week later!

Our regiment, less the 2nd Battalion which was held in division reserve, was positioned in the Schnee Eifel (a long forested ridge) in remnants of the Siegfried Line, which was built prior to World War II along Germany's western border. The portion we held had been taken by U.S. Forces a month or two earlier, before winter shut down the advance which had begun with D-Day and the breakout and liberation of France and Belgium. The Siegfried Line was a defensive installation of heavily fortified concrete pill boxes and bunkers. The German army knew the exact location of each one and could focus fire from their artillery on any spot in or near these fortifications.

My platoon protected the right flank of our regiment, and, during the times the clouds lifted, we could observe German army activities across a valley which separated us. We also had an excellent view of the small crossroads village of Belialf, Germany, about a mile to our west. A narrow paved road crossed through my platoon position and ran generally east toward Prum and West to Belialf. (See attached Map No. 1 which was copied from U.S. Army In World War II. The Battle Of The Bulge, by Hugh M. Cole). My position contained a fenced area which at some previous time had been used as a temporary POW compound and was later converted to a slit trench type latrine.

After our first night in our new positions, Capt. Naumann told me that our Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. William Craig, had gotten word that a German patrol had infiltrated our lines the previous night. He wanted me to take a patrol from my platoon and search out the entire 1st Battalion area to find them and "clean them out." Leading the patrol through snow drifts up to 2 to 3 feet deep was not a fun project and we found no signs of any enemy patrols. Nonetheless, I got the same order every day after that so it became almost routine duty. I did wonder, with all the other 2nd Lts. in the battalion, why my name always came up for jobs like that.

On the morning of December 14, it was reported that a German patrol had blown up B Co.'s kitchen. But when I arrived on the scene, one of my good friends from college and Ft. Benning OCS, 2nd Lt. John Campbell, a B Co. platoon leader, laughed and said that one of their cooks had started to light an immersion heater in one of their mess kit washing cans and hadn't stuck the match in the heater soon enough. When he finally tried to light it, the heater blew up in his face and almost burned down the cook tent. All we ever found in the way of clues that we had had enemy activity were some old faded propaganda circulars which were probably dropped by the German Air Force. At least we could never find any German patrols in hiding or find boot prints in any of the new or old snow.

I had assigned Robert (Woody) Woods, 3rd Squad, Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR)-man, and his assistant, Louis Boyd, to a foxhole guarding the road from Belialf. Patrols leaving or entering the platoon area used the road, and everyone knew and respected Woody and his BAR, which he cleaned and cared for like a baby. The second or third night in our position, I was given the password for the night, and when I passed it on to Woody, he asked if any patrols would be going out that night. I hadn't been informed of any, so I told Woody he could shoot anyone that came up the road without knowing the password. A few hours later, Woody heard someone coming and challenged them to halt and give the password. He received no response, so he pulled the trigger and got the loud click of misfire. As he pulled the bolt back again, he heard the approaching patrol leader call out, "Dammit Woody, don't shoot! It's Sgt. Bridges, 2nd Platoon, with a patrol, and I forgot the password!" That was the only time I ever heard of Woody having a jam or misfire. He was an excellent shot, having earned the Expert medal with his BAR as well as the Expert Infantry Badge. If his BAR had fired, he would have killed or wounded most of the patrol, so we all praised the Lord for His intervention.

When I returned to my platoon after the December 15 morning patrol, several A Co. officers were there scanning the territory between us and Belialf with field glasses. Just as I arrived, a shot rang out from a deserted farm house halfway between us and Belialf I was told that movements had been spotted at the farm house, so a patrol had been sent out from my platoon to investigate. When the patrol returned, its leader, Sergeant (Sgt.) Walter Ware, reported that they found a hog rooting around in the barnyard and they had shot it.

That night, Capt. Naumann told me I had to take a patrol out for training purposes per orders from Battalion Headquarters. By this time, I was tired and resented being told to continue training under combat conditions when I could get some of my platoon killed or wounded. I protested that training exercises should be discontinued under active combat conditions and patrols should be sent out only to accomplish some reasonable objective. He agreed, but said that orders were orders and I had to go. I said I would, but my objective would be to bring back a load of pork from the hog left dead at the farm house that afternoon.

I asked for volunteers who knew something about butchering hogs, and these men agreed to go: Sgt. Walter Ware from Alabama; BAR-man Robert Lee Woods, a full blood Creek Indian; from Okmulgee, Oklahoma; C.E. (Buddy) Dacus, a farm boy from Magazine, Arkansas; Charles R. Tucker from Kiefer, Oklahoma's oil patch; and Sgt. Bill Bainbridge, third squad leader from Illinois. We left about 10:00 PM, found the hog, which turned out to be frozen, and spent the better part of two hours chopping a frozen ham loose so we wouldn't have to go back empty handed. I've often wondered what the

massed German army thought those chopping sounds might have been just a few hours before they began the Battle of the Bulge not more than half a mile away at Bleialf[1].

By the time we were safely back in our concrete bunkers, it was between 4:00 and 4:30 AM, but we were determined to have some of our pork before going to bed. We rounded up a squad heater from somewhere, raided the kitchen for some potatoes and onions, and I volunteered to peel the potatoes if the others would skin and chip off the ham to feed the six of us. I still get kidded by that bunch every time I see one of them since none of them had ever seen an officer peel a potato before!

We were interrupted in our cooking chores by a German artillery barrage that kicked off the Battle of the Bulge at 5:30 AM, December 16, 1944. My platoon area was hit many times by the shelling. When it stopped almost an hour later, I dashed around my platoon area expecting to find many casualties. Surprisingly, there were none! I found a piece of molten steel, about a foot long by six inches wide, still white hot, not more than two feet from one man's head, but he had a good deep fox hole with some cover over part of it and was not aware of how close it had come to killing him.

Our division's defensive positions were spread out over a twenty-two mile front and was full of large gaps. All three regiments were committed, with only the 423rd's 2nd Battalion held in reserve. The big gaps were supposedly defended by miscellaneous small organizations (cavalry, engineers, and parts of anti-tank, cannon companies, and others). The nearest U.S. troops beyond my platoon to the south and west were in Belialf, at least a mile away. It was defended by parts of our anti-tank and cannon companies as well as an infantry rifle platoon. The 424th regiment was two to three miles beyond that.

Belialf's strategic position as a crossroads made it one of the first targets of the Germans. Our troops in Belialf put up a strong defense, but were almost forced out of the town on December 16. A provisional battalion, hurriedly cobbled together and led by our Regimental Executive Officer, Lt. Col. F.W. Nagle, arrived and helped to push the advancing Germans back out of the town. Early the next morning, December 17, the Germans renewed their attack in force on Belialf, broke through the skimpy defense, and continued on down the road toward Schonberg and St. Vith, Belgium.

By noon, the Germans were in complete control of all the area I could see from my platoon position, and the sight of so much German armor, artillery, and infantry going past us to our rear areas was fearsome! They were out of range of all our rifle and weapons companies' weapons, so I called for field artillery fire. A forward observer came to watch and complimented me on the view, but said they were out of ammunition after zeroing in their guns and had had no re-supply. (This statement is in conflict with the histories I have recently read about the 106th Division Artillery and battles in which they were fighting for their lives at that time. I do not remember the forward observer's name or organization, but those were his words on December 17).

That afternoon, we were surprised to see a convoy of German tank destroyers and U.S. Army ambulances coming up the road from Belialf to my platoon position. They were driven by German soldiers who were also manning the machine guns on the tank destroyers. My platoon deployed under cover alongside the road and, when they reached us, I stepped out and stopped them. They readily surrendered. To my knowledge, these German soldiers may have been the first prisoners taken by our regiment and possibly by our division. The ambulances contained both German and American wounded. The Americans were from various units that had protected Belialf and other units which had

been guarding another crossroads village several miles south of Belialf These units had also been overrun by the German attack. Our Air Force, grounded by bad weather, was unable to air drop much needed supplies. By the evening of December 17, I knew that we were hopelessly outnumbered and probably surrounded and cut off from our Division Headquarters in St. Vith.

Captain Naumann confirmed that we were surrounded when he came down to see the prisoners. Even worse, he told me that we could expect to be attacked at any time but we were to hold at all costs.

I expected any attack to come right up the road from Belialf and to be led by tanks. Such an attack would have hit my platoon first. We had one bazooka and only two rounds for it, so we were poorly equipped to fight any armor that attacked us. We sweated out the night, getting little sleep, jumping every time a leaf rustled, but fortunately no attack came.

The next morning, December 18, we were ordered to leave our secure defensive positions and join an attack on the German pincer. By this time, the enemy probably amounted to several divisions or more and were obviously well supplied and prepared for their offensive. In contrast, we had only the weapons and ammunition we had arrived with (about 2 bandoleers of rifle ammunition per man and enough hand grenades for half of the men to have one). We were also poorly equipped for the snow and the extremely cold weather and had a limited supply of C- and K- rations to take with us in the attack.

When our orders to pull out of the Siegfried Line came down from Company Headquarters, mine had a P.S. attached: organize a small rear guard for the company and battalion and stay until we were sure the Germans hadn't seen us leave. If we were seen leaving, it would have been easy for them to follow up and attack from the rear or on either side, and thus split our regiment into smaller groups. It also meant that we would be the "Sacrificial Lamb" for the regiment if the Germans detected our withdrawal and attacked the rear guard. I asked for volunteers and picked my 3-BAR-men, Woody Woods, James Myers, and James F. Mullins along with 4 or *5* riflemen, whose names I don't remember now. I picked a small hilltop on the road to defend. We scattered out, dug in, and waited while the battalion disappeared from view (a pretty lonesome feeling!) After about 2 hours of no enemy sightings, I felt it was safe that we weren't being followed and we took off at double time to catch up.

Our 2nd Battalion had been held in reserve, and they were to lead our regimental attack. They made contact with the enemy before we arrived, and within a short time had considerable casualties. Our battalion arrived just before dusk and moved through their remnants to continue the attack. Until that time, we had had no combat contact with the Germans except for capturing the convoy of wounded the previous day, but no shots were fired then.

We advanced only a short distance and encountered machine gun and 88 mm cannon fire coming from dug-in emplacements about halfway up the ridge we were attacking. I took a hand grenade from one of my men, Lee (Pop) Bemis from North East, Pennsylvania, crawled up to within 25 yards of the machine gun, and threw it at the machine gun crew. It killed both Germans. I called to the platoon to come on up and bayonet the bodies as called for in infantry training. No one moved until one of my scouts, Charles Tucker of Oklahoma, whose sniper rifle did not have a bayonet, took an M-1 from someone else and stuck one of the bodies. This first taste of blood seemed to

electrify the platoon, and I had to stop all the rest from also bloodying their bayonets. I cautioned the platoon to slow down, spread out, and stay alert and quiet.

Upon reaching the top of the ridge, our objective, I sent our Second Squad leader, S/Sgt. Sawyer, and several of his men as a patrol to locate the Third Platoon of A Co., which was to have been on our left during the attack. I went with a small patrol of a few men from the first squad, led by Sgt. Walter Ware, to our right to contact C Company which was to have been on our right flank. I found Lt. Robert H. Thompson, a C Company platoon leader, dazed from the muzzle blast of an 88mm cannon which had been fired at about the same time he killed part of the gun crew with a hand grenade. He was wandering aimlessly with only ten or twelve of his 40-man platoon still alive and functioning. (I, and probably others, were later asked to recommend him for the Distinguished Service Cross. It was approved and was the highest award given to anyone in our regiment as far as I know. The last time I saw Lt. Thompson, in our POW camp at Hammelburg, he was still severely shell shocked.)

I recently discovered while reading Sgt. Bill Bainbridge's book, Top Sergeant, that I possibly gave Lt. Thompson more credit than he might have deserved. Bill's 3rd squad attacked the 88mm cannon at about the same time that Thompson did, and therefore deserves at least half the credit for knocking out the 88. Thompson told me that he had killed two machine gun crews prior to getting the 88. I don't know how many enemy machine guns were firing at us, but it was several. I silenced one with a hand grenade, and I think Bainbridge's 3rd squad took out one or two.

After Thompson was so shell shocked by the 88, he knew several machine guns had stopped firing at us. He possibly thought he'd gotten two of them. Bill's recollection of killing at least a part of the 88's crew is quite clear and is backed up by both Royal Meservy and Robert Woods, who are still alive and remember the event as Bill described it. I'm not trying to take any credit away from Thompson. I feel he deserves the medal he was awarded, but Bainbridge and his squad also deserve a lot of credit that has never before been given to them. And I think Bainbridge and his squad deserves even more credit for having no casualties while performing such a heroic task.

I attribute so few casualties in our platoon to our training for an attack situation: each squad advanced by two or three men running in a crouched position for three or four steps, falling to the ground in a pre-selected spot, rolling over to a depression or behind anything that provided cover or protection, picking a target, firing one or two shots at the enemy, and then repeating the process. This prevented the enemy from getting anyone in their sights long enough to fire. If everyone fired at the enemy before advancing, it made the enemy keep their heads down and stopped them from firing at us. This tactic really reduced casualties.

Sgt. Ware's patrol to our right was unsuccessful in finding another platoon from C Company, or any of the rest of our 1st Battalion. When Sawyer's patrol returned from its unsuccessful search to our left for A Company's Third Platoon, S/Sgt. Tom Martin, from Boston, my platoon guide who fortunately had gone with Sawyer (the patrol leader), reported that they had skirmished with German troops, and that Sgt. Sawyer and two of his men (Rupert and Mullins) had been wounded. Harry Porter, one of my messengers, had grappled with a German, but failed to draw blood and the German got away. Sawyer's wound appeared to be from a bullet or hand grenade fragments which had broken a bone in the leg. The other two men were also in severe pain. Our platoon medic

had been hit earlier by a bullet which had pierced both buttocks. He was also unable to function.

A paved road, which I later found out was probably the Bleialf-Schonberg road (Skyline Drive), ran along the top of the ridge line and my platoon took positions in its borrow ditches and covered our patrols while we searched for help. When we had first reached the top of the ridge, a hay stack had been ignited about 100 yards to my right and adjacent to the 88 mm cannon that had been knocked out. The fire lighted the area well enough for me to see German soldiers run across the road from near the cannon and hide in a small stone barn. I began firing my weapon, a 45 caliber, poorly made sub-machine gun, jokingly called a "Grease Gun" because of its slow rate of fire. But the Germans were out of range and I watched in frustration as they reached cover before some of my men arrived with M-1's. When I found Lt. Thompson, he was near the burning hay stack and I could see that the hay was used as camouflage for crates of ammunition for the cannon. I was afraid that the fire would ignite the artillery shells and that we were close enough to have casualties if the shells exploded and began detonating each other. We needed to move quickly.

I looked for Capt. Naumann and found that he had followed my platoon in the attack. We agreed that we could expect a counter attack at any time. With only my platoon plus the few men left in Lt. Thompson's platoon, it would be futile to try to continue the attack and be almost as bad to try to dig-in and hope for reinforcements. We withdrew, carrying our wounded. We finally found the rest of A Co. along with~ most of the battalion at a place close to our original line of departure prior to the attack.

In retrospect, the decision to withdraw from the ridge we had just taken was probably the most critical I had ever made in my life up until then, and possibly since. If we had stayed and dug in to defend the ground we had just taken, by morning we probably would have been overrun and all killed or captured. If we could have found the rest of the battalion and all stayed or continued the attack, we might have gotten to Schonberg. At that time, Schonberg was occupied by the enemy, but two regiments (422nd and 423rd) attacking together might have successfully taken it. I later found out that, just before we began the attack, Col. Craig, our battalion commander, had sent Lt. Henry Immesburger (3d Platoon Leader, A Co.) off on a patrol. As a result, his 3rd platoon was left in the charge of Sgt. Bob Mills, Platoon Sergeant, who either got lost as we began our attack, or else decided to stay and wait for Lt. Immesburger to return and lead the attack. Apparently our 2nd platoon, temporarily commanded by A Co. Executive Officer Lt. John Clark, was waiting for the 3rd platoon to move out, and in the dark and confusion, the whole attack bogged down. C Co. became separated and badly shot up, so my platoon and the remnants of one C Co. platoon would have been left on the ridge without any reinforcements. Within 30 minutes of arriving back at our starting point and finding the rest of our A Co., Col. Craig came by and said we were to change the direction of the attack. If we had stayed on the ridge line and waited for the rest of A Co. and the whole 1st Battalion to arrive, we would have been left to fend for ourselves when our battalion was diverted to a new objective. Col. Craig was killed by artillery fire a few hours later and may not have been aware of the success my platoon had had. All in all, with over 50 years of hindsight, I believe I made the right decision because at least 30 members of my 40-man platoon survived to return home.

When we rejoined the company and battalion, the rest of A Co. men had dug their fox holes and were protected from incoming artillery shells and a possible tank attack. It was midnight as we started to dig our fox holes, but when we vainly dug into hard rocky

and frozen ground, most of us just laid down on top of the ground and slept. We were physically and mentally exhausted. Most of my platoon had had little or no sleep since the German attack had begun 3 days earlier.

About 2 A.M. on December 19, I was awakened and told to get ready to move out to Oberlashied where we would rejoin the regiment and continue the attack toward Schonberg. When my platoon was ready to go, I tried to find the rest of the company and discovered that Lt. Bill Burgess and his weapons platoon along with my platoon had been left behind when the company moved out. Neither Lt. Burgess nor I had maps or knew the route we were to take, but we started out thinking that we would catch up in a short time. At dawn, we found a truck convoy in a small village, and one of the drivers told us how to get to Oberlashied which was only a few miles away. When we finally got there, we found the rest of A Company which had been assigned as regimental rear guard, along with several small groups from other units that had become disorganized and lost the previous night. We dug in and prepared to defend Oberlashied. However, Major Sanda Helms, our regimental S-4 (Supply Officer), came to get us with the news that our battalion commander, Lt. Col. Craig, had been killed earlier and that the Germans were now moving in tanks and heavy artillery. We were to fight our way to rejoin the regiment near Schonberg or attempt to make it to Belgium. The decision was apparently to fight our way to Belgium because we headed north rather than west toward Schonberg.

We were unaware at the time that a group of German soldiers, disguised in U.S. Army uniforms and driving captured jeeps and trucks, had been sent with their attacking forces to change road signs to disrupt and confuse us as much as possible. We might have been victims of the group's road sign changes.

I was never issued a map of the area and, even worse, had not even seen one, so I had no idea where we were or where we were going. It was foggy, densely overcast, and the sun was not visible to provide direction. The roads were littered with wrecked vehicles and the bodies of both American and German soldiers, frozen purple and grotesquely disfigured from artillery and small weapons fire. I remember thinking how bleak our own future appeared to be.

A day or two before the Bulge began, Capt. Naumann presented me with a bottle of Johnny Walker red label scotch, my officers liquor ration which I had never heard about. I saved it for later when I might have had a better chance to enjoy it. I carefully packed it, along with all the cigarettes I had before we left the Siegfried Line. When we were getting lined up to leave Oberlashied, I broke the scotch out and passed it around to my platoon. We hadn't eaten in the last 24 hours and it left us with a rosy glow and raised our spirits somewhat. I doubt that everyone got even a sip, but all seemed to appreciate it.

We left Oberlashied with my platoon in the lead going across country. After several miles, we came to a village that I have thought for 56 years was Laudesfeld. As we approached, my scouts drew fire from an adjacent wooded area and our weapons platoon used all its remaining mortar ammunition to cover the area. This temporarily stopped the enemy fire at us and we proceeded into the village with each of my three squads dispersed and taking a different route. Rifle and machine gun fire greeted us as we started down the streets.

I was with Pfc. Lawrence V. Carnavale, a scout from the Second Squad. As we rounded the corner of a house, we met a German rifleman at a distance of not more than

25 feet who had his rifle aimed at me. I dove behind a brush pile as he pulled the trigger and the bullet, which hit like a sledge hammer, went through six layers of clothing and dug a shallow trench in my shoulder. A 4-inch lower aim or a split second hesitation by me would have put the bullet through my heart. I'm sure he thought he'd killed me, but he threw a hand grenade into the brush pile to try to kill Carnavale, who dove behind the same pile with me. When the grenade blew, Carnavale was peppered over his entire body with shrapnel. I received only one piece in my right knee. The German then climbed up on a box or barrel to see if we were alive, and I remember seeing Capt. Naumann take aim at him. I yelled at him to let me do the shooting - I wanted revenge! I know I must have fired at the German but have never been able to recall the result of the shot. I don't remember seeing him fall or seeing his body afterward. At such short range, it is unlikely that I missed him, even with a grease gun. We moved immediately on down the street or alley past where he would have been, but I can't recall anything other than I've always been sure that I killed him. Several years ago I visited Capt. Naumann and asked him if he remembered the incident, but he didn't.

During the battle for the village, two of my oldest enlisted men, Orgel Combs of Cushing, Oklahoma, and John Corcoran of Brockton, Massachusetts, were killed. Both were near or at the maximum combat age of 38 and both were married with children at home. Several other men were badly wounded, including Carnavale, whom I incorrectly presumed had died shortly after capture, and BAR-man, Robert Woods. Charles Tucker and Sgts. Jim Harper of Monroeville, Alabama, Larry Poole, and Bill Bainbridge and several others from my platoon were also wounded by machine gun fire and shrapnel. I revisited our old battlegrounds in May of 1999 and found Carnavale's grave in the Ardennes Cemetery. His date of death was listed as May 18, 1945, 10 days after V-E Day. I don't know the cause, unless it was starvation or infection from the hand grenade wounds he received before capture on December 19.

A single German soldier killed Corcoran and Combs and wounded Sgt. Poole and Woody. They were all in my 3rd squad, commanded by Sgt. Bill Bainbridge. Sgt. Bainbridge told me that his squad entered the village down a narrow Street or alley. A German came running at them firing his machine pistol, commonly called a Burp Gun because of the burp sound of its rapid fire. He was evidently a good shot, considering the damage he did to the 3rd squad.

After firing the long burst that killed two and wounded two, the German dove behind a log for protection with one foot still showing. Sgt. Bainbridge called to one of his remaining riflemen, Pfc. Royal R. Meservy from Idaho, and told him to shoot the German. When Bainbridge fired at the German's foot, his shot hit the mark. The German screamed, reared up and Meservy finished him with one shot. (Sgt. Bainbridge later re-enlisted in the army during the Korean conflict, fought in Vietnam, and eventually was recognized for his abilities by being promoted to Sergeant Major of the Army, the highest ranking enlisted man in the army. I am very proud of him, and am delighted to be able to say that he was the first enlisted man I recommended for promotion to Squad Leader. After losing track of him for 40 years, he called me about ten years ago and we have resumed a close relationship that I am proud to have.)

As we neared the center of the village, we saw two German soldiers running away. Two of my assistant squad leaders, Sgts. Walter Ware and Larry Poole, shot and killed them with one shot each at a distance of at least 200 yards.

We then regrouped and checked for casualties and found that none of us had more than three or four clips of ammunition left. As we reorganized, we saw some German soldiers on a ridge to our right waving a white flag. Thinking that they wanted to surrender, Maj. Helms and Capt. Naumann beckoned them to come on down (my only thought was what we would do with prisoners with so little ammunition and no food). At least one of the Germans was an officer who spoke English very well and he told us that we were surrounded by thousands of their troops and he wanted ua to surrender! He signaled back to his troops on the ridges and sure enough, thousands of German soldiers rose from their covered positions to show us that we were indeed badly outnumbered. I sent a scout back the way we had come and he quickly returned to say that Germans had closed in behind us and that we were surrounded. Maj. Helms suggested that we vote on surrender, but everyone was aware of our situation and just shrugged and turned away with no vote being taken. We really had no choice, other than a quick death. We destroyed our weapons and gave up.

When the order was given to destroy weapons, I disobeyed it and ducked into a nearby barn. I hid my gun behind a door with my last half-clip of ammunition in case I found a way to escape after dark, which was rapidly approaching.

We were lined up and searched, but I saw no violence. Several of my men complained about cigarettes being taken and, when I confronted an officer and reminded him of the Geneva Convention rules, he gave orders to return the cigarettes. Until that time, I had been thinking about taking a couple of my NCOs and trying to hide in the barn, but I found I couldn't make myself run off and leave the rest of the platoon. It was either take them all or stay with them, but I couldn't desert all but a few of the NCOs. The window of opportunity closed quickly when the Germans segregated us into groups: officers, NCOs, and privates.

Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers were separated from privates, and all were marched about two miles to the town of Auw. We passed massive columns of German soldiers, armor, and artillery along the road, which told me how helpless our situation had been. Some of the Germans tried to grab our watches and rings. Luckily, my college ring fit tightly, because one German almost broke my finger trying to steal it. But much more seriously, a few of our men were pulled out of the column and lost coats, overshoes, and boots. They suffered terribly the next day when forced to march about 30 miles to Gerolstein in the snow and mud. Aboard the POW train in the extreme cold many suffered frozen feet. Later, I heard that many of our enlisted men were severely clubbed and beaten by German guards on this march as well as on work details they were assigned to. I recently heard that Leo Wildman, a Jewish rifleman from my platoon, was sent from his POW camp at Bad Orb to a coal mine where he starved to death.

When we arrived at Auw, officers were herded into an old building. There we met most of our other regimental officers who had survived after being captured that afternoon when Col. C.C. Cavender, 423rd Inf Commander, surrendered his regiment to stop further casualties from an unmerciful artillery barrage. NCOs and privates were left outside to cope with the freezing weather as best they could.

I found one of my friends, 2nd Lt. Don Houseman, laying on the floor and collapsed beside him. He had a bad shrapnel wound on his right hand, and, after greeting me, he got up to look for a medic. I didn't see him again until we met in his home town of Dallas some six months later. After a year or more in various army hospitals and numerous operations, he now has limited use of his right hand. (See the postscript to this

document for an account of a trip Don and I took in May, 1999, to France, Germany, and Belgium)

On the morning of Dec. 20, after our capture, I found my college friend, 2nd lt. John Campbell, not wounded but nearly frozen. He had given his overcoat to one of his men, and his field jacket to another. I gave him my field jacket and, while we were in the POW box cars, we used my heavy field coat to cover us both. When we got to a POW camp at Bad Orb, the Germans issued him an overcoat and he returned my field jacket with the bullet holes that came from the German rifleman just before our capture. I still have that jacket.

Before we were marched out of Auw, John Campbell and I began looking for a third member of our Ft. Benning OCS class and a good friend from college, 2nd Lt. Herman Philipson of Dallas. It didn't take long to find out that the 423rd Regiment's 2nd Battalion, which had led the fated Dec. 18th attack, had had many casualties and Herman's heavy weapons Company H (81 mm mortars and water cooled 30 caliber heavy machine guns) had been in the thick of the fighting. As his jeep passed a German foxhole, a fragmentation grenade was tossed into the back seat and Herman was wounded badly and left for dead. At least one passenger escaped to tell the story.

The day after our capture, we were marched about 30 miles to a rail yard at Gerolstein and loaded into 40 and 8 (40 men or 8 horses) type box cars, about 50 to a car. Officers were each given two small sacks of hard tack and a little can of cheese to divide among six men. The box car doors were closed and locked and were not reopened until three days later when we parked in a large rail yard at Diez, near Koblenz and Limburg. Our steel helmets and helmet liners were converted into toilets which we emptied out of a small window in one corner of the box car.

On the night of Dec. 23, the Allied Air Force bombed Koblenz, Limburg, and the rail yard where we were parked. Hearing the falling bombs whistle and explode nearby was probably the most terrifying event of the war for me because we were locked in and not allowed to take cover. Bombs fell so close that doors on some of the cars, including the one I was on, were blown open. When we tried to get out, the German guards fired warning shots at us from their covered positions. We were later told that bombs killed quite a few POWs in box cars farther down the tracks from us.

On the fourth day in the box cars, we each were given a quarter of a loaf of bread and a spoonful of butter and molasses. During Christmas Day we were issued a Red Cross box of food for each five men and were told it had to last two days. Each box actually had to last us three and one-half days. Our NCOs and Privates didn't fare as well as the officers. These men were not fed or allowed out of the box cars during the entire nine to ten day trip to Bad Orb.

On the morning of Dec. 29th, we arrived at Bad Orb, Germany, where we were unloaded and marched up a hill to a POW camp, Stalag 9B, about 4 miles away. Conditions were pitiful when we arrived and our influx made matters worse. We were fed dehydrated vegetable soup, 1 cup of ersaz coffee, one-sixth of a loaf of sour bread, some small potatoes, and a small piece of butter each day. The bread actually contained a generous portion of sawdust which kept it from molding. It swelled in our stomachs to make us feel full. Within a short time, we were all starving and losing considerable weight and strength.

All any of us talked about was food. We remembered meals at home, in restaurants, and even good old army chow. To avoid forgetting, we made lists of good places we had eaten in the past, and the places our fellow POWs recommended, carefully noting what each was famous for. We exchanged recipes for favorite dishes, mostly invented on the spot, I'm sure. Cigarette supplies were about used up before we got to Bad Orb, but some had survived and a market for them flourished at $20.00 per cigarette. One day a wagon arrived with a large dead horse. There was a little meat in the soup the next day and I thought it tasted wonderful, but I didn't ask for the recipe.

The weather was bitterly cold and I developed a high fever and lung congestion, so I sought help at our "hospital". The hospital was a small room with several cots attended by one of our regimental doctors, Dr. Sullivan, and a couple of medical corpsmen. Their medical supplies consisted of all our first aid kits which the doctor had collected at his first opportunity. I was diagnosed as having pneumonia and he kept me in the hospital for several days and gave me sulfa from the first aid kits. It worked well, so I was able to leave the hospital in time to learn that the officers were to be shipped out to an Oflag, or officers' POW camp.

On Jan. 10, *1945,* all the officers except for Dr. Sullivan, and probably a chaplain or two, were loaded into box cars and shipped to Oflag 13B at Hammelburg. It was only an overnight trip, but it was so cold that all metal surfaces in the box cars had thick coats of ice and most, if not all, of us had frozen feet when we got to Hammelburg. We might have been worse off if we hadn't been so crowded in the box car. We took turns standing because there was not room on the floor for all to sit at one time. Without our own body heat to warm each other, we all might have frozen to death.

Conditions were slightly better at Hammelburg. At first, we got dehydrated vegetable soup (which we nicknamed "green hornet") twice a day, but it often had small white worms floating on top when it was served. I welcomed a worm day because some of our officers had stomachs that turned when they saw them and that meant more for us who were hungry enough to eat anything.

A break for us was that the entire Serbian army officer corps had been confined at Hammelburg for four years, and they had stashed food from home and had saved up Red Cross food boxes against the potential hard times they correctly expected. They shared the Red Cross boxes which we received at the rate of about one box per man per month. While this was not a great amount of food, it was probably just enough to keep us from starving to death.

It was extremely cold at Hammelburg, and we were given a ration of only enough coal briquettes to keep the room slightly warm two to three hours a day. The rest of the time was spent in our bunks fully clothed and covered with the two blankets we had each been issued. After several weeks of this cold torture, three other junior officers and I slipped out of the room after dark and raided an empty barracks nearby to get the unused bed boards for fuel. We were warm for several hours that night, but our crime was discovered the next morning.

The German Camp Commander threatened to shoot our American Camp Commander, Col. Cavender, if the culprits were not identified immediately and punished severely. We four "criminals" had no intention of allowing our theft of six or eight boards to be the cause of punishment for all the other POWs who had not benefited from the heat we had provided the 40 or so others in our room. We were well known in our room and didn't

stand a chance of not being identified by some stool pigeon who didn't want to be punished for something he hadn't done. We stepped forward and confessed to our "crime", and everyone else breathed a big sigh of relief. We expected to get a good, old fashioned ass chewing, which Col. Cavender was an expert at doing, but he wanted to set an example with us and he ordered us culprits to stand guard on our enemy's property to prevent further break-ins. The four of us stood guard outside the empty barracks for several nights in weather well below zero.

The Allied Air Force frequently bombed the neighboring industrial cities of Schweinfurt and Wurzburg, and each time the bombers appeared, the guards blew an air raid siren, and we were confined to our quarters until the all-clear sounded. After one air raid alert had sounded, a fellow officer from my battalion, Lt. Charles Weeks, was late leaving the latrine (we all had a continual case of dysentery), and a guard shot and killed him when he tried to return to the barracks. Although he fell just outside the door of the field grade officers (Majors through Colonels) room, none of them would go out after him. Three other junior officers and I volunteered for the duty and carried him on a bed board to our dispensary/hospital where he was pronounced dead. At least one other officer was killed in a similar manner, but I didn't know him. The guards wanted us to know that our lives were in danger from them.

With the mostly liquid diet, we all developed an urge to urinate often, and almost all of us were up two to four times a night. After two of our POWs were killed while going to or coming from the latrines after dark or during air raids, most of us managed to find a container of some sort to use without having to make the dangerous and cold trip to the latrine. We had a few complaints from spills and overflows, but we tried to be careful and get the floor cleaned up when an accident occurred. By morning the odor was usually noticeable from the full containers, but everyone emptied his own, and it was safer than being shot at.

On March 8th, a new group of American POWs arrived after a long, cold, and painful forced march all the way from their former POW camp, Oflag 64, at Schubin, Poland. As the Russian offensive on the eastern front approached their POW compound in Poland, the Germans ordered the prisoners to be moved west, where they eventually arrived at Hammelburg. Under the command of Col. Paul Goode, this group had Lt. Col. John Waters as its executive officer. Col. Waters was the son-in-law of General George S. Patton, commander of the U.S. Third Army.

Gen. Patton ordered a 300-man task force, commanded by Capt. Abe Baum, to cross the Maine River at Achaffenburg and penetrate about 60 miles behind enemy lines to liberate what he had heard was 300 U.S. officers in our POW camp at Hammelburg. He sent a major to accompany Capt. Baum who knew Col. Waters personally to ensure that the Colonel was safely delivered back to allied hands. The task force, originally was made

up of 300 men, 16 tanks, 3 assault guns, 27 half-tracks, and 8 jeeps. Reduced to about half by casualties, they made it to our Oflag the afternoon of March 27. After a fierce fire fight which sprayed small arms fire and some artillery around the compound, most resistance from the guards was eliminated, and the German commander surrendered the camp to Col. Goode. A tank crashed through the gate and we saw four POWs acting as a color guard carrying an American flag accompanied by a German officer carrying a white

flag, march down the street and out through the gate. Col Waters carried the American flag and was wounded by a shot from a lone guard they encountered shortly after marching out the gate. He was taken to the hospital and was unable to travel, so he remained in the Oflag. Another officer in the color guard was Capt. Emil Stutter, Adjutant of the 423rd Inf~

As soon as the firing stopped and the gate had been broken down, we gathered what few belongings we had and went out to get on the trucks we assumed would be there to take us out. We walked several hundred yards up a small hill to where the remaining six or seven tanks and 10 or 12 half-tracks were waiting and got there just in time to hear Capt. Baum announce that they were only a small task force. He said that the front lines were still 60 miles to the west. He also said that they were told to expect only 300 POWs to evacuate, not the 1500 that were there. He told us that they had lost a number of their tanks and half tracks and would have to fight their way back. Even worse, they didn't have enough gas to reach the front lines. Those of us that were able to find room on any of the vehicles were welcome to ride; anyone else would have to walk if he wanted to leave.

I had become friendly with two of my bunkmates, Lt. Bill Smith from Baltimore, and Lt. Bill Maughn of Herrin, Illinois. We left the camp together and heard Capt. Baum's announcement with great disappointment. All three of us had lost so much weight and were so weak that we were exhausted by the time we got to the tanks. The tanks were already overloaded before Capt. Baum made his announcement, and Smith, Maughn and I knew we couldn't walk 60 miles through enemy territory in our condition ~without weapons and food. We decided that if a small task force could get through successfully in such a short time, surely Patton would follow up with an all out attack and arrive in force in a few more days. It was obvious that the intelligent thing to do would be to gather up what food and supplies others were throwing away, go back into camp, and wait for liberation in safety.

On our way back to our barracks, I picked up a small sack containing five or six bars of Ivory hand soap and we went through the camp kitchen to get whatever food was left. Others had preceded us, and all I could find was a large head of red cabbage. I gladly took it since I knew it would be some time before we would be fed again. We found our barracks intact and watched the overloaded tanks move out to the west followed at a much slower pace by hundreds of POWs walking. The task force failed to get very far from Hammelburg before the German army regrouped and destroyed its remnants. Many POWs were killed or wounded and all the rest trying to escape were recaptured.

About 2:00 AM, the German guards returned, rousted us out with approximately 300 other POWs who had also returned to camp, and began marching us south. At first, we were all too weak to march more than a mile or so each day. We slept in barns and could occasionally trade for or steal some extra food from the farmers. At one of the barns, I found a scale and was not surprised to find that I weighed 105 pounds, fully clothed, down from my normal 145-150 pound weight. We were fortunate in that by the end of March, the snow was beginning to thaw and the nights were no longer so cold. But rations never improved and we all continued to have dysentery.

The cabbage I had taken at Hammelburg was almost my undoing. I ate the entire head the first day and found out the hard way that it increased my dysentery considerably and gave me quite a stomach ache, cramps, and gas. I had to fall out of the column quite often and the guards were always threatening whenever this happened.

Fortunately, I was not shot or clubbed by one of them. They may have even felt sorry for me.

One day, as we marched through a small village, an old wrinkled German lady reached out, grabbed my sleeve and put two eggs in my hand. Although I couldn't understand all that she said, I did understand that her son, or close kin, was a POW in the U.S. and was being very well treated which she appreciated. I was really glad to hear that, considering the gift of the eggs. When we stopped for the night, I asked a woman in her kitchen to cook the eggs for me. She seemed shocked at my presence, but fried the eggs and I ate them with great relish.

We were all infested with lice. I thought I was lucky and had avoided them until one day the temperature warmed up enough to make us want to shed some of the heavy clothes we had been wearing constantly. We had not removed our clothing since our last shower, probably some three months earlier. I decided to take off my long handles, and when I did, I found hundreds of lice just beginning to hatch. I threw away the winter underwear and bathed as well as I could at an outdoor water well, a chilling experience to say the least.

By April 5th, Hitler's birthday, we had gotten to Nurnberg, the city of his pride and joy, where he often delivered his speeches. About noon, the U.S. Air Force began a huge bombing raid on Nurnberg, presumably in celebration of Hitler's birthday. As each flight of 3 B-i 7s reached its target, the lead bomber dropped a smoke pot and all three bombers dumped their loads with this signal. We were on the south side of Nurnberg on a highway next to a railroad, and the guards herded us over to a grove of trees so that we wouldn't be seen from the air. The bombing started on the north side of the city and progressed to the south with each bomber flight. We waited and cheered them on as explosions, flames and debris filled the air. It was an awesome sight, and we wondered how anyone in Nurnberg could survive such a pounding. Then the last flight dropped its smoke pot directly over us and let their load of 500 pound bombs fall. We knew immediately that we were going to be hit and scrambled desperately for any cover or depression we could find. The bombs whistled for what seemed like forever. When the first ones exploded across the railroad tracks, the rest exploded progressively closer until the last bomb landed less than 50 yards from me. Its blast dug a crater that extended to within 10-15 feet of where I was lying face down, praying that it would not hit a tree and produce an air burst which would be fatal to all of us. A large rock thrown from the explosion landed about two feet from my head and buried itself a couple of inches in the ground. Some of the bombs hit an ammunition dump alongside the railroad and detonated what must have been artillery shells. Those came flying by us like a lot of un-aimed skyrockets. This appeared to be almost as life threatening as the bombs had been. When we could get up and look around, we could see that the last bomb had landed in a group of our POWs, killing about 30 and wounding many more. It was brutal; some of those still alive were missing arms and legs, and bloody body parts hung from trees around us. The guards quickly rounded us up and pushed us on down the road, refusing to let us give first aid to our wounded.

The Air Force finally spotted our column a few days later when a pilot almost strafed us, but we were all standing in the road waving. He flew over us several times as if for identification, wagged his wings and flew on. After that, a plane would fly by nearly every day and we felt confident that they were tracking us.

We began receiving more Red Cross boxes, usually about one per week, to share with two to four or more other POWs. As the Germans realized that they were being

defeated, and the war was nearing its end, they became more friendly. We heard rumors that we were going to be marched south of Munich into the Bavarian Alps where we would be held as hostages for Hitler to use in gaining some advantages at the peace negotiations. By mid-April, we could hear artillery in the distance which grew louder by the day, and we knew that our troops were coming closer.

One afternoon, we arrived at the town of Kelheim on the Danube River about 15 miles southwest of Regensburg and about 60 miles north of Munich. The guards herded us into a large barn on the edge of town. While they were setting up their guard posts, Lt. Maughn and I slipped out while they were disorganized, jumped a fence and went through several back yards to try to trade my last two bars of Ivory soap for food. About the third yard we entered, we encountered several German soldiers. We didn't know what to expect because I'm sure they knew immediately who we were, but thankfully, they appeared friendly and eager to talk to us, even though we spoke almost no German and they spoke no English. One soldier cupped his hand to his ear to indicate he was hearing the distant guns, and when we tried to ask where the American army was, he borrowed my pencil and a notebook (which I still have) and drew a map spotting Nurnberg, Regensburg, Keiheim, and Munich. Then he indicated where fighting was going on. We thanked him and left. About two blocks later, we found a housewife in her back yard. I showed her a bar of soap and offered it for bread. She ran into her house and returned with a loaf of bread and a small glass stein filled with jelly. We returned to the barn, shared our wealth with our friend Lt. Smith, and decided to try for more.

The guard at the barn door was allowing POWs to go across the street in pairs to a water pump to drink. Lt. Maughn and I waited our turn, took our glass stein and went to the well, filled it with water, and when someone distracted the guard, we walked right down the middle of the street, holding the stein in front of us as if we were on official business of some kind. Kelheim was full of German soldiers who looked at us strangely, but never challenged us. We found the house and knocked on the front door to see if the housewife would trade for more bread and jelly. This time, however, a short, fat officer answered the door. When he saw us, he pulled his pistol and began yelling at us. Lt. Maughn and I, both about six inches taller than he was, did a quick about face and started back to the barn with the officer chasing us and waving his pistol. We outdistanced him without being shot, and, as we ducked back into the barn, we could see him about a half a block behind us, red faced and panting, but still yelling.

The next week as our column walked through a barnyard, I saw a French farm labor POW standing close by. I stopped, showed him an almost empty pack of cigarettes which were left from our last Red Cross box, and indicated as best I could that I'd trade the cigarettes for food. He pulled me into the barn, moved some hay, and showed me a large box which was completely filled with Red Cross canned food. He had evidently been given the Red Cross boxes during his years as a POW, even though he was fed by the German family he was forced to work for. I handed him the cigarettes and loaded cans in all the pockets in my overcoat, field jacket, and pants, and then found a small box and filled it as well. I could hardly walk with the load but managed to get out of the barn unseen by a guard before the entire column had passed. I found my friends Smith and Maughn and divided up the load. Not long after, we stopped at an isolated dairy farm with several large barns where we were to spend the night. Waiting for us there was a distribution of one full plus a quarter of a Red Cross box per man which gave us more food than we could carry.

Smith, Maughn, and I had been talking about escaping for the entire time we had been on the forced march. I couldn't imagine going home to Albany and Texas A&M and telling friends I had been a POW without at least having tried to escape. The closer we got to Munich, the more it appeared we might be held as hostages. The day before we had passed a road sign to Moosburg pointing off to the east from the road we were on and we knew there was a POW camp at Moosburg. While we didn't want to go to another prison camp, we were concerned about the hostage idea, or almost as bad, being shot at by either or both the German and American armies as the battle front caught up with us.

With all the food now available, Smith, Maughn,, and I decided the time had come for escape, so on April 28th, when the group was rousted out for a before-daylight departure, we moved into a beet or potato cellar under one of the barns. Taking our prized food, we covered ourselves with blankets and straw and stayed quiet. Our guards were evidently so hurried to move the POWs out of the area that we never heard the head count of the POWs, a process that usually took almost an hour. This was lucky for us because we knew we wouldn't be missed and no one would search for us.

Thankfully, none of us were compulsive talkers and I don't remember any of us uttering a sound when we later heard German soldiers moving into the barn, and even later, listening without daring to breathe, as they sat on our cellar door, cleaning and loading their weapons. During the second day, we heard artillery shells landing nearby, but luckily for us our barn was not hit. We stopped hearing any movement or voices after the shelling stopped and assumed that the Germans had retreated. We waited another full day, for the next morning, April 30, to look out and see if all the German soldiers had gone. We didn't see anyone until we walked into the barn and saw a young SS soldier. Bluffing our way, we demanded his surrender. He gave us his weapons and seemed quite relieved. A few minutes later, two U.S. Air Force officers came down from the loft of the barn where they had been hiding and joined us. Our prisoner told us that Americans were in Wartenberg, a few miles to the north. We left the barn, found a Wartenberg road sign, and walked there. As we approached, German citizens were hanging white sheets and towels out of windows and doors, and they wanted to surrender the town to us to keep it from being shelled. We politely declined the honor and met two Italian POW farm laborers who said they knew where Americans were and would lead us to them.

After several miles, we saw two German soldiers manning a machine gun as a delaying action rear guard in a plowed field. We called to them to surrender and instead of turning the machine gun on us as they might have, they got up and came over to us and surrendered, much to our relief. About dark, the Italians pointed to some GI trucks parked near a farm building. It turned out to be the kitchen for Co. C, 343rd Infantry, 86th Division.

Although they had just cleaned up from the evening meal, the cooks offered to prepare anything we wanted to eat. We voted unanimously for bacon and fried eggs, with buttered toast and jelly. I will never forget the grins on those cooks faces while feeding the five filthiest, most louse ridden people they had probably ever seen. I know we each devoured at least six eggs, and I can't guess how much bacon, bread and jam. A truck was sent for us, and as we left to work our way back to Division Headquarters and home, they gave each of us a whole box of Hershey bars, something we had dreamed of during our entire captivity.

The only troublesome part of our return was when we turned over our captive German soldiers to a couple of GIs outside the kitchen. We told them they were our

prisoners and should be treated accordingly. One of the GIs said, "Take them to a POW camp, like Hell!! I'll shoot them!" We didn't know what the disposition was, but I choose to think they were not executed. However, we were told the next day that General Eisenhower had announced that any German soldier caught bearing arms would be shot.

When we finally arrived at Division Headquarters at Erding about midnight, we were interviewed briefly and driven to a home which had been taken over by the American army. We slept in a real bed for the first time since leaving England. Before we went to sleep, we had all finished our entire boxes of Hershey bars.

The next morning, May 1st, we checked in at headquarters and one of the staff officers told us they would have a truck to take us to an airfield in a couple of hours. We also heard there was an arms factory or warehouse there at Erding. That news was exciting to us - we all wanted to find a German pistol to take home - we found the warehouse, and its contents were amazing! Rack after rack of rifles and shotguns, many with gold and silver inlays and beautifully engraved, but we didn't want to take anything we might not be able to hide and get home. Also, we weren't sure we could find the right caliber of shells in the U.S. for foreign guns. We couldn't find pistols, but we did find chrome plated Nazi ceremonial swords with swastikas on the leather handles, so we each took one and managed to get them home. Mine now hangs above the fireplace mantle at my home.

Later that morning, a truck and driver were assigned to take us to an airfield being used to import gasoline. We were allowed to take a return flight on an empty plane to Le Harve and on to the nearby Camp Lucky Strike. The first airport we went to was not yet in use so we had to convince the driver to take us on to the Nurnberg airport.

At Nurnberg, cargo planes full of five gallon 'Jerry" cans of gasoline were landing one after the other, being unloaded, and then re-loaded with recently liberated British POWs. One of our Air Force escapees caught the first American pilot that taxied up to the POW line and asked him to put us aboard first, and within 10 minutes we were on our way, with one refueling stop at Paris. Although we could have gotten off to see Paris, we were much more interested in going home. That night we were at Camp Lucky Strike, deloused, shaved, showered, issued clean uniforms, given a cash advance, and fed good GI food. We went through a couple of information sessions to caution us to not eat too much for awhile (!!!) and to bring us up to date on world events and war news. We then sweated out waiting for a ship to take us home. It didn't take long.

Before daylight on May 8th, V-E Day, we were issued orders to return to the States and boarded the Hermitage, an Italian luxury liner that had been converted to a troop ship. As I stood in line to board the ship, a Master Sergeant standing behind me tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was Jack Behling from Albany, Texas. I turned around and recognized a guy that graduated two years ahead of me at Albany and was called up with the 36th National Guard Division from Texas. He had made all the 36th's tough campaigns and then was captured in Southern France just before the end of the war. Small world!

Several days after departing Le Harve, an announcement over the ship's loud speaker asked that Lt. Herman Philipson report to a specific location immediately. I couldn't believe Herman was alive, but I headed for that location on the ship and waited for an hour, but he didn't show up and I assumed there was another Lt. Herman Philipson aboard. Several days later, I was walking around the deck and almost bumped into Herman! He had been picked up by German medics who eventually left him at a Catholic

Church and some nuns nursed him back to health. His back has many deep scars from the grenade, but we graduated from A&M together after the war ended and are still good friends. He lives in Dallas and has been a very successful entrepreneur.

My other Aggie friend, John Campbell, also made it back safely and graduated with Herman and me. He has lived on his ranch near Brady, Texas, since then. A fourth Aggie and OCS classmate assigned to the 106th Division, Bob Forrest, was also captured and managed to make it home after the war, but didn't return to A&M. I lost track of him after a brief correspondence.

During the seven month period from mid-October, 1944, the time we left the USA, to my return in mid-May, *1945,* I had led my 40-man rifie platoon (most of whom were older than I was) into combat for nine days, only four of which were involved in actual shooting. However, our battle turned out to be the biggest, bloodiest, battle of World War II, ultimately incurring over 50,000 allied casualties. I feel very fortunate to have arrived back in Albany, Texas, my hometown, before my 21st birthday with only three Purple Hearts. I thank the Good Lord daily for the atomic bomb which prevented all of us from the European Theater of Operations (ETO) having to go immediately to invade Japan. I am thoroughly convinced that most of us would have been killed or wounded in such an invasion.

Jackson D. Behling
July 4, 2000

<u>POSTSCRIPT</u>

After I returned to the States, I developed a desire to go back to Europe and try to retrace my war time travels. The opportunity finally came in May, 1999, when John Kline, workhorse editor of the 106th Division Association quarterly magazine, and a past president of the organization, put together a trip for surviving members of the Division. One of my 2nd Lt. buddies from my Battalion, Don Houseman, called and asked if I'd like to join him in the trip, and I jumped at the chance. We rented a car and extended the four-day Division tour into a 14-day, 2500-mile trip to include a visit to the Normandy D-Day Invasion Beachheads and our POW camps at Hammelburg, and Montebaur, Germany. I was able to find my general route on a forced march from Hammelburg to somewhere near my point of escape about 20 miles north of Munich, but it was not possible to identify the farms and barns that I remember in the countryside. Nurenburg and Munich have both been rebuilt with housing additions which extend a long way beyond the cities as we saw them during the war. Also, much of Germany was reduced to rubble during the war and many buildings are less than *55* years old.

Don had spent several months as a POW in a hospital at Montabaur, about 40 miles north of Frankfurt. The shrapnel wounds he received just before capture had become infected and he was sent to the Montabaur hospital to have his right arm amputated. An American POW doctor saved the arm by stealing enough sulfa, or other drugs, from the Germans to clear up the infection enough to get him safely back to the States where he spent several years in various hospitals until the infection was cured. He now has limited use of the arm but it hurt his golf handicap.

Don owns a place on a lake between Fredricksburg and Austin, Texas. When a neighbor found out he was going back to Montabaur, he told Don that Montabaur and

Fredricksburg were sister cities and many of the Fredricksburg settlers had come from Montabaur. A sister city organization exists in both towns and after making contact with the Montabaur organization, we were invited to spend the night in two homes there and they feted us at a big dinner the night we arrived. They also gave us a complete tour of the hospital and town followed by a visit to the town hail where we were introduced to the mayor and numerous other officials.

A Tulsa friend of mine, Bob Thompson, made a similar trip to ours two weeks ahead of us. Bob had been in a POW camp, Oflag 64 at Schubin, Poland, when it was evacuated and the POW's were forced to march about 500 miles to Hammelburg where I had been for about six weeks when they arrived. Before he went back to Hammelburg on his retracement, a friend offered to contact a general that he knew and the general sent word to some U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonels in Germany that Bob was on his way to Hammelburg and that he was to be treated nicely - it worked beautifully, because both of us received guided tours and very gracious treatment.We were given a really good tour of the Hammelburg POW camp by a German Lt. Colonel. The old POW camp has been greatly modernized but most of the old barracks are still in place. It now serves as the German Infantry Officers School.

Our guide, Lt. Col. Wacker (pronounced Vocker) was a great host. He gave us a complete tour of the battlefield of the disastrous attack on Hammelburg by Task Force Baum as described herein on pages 17 and 18. As he told u about all of Capt. Baum's mistakes in the attack and retreat, Don and I couldn't help but remind him that Baum had penetrated an entire German Army 50-60 miles with 300 men, a couple of dozen tanks and some half tracks, and had actually succeeded in reaching his goal.

We were really impressed by the cooperation we observed between the American and German armed forces on every occasion we saw them working together.

After we left Hammelburg, we joined the 106th Division Association group for a four day tour which included two of the three Battle of the Bulge national cemeteries. The national cemeteries are beautiful and immaculately kept. All graves are computer recorded and any veteran buried in a national cemetery (anywhere one exists) can be located from any other national cemetery. We were able to find and visit the graves of our battalion commander, Lt. Col. Craig; Don's company commander, Capt. Clarkson; and one of my platoon scouts, Larry Carnavale. We didn't have time to visit the grave of another one of my men, John Corcoran of Brockton, Mass; a third platoon member's body (Orgel Combs) had been returned to Cushing, Oklahoma for reburial in the early 1950's. I had the cemetery records searched for three or four more platoon members that were wounded and never heard from. I assume the rest made it home some way - the graves registration crews seem to have been very efficient.

When we joined the 106th Division Association tour at Prum, Germany, Don and I were lucky to find several expert guides - two Americans (James R. Renner and Don G. Patton), and Vincent Gerard, a young man from Belgium. They have been making detailed studies at the

Bulge, particularly the 106th Division's participation. I was able to spot my platoon's positions on a map and they took us to those locations without fail. We found my platoon's old pre-Bulge position in the Siegfried Line including Woody's and Louis Boyd's fox hole. Not far away, one fairly large chunk of concrete was left from what I'm almost sure was the pill box I had used as my headquarters. I was also able to find a large hole in the ground that was A Co. Headquarters. Almost all concrete positions had been blown up and obliterated. A few of the very large concrete artillery emplacements still exist and surprisingly a large number of fox holes are still visible. It's easy to find large pieces of rusty shrapnel and other mementoes. The land is still covered with large pine and evergreen trees although it's been *55* years and this is undoubtedly second growth since 1945. But the road system, although improved, is routed about the same.

I have been sure for *55* years that we were captured in Laudesfeld, a village near
Auw. I saw a sign shortly after we were being marched to Auw as POWs that read Laudesfeld with an arrow pointing in the direction we were coming from. (I wrote the name down.) Naturally, I wanted to revisit that town. The problem was, when I arrived, I knew immediately that it was not where we were captured. The terrain was totally different, the buildings were scattered and fewer. The question then was, where were we captured? It took us less than two or three hours to make the march from point of capture to Auw and I saw several signs naming Auw, both going there and leaving the next day, (Dec. 19, and 20, 1945) and the town is much larger than the other villages surrounding Auw. Schlausenbach, which lies four or five miles east of Laudesfeld but only two or three miles southeast of Auw fits the criteria for distance and time. A trip to Schlausenbach almost settled the question for me except that Schlausenbach is smaller than the village I remember and has fewer trees. The terrain looked familiar, though, and houses could have been lost in the war that were not rebuilt.

I read one account written by a member of our I & R Platoon and I believe they probably had a map. He said he thought we were all at Schlausenbach when they left A Co. as we started to attack whatever village it was, and I believe he's right. The question remaining for me is: why had we gone so far east and where were we trying to go to rejoin our own forces?

The 422nd and 423rd both surrendered at about 4:00 PM Dec. 19, 1944, and most of them were already at Auw when we (A Co.) arrived, probably about 7 - 8 PM. We obviously had intended to fight our way out of the area and find other American forces as Maj. Helms had said at Oberlashied, but fighting our way east was taking us deeper into Germany, and we should have been trying to find friendly U.S. forces in Belgium to the north and west. We were in a hopeless situation, however, because there was no way a *150-175* man American force was going to find a way through the German troops massed and stalled on every road we saw. The I & R Platoon with its 25-30 men, was successful in infiltrating the German columns stalled on all the roads because they found a gap in the German lines that their small group could scramble through - and one account said they were almost caught.

I lived in Denver, Colorado from 1972-1976 and saw Don Naumann several times a year, but could never get him to open up about our capture, except for saying, "I didn't want to surrender, I wanted to fight." I understand he died three or four years ago, so I'll probably never know more than I do now.

1st Platoon Co. A. 423 Infantry. 106th Div.

Platoon Leader:
Platoon Sergeant:
Platoon Guide:
Runner/Messenger/Radio
2nd Lt. Jackson D. Behling
T/Sgt. Thomas H. Lindsay
S/Sgt. Thomas C. Martin
Pfc. Harry W. Porter
Pfc. Wallace E. Rader
0550996
14013304
31302320
35 *795* 395
42 102 686
Squad Leader
Scout
Scout
BAR
Asst. BAR

Asst. Squad Leader:
1st Squad
S/Sgt. Robert H. Beauchamp
Pfc. C.R. Tucker
Pfc. Orgel R. Combs
Pfc. James S. Myers
Pvt. Francis L. Ruppert
Pvt. Vincent Harrold
Pvt. Arthur Couture
Pvt. Leo Wildman
Pvt. Elmore W. Legrand
Pvt. William G. Caruso
Pfc. John M. Kroll
Sgt. Walter E. Ware
36456922
38693311

38 523 806
33 903 516
11050185
34 876 679

36958029
31 416 100
39622020

34 808 580
<u>2nd Squad</u>
Squad Leader
Scout
Scout
BAR
Asst. BAR
Asst. Squad Leader
S/Sgt. Richard L. Sawyer
Pfc. Lawrence V. Carnavale
Pfc. C.E. Dacus
Pfc. James F. Mullin
Pfc. Archie Davidson
Cpl. Robert L. Eckles
Pfc. T.G. Smith
Pfc. Shelby M. Cames
Pfc. Edwin D. Parker
Pvt. Dominic N. Peluso
Pfc. Hugo S. Antoneffi
Sgt. James R. Harper
31217297,

38 662 991
42102603
38449678
6399862

38 682 998
34831 688
32 725 139
42 080 *805*
14176066
Squad Leader
Scout
Scout
BAR
Asst. BAR
<u>3rd Squad</u>

Sgt. William G. Bainbridge
Pfc. John F. Corcoran
Pvt. John M. Smith
Pfc. Robert L. Woods
Pfc. Louis Boyd
Pfc. Lee E. Bemis
Pfc. Royal R. Meservy
Pfc. Adrian A. Waterstraat
Pvt. Leo J. Ross
Pfc. Harold A. Shafer
Pfc. Carl J. Smith
Sgt. James L. Poole
36 752 604

36955255
38 *565* 882
34 972 602
33 845 176
39927370
42087521
39340794
38319054
36957011
14201 800