

Robert E. Bilskemer

423/L

Stalag IX-B (9-B)

Christmas 1944: Panzers' Prisoner

Ex-POW recalls captured and confinement of 50 years ago

The Story of T/Sgt Robert H Bilskemper † 20-03-2009

"L" Company, 423rd Infantry Regiment

106th Infantry Division

By Perry Baird

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following story is reprinted from the December 1944 issue of the Wisconsin R●E●C News.*

A barely edible cup of rutabaga-potato soup and sleeping quarters shielded from sub-freezing temperatures were Bob Bilskemper's two presents on Christmas Day, 1944. Despite the meager accommodations, he was grateful—the ration was his first hot food in more than six days, and a drafty barracks sure beat sleeping on frozen ground.

The 20-year-old Staff Sergeant from La Crosse, Wisconsin, was a prisoner of war, one of more than 7,000 Americans taken during the opening days of Nazi Germany's final, desperate offensive of World War II—the Battle of the Bulge.

Bilskemper, a retired landscaping contractor who now grows and sells Christmas trees, recalled how the German assault fifty-one years ago this month (*story written in 1995*) caught the Americans completely off guard. "*It had been relatively quiet and we had seen no action yet,*" said Bilskemper, whose rifle company occupied bunkers dug into the wooded hillsides of the Schnee Eifel along the Belgian-German border. His division, the 106th Infantry, consisted mostly of young draftees and was thinly stretched along 25 miles of the 85 mile Allied front. They had been at the front less than a week when twenty German divisions mounted the surprise attack.



"We woke up to the sound of rockets going overhead. The Whole front was just ablaze from a tremendous artillery barrage," he said of the pre-dawn assault on December 16, 1944. "We never dreamed there was going to be an attack through the woods."

After waiting out the barrage, the 200 men of Company "L" moved out to meet German troops in an intense fire fight that lasted several hours. Tree burst—where enemy artillery shells exploded in the treetops—showered men on the ground with shrapnel and splintered wood. *"A foxhole doesn't do you any good. We had lots of casualties."* He said. *"It lasted until we ran out of ammunition. This was foggy weather and there was no air support whatsoever. Apparently our supply lines were cut."*

In fact, more than just the supply lines were cut off by the surprise attack. Within the first two days, the German Fifth Panzer Army had completely surrounded two regiments of 106th Division, including Bilskemper's 423rd. *"When we ran out of ammunition, there was a lull, and about six Germans came part way across a clearing with a white flag,"* said Bilskemper. *"They wanted us to surrender. Otherwise they'd keep on firing in the treetops. If they'd kept on, they probably would have killed everybody,"* Bilskemper recalled. The Americans were ordered to pile their empty weapons beside a road and line up.

"You wonder what's going to happen to you. You've heard stories and you wonder if you're going to get taken back and shot," said Bilskemper. Indeed, just two days earlier, 85 men had been executed by SS troops at Malmedy, just 15 miles north-west of where Bilskemper's company was dug in. *"Of course, the lieutenant is coming through telling you it'll be all right because of the Geneva Convention. But as you march through the rear areas there'll be people along the road ready to shoot you; you can heard the talking."*

The prisoners slogged seven miles that afternoon and slept in an open, fenced yard that night. *"All we had was what we were wearing, and we lay down side by side to keep*

war. *It was pretty close to freezing,*" Bilskemper said. The next day, the captives marched 35 miles through slushy snow to another yard, and the following morning were packed into railroad boxcars for a two-day journey deeper into Germany. The train was full; Bilskemper estimated there were more than 500 prisoners on board.

His feet had been frostbitten even before the lengthy marches, and the temperature plummeted during the train ride, freezing his feet again. The most harrowing part of the trip, according to Bilskemper, was when Allied planes strafed the train, not knowing its contents. Some men were killed.

MERRY CHRISTMAS

Christmas evening the prisoners disembarked and marched several miles to a prison camp near the town of Bad Orb, about 135 miles from where they had been captured. Wire-enclosed and with guard towers at each corner, Stalag IX-B sat on a hill and loomed menacingly above the weary, frozen procession that approached at 10:00 p.m. *"But then again it looked better that sleeping on the ground,"* Bilskemper said. *"Everybody was hoping for a hot meal, and we got our first taste of that famous prison camp soup. Most guys couldn't eat it, as hungry as they were. I forced mine down."* He said he remembered men grumbling, *"What a lousy Christmas,"* although he also recalled hearing carols sung in camp that night.

The Compound housed 3,600 American and British prisoners, with separate areas cordoned off for other nationalities. Small stoves in the wooden barracks kept the indoor temperature above freezing, but barely. *"It got real bitter cold the weeks we were at that camp, 10 or 20 below zero, I suppose,"* said Bilskemper, whose feet had become so sore from frostbite he couldn't wear shoes. *"After a few days they became entirely numb. After 50 years, the front part of my feet are still numb."*

THE HOME FRONT

George and Elvira Bilskemper's first inkling their son had been in combat came from a December 28, 1944, article in the *"La Crosse Tribune,"* headlined *"106th U.S. Division Wiped out, Nazi Say."* It wasn't until two weeks later that their next morsel of dreaded news arrived—a telegram from the War Department saying Bob was missing in action.

After almost eight weeks of anxiety, the Bilskempers received a March 6 telegram stating Bob was a prisoner of War (POW). *That whole period was hard, especially on my mother,*" said Bilskemper. He said shortly after arrival at Bad Orb, prisoners were told to fill out cards that the Red Cross would use to notify their families. He wrote several letters to his parents while he was a prisoner, and all were similar to the one dated January 9, 1945.

"Hi All, just another line to let you know I'm a prisoner of war, am alive, well, and unwounded. Please contact the Red Cross and find out what you can send in packages. Send all you can. Suggest oatmeal, dries eggs, cheese and lots of candy and

chocolate. I miss you all and sure wish I was home. My love and prayers to all. Bye. Bob."

"My folks never got any of these letters while I was in the prison camp. They all arrived after I got home," said Bilskemper. In fact, by the time his parents knew he was a prisoner, he had already been transferred, on January 25, to a prison camp at Ziegenhain, 45 miles north of Bad Orb.



American prisoners taken in the opening days of the Battle of the Bulge are marched to the rear. German Panzer (armored) units surrounded two U.S. 106th Division Regiments, capturing more than 7,000 soldiers. Next to Bataan, it was the largest mass surrender of Americans in history.

STALAG IX-A

The new camp had the same features as the compound at Bad Orb, except the barracks were much larger, housing as many as 350 Americans each, according to Bilskemper. He was bedridden for days after his arrival, since the boxcar ride to Ziegenhain froze his feet once again. *"They were badly swollen, and I couldn't put on shoes for about two weeks,"* he said.

In **Stalag IX-A**, the only regular work detail was to fetch food. *"In the morning they'd bring back a ration of coffee. It wasn't coffee as we know it, but at least it was hot,"* he explained. *"For dinner you got a cup of that soup, which you had to learn to eat."* Supper consisted of loaves of dark bread, with each small loaf split among five prisoners. *"As the war got closer to the end and their supply lines got shot up, it got split among six people, the seven people."*

A medical officer estimated each prisoner got between 800 and 900 calories per day, a slow-starvation diet. Bilskemper, who is six feet tall, entered the camps at a fit 185 pounds. He lost 60 pounds during his 102 days of captivity. *"Toward the end we were*

starting to lose one or two guys a night; they just went to sleep and never woke up. It was the malnutrition." Bilskemper said he was on many burial details.

Prisoners were allowed one cold-water shower per month and couldn't shave or wash clothes. Beards and body lice adorned every man. Bilskemper said escape was discouraged by the senior officers. *"If you got caught, the Germans would take care of you on the spot,"* he said. *"Besides, we knew liberation was coming. We knew it faster than anyone else."*



Gaunt from nearly three months in captivity, Bilskemper was sketched by a fellow prisoner just three weeks before Liberation from the POW camp at Ziegenhain.

INTELLIGENCE

"We had news of the war more up to date than the people back home were getting," said Bilskemper, telling how American prisoners would daily walk near the fence that separated the American and French compounds and learn the latest news from the Underground. The American who translated French information held nightly briefing sessions in the barracks, illustrating troop movements on a chalkboard. *"He knew where the Americans were, he knew where the Germans were, and he drew out the geography in great detail,"* said Bilskemper. Prisoners learned how Allied forces began counterattacking in early January 1945.

As the American advance drew nearer, sounds of the shelling reached the camp. *"It sounded like mornings out in the duck blinds at home,"* Bilskemper said. *"Our biggest concern was that the Germans might get crazy at the last and start lining us up to shoot us."* But he said inmates had conditioned themselves to worry only about what was immediately in front of them, not about what *might* happen.

March 30, Good Friday morning, prisoners awoke to find the guards gone. *"They just left overnight and the camp was open,"* he said. No long after, an American armored column liberated the camp's 5,000 inmates, 1,277 of whom had been captured with Bilskemper.

They remained another ten days in the camp before being flown to France for recuperation. *You wanted to eat, but your stomach was so shrunken you couldn't eat much,*" Bilskemper explained. *"You could count every man's ribs, they stuck out so."* The food most craved by the former POWs? *"Peanut butter. For some reason they couldn't get enough of it,"* he chuckled.

"It took three months to get back in some form of decent physical shape, that's how weak we were;" said Bilskemper, who recalled it took another ten years for him to reach his pre-POW weight of 185 pounds. *"People would ask me, 'how were you treated?' and I'd tell them it wasn't that we had grueling treatment, we just didn't have much of anything. But then, I was one of the lucky ones who came home."*

Source: Ex-POW Bulletin December 1945 with authorization of George H. Hemcher Sr, August 2019
<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/935-christmas-1944-panzers-prisoner.html>
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