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November 12, 2004 - Local celebration honors former prisoners of war

Veterans and their families craned their necks, searching the sky for airplanes they could hear before seeing. Fingers shot up, pointing as three World War II models came into view. Two more planes flew overhead, dropping four members of UF's Falling Gator's Parachute Club into the circling formation WWII aircrafts. Colored smoke filled the sky as the U.S. and Prisoner of War flags were flown to the ground by the skydivers, opening the Veterans Day celebration Thursday at the Kanapaha Veterans Memorial.

This year's celebration gave a special tribute to local former prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action. In his opening remarks, Jim Lynch, director of the Alachua County Office of Veterans Services, thanked the veterans and their families for their contributions in various U.S. wars.

"Your courage cannot be diminished with time," he said.

Beginning at 10:30 a.m., the celebration lasted 2 1/2 hours. According to Lynch, almost 3,000 people attended, 1,000 of them war veterans. The program featured music by the Ft. Clarke Middle School Symphonic Band, Swing Shift, the SFCC Show Choir and trumpet players from Buchholz High School as well as presentations by local Girl and Boy Scout troops and members of the UF Navy ROTC.

Judy Lambert, whose father served in WWII, said she enjoyed the ceremony and found it to be very moving. "Tears welled up in my eyes," she said. "I don't realize how patriotic I am 'til I get out here."

Former POW, 1st Lt. Junius Jones of Alachua, spoke of his experience in WWII. "I had a hankering to fly," and so he entered the Air Force, he said. He told his story of being shot down from 13,000 feet above Germany on March 25, 1945. He then spent time in a POW camp. Speaking directly to fellow POWs during the ceremony, he added, "Aren't we lucky - lucky to be here?"

Harold Balch, a soldier in the 106th Infantry Division of the U.S. Army in WWII, was one of 48 local POWs recognized by Lynch.

After being captured by German soldiers, Balch was held eight days in a railroad boxcar before he was transported to the Bad Orb German POW camp. "I remember being given one slice of bread one time," he said, recalling his days in the boxcar.

In the four months following, Balch suffered a 100-pound weight loss in Bad Orb, as German soldiers confiscated Red Cross packages containing food and clothing. It was the middle of winter, he said, and he had to survive freezing temperatures with few articles of clothing and no blankets.

Balch described this year's ceremony as one of the best he has attended. "It was super," he said. *(CHELSEA DONALDSON, Independent Alligator Writer*)

Here are the pages I extracted from my WWII Memoirs re my time in the 106th starting with our debarking at LeHavre. George

CHAPTER II-7 LIFE AS A POW AT STALAG IX-B

The next morning we were given "tea" for breakfast. Teas was the name for a hot beverage which seemed to have been made by steeping some kinds of roots or bark in hot water. It didn't taste too bad, and it was hot. Later that morning we were divided into several groups and led to smaller barracks for permanent assignment. My barracks was No. 27. It consisted of a long open room with three decks of crude wooden bunks on both sides and at the ends.
A small pot bellied stove was in the aisle near the center of the room. At the far end, a door opened into a small empty room where a cold water faucet and a hole in the floor consisted of the indoor sanitary facilities. A few electric light bulbs hung down from the center of the ceiling. A small room with two bunks and a separate entrance was located near the main door and was heated by the chimney from the stove which passed through the room.
There were not enough bunks for everyone and nearly all bunks had to hold two men. My bunk mate was Darrell Lint, from Dickerson Run, Pennsylvania, near Connellville. He had been in the 28th Infantry Division, some of whom had been captured about the same time as we. We had a top bunk across the end of the barracks near the door and against the wall which adjoined the small private room. Blankets were scarce, but with our GI overcoats spread over the top, we kept quite comfortable. No one ever took off their clothes except for shoes, even to sleep. The "mattress" consisted of
a few layers of straw sewn into a bag.

At noon we were led to a kitchen where large pots of soup were steaming. Using my helmet as a dish I was given one ladle full for my noon meal. It was mostly potato soup but had some bits of gristle and a trace of some unidentifiable pieces of meat in
it. Again, it was not only tasty but was hot and food, so it was all eaten in a short time.

Beginning on January 1, 1945, and for the next few days we were processed and briefed on camp rules and regulations. After giving my name, rank and serial number, they wanted my home address, family names, etc, "in order to notify your family properly." When I refused to give them other than the three items we had been trained to do in accordance with the Geneva Convention, they shrugged it off saying you'll have to transferred to another camp where things are much worse unless you tell us
more. However since about everybody made the same refusals it would have meant moving the whole camp had they really been serious about it.

We were given a dog tag to wear marked with a serial number. Mine was marked "Nr. 23770, IX-B." Bad Orb was Stalag IX-B. The tag was made of some sort of soft metal, perforated into two sections with identical markings on each half apparently designed to break apart easily in case of death so that the graves registration etc. would be facilitated.

The religion of each GI is printed on our own U. S. dog tags - "C" for Catholic, "P" for Protestant and "H" for Hebrew. The Germans checked these and those prisoners who had "H" were segregated in a separate barracks from then on. Later these men were all

transferred out of the camp and we never heard further about them. Before they left I did visit their barracks to see on of the fellows from our platoon and recall that they seemed in poorer health than the rest of us, probably they were receiving even less food and heat than we were.

While life seemingly began to settle into a routine, we continually speculated about what was going to happen to us in the immediate future and eventually. However the food situation was the main concern of everyone; we were always hungry. The problem relating to the equal distribution of a single loaf of hard black rye bread of unknown sawdust content among six or eight men became a major event of the day.

We drew lots to see who would be the "cutter" of the day, to try to divide the loaf into equal portions. The cutter was to receive the last pick of the pieces in an attempt to insure that he would be extremely careful to divide the loaf equally. Each subsequent day, in serial rotation, all others got the chance to be the cutter. The bread was so tough and dry that we devised a way to make toast. By lapping one side with our tongue the slice could be made to adhere to the side of the hot pot bellied stove and when done it would fall off onto the floor and made absolutely delicious hot toast - or so it seemed at the time!

Another delicacy we made using the same "spit-and-stick" method was toasted potato peelings. By scrounging the garbage pile behind the mess hall we could occasionally find decent potato peelings to toast. I remember arguments around the stove as to which piece belonged to who when several fell off the sides at once.

Our daily routine involved lining up outside in the morning for roll call, followed by the serving of breakfast tea. It was brought to the barracks in a large wooden tub with two handles on each side. At "tea time" the guard called out , "Four men for tea!" and off they would go with him to the kitchen to carry it back to our barracks.

We never had to go outside the camp on work details, probably because there was no transportation or work nearby which could have been arranged. We did, however, have to go on wood detail in the forest inside the fences to scrounge for bits of wood for the stove. Such details sometimes were given seconds in the mess hall.

Outdoor sanitary facilities consisted of parallel birch tree limbs spread apart to fit our posterior dimensions and located over a slit trench. Latrine detail involved throwing dirt and lime into the pits to make it less obnoxious. fortunately for us, the temperature was quite cold and odor levels were not too bad.

There were other sections of the camp where Indian, Russian and British prisoners were housed. We were segregated from them by barbed wire fences but occasionally could walk near their compounds and converse if we spoke the language. We were allowed to walk around the camp as we wished. As we grew weaker after a few months and considering the cold weather, we didn't stray too far from the barracks.

On January 23, I came down with the mumps along with quite a few others. We were removed to a "hospital" barracks where our own doctor, 1st Lt. Joshua P. Sutherland, attended us as well as he could. I don't remember any special medication but it was warmer in these barracks than our own. After 10 days I was sent back to my own quarters. While I was in the hospital, On February 1, we each received one fourth of a Red Cross package. A whole package consisted for the following items:

1	can of tuna	1	box of cheese
6	squares of chocolate "D" bars	6	packs of cigarettes
1	1 lb tin of butter	1	pkg chocolate candy
1	small can of liverwurst	1	can Spam
1	can of meat and beans	6	vitamin C tablets
1	can powdered milk	100	cubes of sugar
1	can of coffee	2	bars of Swan soap

We constantly traded items within our barracks. I readily swapped cigarettes for candy or whatever. Real haggling took place to determine equal values or the various items. You took great care to secure your items from any danger of theft, although I don't recall any being stolen.

One night a prisoner from some other barracks got out and went to the kitchen looking for food, surprising a German cook there, with the result that the GI took a cleaver and killed the cook. Early the next morning we were routed from our barracks and herded into the main courtyard.

Ominous looking machine guns were aimed at us from all four corners and the camp commandant announced that unless the murderer confessed six GI's would be shot every hour. Somehow our chaplains bargained with the commandant and after standing there for several hours we were allowed back in our barracks. It was rumored that the murderer had given up to the Germans. No more was ever heard of that event.

On the afternoon of February 3 while inside our barracks, we were startled by the sound of planes overhead and the fire of 50 caliber machine guns, apparently from a dog fight between Allied and German fighters. As they swooped low over the camp, several 50 caliber bullets shattered our barracks wall. piercing the wall between my bunk and the door next to the chaplain's office about ten feet from me, knocking the stove pipe down and killing three men, one about ten feet from me. As far as we could determine and contrary to the Geneva Convention, none of the buildings in the camp had ever been marked so that the site could be identified from the air as a prisoner of war camp.

We were allowed to write a letter and a post card at irregular intervals. Most of them apparently never reached home. Letters my mother saved include one written Jan. 5, 1945 which she received March 19th, and four post cards written in January and February and received much later at home.(These are included in the Appendix.)

Sometime in March we began to hear distant artillery fire or bombings which along with the better Spring weather did much to improve our morale. Almost nightly we could hear the wail of air raid sirens in the distance, probably from the town of Bad Orb. Our guards seemed to be a little edgy and perhaps a little more friendly. Mostly the guard detail here was made up of middle aged men who apparently were too old or not physically fit to be in the front lines. I don't recall that any of them were ever unduly abusive to us.

With the prospect of the Allied armies getting closer we began to worry that we might be moved deeper into Germany and this subject became a worrisome topic of conversation and rumors. Looking back at it, it probably was totally unlikely that this might have happened. If anything, our liberation would relieve the Germans of our

maintenance. During the last week in March we could hear the artillery getting much closer and knew it would not be long before we would be freed.

We lined up outside serving windows at the mess hall for noon and evening meals. Noon meal was generally only soup. Two different serving windows were open and much speculation occurred as to which window might be offering the thickest soup and whether or not there would be any meat or potatoes in it. One day after a nearby air raid we had some stringy meat in the soup and speculated it might have come from a horse or mule killed in the raid! The evening meal included tea and bread again, sometimes with a piece of cheese and once a week some synthetic jelly of some sort.

After the evening meal we were locked up in the barracks and evening devotions were generally held by either chaplain. We were fortunate that the chaplains quarters was the semi-private room at the entrance to our barracks. Catholic men said the rosary every night led by a fellow prisoner George Norman, and most everyone of all faiths soon joined in. It was here we all learned the "Hail Mary." Sometimes we would have informal evening discussions but I don't recall the subjects. One thing I know, it was not about women or sex. Somehow when the human body is deprived of sufficient nourishment the brain thinks only of food and survival.

We talked constantly of food - our favorite menus and dishes we had while growing up; those things our mothers made best; what we would eat at our first meal home. We dreamed up a lot of strange recipes for some real and some imaginary food. Since paper was a scarce item most of my memos and recipes were written on the back of photos and other mementos that I had in my billfold, or on scraps of waste paper from the German camp office. My notes included such items as peanut butter pie, potato fudge, pineapple fritters, hot tamales (I certainly had never had them at home) etc. Somebody must have been a cook. I had never cooked before and could not have made up these imaginative recipes alone. I have yet to test any of these. Perhaps sometime I will! We made lists of our favorite vegetables, salads, cakes, puddings, other pastries and miscellaneous items as well as breakfast favorites.

We talked about our home towns and States, tried to name State capitals, etc. I have a note indicating that eventually a rec hall was opened and discussions and State clubs were held. I do not recall any of these. To the best of my memory and notes only one other fellow was from New Hampshire, David King of Concord.

We only had the clothes we were wearing when we were captured and they got a little grimy as the days went by. We had one or two cold showers during our captivity. On warm sunny days we would sit in the sun and pick body lice off from ourselves, trying diligently to snap their heads off with our fingertips and making sure we got all the little fellows embedded in our long underwear.

If anyone had any razors the blades soon got so dull they were useless and beards began to grow. Mine was only a dirty looking stubble, reddish gray and brown while some of the others sported real bushy beards.

Tempers grew short as the days went by but no serious fights occurred. An epidemic of spinal meningitis hit the camp at one time and we heard 36 GI's had died from it.

CHAPTER II-8 HAPPY EASTER! LIBERATION APRIL 2, 1945

April 1 was Easter Sunday and it seemed to us that there were fewer guards around, apparently only a skeleton force was left. Our chaplains conducted Easter services and we all gave our own personal prayers and hope for early liberation. On Monday morning, April 2, at 6:15, we were nearly delirious as the gates opened up and American GI's rolled in with tanks, jeeps and armored vehicles.

We later learned we had been liberated accidentally by a stray unit of the 2nd Cavalry Division, 3rd Army, but officially by the 44th Infantry Division, 7th Army who arrived soon after and accepted the surrender of the camp from the German officers remaining. The 44th stayed to handle camp evacuation.

By 10:30 AM ambulances had evacuated the seriously ill. We still ate thick soup and black bread that day since the mess convoy had not caught up with the advance troops. April 3, however, was the last day of "helmet" soup. We had C rations consisting of ham and eggs, crackers, jam and candy. On April 4, a funeral was held for two GI's who had died on Easter Sunday, the last of the 36 who died in captivity. For breakfast we had beans and pork, orange juice, crackers and candy; dinner was chicken and vegetables, coffee, crackers and jam and caramels. Supper was stew, cocoa and more crackers and candy. While all this was greatly relished, our stomachs were not used to such lavish fare and the latrine became a busy place for several days and nights thereafter!

On April 5, women from the Red Cross showed up with coffee and donuts and we even had a movie, William Powell, in "The Thin Man Comes Home" Such an appropriate film! The movie was shown in an empty tavern across the road from the camp. Near the bar, I picked up a few chits and tokens used by the Germans, "Gutschein fur ein Glas Bier." (See memorabilia. In 1979 I returned to this same tavern, now back in operation and was graciously served my glass of beer by a most surprised host, the son of the former owner.)

On April 8, we rolled out of the gates of Stalag IX-B on our way home.