Donald E. Doubek

Company C, 424th Regiment
106th Infantry Division

Donald E. Doubek, Scout for Company C, died without telling his story of capture during the Battle of the Bulge. In an effort to capture this heritage for his son, members of Company C shared their own stories with me. So although titled, Donald's Story, let this be the story of all the brave men of Company C of the 424th Regiment, 106th Infantry Division.

Dedicated to the members of Company C and, especially those who are still living: Ray Ahrens, Carl Canup, Michael Ciliberti, John Davis, Vern Huyck, Richard Idstein, Royce Lapp, John Plenskofski, James Shanahan, John Speliman, Peter Taddeo, Richard Thomas, Wendell Ulrich, Scott Westbrook, and Bill Wiggers.

Battle of the Bulge Company C's Story
by Bonnie L. (Doubek) McNunn

Donald's Story

While still in his teens, life in Longford, Kansas, most likely seemed dull compared to the extra-ordinary events shaping the world during the early 1940's.

Inducted into the U.S. Army

Ignoring parental pleas to finish his high school education, Donald and his buddies were eager to be part of the troops marching off to war. Weighing 123 pounds and standing five feet four and a half inches, Donald underwent his pre-induction physical examination by the U.S. Army on November 24, 1943 and was classified 1A by the Local Board of the Armed Forces.

Less than one month later, he was ordered to be at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, on December 17,1943, with his formal induction into the U. S Army taking place on January 7, 1944. He spent four months there in Basic Training. He had additional training as an Army Scout at Camp Faning, Texas. He then transferred to Camp Atterbury in Indiana just before leaving for overseas as part of the 106th Infantry, 424th Division, and assigned to Company C as a Scout.

According to Richard Idstein, 1st Platoon of Company C, "We spent about 60 hours a week training so I didn't have time to socialize much."

Crossing the Atlantic on the Aquitania

Leaving Camp Atterbury they went to Miles Standish, Massachusetts where specialized training in case of emergency at sea was provided. On Friday, October 20, 1944, just three days prior to his nineteenth birthday, Donald became part of the 106th Infantry "Golden Lion" Division. Under the cover of darkness he boarded the Aquitania at the Port of New York. The big ship before them evoked a mixture of awe, excitement, and foreboding as many had never seen the ocean before, let alone crossed it.

The Aquitania was immense in size stretching 901 feet and having a breadth of 97 feet at her widest point. She was the last of only fourteen four-funneled liners ever constructed, and the first line to have a gyro compass and special "anti-rolling" tanks for stabilization. She had six spacious decks and her large hull was divided into ten watertight bulkheads. Each of her four propellers weighed an awesome 17-1/2 tons. Her once bright superstructure had been repainted a uniform shade of battleship grey and her rambling decks, once the scene of carefree fun, were stripped of anything not expressly necessary to her wartime duties.

Large guns were mounted on her fore and aft decks and the once large swimming pool had been drained and converted to a storage area for food and supplies. She was now carrying six times her normal peacetime passenger load of 2,200. The G.I.'s and their gear were packed into bunks stacked six high in every nook and cranny of the ship.

Late in the morning on October 21, 1944, the Aquitania backed out of her dock in the Port of New York and pointed her bow toward the open sea and Greenock, Scotland. For many of the men, this was the first look at the Statue of Liberty, an awesome sight in the morning light. It was just four months since the D-day invasion and she would be facing the dangers of German U-boats patrolling the North Atlantic.

The jubilation of embarking on the Aquitania soon gave way to seasickness once the ship had reached top speed in the open sea. While one group was sleeping on the bunks, another was on deck doing mopping details or waiting in line for their next meal. Meals were only served twice a day and it took hours to rotate all the men through the line. Hershey bars helped many make it through the eight long days of sea travel.

The Aquitania was met by two Allied escort ships and English flying boats as it approached the coast of Scotland. The men disembarked at the deep water port of Greenock, Scotland, on October 28th, and boarded trains headed south for the midlands of England, arriving first in Banbury, England, and then moving to Southhampton, England, where additional training took place.

John Davis, currently of Monterey Park, California, was the C Company first scout and noted, "Donald and I probably trained together in England. Ivy Morris, who was killed in Belgium, was a second scout and the only one I remember, but I had several seconds."

They boarded another ship which took them to LeHavre, France. Arriving at dark, they to climb a steep hill carrying their backpacks, helmets, rifles, and duffel bags. Richard Idstein recalls, "C Company moved inland and camped in a cow pasture due to less chance of mines, spending several days there even though it was raining. We slept in pup tents and it was strange to feel a cow breathing through the tent canvass."

Nearby was a barn with straw which was enviously eyed, but the troops were told in no uncertain terms to stay away from it. Many of the men used their rain coats for ground cover.

Heading For Belgium

From LeHavre they traveled by truck convoy across France, stopping at Rheims, and then headed for eastern Belgium. There was quite a snowfall, according to Ray Ahrens, and the men were ordered to wash their feet in the belief that this would help prevent infection if

they got frostbite. They built small fires and gathered snow which they put into their helmets to melt.

Ahrens remembers that, "while melting the snow, the heat from the fires would rise into the evergreen trees causing the snow on the branches to fall which often ended up putting out our fires. We would have to start all over again." They also used their helmets to heat soup.

Company C had been issued overshoes several days earlier, but were asked to turn them in for "the troops up front". Unfortunately, it was just a matter of days before they were at the front and had no overshoes.

In the morning they were moving again on curving roads, up and down hills, with truck engines whining and growling, trying to maintain a close convoy. They passed signs that said, "You are now in sight of the enemy." They stopped at a small village with a good size stream running behind it with high cliffs or hills behind that. At night the artillery up in the hills behind the village would light up the sky like lightening flashes. Ahrens believes the village may have been Steinbruck near the Our River.

For three days they endured heavy snow and had no visibility from the air. For that reason they were able to build large enough fires, without risk of observation, to get some of their clothes and blankets dried out. They cleaned their weapons every day and were very serious when it came to thinking about using them very soon.

"None of us were too scared right then," states Royce Lapp, C Company Weapons Platoon, "because we didn't know what we were getting into. The mortars had gotten caked with dirt and snow and a little rust lying in the jeep coming up from LeHavre. We got them all cleaned up and ready to go."

Arriving at the Front

The first day there, about mid-afternoon, they heard a machine gun fire off a burst. It was later determined that a gun mounted on a jeep had flipped down and the impact of the gun on the mounting post started it firing. After the initial scare (imagining it was the Germans), it was considered funny.

Some members of Company C were quartered upstairs in a farm house about 200-feet from the stream. The house was at the end of the small town called Himmeres, a small village near northeast Winterspelt, on the Belgium-German frontier. They unloaded in broad daylight and didn't realize how dose they were to the line and felt fairly safe. Unknown to them, they had been under enemy observation coming into town.

Ironically, according to Royce Lapp, "Here we were closer to the line than we had ever been, yet for the first time since leaving Banbury, England, we had a roof over our heads."

The house had several steps leading in the front door. When you stepped through the door you were in the corner of the barn or livestock quarters; through the left was another door and to the right were the stairs to the platoon's quarters. The family living in the house was very friendly, yet the troops had been instructed to trust no civilians and to go nowhere without side arms. The dining room was also available to the men with a large heavy table, chairs and benches, a good place to write or just sit around at night and talk. The cook stove was there and it was the only place the family had to eat so the troops tried not to

intrude when they were eating. Across from these quarters was a building which had the Army mess kitchen.

The family went out of their way to be cordial and seemed anxious to make friends with the troops.

"I remember very well one of the last nights we were there," writes Royce Lapp. 'The man of the house had come in evenings before and we would practice our German on him. He was about 40 (seemed old to us), not very large and was taking care of the place. He would come in and stir up the fire in our small stove, bring us apples or waffles or hot chocolate (made with real milk), and usually stay awhile to talk. This particular night, Pat our section runner, was playing his harmonica and got off on Christmas carols while the old man was there. We soon coaxed him into singing along. We opened the door to the next room and there was the whole family singing with us. It was a language of song that we all understood. We were singing praises to the same Lord. That was the closest I came to feeling a Christmas spirit that year."

December 16, 1944 - The Germans Break Through

The troops had become accustomed to hearing the sounds of their own guns firing from up the hill across the river behind them. They had been firing harassing fire every day, but the noise on the morning of December 16th was different.

"We had not been there more than a couple of days and were in the morning chow line," recalls Ahrens, "when the residents were conspicuous by their absence. Word came that the Germans had through the front lines. We dropped our mess kits. We were handed two C ration cans and hand grenades. I was issued two boxes of 30-caliber ammunition."

Lapp writes, "If I had realized that was the last hot food we would see for weeks I wouldn't have it."

C Company did not stay intact. Ray Ahrens was with part of C Company's Rifle Platoon near Steinbruck by the Our River. Royce Lapp was with C Company's Weapon Platoon and saw battle closer to Winterspelt, Germany. This story contains portions of both of their experiences which, although experienced several miles apart, were very similar. Although it cannot be confirmed, it is more likely that Donald's experience more closely reflected that of Ray Ahrens as Scouts were assigned to the Rifle Platoon.

Sgt. Gribbin told the troops: "They've broken through Cannon Company and "C" Company is going up to plug the hole." The men believed it to be a heavy combat patrol that happened to hit a weak spot and slipped through. They didn't believe it could be anything more than that as the weather wasn't right for an attack.

The weather was freezing. The men had all the stuff they would need jammed into their packs: rations, gun cleaning oil, extra socks, a blanket, but just before climbing into the trucks they realized they couldn't do much fighting with all that stuff on their backs so they dropped their packs along with their gas masks. That left them with field jackets, wool gloves and overshoes to fight the cold, plus weapons and ammunition.

Company C believed they would go up, meet the bunch that had broken through the line, push them back, regain Canon Company's old positions and set up to hold. They expected their packs and overcoats to be brought to them in the trucks.

"As it turned out," says Lapp, "I never saw my pack, overcoat or any other of my equipment again. There were plenty of uniforms in those duffle bags and the Jerries weren't slow to take advantage of them. We learned later that, dressed in our uniforms, they had a merry time disrupting communications, traffic flow, and supply lines."

Ahrens writes, "Quickly we loaded into trucks. As they were covered, it was difficult to tell how far we went. We stopped in a village, Eigelscheid, and piled out of the trucks. We had moved part of a block when we got our baptism in fire. Hugging the street, I started to pray the Lord's Prayer, and got to 'thy will be done' when the Sergeant yelled, 'Ahrens, go to the jeep and get the pintie.' It connects the machine gun to the tripod. In that rain of death, I got up with my ammo boxes, and crouching very low, I ran back to the jeep. I rummaged around until I found the pintle."

"When I got back the Sergeant yelled, 'Move out.' We scurried out of there to the edge of the village and cut down across a pasture and into the woods [that] were so dense that the back ha if of the squad was left behind. I was sent back to get them. I found them in a few minutes, did an about face and, to my surprise, returned exactly to the squad. We proceeded through the woods and across another and up against another woods where we came under shellfire again."

The troops retreated to Winterspelt.

Ahrens writes, "This gave me an awful feeling like I was letting my country down; like I was a coward and letting down my fellow soldiers. It is of little comfort that I was following the machine gun with the ammunition. We took up defensive positions in the southwestern corner of the village."

The men took position across the cobblestone street from the last stone building where they set up their 30-caliber machine gun to the right of the Winterspelt sign and just across from the stone building. They were about 10-15 feet beyond the house in a cave in the bank at the side of the road which may have been used for fruit or vegetable storage.

During the night the Germans sent up flares lighting up the whole area. The best thing one could do was to remain motionless. A truck pulled up in front of the cave in the middle of the night. It was so dark they couldn't see it, but they could hear German voices. The voices passed on in a few minutes. The next morning they could hear hobnail boot steps on the cobblestones. Closer and louder the footsteps came until finally, almost as one, the MI's cracked. With that, the Sergeants dashed from the cave across the road glancing at the crumpled bodies of the German soldiers.

"Just as I got to the corner of building, there were explosions out in front of me," writes Ahrens. "I turned, saw a door in the rear of the building, yanked it open and almost dived in. I didn't dive far. It was a toilet. I thought it was about as safe as I could find in a hurry."

Company C and the 106th Division occupied a front line that covered over three times the normal distance and, according to all sources of Military documents, thel06th caught the brunt of the German offensive on December 16, 1944.

The shell fire grew heavier and a Captain said, "I'm going for help." Ahrens notes, "He may have been my Captain as we had not been together long enough to really get to know one

another. I later found out our Captain Miller was killed by mid-morning. By late afternoon we had lost 12 men out of 16."

"Our section was broken up and each mortar squad was attached to one of the rifle platoons," writes Lapp. "The terrain was rough and the load of ammo grew heavier with every slippery step. We soon began to see what was waiting for us up ahead. We saw that a fellow can be a beat-up bloody mess and still walk. These boys making their way back to the aid station were not a pretty sight."

Some of the men were not wounded, but were dazed, disoriented, disorganized, and wandering aimlessly looking for buddies. From their comments the men learned that it had truly been a German break-through -- the line hadn't given and bent or fallen back - it had been chewed up right where it was with massive artillery fire and overwhelming infantry assault.

Lapp writes, "It was a baptism in fire to be long remembered." They were whisked off to one side and it soon became instinct to hit the ground with the first whistle, find the lowest depression possible and hug it close. At every little let up or pause in the bombardment the troops would move ahead. The Germans had the woods boxed in as perfectly as if they knew in advance exactly where the troops would be going. It appeared to the troops that they were throwing everything they had at once to catch them before they could reach the Germans.

"They did succeed in getting well over half the company in those first few hours. If I ever did any honest to goodness praying, I did it lying there with my face in the slush. Time had ceased to exist and the cold was no longer your primary concern," writes Lapp. "We were still pushing ahead to get out from under the artillery when we made contact with their infantry. They were taking chances then, practically dropping their shells on their own men. I heard the rip of a burp gun (a very rapid fire German machine gun) for the first time and everyone instinctively scooted back to lower ground as chips flew from the trees above. One of our boys got that first gun with a rifle grenade. From then on it was almost like attack problems we had run over and over at Camp Atterbury."

Lt. McKay, the 1st Platoon Leader, must have seemed invincible to the Krauts. He didn't appear to know the meaning of fear and was ahead of the troops exposing himself to signal the men forward.

"If we had known then what we were doing we probably never would have done it," writes Lapp. "We were bucking the point of a major offensive that was soon going to crush about 40 miles of our lines and penetrate westward about 75 miles. We were green troops pushing back a small element of Hitler's pride and joy -- the 6th and 8th Panzer Armies!"

Lapp's story continues in another direction as he avoided capture. Nonetheless, it is a story of heroics, saving fellow G.I.'s, and defending one position after another.

December 16, 1944 - Captured

The men in Company C did not know what others within the company were doing. It was almost every man for himself.

Ahrens, still in the small building with the toilet, recalls, "I had paused firing for a few minutes when I heard German voices. Very carefully I peered out of the hole. I could only

look for a split second or risk being seen. The best I remember there were about five or six German soldiers on the road in front of the building. The thought flashed through my mind, 'R~fle too unwieldy through that small hole, too slow a rate of fire; I must resort to a hand grenade.' In order to use it, because they were so close, I had to get rid of some of the five seconds on the grenade fuse, so I held the grenade in my right hand, pulled the pin, let the handle fly off in the room, and started the count:
one, one thousand two, one thousand three, two seconds to go. I threw it as hard as through that small hole."

Sensing my time or luck had run out, I started for the back door with the other G.I., Leetz was his name, right behind me. I got about two steps outside the door and turned to see other G.I. 's alongside the building already in the process of surrendering."

Before I could take another step, 'KerWhoom' -- it was a German grenade thrown over the roof I suppose in response to mine. I felt a pain in my right thigh. I was thrown back toward the door and lifted into the air somewhat. Leetz was thrown backwards into the building with a wound on his nose -- it was not bleeding very hard."

"We followed the several G.I. 's in front of us. The lead one was already in the street next to the Germans. As soon as we were all at the street, we were checked over for weapons."

The captured G.I.'s were taken to a place on the east side of the street about. halfway between the curve in the road and the main road running through the village. There, they were checked again for weapons and gave their names, ranks, and serial numbers.

They proceeded to the main road where there lay a dead bloated cow. Just to the northeast of it was a gap in the woods [later identified as a road leading to Grosslangenfeld]. A P-38 Lockheed Lightning fighter plane passed over the village.

Ahrens recalls, "As I turned to the east my eyes came to rest on a dead American soldier laying in a half curled position with his head laying in a shallow puddle of water. My thoughts were, 'Even the dead should not be that way.' My next thought was, 'Did they booby-trap the body?' That is, put an explosive charge under the body so that when the body was moved it would explode killing or injuring some more soldiers."

"About then I was motioned to move toward a captured Dodge weapons carrier. We paused for a bit. My hands were getting cold; I reached in my field jacket pocket and pulled out one sock. I held it up out in front of me and motioned for the German guard to cut it in two which he carefully did. The two halves felt good on my hands."

By this time the Germans had gotten their wounded together.

Prisoners of War

The captured men of Company C mounted the German weapons carrier. The wounded Germans served as guards by placing their rifles across their knees, pointing them right into the American's mid-sections. This was not a choice situation and became scary as the truck roared to life and jerked into motion down the road.

Looking into passing fields, the prisoners noticed holes appearing in the ground, evidence of American artillery fire. The truck engine noise was covering up the incoming noise of rounds. Ahrens remembers thinking, "...further away, no closer, etc.

Just outside of Winterspelt where the road turned and headed down hill the truck met an oxen with large horns pulling a cart. The road was narrow and as they passed, it caught a horn on the side of the truck. It's neck was twisted around until it appeared ready to snap, then it came loose. They continued down the hill winding through the woods and dismounted at the bottom.

The prisoners were herded into a line for first aid, an indiscriminate mix of German and American soldiers. As the line shuffled along, men were being given shots. Ahrens recalls thinking, "What are those? Everyone was getting shots so I'm not going to have a choice." He later determined they were tetanus shots. After getting his shot, a paper bandage was placed on Ahrens hip injury.

From there they were loaded onto a good size bus with bench seats running lengthwise. There were a couple of lights in the ceiling, but just light enough so they could see one another. The bus windows were blacked out. On the bus the men were mixed German and Americans, without order.

Ahrens writes, "Before long I dozed off The bus made a lurch and I woke feeling my helmet moving against steel. I tipped my head back away from the noise. What had happened? I and a German soldier had dozed off, and as we did we had tipped together and were resting against one another. The strangest feeling came over me. Here we were just two soldiers reduced to one common level."

At no time on these rides or marches did the prisoners talk. It was almost absolute silence... .men without voices. They were taken further into Germany to the village of Gerolstein where they arrived at dark and were kept in a building with a large room. In the morning, more prisoners were brought in.

Among these was Duane Anderson, a G.I. who had been in basic training with Ahrens at Camp Fanning, Texas. Anderson and Ahrens were glad to see someone they knew.

Late in the day the prisoners boarded a train with a shrill whistle. The train moved out at dark so the town was not visible. Trains had to run at night to avoid their smoke being seen in daylight or risk being strafed and bombed by Allied pilots. The train was a passenger train compartmentalized with benches crosswise facing one another with a side door. The prisoners huddled together for warmth.

As the train made its way through darkness, it passed a sign which said, Koln (Cologne), before halting in a rail switch yard. The city was being bombed close enough that the flashes showed the rails next to the train car. There was a hole where the rails had been and they were bent upward in huge circles. Vibrations rattled the car as the train moved on into the night.

The next morning they were deeper into Germany. About mid-day they stopped and the Germans asked for volunteers to distribute soup. Ahrens says, "I sent my helmet out from our compartment and we ate our meal out of my helmet. This was my first recollection of eating or drinking since the evening meal on December 15th. Many G.I. 's had ditched their leggings, helmets, etc. I ditched nothing, a result of upbringing as well as service training. That served me well since my helmet was needed for soup."

At another meal stop several days later, the Germans again asked for volunteers. Through the high window opposite the door were pushed several loaves of hard brown military bread and some cans of meat.

At one time the train passed an overpass in a small town during late afternoon. Out the small window was seen a German civilian on a bicycle with an evergreen Christmas tree being pulled behind him. The scene was too much food for thought for the prisoners captured just prior to Christmas Day.

The Germans passed out fold-over post cards on which the prisoners were authorized to write a letter home. These post cards were the first signs that those captured were still alive, classifying them as Prisoners of War. Many families did not get these post cards until three months after they were written.

Back in El Dorado, Kansas....

A telegram is received from the War Department by Donald's Mother, notifying her that her son, Pvt. Donald E. Doubek, is reported as missing in action since December 16, 1944 after an intense German counter-offensive in France. However, she was unaware of the message for several days as she had been out of town on a buying trip for her store, the Doubek Hat and Dress Shop. She collapsed at the news and was taken to the Allen Memorial Hospital.

On March 7, 1945, Donald's mother received a second message from the War Department informing her that Donald was a Prisoner of War and interned in Stalag Ill-A, Luckenwalde, Germany. She had received a letter from Donald the previous Wednesday stating the same thing.

Life as a P.O.W.

January 20, 1945. The men were deloused. They undressed and the clothes they put in a basket were put in fumigating chambers. A German sat with a bucket in front of him with a swab on a stick and as they passed facing him, out of the bucket came the swab, and with the deft of a person with much experience, he moved the swab in a circular motion around the men's genitals. It burnt.

From there they hurried to the shower room which had steaming water coming from numerous nozzles in. the ceiling. They tried to cool the swabbed area . but it was like ting fire with fire. They showered for only a few minutes and then their clothes were brought to them.

They continued on in the train arriving sometime in the night and stumbled from the train into the cold air. They were herded to flatbed trucks without any side boards and crowded into them standing up.

Their next stop: POW Camp **Stalag XI-B.**

The prisoners were separated with those having Jewish names going somewhere else. Many of the G.I.'s were not aware that Jews were being treated different by the Germans. They were herded to a barracks and given a blanket measuring approximately 3' x 4'. It was not uncommon for two men to share their blankets, overlapping them for maximum coverage. If a G.I. happened to still have his overshoes when captured, you would see them sticking out from under his blanket when he slept. He dared not take them off or they would have

been stolen. The bunks were bare boards. There was a place at the end of the barracks for a toilet, but feces covered the wall and floor. An alternative was a ditch dug outside, but no privacy. It was not uncommon to be harshly awakened in the middle of the night for searches.

Prisoners were sparingly given Red Cross parcels, or at least parts of them. They contained dried fruits, chocolate bars, powdered milk called Klim, cigarettes, vitamins, salt and paper packets, and meat. It would not be uncommon for a small group of prisoners to divide a single chocolate bar among themselves. Gold top Parker ink pens were hot trading items for food as well as Solingen straight razors.

Sleeping on bare boards, especially for the wounded, pushed prisoners to, the limit. Ray Ahrens writes, "I saw the Germans putting up tents in the prison yards and putting straw in them... .one night the air raid sirens started and the lights went out inside the barracks as well as all of the outside lights. From bomb flashes I could see just enough to dash to the tent, grab up a large armful of straw, and run back to the barracks and to the bunk. If the Germans would have caught me, I might have been shot on the spot. If other G.I. 's had seen what I was doing, it would have gotten out of control, then who knows what. Of course, thereafter, our bunk was much more easy to lay in. I still don't know how I got away with it. Dumb luck, I guess."

The men were grateful for the Army-issued clothes they had on when captured: long woolen underwear, field jacket, good shoes, leggings, wool knit helmet liner. Many had left their gloves in their barracks bag when first ushered to the front and had no time to get them.

On Christmas. Day prisoners were given a half a glass of beer which tasted kind of good, but more important they were hoping there was some food value in it. Many of the men suffered dysentery and hunger was eating away their body weight. Many prisoners suffered frostbitten feet, many had skin infections oozing pus, others had breathing problems.

On a sunny morning around the first of the year the prisoners were told to form ranks outside the barracks. Food was rationed. Every so many prisoners received a can of meat; every so many more got a loaf of hard bread. The prisoners would share with one another.

They were moved again, this time riding in plain box cars with enough room only for them to sit. No sooner had the box car been filled and the lock clacked on the door, when the prisoners heard fighter plane engines growling for all they were worth, machine guns going rat-a-tat-tat, and wind screaming past their wings. The prisoners could not see out. There were two holes about seven inches by sixteen inches up about six feet in opposite corners of the box car. The men sat huddled against the sides and were very frightened, many accepting the fact that they were going to die. Fortunately, the box car in which Ahrens was located took no hits and it grew quiet again.

According to John P. Kline, there was a bombing incident on 23 December 1944 at Stalag XII-A which was at Limburg, Germany, where Donald was prisoner. This was about 25 miles east of Koblenz, and about 110 miles from where Donald was captured. The English bombed the rail yards next to Limburg, a small village named Diez. The heavy winter winds blew the bombing markers over Stalag XII-A. One large bomb hit a brick building inside the camp. There were 63 officers of the 106th, most of them medical officers, who were killed by that one single bomb. In the village of Diez, 163 civilians were killed and nearly 140 houses destroyed.

Many of the 106th POW's were in the rail yards in box cars on their way to Bad Orb, Stalag IX-B. There were a few killed, but not as many as it would have first appeared. The trains, three of them, continued to Bad Orb, 35-miles northeast of Frankfurt after, the rails were repaired over the next two to three days.

Box cars were typically loaded with 80 to 100 men per car. The European box car is roughly half the size of those with which we are familiar in America. Sanitation was nonexistent. Buckets were frequently hung on each end of the cars for human waste and were in frequent use since many of the men suffered from dysentery.

The Germans usually placed a box car loaded with French women ahead of the engine to discourage the French Underground from blowing up the bridges. The train on which Dale Harriman road was no exception.

The bombing and strafing by American planes was not unusual as the cars were not marked. Once, while Harriman was on a train, P-47's strafed the train twice, the first time on the outskirts of Tours. The bridge had been destroyed by bombs. The P-47's destroyed the engine, but also killed 16 men and wounded many more while they were locked in the box cars.

Ahrens writes that one day a dozen prisoners were called out to go to the woods about a mile and half from the camp. Snow was about a foot deep and without the Army-issued leggings, snow would have been in their shoes. About half a mile away they saw a German plane which had belly-landed in the field. The Germans told the prisoners to go into the woods to gather fire wood and return in fifteen minutes.

It could have been a chance to escape, but to what? It was the middle of one of the coldest January's on record, the Allies were about 300 miles to the west, and the Russians just 100 miles. To escape to the Russians meant you might never be seen again. [In 1992 the Russians admitted they had had some POW's they didn't return!] With no food or water, no shelter, plus the enemy, escape maybe wasn't impossible, but definitely stupid. Interestingly, the Germans required the POW's to give them their salt and pepper packets from the Red Cross parcels so they couldn't be used to throw off tracking dogs!

The wood gathered was not for the POW's; it was given to the Germans.

Prisoners were fed once a day: a bowl of cabbage soup, maybe a chunk of meat; maybe a cabbage worm or two (they never bothered to look!), some hard bread. Once a week they got a thick barley soup which was good. They also got coffee. Because the coffee was hot and the barracks only had cold running water (from 3am until 8am), it was not uncommon for the men to use some of the coffee for shaving. The Germans would give the prisoners two cigarettes a week but they were very mild and not good enough for trading for other items.

Ahrens remembers, "One day my portion of the Red Cross parcel was part of a box of prunes. I nibbled at them a little, then a little more, and then I noticed I had nibbled quite a few of them. Well, late in the night I had to head to the toilet. I recall I was a little short of making it. I had never learned until that night the effects of a lot of prunes, especially on not too full a stomach."

Americans were separated from British and Russian prisoners. When the air raid siren went on, out went the lights. The men had been warned by the American officers as well as the

Germans that a lit cigarette could be seen for an incredible distance. In fact, the Germans had told them if they saw a light they would shoot right at it.

"I looked out the window (at the sound of the sirens) and saw a light flickering in the washroom of the British barracks next to ours," writes Ahrens. "In our washroom I loosened the faucet knob, opened our window, and hurled the knob at the light. It must have hit the window frame so I loosened another one and hurled it. I could hear the glass break, and the fire went out immediately!"

In the camp carpenter shops they built mummy shaped coffins. Every so often one was used, almost always out of the Russian part of the camp.

Daily life in the prison camp was varied and often depended on a prisoner's bartering capability. Cigarettes were the most popular form of barter, but food such as bread was equally good. At one point the Russian prisoners began paying for things with more cigarettes than the Americans, creating a prison inflation on goods. The Americans persuaded them to keep prices level and equal for everyone.

Somehow a few Americans had acquired a violin, a guitar, an accordion and a harmonica and put on a show. One of the tunes was: "Grandpa nearly eighty, says by cracky, I'm going to marry Katy, and they're doing the boogie now..." This relieved anxiety for a few minutes, but fear was a constant companion. Prisoners had been forewarned not to be surprised if the guards in the towers opened up on them with their machine guns. It kept prisoners in line and conversations minimal among men.

About the first of March 1945 the prisoners were told they were vacating the camp as the Russian Army was at Atettin, about 50 miles east, on the Oder River. Prisoners were assembled into ranks and marched out of camp through a large overhead stone gateway. It looked as if it had been there several hundred years. This was in the northwest corner of Neu Brandenburg. The weather that day was moderate and as the prisoners marched they jettisoned anything not absolutely necessary. The stony silence as they marched was conspicuous.

They saw a road sign which read Maichin. There were small towns before that, and by the end of the first day the men were dragging their feet. It is estimated they had walked twelve miles that first day before turning off the road and entering a barn. Some soldiers were hit in their backs with rifle butts to hurry them to the back of the barn; others rushed past the guards trying to avoid this punishment. The men were packed in the barn; in the dark every move resulted in your hand being in someone's face or stomach. The only good thing about being packed in was that it kept you warm.

Other towns were passed: Teterow, Gustrow. They plodded along until their next stop at a really large barn. Access was through an outside ladder and through an 3 x 5 foot door. The next morning several G.I.'s were missing at roll call. When the German's threatened to go through the barn with pitch forks, they hurried out. It was a dumb thing to do because they were too far away from any place that could be called safe.

The prisoners were thirsty having little water to drink and some rushed to the river's edge for water. A German officer fired his pistol at them, high over their heads, and they rushed back to the line. Ray Ahrens recalls, "I was thirsty, too, but I had put a small stone in my mouth. This seemed to help. It also kept my mouth shut... that helped, too."

Ahrens continues, "At another place we were kept, the building alleyway had a gunny sack of oats. I took a handful and put them in my pocket. I probably used as much energy hulling the oats as I got from eating them. One time I was the last one out of the German supply building, saw a chance and took it. I grabbed (stole) a loaf of bread... .waltzing again with the grim reaper! As I walked toward the rest of the group, the German's were yelling, I hoped at one another! Of course, I imagined they were looking for the bread. As quickly as I got into the barn I cut it up in pieces and got rid of it. This was foolish. Even though we were losing weight, we were not yet desperate."

Had he been caught, he most likely would have been shot on the spot.

The sights along the road varied. They passed horses pulling wagons. They saw oats being thrashed with a stationary steam engine, baling the straw into loose bales right behind the thresher. At another farm they saw a McCormick Deering Big Four hay mower, reminding the men of home. The tractors were two-cylinder (like John Deere) and called Lantz Bull-Dogs.

Around the first of April the prisoners came to the Elbe at Dannenberg. The river was overflowing onto grassy pastures. The Germans allowed the men to undress so they could go into the river to bathe. The water was cold and they had nothing with which to dry themselves.

After passing Parhion, then Neustadt, then Ludwiglost, then Dannenberg, the prisoners realized they were marching in a curve toward the southwest and then, later, almost due south. They considered these twists and turns a good sign that the Western Allies were advancing as the days went by. Fear developed among some of the men that if this were true the Germans might march them back across the Elbe and east to Lord knows what.

One day some American planes dropped bombs. The Germans allowed the prisoners to take shelter up against a stone fence, most likely in the hopes that the planes would move on.

Another day on top of a hill, the prisoners could see radar screens revolving slowly as B-17 bombers droned overhead. The planes dropped tinfoil to disrupt and fool the German radar. On sunny days this made the sky glitter like it was decorated. One day planes were heard several miles away and the prisoners gathered to watch B-17's in huge groups almost blanket the sky. They could see their vapor trails head down and right through the bomber's formation. The German planes took out two B-17's, one bomber trailing smoke made a large "U" turn losing altitude all the time. A few parachutes appeared and then the plane exploded into a million shiny pieces in the sunlight. The other plane just nosed over and spiraled to the ground. The crew joined the rest of the prisoners.

Because the American forces were so close to the prisoners, they were frequently marched late into the night. One night a small German car driving with only its blackout lights ran into the column knocking down several G.I.'s and a German guard.

Near dawn one morning, about three-fourths of a mile from Wolmirstedt, they heard artillery and soon a squadron of American P-47 fighter planes appeared. The prisoner's scattered and held their breath as other POW's, mistaken for enemy troops, were strafed and lost their lives. The prisoners were lucky because a few minutes later those planes bombed and rocketed the town. American troops were just a few miles from the prisoners but they did not get liberated. Instead they were marched back away from them.

At this point there were about 200 POW's and German guards in the group.

Because of that incident the men were marched late into the night until they reached another large barn. The next morning as the prisoners woke, it was obvious that the end of their captivity was close. Most of the guards had disappeared. The German Sergeant who was left in charge of the prisoners, said, "Alles Kaput (all is finished)." He told the prisoners if he were given orders to move them, he would leave and not march them further. He said he knew what they were up against. He was really caring and told the men he had been a prisoner of Americans in World War I. He was returning the kindness of his treatment.

Liberated!

About 1:30 p.m. on Friday, the 13th of April 1945, an American jeep pulled into the square and an American officer shook hands with a few of the G.I.'s. The prisoners were given K rations and the jeep turned around, leading them down the road to a small village several miles away. The prisoners marched to the edge of the village and stopped while an officer went through the village telling the residents to leave. The prisoners followed in like a swarm of rats.

The first thing the prisoners did was heat water in a tub on a stove. Some men went to a chicken house declaring rights to chickens and eggs. They bathed and dressed. Ray Ahrens went to a dresser "but nothing was left but a pair of women's pants (no problem), I put them on. What a relief after four months in the same clothes!" He put his old outer clothes on over them.

The next day U.S. Army 6x6 trucks were there to pick up the prisoners. Several hours later they arrived at Hildeschein, given good warm clothes and dusted with DDT. The men had their heads shaved because of the lice.

The command came to load up, and the men climbed aboard C47's. The planes flew close to the ground staying tight in formation to protect each other from German fighter plane attacks. The planes were so dose together you could see faces in the other plane's windows. They were flown to Reims, France, then taken to Camp Lucky Strike at LeHavre.

Camp Lucky Strike

Flying in low over fields, Camp Lucky Strike was in sight. The men could see wrecked planes on the edges of the field.

After the Allies secured the French harbor of LeHavre on the eastern side of the Bay of the Seine, the Americans began ringing the city with camps that served as staging areas for new troops arriving. Most of the camps were located between LeHavre and Rouen.

The camps, by war's end, were devoted to processing liberated American POW's. The camps were named for American cigarettes, which were fast becoming a universal currency. The places were called Camp Chesterfield, camp Lucky Strike, Camp Old Gold, Philip Morris, Pall Mall, etc. Unfortunately, the camps also had other nicknames: Pneumonia Hole, repple-depples, repo-depots. Trench foot ran rampant. So did the flu. They were not much more than canvas tents sitting in mud.

Camp Lucky Strike was the biggest transit camp, meaning troops did not stay long. It was opened in December 1944 and closed in February 1946. The camp was like a U.S. town

with theaters, hospitals, PX and gift shops, and it mainly consisted of more than 12,000 tents. At times, more than 100,000 U.S. soldiers stayed there.

The men arriving at Camp Lucky Strike were suffering from the intense cold and lack of sleep. Cots were assembled, stoves setup, and fuel procured for the weary men. The heat from the stoves served to thaw the dirt floors and transform them into ankle-deep mud. To remedy this, gravel was hauled in pails, steel helmets, and any other container that could be found. Some tents had wooden floors, doors, shelves, and cabinets, but not all.

After the prisoners were at Camp Lucky Strike a week, they were transported to the docks for the Liberty ship to take them home. Ray Ahrens was in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean returning home when V-E Day was declared.

Donald came home.

Page last revised
James D. West
www.IndianaMilitary.org