

# James Sutton

*106th Infantry Division  
Stalag 9-B*

## **Jim Sutton of Cleveland Heights recalls being POW in Germany - A world at war**

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On Christmas Eve 1944, British bombers attacked a German railroad yard, unaware that they could also be hitting boxcars containing American GIs captured in the Battle of the Bulge and being transported to POW camps.

When the scream of bombs and ground-thumping explosions finally faded, a voice drifted from one of the boxcars, singing "Silent Night." Soon, that voice was joined by dozens more, united in a forlorn Christmas carol of war.

Jim Sutton, 83, of Cleveland Heights, believes he may be the last in his old platoon still around to remember that small glimmer of hope in the otherwise grim experience awaiting fellow members of the unit they called "the Sitting Duck Division."

The moniker was applied to the Army's **106th Infantry Division**, which, shortly after training, was rushed to the front lines in the Ardennes Forest.

When the Germans launched a surprise attack in what became known as the Battle of the Bulge, Sutton's regiment was surrounded and overrun. More than 7,000 soldiers in the division were captured (including future author Kurt Vonnegut, who would write about his experiences in "Slaughterhouse Five").

Some of the soldiers considered making a run for the American lines. Among them was **John Moore**, who recalled in his book, "Sitting Duck Division," how Sutton probably saved his life.

He wrote: "I certainly didn't want to give up! I asked if anyone had a compass? Somebody threw one to me and Jimmy came over, snatched it out of my hand and smashed it, saying, 'I promised your bride that I would look out for you. You're talking suicide, and I won't let you do it.' As it turned out, Jimmy was right."

Their unit had been in combat barely 10 days when they were hit, said Sutton, who remembered the blowing snow and bitter cold that accompanied the attack. He was accustomed to hard winters, having grown up as the son of a sawmill worker in Sault St. Marie, Mich. Sutton was already planning to enlist when he was drafted in 1943, if only to avoid the icy glares he would get from parents with sons already in the service.

But nothing really prepared him for the cold reality of war.

Sutton and other captured GIs were taken to a POW camp in Germany. "The worst things were the filth and hunger," Sutton recalled.

Daily rations, eaten out of their helmets, consisted of a dipper of thin tea, a small loaf of bread divided among eight men and a dollop of gruel. Almost every day, one of their own died from starvation and the cold.

They spent most of their time talking about food, remembering their favorite dishes, while killing body lice with their thumbnails, said Sutton, who dropped from 165 pounds to 110 while a POW.

He was able to send a postcard letting the folks back home know he was still alive. Sutton quipped that when his mother saw the camp's location in **Bad Orb**, Germany, "she thought it was code for telling her that I had something wrong with my eyes." Despite the hardships, the prisoners were not treated badly by guards who were mostly too old to serve on the front and could see the end of the war nearing, Sutton said. He spent four months as a POW until he was liberated. He still gets teary recalling the sight of an American tank at the front gate. "It felt good. Real good," he hoarsely whispered.

After his service, Sutton resumed his prewar trade as a plasterer, working for the Cleveland Board of Education. That's how he met his second wife, Julia, who was a teacher, and, as Sutton recalled, "I kept finding more and more work to do in her room." He retired from the school system as an assistant to the business manager in 1987. As the reminders of his imprisonment faded, Sutton could even laugh at one of the most wildly improbable depictions of World War II American POWs, in the old TV comedy series "Hogan's Heroes."

In recent years Sutton's health, not barbed wire, has kept him in check. He had a triple-bypass heart operation in 2001 and nowadays is always tethered to an oxygen machine. Sutton shrugged off the latest challenge of his life, saying he just goes with the flow, wherever it leads. Like the kind of crossword-puzzle fan that he is - one who never checks to see if his answers are correct.

Like the situation 64 years ago, when defeat and surrender were the only war he knew. "I wasn't scared, or anything like that," he said. "There wasn't much you could do. You're captured. That's it."

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