

Jacob H. Underwood "Jake"

590 Field Artillery/ Battery A
Stalag 9-B

Fort Scott veteran discusses his time as a prisoner of war

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By Ruth Campbell/Herald-Tribune

Knowing that he would be drafted, Jake Underwood signed on for duty in the U.S. Army to serve in World War II. Little did he know that he would be taken prisoner by the Germans for five months and endure what most would prefer not to think about.

Underwood, now 92, told his story of captivity to a group of about 25 people at Presbyterian Village recently to mark National POW/MIA Recognition Day, Sept. 16. From World War II through Desert Storm, 83,578 have been listed as unaccounted for, according to the Department of Defense's Prisoner of War/Missing Personnel Office Web site.

Dressed in his pressed khaki uniform, Underwood offered a recollection of his experience. He spent time in the 3rd and 7th Armored Division and got ready for D-Day and was sent to the 106th Infantry Division at **Camp Atterbury** in Indiana, helping train new recruits. Shipped out to Germany, Underwood was put on the front line.

Hitler began the Ardennes Offensive, or the Battle of the Bulge. Underwood and his fellow soldiers were surrounded by panzer divisions. "When it was all over, we were trying to stop the Ardennes Offensive. We got no aerial support whatsoever. We were overrun. We started toward the front again. There was so much confusion. Nobody really knew what went on," he said.

"When we were through trying to stop Hitler on that Ardennes Offensive, we were out of ammunition. We had one shell left. Years later, the division commander said if we hadn't surrendered they would have made mincemeat out of his men," he added.

The next morning, Underwood's unit moved over a hill and down in a valley. A white flag went up. "The minute we did that, there was a German every three feet with rifles pointed at us," he said. He and the men with him had to put their hands over their head and start marching. "There were probably 100 of us. We went through a small creek and there was blood running down" it, he said. "That was one of the most tiring things I ever did was march six miles with my hands over my head."

Their captors took everything the soldiers had -- money, watches, any personal belongings. He remembered it being very cold and there being no blankets. That first night, they slept in a pig sty. The next day, they marched 40-60 miles. "Some men wanted to break and run, but that was an opportunity to lose your life," Underwood said. "We survived the march."

They stopped at a horse barn. It was one of the coldest winters Germany had ever recorded. Underwood went three or four days without water and food. "You can live without food, but after three or four days without water, it gets pretty rough," he said.

The prisoners were taken to a rail yard where they were getting bombed every 15 minutes. "We could see every bomb that fell. ... Men prayed to the holy heavens" just to survive, which they did.

On Christmas Eve, they got to Bad Orb prison. "We were decked three high. We had compost for mattresses and two men to a bunk," he said. A small blanket was provided for two men and they were never out of their clothes or took their combat boots off.

There was very little food. Breakfast was tea, which he said resembled dead grass in water. Lunch was soup, which was more like water and dinner was a loaf of bread for six men. Some of the men thought the bread was made out of sawdust. "Maybe it did, maybe it didn't, but it made pretty fair bread." They got one Red Cross parcel the whole time they were held captive, but heard there was a warehouse full of provisions.

Every morning, the Germans would take the soldiers outside and count them. If they missed one, they would count again.

"That was pretty severe punishment to be out there every morning," Underwood said.

"The Germans didn't have very much either," he said.

The camp was liberated in 1945 by the 6th Armored Division. By then, Underwood had lost 45 pounds from his 5-foot-11-inch, 192-pound frame. He said it wasn't long, though, before he was flown out to Camp Lucky Strike in France. He said they had to eat carefully after being deprived of sustenance for that long, but there was a story of a soldier eating 40 doughnuts and dying.

From France, the troops were put on an American ship sailing to the United States. After seeing the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, Underwood said, "You're never going to get me on the other side of that."

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