The War Years

1943-1945

My military experiences including the Battle of the Bulge
and as a prisoner of the Germans

Revised and updated July 2020

by

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Preface

Last February, I opened a chest that had been sitting in our basement untouched for at least 40 years. In it I found a trove of wartime memorabilia; personal accounts written during captivity, some by me and others by fellow prisoners. I also found a Troop Roster, photos, names, dates, locations and much more. The earlier editions of my experiences were based on a tape dictated entirely from memory in July 2007. This new material, plus additional references gathered over the years proved that these earlier editions weren't entirely accurate. Therefore this new edition is the 4th and final one of my military experiences.

Paul G. Thompson

June 2020

Here I want to acknowledge my daughter Margaret's contribution, without whose yeoman service this edition would not have seen the "light-of-day". Margaret made sense of my hand-written scrawls and deciphered my byzantine format directions. Thank you Margaret, you're a jewel!

Accolades for the 106th Infantry Division

("The Golden Lions")

"This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American Victory."
Winston Churchill British Prime Minister

"However, to one division, the 106th Division "Golden Lions", this great American battle would become a living nightmare. This division and its men would have the dubious honor of being hit by a greater concentration of enemy strength than any other American division in the war. Also, in their single brief engagement of the first three days of the battle, the 106th suffered more losses than any other American division in World War II."
Josepn M. Giarrusso – Historian

"When the history of the Ardennes fighting has been written, it will be recorded as one of the great strategic Allied successes of the war in Europe. Tactically, for the 106th and the other American divisions involved, it was a bitter and costly fight. But it becomes increasingly clear that the Germans expended in that last futile effort those last reserves of men and materiel which they needed so badly a few months later. The losses and sacrifices of the 106th Infantry Division paid great dividends in eventual victory. We are dedicated to those gallant men who refused to quit in the darkest hour of the Allied invasion, and whose fortitude and heroism turned the tide toward overwhelming victory."
Donald A. Stroh Major General, 106th Commanding

"They never quit. The American soldiers of the…106th Infantry Division stuck it out and put up a fine performance. By Jove, they stuck it out, those chaps."
Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery

"Tonight for the first time there may be told the story which, in its dual aspects, is one of the most tragic and yet one of the most glorious episodes in the history of American arms…the story of America's 106th Division…The record they wrote is a shining example for all of the armed forces of the United States."
Cedric Foster, Newscaster 21 Jan 1945

"No troops in the world, disposed as your division had to be, could have withstood the impact of the German attack which had its greatest weight in your sector. Please tell these men for me what a grand job they did. By the delay they effected, they definitely upset von Rundstedt's timetable."
Lt. Gen. Courtney H. Hodges, Commander First Army

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The time covered in this account is not very long. It is only 34 months from the 13th of February 1943 to the 29th of November 1945. But it includes not only instances of terror, adventure and extraordinarily good fortune but it also covers the formative years of my adult life. Looking back at it from 50 years or so later it's obvious to me that the decisions that I made and those decisions that were forced upon me by others in that period established the course of my adult life and of course the lives of those of you who became dependent upon me.

I'll begin on the date of my first contact with the military – 13th February 1943, the day I enlisted in the Army. I enlisted not only because of a certain patriotic fervor (I certainly did not want to be the only young man who had not served) but also because I knew that the only chance I had to finish school was to enlist in the Army and have my draft date deferred. At the time I was 17 years old and I was in the third year of a four year baccalaureate program at the University of Chicago. At that time the University of Chicago granted credit for a scholastic year only if the student passed a series of comprehensive examinations given during the first two weeks of June. Since my birthday is the 16th of May, I was certain to be called up before that date, thereby losing credit for an entire year of work. The recruiting officer promised that by enlisting my call-up would be delayed until the last week in June. As it turned out, he was wrong. I was called up on the 13th of May and I lost that year of schooling anyway. An ironic twist to this was afforded by Dr. Theodore Case, my boss at the University of Chicago Experimental Neurosurgery Lab where I was working at the time. The afternoon of February 13, after I had enlisted, Dr. Case told me that the lab's work had been declared essential to the war effort and he could get me an indefinite deferment. I've often wondered in the years since what my life would have been like and what I would have to say in these pages had he spoken only a few hours earlier.

At any rate I was called up on the 13th of May and was given a choice of going to the Signal Corp Radio School as a civilian or going on active duty and training as a rifleman for the infantry. This was a "no-brainer" – I chose radio school. I was ordered to Ashland, Wisconsin to the Bancroft School of Electronics to begin training as a Mechanic Learner leading to the position of a radar repairman. At that time radar was the leading edge of technology and I was certainly excited about the prospect of becoming involved in this. This was a major course correction in my life. Prior to this I had intended

to become involved in archaeology and all things ancient. Those things still interest me, of course. I was probably destined to become a teacher or something else in academia. However because of my experiences at the signal school I remained in electronics and went on into engineering and into various positions in industry.

The assignment to Ashland was every recruit's dream – serving in the "Vacationland of the North" during the height of the vacation season under army orders, but without military restrictions, money in my pocket and in a town almost devoid of other young men. What's not to like?

The schooling went on throughout the summer until November 16th when the Radar Repairman Training Program was shut down and I was ordered to active duty at Fort Sheridan. This was a tremendous disappointment to me, but in retrospect, it was an immense stroke of good fortune. I am told that those who had preceded me in the program and went on to become repairmen, are all dead – victims of cancer, cataracts and similar problems induced by the high frequency emissions of the radar klystron. This power source was inadequately shielded and these men were all "cooked" by the radiation. If I had remained in the program and become a repairman that's what would have happened to me. So the evil at the time turned into a Godsend for which I am eternally grateful.

As it happened, I reported to Fort Sheridan on the 20th of November 1943 and was sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for 16 weeks of infantry basic training. It seems like I was destined to be an infantry rifleman after all. Fort Benning, Georgia is the major training center for foot soldiers, paratroopers, rangers and so forth. I was pretty excited about the assignment. I grew up on the south side of Chicago and, except for scout camp in Northern Wisconsin, I had never traveled further than the Indiana Dunes. The prospect of going to the south, seeing different people and perhaps even a different culture was exciting and I looked forward to it.

Infantry basic was essentially a physical training program built around learning battlefield survival skills. We learned to fire the M1 rifle, the 30 caliber machine gun and the 60 millimeter mortar. We learned to fire the carbine and a weapon we called the "grease gun". We learned how to throw a grenade. We were taught hand-to-hand fighting both with and without a trench knife, how to fend off a bayonet attack, how to make a bayonet attack, how to dig a foxhole, how to use a gas mask, etc. etc. The whole was interspersed with forced marches, two mile runs, obstacle courses and 45 minutes of calisthenics every day. By the end of 16 weeks you were remarkably fit. In fact, you could almost tell how many weeks of training a city boy had undergone by how physically fit he looked. This is not to give the impression that I enjoyed this. On the contrary, I deeply resented the regimentation. There was constant ridicule and humiliations – all part of the training. But I was grateful later on for it because on at least one occasion, and perhaps more, what I had learned prevented serious injury and perhaps even saved my life. But more on that later.

Besides the physical training, I learned far more than I had bargained for. The training group included men from all over the U.S. Some from Philadelphia, from New York, from South Carolina, from the

Florida swamps. There were sharecroppers, there were men from the hard scrabble farms in Oklahoma, Nebraska and so forth. I grew up in Chicago in a middle class home with a strong moral background, education oriented and generally associated with people of similar backgrounds. I was astounded at some of the men in our group. It never occurred to me that people lived like that. I thought people like that existed only in novels. So basic training was an education in the wider world certainly. As I said, I didn't like it, but it was valuable, and I think with the draft no longer in place, you of the younger generations are the poorer for not having experienced it.

Basic training was essentially uneventful, but there are three items that stick in my mind. The first of these is Stabley – "Sad Sack Stabley". He was a boy from the East somewhere who simply could not grasp the fundamentals of Army life. He was probably of marginal intelligence. I look back at it today and his snafus are certainly funny, but at the time they were far from funny because they resulted in confinement for the barracks for most weekends. He was, for instance, totally unable to march in time. It was torture to be in the column in front of him. He was always tramping on your heels. As I say, we hated him because his failures always gigged our barracks and we spent most of our weekends confined. But he did manage to complete the training and he was sent to the front somewhere. I've often wondered how he fared and if he survived.

The second occasion of vital interest to all of you is that I wrote a letter to Laura Jones. Laura Jones is a lovely girl who lived across the street and she is now your mother or your grandmother, whichever. The situation was this: Laura and I had dated some before I went into service but nothing came of it and we hadn't seen or written to one another for more than a year. The training group was camped at the rifle range when I learned that her mother had died. I liked her mother very much. She was a wonderful person and I determined to write Laura a letter. So I pulled up an ammunition case, found a candle somewhere and write Laura a note. The end result is, as they say, history. We were married August 2, 1947 and the rest you know about.

The third item that might be of interest concerns a swimming experience. There was a stream that ran by the rifle range encampment and we were forbidden to go near it. Two friends and I assumed that this was more of the Army's meaningless restrictions. Georgia in June is hot and muggy so one Sunday we sneaked out of camp and went swimming. Bad Move! We soon learned that there was sense in this restriction. The stream was lined with poison-oak bushes. We put our towels on these bushes and, of course, rubbed poison oak all over our bodies. I wound up in the hospital, missed the last two weeks of training and didn't graduate with my group. This was probably just as well as I heard they were all sent to the Pacific. The experience, however, was not without value. I learned that at least some of the time, sergeants do know what they are talking about.

In the meantime, I remained behind and was detailed to clean the soot and old grease off of cook stoves while the command structure figured out what to do with me. Ordinarily this would have been no problem but while in basic I had been assigned to ASTP - the Army Specialized Training Program. This meant that after basic training you were sent to college at government expense with the idea of developing scientists, teachers, intelligence people, engineers and the like, to support the

war effort. But sometime in April or May of 1944 this program was closed down and all ASTP personnel were sent to front line units to support the invasion – hence the problem of what to do with me. At the time I was covered with open sores from the poison oak lesions and was not in any condition to go to anywhere.

Eventually, sometime in July, I was ordered to the 106th Infantry Division at Camp Atterbury in Indiana where I was assigned to a rifle company of the 424th Infantry regiment. I certainly wanted out of this assignment. So at the earliest opportunity I told the sergeant in charge that I was a trained radio repairman and was promptly transferred to the Signal Company, assigned to the radio repair shop. Unfortunately this didn't turn out to be a good move. My fellow repairmen all had extensive training at Fort Riley, the Signal Corp training center. I had never seen any of these radios. I could fix any radio put in front of me but first I had to figure out how to get into it – not always an easy task. The sergeant in charge, whose experience, I'm told, consisted of assembling radios on a Westinghouse assembly line, had a "victim". Not only was I the "new kid on the block" but I was also a "College Kid". He "rode" me constantly. I took about two weeks of this before I blew-up and told him off. My next assignment was the mess hall scrubbing greasy pans, peeling potatoes, cleaning grease traps and the like. When my "sentence" was over, I was not allowed to return to the Signal Company and as an ultimate punishment, I was sent to the Reconnaissance Troop to be their radio repairman. However, the troop roster shows that I was a radio repairman in name only. I was entered in the record as "armored car crewman". As it turned out this was rather like sending Brer Rabbit to the briar patch, it couldn't have turned out better. I worked under Harry Nash, the repair sergeant. Harry was a lot older than I was, well into his thirties, with children. Harry was like an older brother to me. He showed me "the ropes" and covered for me when I "screwed up". I liked Harry a lot.

While at Atterbury, at every opportunity I made it to Chicago to visit Laura Jones. Atterbury is just outside of Indianapolis and the trip involved overnight rides on the railroad. These were marathon affairs, standing room only. I would arrive at Dearborn Station about 8:00 Saturday morning, take public transportation home and spend as much time with Laura as possible. Sunday afternoon it was back to Dearborn Station and repeat the trip in reverse. I would return before reveille on Monday and try to stay awake until Taps that night. But I was young, in good shape and it was certainly worth it. I think all of you would agree with that.

Also while at Atterbury I had my first experience driving an automobile. It happened this way: a group of us were on a detail somewhere when the lieutenant in charge ordered me to go to the motor pool and get him a jeep. I had never sat behind a steering wheel, much less driven a car, but I was not about to tell him that. Growing up in Chicago we always used public transportation. My father never owned a car. As I had been with the Signal Company, I was again "the new kid on the block". All these troopers had been together for several months through Basic and the Tennessee maneuvers. I had been with the troop perhaps a week. Besides, I was the youngest man in the troop. I wasn't about to give these guys something more they could razz me about.

So I trudged off to the motor pool thinking driving can't be all that hard. If these guys could do it, so could I. I selected a jeep and studied the instructions on the dash. I already knew about the clutch, the brake, the gas pedal, etc. So after practicing shifting gears a few times I was ready to go. I turned on the ignition, shoved it into gear and gave it gas. What I didn't know was that you must ease the clutch in slowly as the car begins to move. The jeep jerked, jumped and "jackrabbitted" backward onto the road. I turned off the ignition and studied the instructions again. I decided there must be something unique about reverse gear that I hadn't grasped, but since I was only going forward I would worry about that later. Again I turned on the ignition shoved it into first and gave it the gas. The jeep leaped forward and started "jackrabbitting" down the road all while I am steering and frantically re-reading the instructions to see what I had missed. I looked up and found myself staring at a red license plate with a big gold star on it. It was the Brigadier General commanding our artillery battalion. He ordered me out of the jeep. "Soldier, don't you know how to drive, and what are you doing in that jeep?" (This is paraphrased – his actual words were much saltier and to the point).

I explained and, considering the circumstances, my "dressing down" was mild indeed. Years later I mentioned this incident to Joe Haines who had commanded the 2nd platoon. We visited Joe and Clara every year on our semi-annual treks to Mesa, AZ. Joe "lit-up". He was that lieutenant. He didn't remember the private he'd ordered to get him a jeep but he certainly remembered the "dressing down" he got from the Brigadier General for allowing an unqualified man to drive a jeep. I didn't learn to drive until after college and went to work for Honeywell. I bought a used 1948 Ford sedan and got a friend to drive it home for me. Laura enrolled in AAA and then taught me how to drive.

Late in the summer we were ordered to prepare for overseas and on the 9th of October the division entrained for Camp Miles Standish in Taunton, Massachusetts. We were there until the 10th of November when the division boarded the U.S.S. Wakefield. The Wakefield was a converted luxury liner and a very fast ship. It sailed without escort in the hopes of avoiding submarines, which it obviously did. My bunk was in the lowest hold in the ship – E3 – well forward just above the keel. I could hear the water sloshing outside the hull and wondered how I was going to get out of there in the event of an emergency. The crossing was rough. There was a lot of seasickness. Fortunately I had none and I rather enjoyed standing on deck watching the great green swells roll up, over and around the ship and on into the horizon.

On the 17th November the Wakefield docked at Liverpool. We debarked in the dark and boarded a train for Stow-on-the-Wold. Stow is a town in the Cotswolds, a lovely part of England and a common vacation area for the British. We got a kick out of the town names in the area: Stow-on-the-Wold, Bourton-on-the-Water, Upper and Lower Slaughter and so forth. Marching through the beech forest from the rail siding after we had detrained, I remember thinking that this is ground the Romans marched over; the Vikings and the Anglo Saxons fought here, the Canterbury pilgrims had walked this ground. It was hallowed. I had never hoped to be in such an ancient and historic place. Naturally I was awestruck. After liberation when I had a chance to visit Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris I experienced the same feelings. Knowing history adds so much richness to a travel experience. I recommend it to all of you.

Stow was cold, wet and dark most of the time. There was no heating in the buildings and England is about as far north as the latitude of Labrador. It was dark well after nine a.m. and sunset was about three p.m. My bunk was a table in the town hall. On one clear day, a friend and I rented bicycles and we rode into the nearby town of Cheltenham because I had learned there was a famous girls' school there. Unfortunately the school was "on holiday". We found no girls but the ride through the country was really pleasant. We stopped to talk with several farmers on the way. We enjoyed that a lot. I learned later that looking for female companionship in Cheltenham would have been fruitless. The 424th was billeted in Cheltenham and most days the town was swarming with soldiers. I should add that Laura and I with Sue and Timm and their girls got a chance to go back to Stow about 1984. I didn't recognize anything but the town hall. The town had grown so tremendously and is now a strong tourist attraction. It was really pleasant to go back and see the place that we had knocked around in a bit.

On the 2nd of December the troop left Stow for the Port of Weymouth. Here we were loaded on LSTs bound for Le Havre, France. That was a miserable, cold, rainy, windy day and I had been on guard duty the night before boarding. As I now know I was also experiencing an allergy attack. I could barely carry my barrack bag. I was certainly a "sorry soldier" when I got on board the LST.

The Channel is notoriously rough. The LST shuddered and plunged on every crest but I got kind of a "kick" out of it. I would ride on the end of one of the M8 cannons. The M8s were armored cars and they were chained to the deck. It was better than an amusement park. That lasted until some lieutenant saw me up there and figured I shouldn't be enjoying myself so much and ordered me below.

At any rate, when we got to Le Havre the weather was rough enough that the LST lost both anchors. We had to go back to Weymouth and then repeat the whole experience back to Le Havre by December 7th. At Le Havre the devastation of war was impressed on all of us. The harbor was full of destroyed cranes, half sunken ships and wreckage of all sorts. The coastal guns in the cliffs hung out of their blasted galleries. There was nothing standing in the harbor area except a partial wall with the remains of a Dubonnet advertisement on it. We unloaded and drove as far as Rouen, the medieval capital of Normandy. Rouen is famous for its Gothic Cathedral, the subject of several of Manet's paintings and where the English burned Joan of Arc at the stake. Unfortunately there was no time to visit the cathedral. We slept in a barn for the night.

The next day 9th of December we moved through Belgium, Luxembourg and into the Ardennes Forest near St. Vith with a rest stop at Phillipeville. The local children swarmed all over us with the only English phrase they knew "gotnee gum chum". Sergeant Spade, who had taught French in civilian life, pointed out to the children that Sergeant Le Croix was an American Indian. Sergeant Le Croix was Cheyenne and was the perfect picture of an Indian warrior – right out of central casting. He could have posed for the Indianhead nickel. The children were awestruck and swarmed all over him.

It is worth mentioning that Le Croix went on to receive a battlefield commission as 2nd Lieutenant, became mayor of Rapid City, SD and is a much admired sculptor. I'm told that Rapid City has several of his creations on display in various places about the city.

The 106th Division had been assigned to General Hodges' First Army, the 8th Corp and were to take positions astride the Siegfried Line in Germany. This was expected to be a quiet sector so the division could get some easy seasoning before going into combat. As you know, it didn't work out that way.

The Ardennes is a forested hill country on the border between Belgium and Germany. It's rugged country. The Germans fooled the French in World War I by attacking through the Ardennes. They fooled us in the same way in this war. The initial battles of the Battle of the Bulge were through the Schnee Eiffel and the Ardennes. My division, the 106th Infantry and particularly my company the 106th Reconnaissance Troop were among the first to be attacked and we took the brunt of the Germans' initial assault.

The Ardennes is beautiful. It's Christmas-card country. Their roads wind down into deep valleys. There were quaint bridges crossing the streams, the whole framed by these tall perfectly conical evergreens, heavy snow covering all the branches. However, it quickly lost its appeal as the temperature was just above freezing with mud and slush calf deep. Every time we moved, the trees released a great glob of wet snow which dropped on your head and down in the neck. In the five days we were encamped here, we lost 17 men to trench-foot and other ailments. The result was when the Recon troop moved into battle positions our strength was down to 131 men. We were expected to cover a front which a full infantry rifle company, about 200 men, had previously covered. As per my luck, however, the losses were to my personal favor. In the encampment it was usual for two men to combine shelter halves to construct a low A-frame open at both ends. We got six men together so there were three tents end-to-end. The guys in the middle were warm and comfortable but the guys on the ends would have warm heads but cold feet. The only drawback was getting out to go to the bathroom. The arrangement, however, worked to my advantage in the fact that one of our number was a scout who was armed with an M1 rifle. He got trench foot and was sent back to the hospital. I coveted that rifle. We were armed with carbines which were mere "pop guns", 25 caliber, too light to be of any use in battle. So I "glommed" onto that rifle as well as his blankets when he was sent back. I carried this M1 to the front with me and used it to good advantage in the upcoming battle.

On the 11th of December we received orders to move up to the front and relieve a rifle company of the 2nd Division at a town called Grosslangenfeld. The 2nd Infantry had fought across France since D-Day and deserved a few days of rest. This move was to take place under cover of darkness and complete radio silence. We were ordered to hide our armor after arrival so the Germans wouldn't know the 2nd had been relieved by an armored unit. The move, however, was done by day, and of course, nothing went according to plan except for the radio silence, which proved to be a huge error. When we needed ammunition we were unable to communicate with anyone to order it up.

Grosslangenfeld is over the Belgian border into Germany and on an elevation facing southwest, commanding the A20 highway between Winterspelt and Schoenberg. The positions we took over were in most cases bunkers with log tops and sides. My assigned bunker was code named “Lennie Seven Able”, which means it was “Lieutenant Leonard Prosnick’s position number 7A”.

My assignment was as a radio repairman, but since our radios had been silenced and no frequency cards had been issued, I had no function. This was probably just as well because all of our radios were foreign to me anyway. The troop used SCR537 walkie-talkies and FM radios in the armored cars and on the jeeps. I’d been trained in the principals of radio and I could fix anything, given time, but I had no experience with these particular sets. If I’d had to fix them under battle conditions it would have been a disaster. The other side of the coin is that I was the only person in the Headquarters Platoon who knew anything about a light machine gun so I was assigned to one of these – a 30 caliber air-cooled weapon. There were two of us assigned to this gun. I fired the gun and my assistant, Dan Hamel, kept the ammo belts flowing and provided another pair of eyes to look for enemy movement.

My gun had a field-of-fire down the slope with no right or left restrictions. I could cover perhaps a 150 degree field of fire. I could sweep the entire slope in front of me except for a ravine to my right and a little pocket of woods far down to the slope to my left. The bunker was reached through a tunnel leading from the basement of the nearby farm house. The two of us set up housekeeping in the farm house in the master bedroom on the second floor. While in England I had “liberated” an Army folding cot and I had acquired a number of blankets and I had the M1 rifle left behind by the man sent to the hospital from the Ardennes. I set up the cot with plenty of blankets over and under to keep warm and there were enough extra blankets to black out the windows so we could have light. Dan was good at scrounging food so we had a footlocker full of cans of chicken, cans of peaches, “C” rations, fruit bars and all other kinds of goodies. We were all set to ride out the war in comfort.

Many years later I encountered the man who owned this house. His name was Josef Reusch and I had set up our “fur lined” foxhole in his bedroom. Josef had been captured by the British and had spent three years on an English farm. He spoke excellent English. He attended one or two of our Recon Troop reunions and he and I enjoyed many hours together. I might add that when your mother and I revisited Grosslangenfeld in 1973 this house was still intact although the rest of the town had been leveled in the back and forth fighting.

About 5:30 on Saturday morning, December 16th, all hell broke loose. “Screaming Meemies” were whistling overhead, shells exploding all around. The house shook, the windows rattled. I was certain the very next shell would come through the wall and explode in our bedroom. So much for our comfortable set-up. The barrage went on for perhaps forty-five minutes, maybe an hour, walking up and down the line, down to our right and then back across and doing the same to the left. I snatched my trousers and tried to put them on but for the life of me I could not get my legs into the openings. I threw them aside, jumped into my boots, grabbed my overcoat, helmet and rifle and raced for the

bunker. I fought the first battle without trousers. If I had been captured then the Germans would have caught me not only with my pants down but with no pants on at all.

At daylight we could see the infantry advancing and since we were short on ammo, I peppered away with the M1, conserving the machine-gun belt. Lt. Prosnick recognized the M1 firing and came down and took the rifle away from me, giving it to Cunningham with orders to go to the second floor of the farmhouse and ensure that no German could creep up the ravine to my right and drop a grenade in the bunker.

Our officers rolled out the armored cars which carried a 37 millimeter cannon and 50 caliber machine guns, and with our combined machine gun fire drove them back. I used my machine gun rather like a hose: firing short bursts using the tracer bullets to aim. During the fighting a group of German soldiers took refuge in a grove of trees in the hollow down-slope and Prosnick called for mortar fire. We had a fellow, Private Long, a mortar man who had joined us in Camp Miles Standish. He came forward, aimed the mortar more or less by eye, and dropped a shell right in the middle of those guys and took out the whole group.

Throughout, Lt. Prosnick repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire. He kept his bunkers supplied with ammunition, kept us informed as to how the battles were going. Sunday morning he came around with rations. He kept us in the fight to the end. Prior to the battle none of us had any respect for Lt. Prosnick. He was more like an overgrown middle-schooler than an infantry officer. We could not have misjudged the man more. He proved to be a superb leader – an officer ready and willing to expose himself to great danger in support of his men and as is often the case, he lost his life in the process. We were devastated to learn that he had been killed the 23rd of December by British bombs in a raid on the Limberg rail yard.

In the ensuing years I made several attempts to find his relatives. I wanted them to know what a brave and true soldier he had been and how much I respected him. None bore any fruit until Marolyn Johnstone suggested that perhaps her relative Gene Mattocks, who is an expert in such matters, might be able to come up with something. Gene did indeed. Within less than a week he found Lt. Prosnick's widow and daughter in a small town in Tennessee, plus two half-brothers, one in New Jersey, one in Florida. He also found that Lt. Prosnick's remains are buried in the American cemetery in Margraten, Netherlands. I telephoned these people immediately with mixed results. Prosnick's family was obviously dysfunctional. The New Jersey brother wouldn't talk to me. The Florida half-brother was mildly interested but did not want to pursue the matter. Prosnick's widow, Alene Scott, was apparently suffering from dementia and could not speak to me. I did have a long talk with his daughter, Sherry Smith. Everything I had to say was news to her. She knew only that her father had been killed in "The Bulge". After our conversation I invited her to our next reunion but she never picked up on it and the relationship ended there.

At some point during a lull in the fighting, I managed to get back to the farmhouse and retrieve my trousers and shirt and I fought the rest of the battle fully clothed. The Jerries mounted two attacks on Saturday, the second about sundown. We drove them back both times with heavy losses. Apparently their infantry had had enough of our fire power and during the night decided to bypass us. The fight accordingly went around to my right through the Cannon Company of the 424th. I could follow the battle by the sound of the machine guns. The Americans fire with a steady pounding sound and the Germans "riffed off" a burst which sounds like tearing paper. The pounding steadily retreated and the "ripping" advanced until by morning there were only "rips" and these were well behind us. We were exposed on our right flank. Our left flank was protected by the 18th Squadron of the 14th Cavalry Group, but they withdrew under fire leaving us without protection on both flanks. The Jerries, however, did not leave us alone. There was mortar and small arms fire throughout the night. Sometime during the night one of their mortars hit the half track carrying the remainder of our ammo. Shells and bullets whistled all around. There were flares exploding in every direction – a wonderful 4th of July experience. It was spectacular but it certainly didn't work to our advantage. It took all the rest of our ammo so when the Jerries attacked on Sunday morning we were almost out of bullets. In front of my position there were no tin cans full of stones or barbed wire or anything else that would give me any idea whether infantry was creeping up the hill in the night. Listening in that cave-like blackness for some sound was a really stressful time. Every once in awhile a parachute flare would go up. Whether it was ours or German, I don't know, but I was mighty grateful for the light, and these preserved us until the morning.

On Sunday morning the Jerries attacked a third time, this time with two reinforced infantry companies (about 600 men). We had little left to fight with and they simply overwhelmed us. In my case, when Prosnick gave the order I threw the several grenades I had in my belt at a determined Jerry burp gunner who was holding-out in a fold of ground in front of me. I wanted to clear him out with those grenades, but I missed. As soon as I was up and out in the open, he bounced up firing burst after burst at me. Bullets were snapping all around, but I managed to make it to an armored car unscathed. I slipped behind it with bullets snapping against the turret all the while. Between bursts I went up and over and dropped into the gunner's chair. I yelled to the driver "How do I fire this damn thing", (a 37 millimeter cannon). He yelled back how to slam a shell in the breach. I did so and we started off, but didn't get very far. A few yards down the road a mortar round blew a wheel off and we were trapped. Somebody waved a handkerchief and the Jerries swarmed all over the column ordering us out. I can still see their commander, Oberleutnant Bachmann striding about in his long gray overcoat snapping out orders. Darth Vader, forty years before he was conceived! We were herded into a pig sty under one of the houses and disarmed of our trench knives and bayonets. That's when I noticed how close that burp-gunner had gotten to me. There were several bullet holes in my trousers but nothing had touched me - a considerable shock to say the least.

I should add that all who were at the front were either captured or killed. I don't remember how many died but those who were not there and escaped capture were, in addition to the 17 lost in the Ardennes, Earl Liston whose halftrack broke down and never left St. Vith, those wounded and sent back on the 16th: Sgt. Arthur Le Croix, Bob House, Oscar Willi and Willis Seljie. Aby Freund went with the wounded as a medic plus Jim Guthrie, Howard Hughes and Jim Hetrick as driver and helpers.

I would like to say here that the Germans were good soldiers. They treated us as well as can be expected under the circumstances. Rudy Aittama had received a serious gash from a mortar fragment on his thigh, cutting it all around the back from side to side. Ray Kulke and I helped him down to the German aid station. There were German troops lying all around ready to be treated but the doctors looked at Rudy's wound and treated him immediately. You can't ask for more than that from your captors.

As I learned later the troops that attacked us were from the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division – specifically the 3rd Company of the 164th Regiment and a company or two from the 190th Regiment. It was pretty obvious these were the last troops Hitler had left. Many of them wore glasses, all were older men and in fact, any one of them could have been my father. But they knew how to fight. Years later when I returned to Grosslangenfeld and looked up the slope to where my bunker was I thought that it would take a very brave man indeed to crawl up that slope in the face of my machine gun fire.

At this point I would like to insert an account of the battle for Grosslangenfeld from the German's point of view. I excerpted this from a history of the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division written by a Lt. Gerhard Wurm. Lt. Wurm commanded the 3rd platoon, 3rd company, 164th Regiment of the 62nd Volksgrenadiers and was a leader in the attacks on our Headquarter Platoon's positions.

> "Just after moving through Habscheid we received heavy fire for the first time that day. Since we received heavy fire from the north by Grosslangenfeld, a reinforced company received orders to support the regiment which was already fighting there."
>
> "Along the road from Eigelscheid we pushed in a northerly direction toward Grosslangenfeld and received such heavy fire from 37mm cannon, mortars and light and heavy infantry weapons that we withdrew into the forest on the right river bed to the left. At the same time the Americans are under attack from the west by parts of the Regiment 190, which stood on the tree-covered Hill 508. A courier from the neighboring company sent orders to coordinate the next attack which now should start at the same time in order to deny the Americans the possibility of a concentrated defense of their positions and force them to surrender. Our company should start the attack and 5 minutes later the other company should attack from Hill 508 and push into the village."
>
> "However the attack does not go as planned. The resistance is much stronger than we had expected and coordinated very well tactically. The defendants of the town seem to be everywhere and defend against one wave after another. We take heavy losses and there are rumors that our two companies are facing an entire battalion. Until the late evening it is not possible to penetrate the town and the fight goes relentless on until 10 o'clock, when an American armored car was hit by a Panzerfaust and begins to burn. And then "peace" falls over the village, but I do not want to leave my foxhole because every movement draws direct fire and so I hoped for break in the fire, since I would like to take a look at the rest of my platoon. I creep up and down our positions and see a high number of wounded and dead in their foxholes. From my platoon is not much left, only some 8 men were still fit for action and most of their ammunitions had been used up. Under these circumstances we await the next morning in icy cold weather."

> "Just even with the dawn the attacks resumed. The battle now took on a gruesome form, as now we could see the bodies of our comrades who were killed the day before and during the night, which were strangely frozen, preserved in their death throes, their blood turning the surrounding snow pink. A few looked like they were only sleeping, but among others, one recognized the hideousness of death immediately."

The Leutnant was wounded in this third attack and his account of the battle stops at this point. But in the concluding paragraph of this account he says:

> "The Ardennenoffensive" did not bring the hoped-for success. Apart from me, I have only met one surviving member of the company, Josef Graf, who was captured around noon of December 17th. In conversation with other comrades of the division, I learned years after the war, that our company was up to 90% destroyed and was sent to break the toughest resistance and faced the hardest fighting in the battalion's area. The defenders of the town were outnumbered and already shattered by our artillery fire. Nevertheless they fought bitterly and held out beating back the attack of two full companies. To these American soldiers I can only pay my fullest respect."

The complete history may be seen at www.62vgd.com/wurm.htm

About three o'clock in the afternoon, we were formed up and forced to march back through the German lines toward Prum. When I saw what they had lined up for us the next day, in the event we had not collapsed Sunday, I was almost grateful for the fact that we ran out of ammunition. Each tank in that line seemed to be as big as a house. We had nothing to fight tanks with. If those tanks had been deployed against us, few if any, would have survived the fourth attack.

When I began this narrative I mentioned that I survived through an amazing number of remarkable coincidences and amazing good luck – there was one that occurred here. Prior to the German attack I had been ordered to man a forward observer foxhole well in front of our prepared positions. This foxhole was manned only during the day and I was supposed to get there at six o'clock in the morning. On the morning of the 16th the German barrage began at 5:30 so I never made it to that foxhole. If the attack had begun a half hour later I would have been out there and probably would have been one of the first casualties of the attack. Another interesting coincidence as we marched we passed by fields of German 88 artillery on both sides of the road. There were dozens of them lined up, apparently for that initial barrage. It was a remarkable coincidence that some years later I shared a ride to work with a fellow engineer at Honeywell named Hans Sondheimer. Hans had served in the German army. It turned out he had been one of those artillery men firing the 88s at us.

Prum is a transportation hub about 13 miles east of Grosslangenfeld. By this time we had been up and on full alert for well over 30 hours. As the adrenaline started to wear off we naturally became pretty sleepy. As we were marched back some guys would fall out because they were not able to march any more. They were clubbed back into line or were bayoneted if they wouldn't get up. We learned quickly to sleep and walk at the same time. The way you do this is you put your hand on a buddy's shoulder and he holds onto it while you doze and walk. If you faltered a little he would jerk you and you began to walk again. Every so often you would trade positions so everyone got a chance to "sleep walk".

In this way we got to Prum well after dark and were confined in an empty church. Later on as we became more accustomed to it wasn't so bad, but this first night had to be the worst night of my captivity. I was cold, wet, exhausted with no food, water or blankets and nothing to sleep on but the stone floor. Some of the fellows didn't even have overcoats. The worst problem, however, was psychological. We'd been defeated and we had no control over any aspect of living, even relieving ourselves. We were liable to be shot or bayoneted or whatever at the whim of any one of the guards. It's difficult to describe adequately what that feels like but it's not pleasant.

The next day after arriving at Prum, we began the march to Gerolstein. Gerolstein was a rail hub 13 miles to the east. The Germans used it as their interrogation center. There we were assigned to the various prison camps and were stripped of much of our clothing. During the march I was envious of the men who had had the good fortune to be issued "shoe packs" which were impervious rubber boots. But at Gerolstein I was grateful I was not one of them. The guards confiscated all shoe packs which they gave to their own troops, giving nothing in return. These unfortunates had to make out with no shoes at all in that bitter winter. My overcoat and helmet were taken. I was issued a French overcoat which was too small and a Serbian forage cap. I retained my American knitted wool cap and I kept that throughout prison. We were sorted into groups and confined in cattle cars until the trains arrived to take us out to our various camps. These were boxcars, the 40-by-8s of World War I fame. Upon loading, each of us was given a box of rye crisps and a small can of Limburger cheese. These were to last us to our destination which turned out to be Stalag XIIA near Limburg. The trip required 2 days, arriving December 21st.

At Gerolstein I teamed up with Carlton Schilcher who had been a jeep driver in the 2nd platoon. We stayed together throughout our prison camp experience. He was, in fact, the only 106th survivor I encountered until Hildeshiem after returning to the US military control.

Carlton and I shared our rations and we would eat one and save the other for the trip, however long. Fifty to sixty men were loaded into each car. There wasn't enough room for everybody to sit so some people had to stand which led to some bitter arguments later in the trip. For toilet facilities, a large bucket was placed by the door. A lot of the men had already developed diarrhea and the bucket was overflowing within the hour. The guys who had to ride near the bucket were soon sitting or standing in the overflow sewage. Some men couldn't get through and they fouled the car wherever they happened to be. It wasn't long before the car was a stinking, disgusting mess. Carl and I worked our way back to a corner of the car, as far as possible from the slop bucket. He'd managed to hang onto a broken pocket knife, and using that broken blade, we chewed a hole through the bottom of the car, a long and arduous task, and used this for our latrine. Thus we avoided the worst of the sewage.

As I said, the trip required 2 days. I don't remember much about the trip other than the engine unhooking and running for cover whenever allied planes were seen, leaving us in the boxcars like sitting ducks if the aircraft decided that this train looked like a likely target. Fortunately none of the

planes decided to attack the German rail stock those days and so we got to our destination in reasonable shape. Cars were opened and we were marched to the nearby stalag where the barracks were large empty buildings, formerly stables, supplied with straw mats.

We were there until 28 December when we were again loaded into boxcars and shipped east to Luckenwalde, Stalag IIIA, about thirty or forty kilometers south of Berlin. At Limberg we had been officially recorded as POWs and given a German POW "dog tag". My number is 094220. (I still have that "dog tag" stored in a leather jewelry box in my office). Sometime after dark on the 23rd we were startled by a massive release of parachute flares over the railyards. It was the British making this night attack that I referred to earlier where Lt. Prosnick was killed. They were bombing the German rolling stock in the Limberg railyards. They didn't have any idea that those boxcars were full of American prisoners. Fortunately Carlton and I were in a barracks away from the railyards but the explosions did blow large chunks of plaster out of the ceiling. We hugged the walls and nobody was hit. There were, however, heavy casualties among the troops in the railyards.

Two or three times in the following months, German intelligence officers came through the prison camp posing as Red Cross representatives and attempted to get people who had known Prosnick to denounce the bombing on the 23rd as a terrible British atrocity. This is in fact how we all learned of the disaster at Limberg. Nobody signed anything, of course.

The next day was Christmas Eve. We didn't know of the disaster the night before so we celebrated as best we could. Somebody had a Bible and read the Christmas story. Sgt. Spade from the 106th Recon troop sang. He had a beautiful voice and he led songs on Christmas Eve and that was our best celebration. On this occasion the Germans joined in the celebration. On Monday, Christmas Day, they provided coffee, barley soup, bread and butter. Such generosity was never encountered again in my prison experience.

On December 28th we were loaded into boxcars and remained there all night in the cold. About 8:00 in the morning the cars were hooked up and we were moved out to Stalag IIIA Luckenwalde some 30 km southwest of Berlin, arriving on the afternoon of 30 December. This experience was the same as the first except it took longer, that is 40 to 50 men per car, sewage everywhere – the "whole nine yards" as they say. On arrival we were taken to the barracks where the Irish prisoners were anticipating our arrival and had prepared tea.

We were at Luckenwalde from 30 Dec to 5 Feb. I don't remember much about our stay except for 3 events:

1). On Jan 31 the Brits gave us two Red Cross packages. We each got 2 cigarettes. Presumably the Jerries had swiped all the food and other "goodies".

2). We were given typhus shots. These were administered in the shoulder. I felt like I had been hit with a sledge hammer.

3). We were deloused. Body lice were an ever present nuisance in prison camp particularly when you got warmed up after going to bed. This would activate the lice to crawl about and nearly drive you crazy with the itching. Delousing provided a few days of relief but the procedure was decidedly unpleasant. We were formed up and marched to the delousing shed. There we were stripped naked and marched into the shower room. After a cold water shower (the shower room was unheated) we were returned to the dressing room, also unheated, to air dry. Our clothes were then returned free of lice. How our clothes were deloused I don't know, but it did provide a few days, up to a week in some cases, louse free.

I would like to interrupt the narrative here and talk about prison camp life and some of my experiences during those few months. These will not necessarily be in chronological order. Exactly when certain events happened tends to fade with time but they are as close in order as I can remember them.

First about morale: with your life completely under the control of others, it was imperative to be positive and retain your self-respect. In my case and also Carlton's, there was never any doubt that we were going to survive and would return home in good shape. We bolstered this by doing our best to be presentable at all times. Whenever we could we would "wash-up" at the cold water fountain in the yard and shave. We would find a glass shard with a relatively straight edge and use it to scrape off our whiskers, all done by feel. Probably a poor job but without mirrors who's to know? We also tried to put a bit of distinction on our uniforms. Someone had found a number of crimson tassels which the Belgian artillerymen wore to indicate their branch of service. At Gerolstein a few of us had managed to keep our wool caps and we sewed a tassel on the top for a bit of distinction.

Secondly about the food: The best that can be said about the food is that it was inadequate. Usual ration was one cup of turnip soup plus one fifth of a loaf of military bread once a day. The turnip soup was about one turnip to a gallon of water. The only notable thing I can say about that turnip soup is that I still cannot abide turnips. The loaf of military bread was about the size of a common brick and was made up of rye with a heavy inclusion of sawdust. The AX-POW Bulletin – that's a magazine for former prisoners of war - published a recipe for this bread. This recipe calls for fifty percent bruised dry grain, twenty percent sliced sugar beets (probably the pressed remains of sugar beets rather than the slices of whole beets), twenty percent sawdust and ten percent minced leaves and straw. I think there was a lot more sawdust than twenty percent.

In our five man group I was the bread cutter because I was the only person with anything stiff enough to force through the loaf. At this time none of us had knives or metal of any sort. But I had a playing card that I'd picked up somewhere and this served as a bread knife. As you might expect, this bread cutting was a very careful and exacting operation. I wouldn't cut until all agreed that all portions looked equal, me included, because as the bread cutter I got the last piece.

If you were lucky you developed the bacteria in your stomach that would digest this stuff. If you weren't, you starved. In particular I remember a really big fellow, Zabratanski by name, I never did learn his first name. "Zab" simply wasted away. He died sometime in March as did several other men in our barracks. On one occasion the Jerries provided a rare treat – barley soup as thick as paste. I suppose it was their idea of a joke because the stuff was sour. I wouldn't eat it and those who did got very sick. Of course that was our ration for the day. We got no bread or soup on that day.

Now and again we would get boiled potato skins in place of the turnip soup. This is a bit better because some potato always remained on the skins. On one particularly glorious occasion we were issued two small boiled potatoes. Otherwise, the rations were as I have mentioned – turnip soup and wood bread.

On three occasions we got Red Cross parcels – once at Luchenwalde, a gift from the British prisoners, from which as I mentioned earlier, we only got 2 cigarettes each, and twice at Altengrabow, four to each box, which the Polish prisoners gave us. The Red Cross parcels contained food from home – canned meat, canned fruit, canned salmon, fruit bars, cigarettes, chocolate, crackers etc. These were really first rate rations, but you had to be very careful about how you ate them. Under the starvation diet, our stomachs shrank and wouldn't handle the American food. Also, the Jerries opened all the cans to make sure no one was able to build up a cache of food to support an escape attempt. Actually at this time no one was thinking of escape, at least not in the immediate future. We knew the war was essentially over and the chance of a young man speaking no German making his way through several hundred kilometers to the American line was pretty small. There were no young people in Germany at this time and an escapee would stand out like a "sore thumb". Anyone old enough to carry a rifle was at the front. The Russian lines were closer than the American lines, but from our experiences with Russian prisoners in the adjoining compounds, no one was willing to take a chance on Russian hospitality.

At any rate, each group would divide the contents into portions of equal value, "equal value" being pretty subjective. For example, how many cigarettes were equivalent to a can of salmon, how many cigarettes were a fruit bar worth, and so forth and so forth. We would then draw lots for first pick, second pick and so on. This was usually followed by intense bargaining until everyone was as satisfied as he could be with his portion. Fortunately the weather was cold (I understand the winter of '44-'45 was the coldest in the century) so Carlton and I were able to keep our open cans for a few day and consume them sparingly. Those who didn't got deathly sick and vomited most of what they ate.

At Altengrabow, Carlton and I fared a bit better than we had at the previous camps. The French were in the compound next to us. They worked in a nearby tank factory and had plenty of food including civilian bread. The French were willing to trade this bread for American jackets, shirts, cigarettes, almost anything that was American. I got into this trading activity in a big way and the food I earned kept Carlton and me in reasonably good shape until the end.

How I got to be a trader happened this way: first you should know that prisoner compounds are separated by two barbed wire fences about eight feet high, separated by about ten feet of open space

between the wires. On the compound side, about six feet from the fence, was a single strand of wire maybe a foot or so off the ground. This was the “Death Wire”. Any prisoner seen between this wire and the fence was shot. At night the guard tower would illuminate the fence at irregular intervals. Anyone foolish enough to be near the fence was shot. As a matter of fact, anyone outside of the barracks after dark was liable to be shot.

In spite of these risks, as I said, I became a trader going over the fences to bring back food. The fact that I survived was sheer luck. Others who tried it did not. At the time the idea of getting into the French compound and spending some time with the Frenchmen looked like a great adventure and I was determined to do it. Looking back I’m appalled at my foolishness but when you’re nineteen and bored stiff, any prospect of adventure is irresistible. So over a period of a few nights I timed the intervals between the illuminations and judged that even with the shortest interval I could make it over the wires without being seen. I don’t remember how I timed those intervals but I probably did it by counting. We certainly had no watches, the Germans had stolen them long before.

I did in fact make it over the wires every few days for several weeks and each time was really an adventure. I became particularly good friends with two of the Frenchmen – a Sgt. Charles Coudere who had been a policeman in Lyons before the war, and Pvt. Jacques Kercadio. All our conversations were pretty rudimentary. I spoke no French and they knew little English. But with plenty of gestures, sketches and a few works in any language we could mutually understand, we got along. I remember Coudere asking me on one occasion where I was from. I told him “Chicago”. His eyes popped and he asked “Sheekagoo Illinwah”? I said “Yes”. My stock went up immeasurably. I must be an important man. Anyone who had survived in the city of Al Capone and “Bugsy” Moran had to be someone to be reckoned with.

These men helped me in many ways, not the least of which was to find a leather glove for me. Climbing barbed wire fences without hand protection is no picnic, but a leather glove which they found for me furnished protection for one hand at least and that helped a lot. After my first time or two, I was approached by other prisoners who wanted me to take items over and see if I could sell them for some bread. I agreed and settled on one-fifth of whatever I could get as a fee for the risk. The deal worked. I became a regular trader bringing back usually bread or onions for whatever the soldier wanted to sell. I made a “poke” out of a GI towel to carry the merchandise, and as I said, I did fairly well for several weeks. Unfortunately this poke disappeared in Camp Lucky Strike on the way home.

I would like to insert a paragraph here about my follow-up with these men after the war. I had obtained their addresses when we were together but these scraps of paper had disappeared by the time I had gotten home. However, a few years ago they turned up under the cloth cover of a German notebook I had picked up. The addresses were obviously out of date but with the help from people at UNTOUR (a travel agency we had dealt with) current addresses were found for both. I wrote to them hoping they would find someone to translate my letters. Sgt. Coudere was a dead end, no response whatsoever. However, my letter to Kercadio reached “pay-dirt”. Kercadio had died but his son

answered with a pack of pictures his father had taken while he was a prisoner. Unfortunately none of them were from Altengrabow where I had known him. After a letter or two the correspondence stopped. Attempts to revive it failed. I don't know whether I wrote something that insulted him, whether he died, moved or whatever. It remains a mystery why he stopped writing.

This whole trading business came to a tragic end sometime about the end of March. It seems that a number of fellows saw that I had a good thing going and decided to "get into the act". They decided that going over the wire was too slow and dangerous so they burrowed under the fences. Such an obvious exit could not go unnoticed. The Jerries threw a cordon around the French compound and sent police dogs into the barrack searching for American prisoners. My French friends opened the panel in the wall and hid two of us – me and a fellow from California named Larry. The Germans caught several but Larry and I were not found. About three in the morning knowing that we could not afford to be in the French compound come sunrise, Larry and I decided to take our chances. The night was as black as the inside of your pocket with only starlight, but even so, the guards detected movements and opened fire. Larry was killed. The bullets missed me and I took off and made it back over the wire. Why the guards didn't turn on the searchlights I'll never know, but they failed to do so for which I thank God.

During this career I had two other close calls, but they failed to frighten me enough to call off the activity. The first of these was shortly after my first successful trip over the wire. I was creeping out to make another attempt when a patrolling guard unexpectedly came around the corner of the barracks. I couldn't run, I would have been shot. I fell to the ground, covered my face and waited. The guard walked by me so closely I could have touched him. Whether he saw me and chose to ignore what he saw or he actually didn't see me, I'll never know. But I was certainly grateful for his inattention. Needless to say, when he disappeared, I crept back to the barracks and made no trip that night.

The second fright didn't involve the Germans at all, but involved a Frenchman. This fellow took a dislike to me, or maybe he was after something I had, I don't know but as I entered the French barracks he attacked me with a knife. He was obviously an experienced knife fighter but I managed to fight him off using what I'd learned in basic training until my friends, answering my frantic yells, could grab him.

How I had a knife to defend myself is another story. The way it happened is this. One day wandering the compound I came upon a length of steel strapping from a barrel. I determined to make a bread cutter out of it, something that would be easier to use than the playing card. By grinding and scraping it on the brick walls I was able to grind out a serviceable blade that would fit my hand. For a grip I split a branch, smoothed it on the bricks and tied the whole together with strands unraveled from my socks. Not much of a knife but it worked for cutting bread. I showed it to one of my French friends. He thought it was probably the weirdest knife he'd ever seen and traded me his clasp knife for it. He had made this knife in the local machine shop and it had a good six-inch blade. This is what I used to defend myself while I was yelling for help. As I said, my friends grabbed him before he did any

serious damage but not before he cut me up some on the left hand and a stab or two in the leg. I have managed to keep this knife and it's in the library with the other memorabilia.

I would like to tell you a little bit about camp conditions. At Limburg the barracks were simply one-story barnlike structures without furniture or heat. Each man found a place to sleep on the floor or wherever. At Luchenwalde and at Altengrabow, there were three tiered bunks – or maybe these were platforms, I don't remember clearly – on which two or more men could sleep. We usually huddled two by two to keep warm and share blankets. We were furnished straw pads but they were so full of bugs that Carlton and I burned ours. We got so used to bare boards that at Hildesheim on the way home, I was given a GI blanket to sleep on and it felt like a feather bed. My memories of Luchenwalde in this regards are a bit vague, but I do remember that at Altengrabow Carlton and I were assigned a bunk on the third level. We liked this because the 3rd level afforded some degree of privacy from the activity always going on below.

Our group was more fortunate than the prisoners in many of the other camps. Latrines were not holes in the floor at the end of the barracks but were separate outhouses with multiple holes and were regularly emptied by slave laborers with their "honey wagons". If you had to go to the latrine at night, the guards at the barracks door had to give permission. In lean times this was usually no problem. But after the Red Cross packages, the guards knew we had cigarettes and demanded a bribe. American cigarettes were "gold" in prison camps. Marlboros were the best. The least desirable were Pall Malls because the package said "English Blend" on it and the guards wouldn't believe that these were American. Sometimes we would get Russian cigarettes. These were short papers stuffed with black tobacco placed on the end of a small cardboard tube. We called them "stukas" because if you smoked one, you were "dive bombed". The guards would not accept these, only American cigarettes. So to keep the bribery to a minimum, we would pull a horsehair from our jacket shoulder pad and push it into the cigarette. More than one of these and the guard was pretty sick.

Heat was provided by a potbellied stove in the center of the barracks. There was never enough fuel to keep the place warm but it did help a bit. Bunks near the stove were coveted. Medical facilities were essentially nil. There was a room for each compound called the Lazerette. Very seriously ill men were moved to it. But to my knowledge there were no medical supplies and no doctors.

In regard to disease, dysentery and diarrhea were deadly. If you got a serious case your chances of survival were slim. On the marches the guards would shoot or bayonet men too weak to keep up. In camp you either recovered or wasted away. Carl and I never contracted either. Certainly luck was a factor, but I believe that because we made a point of keeping ourselves personally as clean as possible, plus the fact that we also made it a point to eat chunks of charcoal every few days, were helpful. As a result, I believe Carl and I got out of the prison camp in better shape than most of the other prisoners.

Every morning there was a prisoner count. Everybody was routed out of the barracks and police dogs were sent in to force out stragglers. The guards would line us up in rows five deep. "phinphe-mon, phinphe-mon" is a command that every former prisoner recognizes. The guards would then count the number of fives. It was great fun to shift the rear lines back and forth to exasperate the guards. The other side of that coin was that it was cold and we had to stand there until the guards were satisfied with the count. I remember that on one occasion we were rousted out and lined up in a single rank. A platoon of machine gunners was trotted out and set up their guns along the front of the line. Guard dogs were sent into the barracks to force out any stragglers. The commandant, starting at the far end, began pulling every third man out of the line. I was frightened out of my socks and I kept glancing down the line and trying to figure out how I was going to survive if they started firing. About half way down the line the commandant stopped. He ordered the machine gunners to pack up and he and the gunners and all the officers marched off. I never did learn what that was all about but we were a mighty subdued bunch for several days, that's for sure.

Jewish soldiers were a matter of concern. American "dog tags" stated the religious preference of the soldier and on at least one occasion, and there may have been more, German agents entered the camp demanding to examine everyone's dog tags. We assumed they were looking for Jews. Fortunately someone had thought of this early-on and all the Jewish soldiers had thrown away their dog tags. Enough other men also threw away their dog tags so that it was obvious that with so many missing dog tags we couldn't all be Jews. So far as I know, no Jewish soldiers were ever removed from any camp that I was in. I understand Jews did not fare so well in some of the other stalags.

Besides food, boredom was a major problem of prison life. Occupying our time was a huge problem. We walked around the compound a lot, but when the weather was bad we had to find something to do inside. One man had saved a deck of cards, a real treasure. I think the spots had been worn off of those cards by springtime. Books and reading material were nonexistent, but I did manage to get a New Testament which provided some reading. I happened upon this fellow in the latrine about to tear out the pages of a New Testament to use for toilet paper. I was incensed for obvious reasons but also because he was destroying something to read. I took it away from him and have managed to keep it. It is stored with the other memorabilia in the bookcase.

Some fellows used their time to make attractive rings out of coins. The way this was done was to rotate the coin against an anvil rock while continuously pounding the edge with a second rock. Eventually the coin mushroomed to ring width. I don't remember how they bored out the center, I'm guessing that they used a pointed rock. But whatever, it was a very tedious process. But the idea was to occupy time after all so it was a useful activity.

I never made any rings but I did fashion a few cups out of Red Cross ration cans. Somewhere I had obtained a little hand-operated can opener that came in the Army 10-in-1 ration boxes, plus a steel jacketed bullet. I used the can-opener to cut a can into wide strips which I folded over and over and pounded flat to make a metal strap which would serve as a handle. I folded the ends of this strip over the rims, top and bottom of a second can, and wedged them tight using the bullet as a punch. The

cups were serviceable and it was something to do. I have managed to bring home this can opener and the bullet. They are also stored with the other memorabilia.

One day in late March when the weather was pleasant, Carlton and I were ordered to police the grounds around the German officers' barracks. We welcomed this as a chance to get out of the compound and move around a bit. While picking up around the flower beds, Carlton found a cigar butt. Carl managed to keep a broken amber stemmed pipe and when we got back to the barracks, he stuffed the butt into his pipe and we smoked it together. Real Joy! When you have so little, it doesn't take much to get pleasure.

Other than this and a couple of Russian cigarettes, I gave up cigarettes entirely and never smoked cigarettes again. In prison camp, cigarettes were currency and as far as I was concerned, the choice between smoking and eating was a no-brainer. Carlton had a much more difficult time getting away from cigarettes and when it looked like we could afford one, he would enjoy a smoke. He smoked these down to a stub too short to hold. I kept these stubs for him in a little box and when we had several I would split them and roll him another smoke. Carlton had lost the first finger of his right hand, whether it was shot off or was a farm injury I don't know, but at any rate, he couldn't roll his own.

I should say something here about Carlton. He's coming across in this account as something of an appendage. Of course, this account is about me, not about Carl, but I wouldn't want anyone to think of Carl as an unimportant person. No one survived in prison camp as a "loner". Anything – blankets, food, clothes, anything at all, would be stolen as soon as it was out of your sight. Carl protected our stuff while I was out trading. Neither Carl nor I were the biggest or strongest in the barracks and he shouldered more than his share fending off would-be robbers.

While prisoners, we were subjected to two lengthy marches. The first from Luchenwalde to Altengrabow which lasted 5 days from February 2 to February 7. On this march we were billeted in the hay barns at night and the farmers fed us whatever they had, which was definitely better than camp food. Sleeping in the soft hay was luxury at its greatest. My only problem was with my feet. They swelled up. I was afraid to take my boots off for fear I couldn't get them back on again. I worried a lot about becoming unable to walk but it all worked out okay.

The second from Altengrabow to the American front began April 2nd. We were ordered out of our barracks, separated into groups of 30 or so and marched west toward the American front. We were to be "Arbeit Kommandos" (work details) sent to repair the railroads damaged by the Americans. We were all in bad shape, weak and sick from a winter of sawdust bread and turnip "soup". Marching was hard but few of us were unhappy about being on the road. Anyway of getting outside the barbed wire was welcome. Those of you who have been prisoners will fully appreciate how wonderful it felt. Besides, the German countryside in early spring was pretty nice. Also, outside the barbed wire escape became a possibility.

On April 8th after 6 days of marching, we neared Halberstad, a manufacturing town apparently still making armaments for the Germans. The town was under attack by American bombers. After the attack we marched in. There was almost nothing left of the town, at least of that part we marched through.

Here I experienced one of the most painful and poignant experiences of my time in prison. Our kommando was under the command of a feldwebel, an old man in our eyes and a veteran of the German Army. He was about 40 and as guards go he was more than decent. He allowed rests from time to time and permitted us to help those who had become too weak to keep up. On previous marches guards forced us to abandon the weak. They were then shot or bayoneted. From time to time this feldwebel even distributed apples from his knapsack. He also permitted rest stops. He was from Halberstad and we marched past where his house had stood. A bomb had destroyed his house utterly, killing his wife, two children and both of his parents – his entire family. He absolutely fell apart. Our hearts went out to him. He was a decent man, but we were the enemy and we had destroyed his life. I know that there were thousands on both sides who had suffered similar tragedies but this one was up close and personal. It hurt. War is indeed Hell!

The next day we continued our march under the command of another feldwebel. As we marched west, the front became more and more evident, especially at night when the horizon was lit up by the flames and explosions of the American advance.

On the night of April 10th our kommando, along with several others, was camped among the trees beside a country dirt road. Behind us were thick woods in front open country without a tree in sight. During the night Carlton and I heard shots coming from the areas of the other kommandos.

The Americans were no more than a day or two in front of us and we reasoned that perhaps the guards for these kommandos had received orders to execute their prisoners. Nothing like this was happening in our area but we decided not to wait and see what developed. Behind us were thick woods and in front open meadows. We reasoned that the guards would expect escape attempts to be made through the woods but wouldn't expect anybody to try the open country. So we crept off across the road into open country. As it turned out we were right. Several men were shot trying to escape through the woods but we got away unmolested. We hid out during the rest of the night and emerged about midmorning when the mobile artillery of an American division roared by travelling fast. They were elements of the 7th Armored Division.

Now came the scary time. I was wearing a German field jacket and a Serbian barracks cap. Carlton wore a French overcoat. As we approached a jeep full of solders we worried whether they would welcome us or shoot and ask questions later. We needn't have worried. They thought we were the sorriest looking soldiers they'd ever seen and drove us to the company mess. They were certainly wrong about being sorry. At that moment we were the happiest men on earth. Being free is a day none of us will ever forget. At mess they were serving ham with raisin sauce and sweet potatoes.

We devoured it! The mess sergeant hovered about soaking up our praises and obvious delight in his cooking. Perhaps that's the first (and maybe the only time) any G.I. ever said anything good about Army cooking, but on that day it was the finest in the world. ("Devoured" is perhaps too strong a word. We actually ate very carefully fully aware that too much rich food after months of starvation is dangerous).

At this point I want to point out three major discrepancies in this account for which I have no answer. My notes say we escaped. Carlton's are markedly different. He mentions an escape attempt on the 10th of April in which 2 men were killed. I have no recollection of this whatsoever. Secondly that we marched from Altengrabow to Halberstad in 2 days. That distance is 119 km. We did no such thing. That would have been a "death march". Thirdly he writes that on that same day, April 10th, we marched 12 miles and on the 11th another 8 miles and were liberated on April 12th i.e. we did not escape but were liberated. As I said I have no answer for these discrepancies.

The Army was moving fast and had no time for escapees so Carl and I and the other POWs were on our own. The two of us hooked-up with a contingent of British troops who had been captured during the Greek campaigns and we "holed-up" together in the little nearby hilltop hamlet near Aschersleben. While we were there a contingent of "Black Shirts" hiding out in the woods below, apparently decided to retake the hamlet. They began their attack with heavy mortar fire and then advanced across the fields toward the town. We knew full well that if the Germans managed to take the town we were dead men. None of us had a thing to fight with and there was no way or place to escape. However, in the nick of time, "The Cavalry", as it were, appeared in the shape of an American tank and drove off the Germans.

The British celebrated by butchering a sheep that had been killed in the shelling while Carl and I contributed a 10-in-1 ration box including that unheard of luxury – white bread. We had managed to "cadge" this from a passing 2 ½ ton supply truck. We all feasted.

Some time later, perhaps two or three days, I don't remember, I convinced a supply truck returning from the front to take Carl and me to Hildescheim where we were formally returned to American Control. At Hildescheim Carl and I were separated and as it worked out, I never saw Carlton again.

From Hildescheim we were flown to Camp Lucky Strike on the French coast. At Lucky Strike we were issued new uniforms and deloused. The way this was done was that we were called out into formation and made to strip naked. After stripping we were individually drenched with DDT and given new clothes. Our old clothing was swept up and burned. This was certainly effective against lice, but the downside was that anything I had with me was lost. Only those things that remained in the tent that I hadn't been carrying were saved.

At Lucky Strike I was awarded a 3-day pass to Paris. Along with a companion, (I don't remember his name), we spent two days going and returning from Paris, so that we enjoyed an afternoon and an evening in the city. I was awestruck by Notre Dame. I never dreamed that I would actually see and walk inside of this wonderfully historic building and sense all the history that had occurred there. Nearly a thousand years of medieval fairs, miracle plays, coronations, the guillotine of the French Revolution and so forth. We were allowed to climb the towers and to walk among the gargoyles on the roof. Even the urchins in the square selling "feelthy pichoors" couldn't dull my sense of being in the presence of so much history. Even though I've been back there several times since, that sense of awe and wonder has never left me.

That night we went to the Folies Bergere. My memories of this are that we had to pay the usher before she'd let us sit down, and that the nearly naked women on the stage left us totally uninspired. All we were really interested in was food. We also had to walk nearly the length of Paris, fending off prostitutes at every corner, to get back to our hotel. We were unaware that the metro ceased running at midnight and we had stopped for a beer, which incidentally made me sick.

About the first of May we were herded aboard ship I don't remember where we boarded it, and headed for home. What I do remember about this trip is that it was a Navy transport and I never ate so well in the service. Blueberries at breakfast, no less.

We foot soldiers were billeted below deck and the cabins above were allotted to Air Force people who outranked us. That didn't sit well with most of us since we were all battle experienced veterans and not prepared to take any "guff" from Air Force people that spent their time in-service sleeping between clean sheets. The colonel in charge prevented a near riot when these Air Force folks ordered us out to police their quarters, make their bunks and run errands for them.

On May 8, that is V-E Day, we were on the high seas. We docked at Newport News, Virginia on May 14th and I was home in Chicago on the 15th, one day before my 20th birthday. I was issued a 60-day pass, then ordered to Miami Beach for R&R (rest and recreation). Miami Beach in July is very hot. There was no air conditioning in those days but I enjoyed it nonetheless. Tropical sunsets, palm trees, flowers, fishing in the gulf, white sand beaches, remarkable seashells – this world was all new and truly fascinating to me.

From Florida I was ordered to Camp Crowder near Joplin, Missouri. Camp Crowder was a training center for medical personnel and I was sent there because I had worked as an EEG technician at the University of Chicago before enlisting. EEG technicians were considered essential and were not discharged regardless of how many "eligibility discharge points" they had earned. I was assigned to the 35th Battalion. This battalion was entirely made up of combat veterans, none of us having any assignments or duties. They were an earthy, unruly bunch. On VJ Day, for example, the military police rounded all of us up who were in town and confined us to barracks to make sure there were no riotous celebrations.

I joined the boxing team to have something to do. I fought welter weight at 147 pounds. "Boxing Duty" was a very "cushy" assignment. We would roll out at 6:00 a.m. in the morning for roll-call, wearing just enough to be decent. We would then go back to bed and sleep for another hour or so. About 10:00 o'clock we'd trek to the mess hall where the cooks would serve us breakfast – usually scrambled eggs, sausage and hashbrowns. Then it was off to the gym for a work out. There wasn't any formal training program at all. We'd punch body bags, shadow box, practice our "left hooks" & "right crosses", trot around the track, etc. Two or three times a week we would travel to other parts of the camp for exhibition bouts.

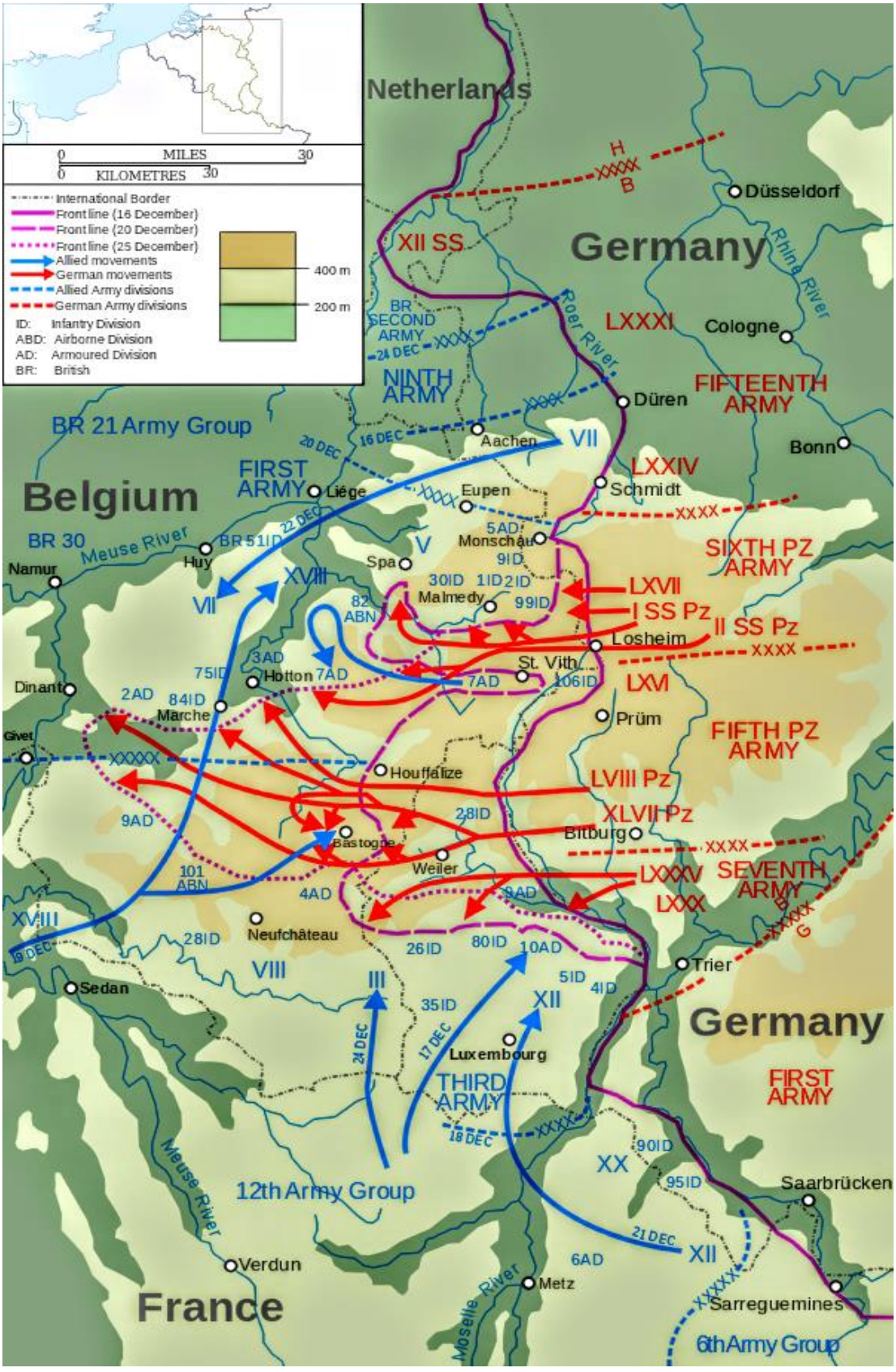
At the bouts I was always introduced as the "escaped POW" which always put the crowd on my side. Let me say that being in the limelight so to speak, with the crowd rooting for you, is "heady stuff" indeed. I fully understand why some athletes remain in the game well beyond their prime. Crowd cheers are hard to give up. As a boxer I was not too bad. I never lost a fight but my boxing career was shorter than I liked. In a letter to your mother I wrote about sitting in the audience with my arm in a sling feeling sorry for myself watching a boxing tournament in which both the welter weight and middle weight winners I had beaten in previous bouts.

In the meantime, I had been promoted to Corporal and I could now be put in charge of something so I was put in charge of the dispensary for military dependents, mostly pregnant wives. With no experience or training of any sort, I had to administer liver shots and dispense other medicines. Fortunately, I had seen my father administer adrenaline shots to my mother to "break-up" her asthma attacks. So I had a good idea of how to keep the needle sterile and do the injection. It must have been an ordeal for the ladies but we all got through it okay.

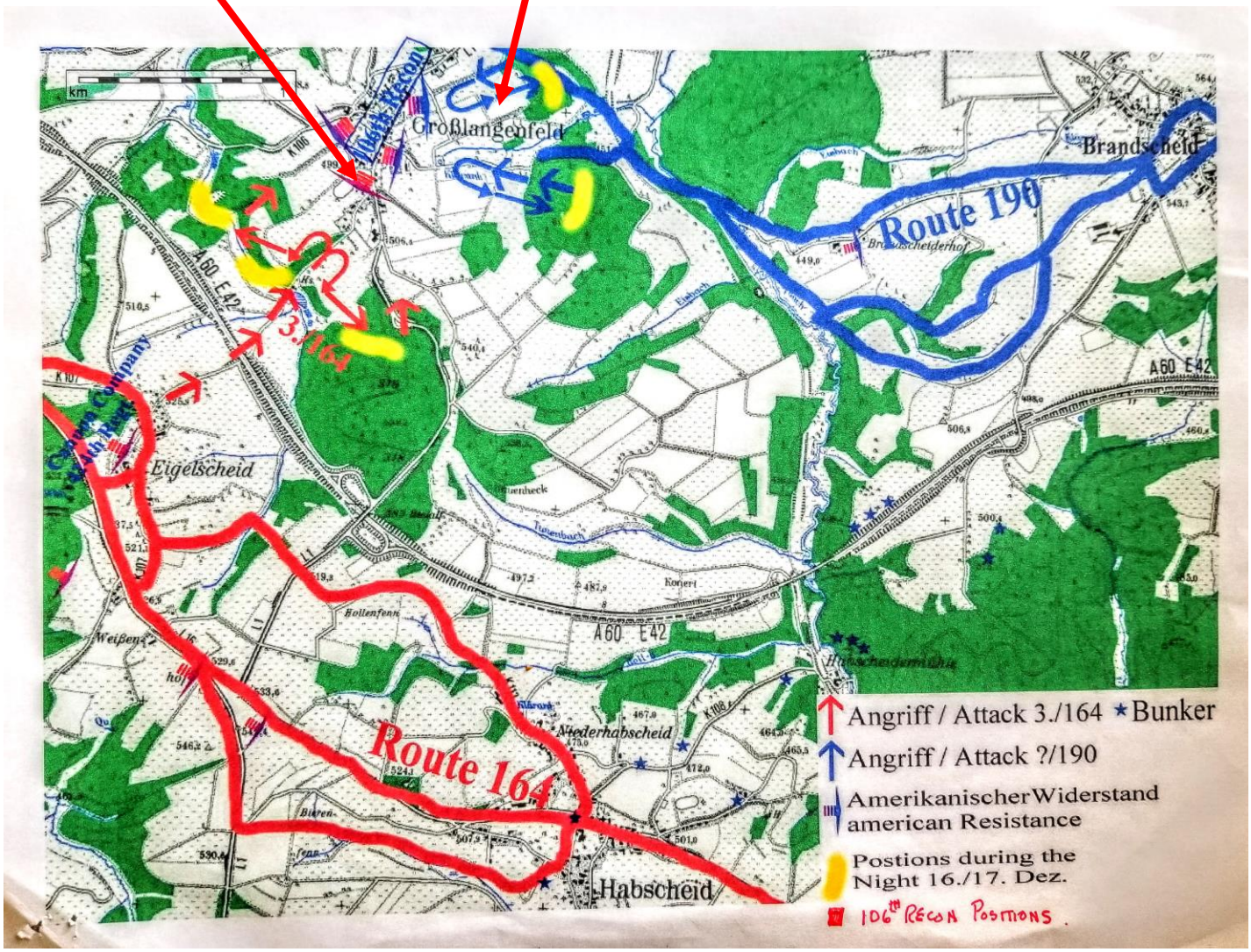
Another thing: while I was at Crowder two FBI agents arrived looking for me. They were preparing a war-crimes trial against the commandant of Altengrabow. They wanted a deposition and they were particularly interested in the details of the killing of Larry when he and I were attempting to escape from the French compound. Unfortunately, I have no idea of the outcome of that trial.

My next set of orders sent me to Camp Ripley, Wisconsin. Apparently my EEG certification had been lost because Camp Ripley was a discharge center. This was about the end of October. Again, three or four weeks of extreme boredom before I was discharged on the 29th of November 1945. I'd been under military control for 34 months, on active duty one day over 24. I returned home, went back to college and married Laura Jones. You all know the rest of the story.

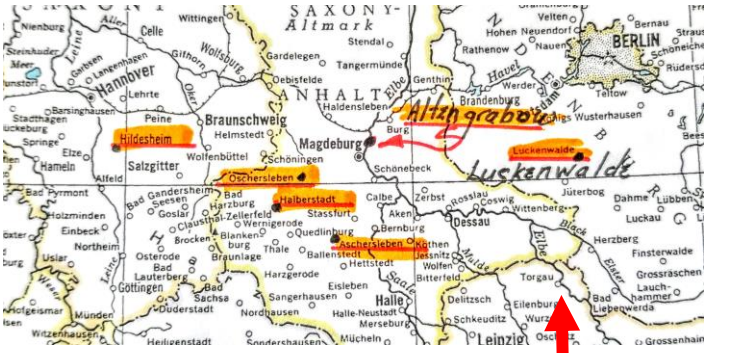
Battle of the Bulge Overview

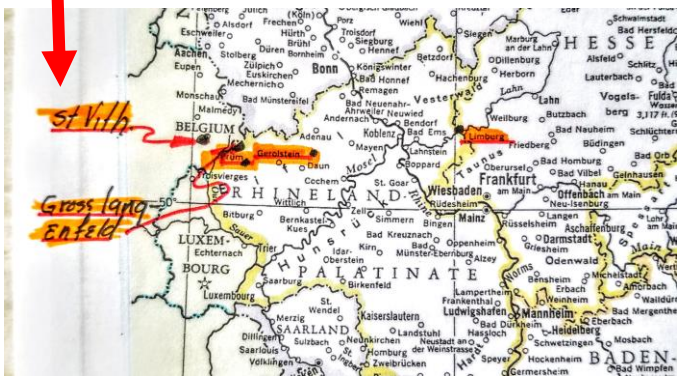


Battle Map – Attack on Grosslangenfeld



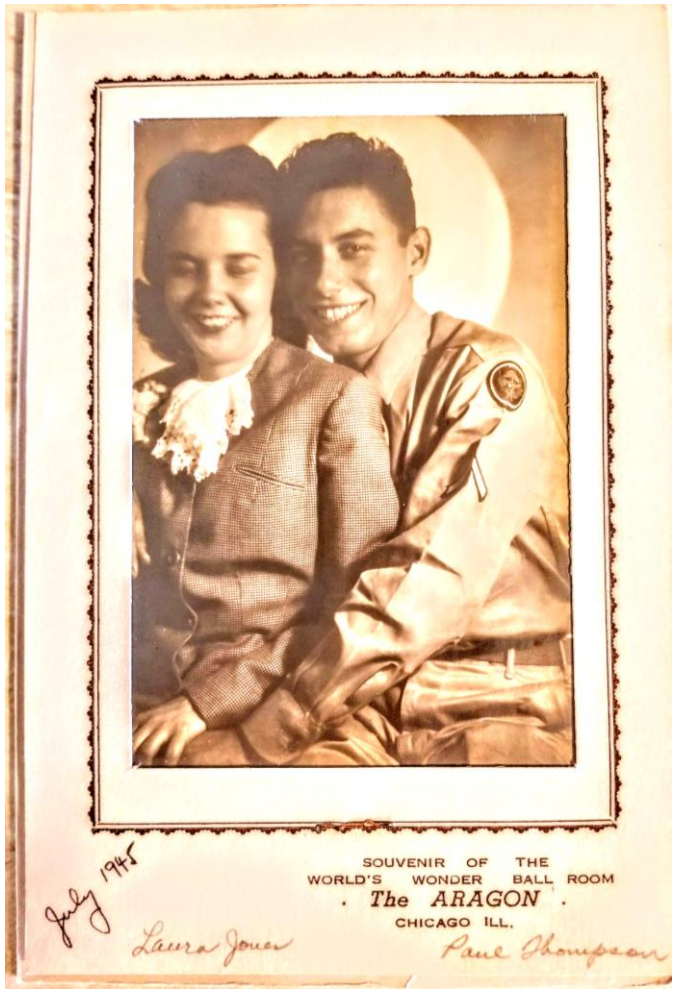
Areas Covered in the Narrative





Miami Beach -- July 1945

Chicago -- Aragon Ball Room



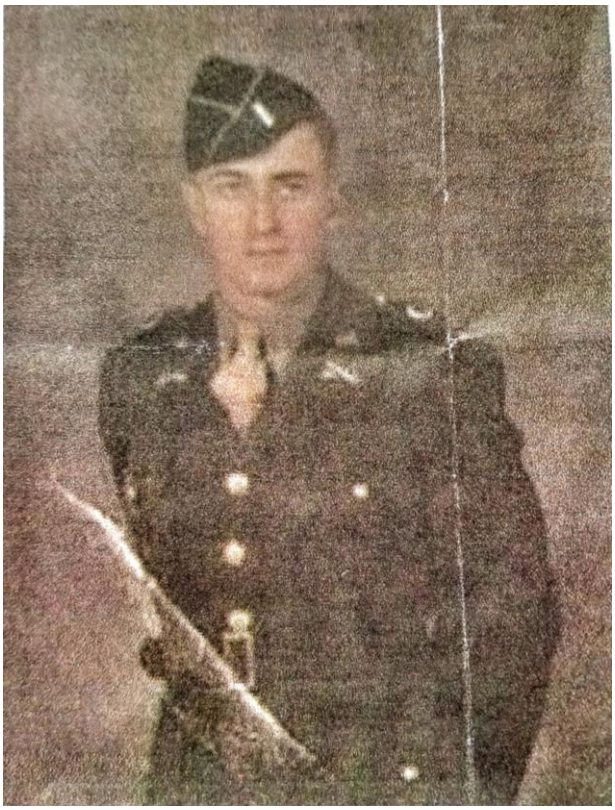
July 1944

Sgt. Coudere

Jacques Kercadio

Kercadio Coudere

Lt. Leonard Prosnick



Officers of the 164th VG Regiment of the 62nd VG Division

penbesuches im November. Oberst Jüttner im Gespräch mit General von Hülsen, ehemals Kommand
Artillerie und Bachmann war Chef der 3. Kompanie / 164. Bachmann ist gefallen am 19. Dezember

Salary paid me for arbeit kommando work

knife, bread cutting card & POW "dog tag"

Railyard where Lt. Prosnick was killed