

Penn Woods
99th Infantry Division
Stalag 12-A

PFC Penn Woods was 21 the week he was captured by German forces. A retired National Guard colonel and former member of the 99th Infantry Division, Woods recalls his most memorable Christmas: December 22nd, 1944.

It was two days before Christmas Eve in 1944. We were pulling into a railroad siding at Limburg, Germany, on a prison train. On one side of the track was a German airbase. On the other side was the prison which would soon be our home.

Throughout the preceding four days we had been crowded into a 40 and 8 boxcar, so named because it could hold 40 men or eight horses. However there were at least 100 of us locked within.

In some ways being crowded had not bothered us. With no heaters in midwinter in northern Germany, we had more body heat to share among ourselves. But the combination of cold, crowdedness, hunger and diarrhea had made it a miserable four days.

We were convinced that any change in our situation would be an improvement. But we were wrong. **Stalag XII-A** (all German military prisons were known by numbers), was a compound of several large buildings, each as large as a gymnasium,

We arrived at the prison only six days, December 22, 1944, after the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, the last major German offensive. aimed at the thinly spread army divisions in the Ardennes forest.

Outnumbered and overrun, U.S. soldiers had been cut off from their commands. Prisoners had been taken by the thousands. Many came to Stalag XII-A.

In our building we were so crowded that we could not lie down together on the concrete floor without our bodies criss-crossing. We could only reach the latrine by crawling over the bodies of one another. And it did little good when we reached it, because sewer pipes were either frozen or clogged. The residue overflowed into our area of confinement.

The following night, December 23, 1944, just a few hours before Christmas Eve, all lights suddenly were doused. It took us only moments to learn why. Flares began falling in our area — the kind that the Royal Air Force, which dropped its bombs at night, used to mark targets for the bombers which always followed quickly behind.

With flares landing on both sides of our prison barracks, we knew the pilots had missed the air base adjacent to our prison, which was obviously their target. They had mistakenly dropped flares on the prison camp.

Within moments, bombs were falling upon us. The prison barracks next to ours received a direct hit. Most of its inhabitants, principally American officers, were killed. Our own

building was not hit. However, every window was shattered. The cold air poured in on our misery.

The next morning was Christmas Eve, December 24, 1944 but there was little Christmas spirit. However, as I walked toward the corner of our building to receive my daily ration of what the guards called "turnip soup," I saw a limb which had been sawed from a dead tree placed in a tub of dirt. Hung upon the barren, outstretched branches were string made of metal foil we had used in the Ardennes to deflect radar. They looked like icicles. It was someone's simple reminder of Christmas Eve.

Then from one of the prison compounds adjacent to ours drifted faint sounds of other American soldiers and airmen. They were singing the most memorable Christmas song of all —Silent Night, Holy Night."



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