

Writer Recalls German Capture

Editors Note: UPI Broadcast Sports Editor Wally Martin was part of a regiment encircled by the Germans during the battle. After days that passed in a blur of digging foxholes and ducking artillery barrages, Martin was captured and spent the rest of the war at Stalag 4-B in Muhlberg, Germany.

By Wally Martin

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Reveille came before dawn for E Company on that cold, gloomy Dec. 16, 1944. The unusual activity indicated something big was going on.

E Company of the 106th Division's 423rd Regiment, composed mostly of green recruits just arrived from the States, was in a rear area near St. Vith, Belgium.

Other 106th units were sprawled along a quiet 27-mile front where we had recently relieved the 2nd Division. We left New York on the Queen Elizabeth early in October, trained for a month near Birmingham, England, and made the channel crossing late in November.

I remember winning a \$5 bet with a buddy on the Army-Navy football game, and listening to the game with a couple of sailors on the fantail of the channel steamer.

We camped near LeHavre for a few days, then trucked to Belgium where E Company remained in a rear area near St. Vith. I wrote a letter on Dec. 15 to my family in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., just to say I was fine.

On that Dec. 16 dawn we had a hurried breakfast and were loaded on trucks in a flurry of rumors about a big German offensive. Artillery fire pounded in the distance. The rumbling became louder as we approached the front, some 18 miles from our camp.

We passed farmhouses and homes along the way, with residents peeking out windows.

We had wondered what it would be like going into combat for the first time, and found out soon enough. For four days we dug foxholes, took artillery barrages, moved on, and dug again.

What we did not know was that our regiment and another had been encircled soon after the German offensive started.

I remember crossing a long field and reaching a dirt road when another artillery barrage caught

the company. I jumped into a ditch at the side of the road as shells dropped around us, hugging the ground in mud and water. The barrage lasted maybe five minutes, but it seemed like hours. When our officers ordered us to move out we had dead and wounded scattered in the fields ahead and behind us.

That night we seemed to walk in circles. Flares lit the sky and we found ourselves in a field, unable to move. In the morning, an artillery barrage pounded in and we moved on again.

Four days later, we were still trying to escape the artillery and rumors surfaced that we had been surrounded for days. On the afternoon of the 19th I joined up with a patrol.

After failing to make any contact with the enemy, we returned to the company late in the afternoon to find members of my unit breaking up, scattering their rifles and tying white handkerchiefs around their arms and helmets. We were told there was no hope — a colonel had surrendered our two regiments.

I remembered the training films in England and what we were supposed to do if we were captured. The only information we were to offer was name, rank and serial number. At the time I thought it could never happen to me.

Before long, Germans appeared everywhere and hustled us single file on to a road. As we moved eastward, German troops and horses pulling artillery pieces were moving toward the front. At this late stage in the war, Germany was reduced to using old-fashioned horsepower.

Some Germans frisked us as they passed by, and took our wrist-watches.

The march to the rear lasted for three days, with only the wounded in trucks. We slept in fields or in farmhouses, eating what remained of our field rations.

We finally reached a rail center and were loaded on box cars — 60 to a car. On Christmas Eve, our train was parked at a siding near Limburg when Allied planes bombed the area and our guards let us out to seek cover.

On Christmas morning, the dead were loaded on to a wooden wagon and carted away.

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