

Ex-POW recalls German captivity

By RITA HARPER
Daily News Special Writer

Forty 40 years have passed since Mel Johnson and about 450 other American soldiers were captured by the Germans in Belgium's Ardennes Forest during World War II, but the events are etched forever in the memory of the Huber Heights resident.

"We were protecting a 23-mile line. This was the initial thrust of the Battle of the Bulge, which started at 4 a.m. Dec. 16," the retired plant superintendent recalled. "The Germans picked the weakest spot in the line to penetrate. It was their last swing.

"In 1940, Hitler had ordered the Germans through that same area and we didn't think they would come through there again. Orders came on the 17th that we would get an air drop of ammunition, but weather prevented it. They couldn't locate us. We knew we were surrounded by the enemy so we destroyed all of our equipment," said Johnson, who was a staff sergeant and squadron leader in the Army's 423rd Infantry, 106th Division.

AFTER BEING captured by German troops, they were searched and stripped of rings, watches, cigarettes and candy, but were allowed to keep their money. On their third day of captivity, they arrived at an International Red Cross station.

"We were permitted to turn in any personal items and money identified by names and serial numbers, and were given receipts. When we returned to this country, we got them back," Johnson said.

For the next three days, as they headed on foot for Coblenz, Germany, the prisoners ate only sourbread and potato soup or turnips.

In Coblenz they were put in boxcars, 80 to a car. In a way, we were glad to get in there because it was warmer. The weather was cold and snowy and most of us were suffering from frostbite," Johnson said.



Staff photo by Eddie Roberts
Former POW Mel Johnson

"On Christmas Eve, 10 or 11 p.m., we were bombed by England's Royal Air Force. Their target was a synthetic oil plant at Coblenz. We got blown out of the boxcars and were hit by rocks and flying debris, and I did a lot of praying.

"Of course there were casualties. On Christmas Day, they rounded everybody up and we were put in boxcars again," Johnson said.

THEIR NEXT destination, by rail, was Czechoslovakia, where they were incarcerated at Stalag 9A with British prisoners. The camp housed 3,200.

"Though they didn't have stamina, the British were in pretty good shape," Johnson said. "They were allowed to make gardens in the compound, and they received boxes from Red Cross and home. We arrived on New Year's Eve day and ate pretty good because the British shared with us."

About a month-and-a-half later, as the Russians advanced toward the Czech border, the 3,200 prisoners were marched out of the camp by the Germans.

"The Germans were scared to death of the Russians and they knew they were getting close," Johnson recalled.

They were given rutabaga soup once a day. Twice a week, each got a half-loaf of sourbread. Such meager fare took its toll on the marchers. "People were dropping like flies," Johnson said. "I weighed 230 pounds when I was captured and at the end of the march I was down to 105."

HE IS CONVINCED that an unconfiscated bottle of water purification pills saved his life. "Germany's water was contaminated and the sourbread they gave us was made of 40 percent sawdust," Johnson said.

After 56 days and 756 miles, the surviving 324 prisoners were freed in the vicinity of Brunswick by the American Army's Second Armored Division and taken to a convalescent camp in France.

At about midnight on May 10, 1945, Johnson arrived by ship at Boston. He was home in Dayton for his 28th birthday May 20.

1984-12-26 Ex-POW recalls German captivity-Melvin Johnson

Clipped By:



criswest

Tue, Apr 24, 2018