

## John Knappenberger

*110 INF/D*

*Stalag 4-B*

### Ex-POW recalls boxcar Christmas



John Knappenberger shivered in a cold, dark box car.

He wasn't exactly sure where he was, but he knew what day it was. And so did his fellow American prisoners of war.

"We thought about past years and the good times we had," Knappenberger said. "Then somebody began to sing a carol and that carried on throughout the boxcar."

That's how the Charleroi native spent Christmas 1944, the last Yuletide season of World War II.

The situation was gloomy for the men, but they never lost the spirit of hope that comes with the Christmas season.

"A lot of the guys carried pocket versions of the New Testament with them and would read them," Knappenberger said. "We had a little service among ourselves."

A 1940 Charleroi High School graduate, Knappenberger joined the National Guard in Monessen in February 1941.

He was sent to Fort Indiantown Gap, signed up for one year of service.

"In December 1941, Pearl Harbor happened and that changed the whole picture," Knappenberger said of the sneak attack by Japan.

"We were in for the duration."

A member of the **110th Infantry, 28th Division**, Knappenberger arrived in England in October 1943.

He landed in France in July 1944, and his unit fought its way to Paris. In the French capital, the division marched past the Arc de Triomphe along the Champs-Élysées. A famed photograph of that march eventually became a 3-cent postage stamp.

From France, he fought in Luxembourg and Belgium. On Dec. 17, at the start of the Battle of the Bulge, Knappenberger was captured.

"The Germans were advancing," Knappenberger said. "There were more Germans than us. We couldn't resist their advance."

Knappenberger was among a dozen men who became isolated during the battle.

After being captured, they were forced to march for more than four days before being loaded onto a train - 50 men to a boxcar.

Knappenberger was taken to Stalag IV-B, five miles northeast of M̃hlberg in Brandenburg. He was among a group sent to work at a paper factory. The forced-labor shifts lasted 12 hours a day.

"It was cold and we didn't have much food," Knappenberger said. "Trying to work outside in the cold was difficult."

On April 24, 1945, the Stalag was liberated.

"It was the best day I ever saw," Knappenberger said.

Upon release, Knappenberger was wearing the same clothes he had on when he was captured.

As the Allies approached, the Germans marched their POWs west toward the Americans rather than surrender them to the Russians.

He was sent to a camp in France, then shipped home. After a 60-day furlough, Knappenberger reported to a redistribution center in Asheville, N.C., and was at Fort Indiantown Gap when he was discharged.

When he made it to Pittsburgh, Knappenberger took the streetcar to Charleroi, where a joyous homecoming awaited.

He worked for West Penn Power, initially working out of the office at 12th Street in Charleroi. He began as a lineman and retired 38 years later in 1984 as a foreman.

He moved to Florida after retirement, living in Orlando with his wife. His daughter, Janet Boswell, lives in North Carolina.

Knappenberger attended army reunions for many years, but acknowledges that too many of his buddies have passed on.

As Christmas approaches, certain things will come up to remind him of the Christmas spent in a boxcar bound for a Germany POW camp.

That experience has given Knappenberger an appreciation of each Christmas since.

[Chris Buckley](#), VALLEY INDEPENDENT

### ***My Ardennes Story***

The Division fought through France and came to the Siegfried Line on or about September 12, 1944. After weeks of battle in this area, we were sent to combat in the Huertgen Forest near Vossenack and Schmidt. During this battle companies were reduced in manpower by 50% or higher. Replacements kept coming and some did not stay long. The entire Division was reduced. We were relieved of this position on November 15th.

The regiment was sent to Bastendorf Luxembourg for rest and relaxation and again to receive new replacements. It was necessary to train some of these men because they were not familiar with the weapons of our company. Most of them were trained as riflemen back in the United States.

In December, we were sent to the Ardennes. Since this was considered a "dead" front the Division was scattered over a lot of territory. The main purpose was to patrol and contain the enemy east of the Our River. This front was approximately 25 miles. Our company was scattered over a ten mile stretch. The 1st section of the 2nd platoon of which I was a member (about 12 men) and 2 machine guns occupied a village by the name of Heinerscheid in Luxembourg. The second section (the same strength) was located in Marnach, about 5 mile from us. This was about December 10. Also in the village were some riflemen and a squad (6 men) and their 81 mm mortar.

Our group occupied a four or five room house. In one of the back rooms we had a machine gun mounted in the window that was surrounded by sandbags. Outside near the house, our two jeeps were parked in sheds. We blacked out the windows in the kitchen and other room so we could have some light from candles at night. We were told to stay on the street and walks since some of the yards and other grassy areas were possibly mined. It wasn't advisable to walk around at night since there was a possibility you might get shot since the enemy was not far off and infiltration was very possible even though there had not been any activity in this area for some time.

At Heinerscheid, our two jeeps in connection with two jeeps in Marnach had patrol duty. A jeep with one mounted machine gun on the dash area and two men besides the driver would go from Heinerscheid to Hosingen and report if everything was O.K. Then backtrack and on to Marnach to do the same. The route covered was about 15 or 20 miles round trip. The route for the men in Marnach was similar. The entire road known as "*Purple Heart*" Road was under German observation most of the trip. The trip was taken every two hours, the groups alternating from daylight to dusk. Needless to say, you felt like a duck in a shooting gallery because of the sight of blown up trucks and jeeps along the road. Many a driver and crew had a few "*Schnapps*" beforehand to help out. We were told by intelligence that there were only some "*old*" men across the Our River and not to panicky. They may have been old men, but we felt they probably had some young men doing the spotting and firing.

After several days of this duty, we were suddenly awakened on the morning of December 16 and were told that enemy patrols were seen crossing the river and coming towards us at about 0800 hrs. Every one hurried to get additional ammo from the jeep trailers. The Germans started to attack about noon and gun fire was getting closer. From our gun position we could see the enemy advancing. We asked for mortar fire about 2 PM and were told we would have to direct the fire since they could not spare anyone to do it. Even though I had never done it, I gave the directions by phone for the target. Since they were limited on their ammo, they could not keep up with it. Along about 4 PM the attack seemed to halt. We of course kept on guard at our gun position and the front door of the house. We had short hitches on our guard duty so as to have alert personnel watching for any movement. Our other darkened room was lit by candles and there the men came in after guard duty and drank coffee that was made on a small gasoline stove issued to us and smoked cigarettes by the pack. Everyone was jittery and knew the odds for the next day.

While I was on duty with a buddy, we saw in the distance huge searchlights, not shining up, but they were horizontal. We could hear trucks and tanks moving about in the valley and knew they were getting organized. We also could hear the Germans in front of, they were hollering and laughing and could see them lighting cigarettes. They were about 500 yards from the house. We didn't dare fire at them since they would have seen our position and that would have been it for us.

We called our Company Headquarters and told them these happenings. All they said was "*sit tight something is brewing at regimental*". We felt that if we could pull back a ways where more men might be located, we would stand a better chance. Since the riflemen had gone, we were now in a jam. In a way we were glad to see daylight after a dreaded dark night. We felt sure that some of the Germans went around us. About 8AM, we heard tanks and thought they were Jerrys, but we saw they were ours, as they went by our house towards Fischbach, we counted about 25 light tanks. We were happy as we now had hope. Soon firing began by our men as Germans

were spotted near the house. We then heard a tank coming and we yelled as it was retreating from Fischbach. The commander hollered "*This is the only tank left*" Our hope was fading fast. Our Sergeant told me I could take some of the men in my jeep and go back where there were more troops. I told him it was impossible because we were cut off from my jeep by several Nazi machine guns. He didn't seem to believe me, but when he looked out the front door, bullets were chipping off bricks above his head. He agreed with me this time.

The situation was getting worse by the minute. Just then, one of our men hollered and said that there was German tank up the road headed our way. We knew we could not go out the front door and the rear door was in the direction of the push. We tried a locked door going to a side room that we had never been in before. We used an axe that we had to chop open the door. There we saw another door that would lead us out the side of the house. We got it open and the Sergeant said "*Every man for himself.*" We ran across the yards of other houses. A wire fence about 4' high was no obstacle. I had on a long overcoat and 4 buckle artic boots and I cleared that fence with no problem, like a track star. When you're scared you can do strange things and this was one of them. Soon we had to run on the street and wean zigzagging since machine gun bullets were zinging off the pavement.

We ran through an orchard and an 88mm shell hit nearby wounding one of the men. We ran into a barn where we found three other comrades. We went back for the fallen man and brought him to the barn and gave him first-aid as best we could. Tanks again!!! This time they were American. There were three of them, but two turned and left, the third one was hit by a Jerry tank destroyer. One man jumped out and came in the barn. He was wounded and said he was the only one left. Again a temporary patch up was necessary. We then decided to destroy our weapons and just as we did, were noticed several Germans passing by the window and a Tiger tank turned its gun into the window.

The only thing left to do was to hold up a white handkerchief by the window. A couple of the Germans appeared to be 15 or 16 years old and very cocky. It really teed us off to be captured by a couple of kids. Of course their comrades were older. They searched us and marched us up the road and soon we were joined by other men from our outfit. As we went on we saw that most of the houses were shelled and burning and "*our*" house was really a mess. We were glad that we had gotten out of there when we did. When we walked past Fischbach it was the same shape, shot to hell. Next they took us behind a building and searched us again. This time they took cigarettes matches, lighters and any type of food that you might have on you. They next told us to line up against a wall with our faces toward it. We all thought that this was the end of our existence. But, we lucked out as they just searched us more thoroughly.

Once more we started walking along "*Purple Heart*" Road and we were in a column of three's. I was one that was in the last row. The guards stopped us and then motioned to us to go to the front of the column. Shortly we were on our way again when a mortar shell hit near the rear of the column where I had been moments before. We then ran to ditches until it was over. We felt that it was American mortars mistaken us for Krauts. A few medics came and helped those who were wounded. Others were left there. All along the way we could see more Germans Mark V and Tiger tanks moving up. It was an eerie sight.

As we walked along the road, I noticed a jeep with two German soldiers in it driving past us. They had the windshield up and there painted on the windshield was "KNAPPENBERGER". It was my jeep that I had to leave behind in the shed. It sure made me mad to think of the enemy driving it. We endured numerous shelling from our artillery along the way. They marched us to Marnach and put us in a crowded room in a house. There they searched us again. We figured they were looking for maps or other information that we might have. They took our watches and mine was a new one that my Mother and Father had sent to me a month or so previous. One German soldier tried to take a fellows wedding ring, but the only thing he got was a sock in the jaw from a German



officer. Evidently this officer had some feelings. I had a few photos in my wallet of family and a friend, but they didn't take them. They also let me keep my pocket sized New Testament that I always carried in my shirt pocket.

During the night, our Platoon Commander, a Lieutenant, was brought in and he was surprised to see me as someone told him that I was killed. He had a few chocolate bars on him that he managed to keep somehow and he gave them to a couple of us and said "*You need these worse than I do*". We really appreciated it since we had not eaten for about a day and a half.

The next day they started us marching toward Germany and our future "home".

Source: Bulge Bugle website October 2013



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