

Jerry Meadows

106th Infantry Division

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One man's story of survival

U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Jerry Meadows crouched in the foxhole between his two machine gunners, telling each of the soldiers where to shoot.

It was Dec. 19, 1944, and the soldiers of the [106th Infantry Division](#) were positioned along what was supposed to be a quiet road bordering the Siegfried Line near St. Vith, Belgium. The troops were undermanned, had not eaten in four days and were guarding a road three times the length they should have been.

But Adolf Hitler's Nazis had launched their Ardennes Offensive -- the Battle of the Bulge -- sending a swarm of German troops through the 26-mile stretch Meadows' "green" troops were guarding.

Machine-gun bullets sliced through the air as Meadows' gunners fired off round after round to keep the Germans at bay. The Nazis shot back, firing a German 88 mm anti-tank gun at the young troops, exposed in their foxhole by the glowing tracer bullets fired from their machine guns.

Meadows watched as men he'd trained with since March 1943 -- men he'd come to Germany with less than a month ago -- were taken out one by one, including his gunners. A shell exploded. Shattered shrapnel burst forth, lodging into Meadows' body, searing his skin. A platoon sergeant pulled the injured soldier up over a hill, lying on his stomach as the pair waited for the Germans to disperse.

The Nazis tossed one more shell up at the American soldiers. A piece of shrapnel sliced through the platoon sergeant's jugular vein. Meadows watched as his superior died -- right there next to him.

He lay on the hard German ground for hours, waiting and wondering if other men from his platoon would come back to get him. The pain of the shrapnel intensified. He didn't know if he was going to make it. But then, he heard voices -- first German, then American voices. He called out. Two soldiers from his company climbed over the hill and started to pick him up. Meadows said to them: "Don't you think you should take the weapons away from those Germans?"

One of the soldiers looked at him and said: "You don't realize it. We're captured. We're POWs now."

[Meadows hadn't realized it.](#)

Like many young men during World War II, Meadows joined the U.S. Army with eyes wide open, wanting to help in the war. He had thought about the possibility of being wounded or even killed when he went to war. He never thought he would be a prisoner of war.

Nearly 60 years after his capture, Meadows, now 79, still looks the part of the stoic soldier, softening only when he talks about the people who helped him and the attack that took the lives of so many of his friends. He didn't know until years later that he was one of only two men from his division that survived the war.

"We lost a lot of good men that day," he said, sitting in the living room of his Punta Gorda home. "A lot of good men."

Life in a German hospital

After his capture, Meadows was taken to a nearby town to be treated for his injuries. Doctors removed as much shrapnel as they could and sent him to another hospital in Koblenz.

He arrived in Koblenz by boxcar. He was the only American in the group. As they got to the city, a whistling *zip, zip, zip* sounded above. The German soldiers unloading the injured from the boxcar scampered away. The Allies were bombing, blasting their way through the German town. Meadows watched as the ground shook and walls built 2 or 3 feet thick weaved back and forth.

"They just left us there," Meadows said. "We're lucky we didn't get hit."

When he finally got inside the hospital, soldiers left him on the terrazzo floor. He asked the nuns working in the hospital if he could be with other Americans. They didn't understand him, bringing him instead a bowl of watery cabbage soup. He kept asking and getting more soup until finally, two nuns carried him up four flights of stairs to where other American soldiers were housed.

The 26 American prisoners in the hospital were laid out 13 men to a table, given only one loaf of bread every day -- moldy and made with sawdust -- to share between them and one bowl of the watery cabbage soup each.

There was this rule: Whoever could cut the bread the thinnest did the cutting. Three pieces of paper-thin bread seemed better than one average slice, Meadows said.

They dreamed about food -- concoctions like a Snickers bar cut in half with a hot dog in the middle and Meadows' own creation: a banana filled with cream and dipped in ice cream and then chocolate. And they talked about their lives back in the United States.

A former all-star center for the Flint Central High School football team in Michigan, Meadows weighed 198 pounds when he was captured. By the time he was free, he

weighed just 152.

The prisoners didn't receive the best medical care either. Meadows remembers the shrieks of pain that ripped through the hospital when the Germans would change soldiers' bandages. The bandages were made from paper and stuck to a wound like glue.

Because he was seriously wounded, Meadows spent most of his time as a prisoner in German hospitals or on trains. At the time, he thought it was an unlucky break. It wasn't until years later when he talked to veterans who had been held in brutal German prisons that he realized how lucky he was.

"At the time, I thought: 'Why did I get wounded and the rest of these guys didn't?'" he said. "But as it turned out, it was a blessing."

German soldiers kicked him and hit him with the occasional rifle butt, but he says he was never actually beaten or tortured like other soldiers.

"We were treated very poorly," he said. "But not like some of these other guys."

After Koblenz, Meadows was taken to Meiningen, where he was kept in the town opera house with other American and British troops.

That's where he met 2nd Lt. Reba Whittle, a nurse who had been captured after being shot down. The Germans allowed her to nurse Americans like Meadows while she was there, eventually deciding she could go back to the States. When she was preparing to leave, Meadows said she got his information so she could write his parents and young wife back in Michigan to let them know where he was and the extent of his injuries. All they had known was that the 20-year-old was missing in action.

"I still have that letter somewhere," he said.

The soldiers he was housed with at [Meiningen](#) shared what few razor blades they had to stay clean-cut. They slept on straw mattresses placed atop wooden boards, and at night, Meadows and other soldiers placed their slacks underneath the boards. By morning, the slacks had a respectable crease in them.

"We wanted the Germans to see our *esprit de corps*; we wanted them to know -- even though we were their prisoners -- we still had some fight in us."

[Coming home](#)

The winter Meadows spent as a prisoner of war in Germany was the coldest the country had endured in decades. His feet became frostbitten, and he came down with pneumonia, running a high fever.

He didn't think he would make it.

There was an Airborne soldier there who said to Meadows: "Hey, sergeant, when you get to feeling better, if you'd like, I'll tell you my battle experiences."

"We're about 3 million miles away from home," Meadows looked at him and said. "I doubt if we're ever going to get home again, and you're going to tell me about your battle experiences. No thank you."

He was being held in Meiningen then and was able to get some medicine from the Germans.

But his foot wasn't getting any better. He was able to walk on crutches using a piece of wood he'd whittled into a walking cast. But one day, when he stepped down on the foot, maggots oozed out of his skin.

"That was probably the weirdest feeling I ever had -- to think that maggots were in there eating my flesh," he said.

He was sent to another hospital to have his foot amputated. But the Saturday before his surgery, he and other prisoners in the hospital noticed the Germans fleeing in the streets and the sound of artillery fire in the distance. When he woke up on the morning his surgery was scheduled, there were no Germans left in the hospital. The prisoners took over, hoisting a sign up on the flag post that read: "POW."

Later, the 11th Armored Division burst into the building, liberating the men. There were African soldiers who had been detained so long, Meadows said it took them awhile to understand that they were free.

Five months had passed since Meadows was first captured. The 20-year-old Michigan native was later flown to England, where doctors saved his foot.

He was sent back to a hospital in Battle Creek, Mich., and in November 1945, he was medically discharged from the U.S. Army. He went back to his life in Flint, hitching a ride into town to where the young wife he left behind now lived with their baby son.

Before he left, he planned on going to college. He even had a scholarship to a Michigan to play football. But when he came back, his body was in no shape for football, and he had a family to support. He went to work for an oil company, and like many World War II veterans, left his war stories behind him.

"It just was one of those things we didn't talk about," he said.

"I don't know why."

He and his wife of 23 years, Shirley, moved to Punta Gorda in 1995. Two years later, he joined the America Ex-Prisoners of War. In the group, he says he's found more camaraderie than any other place in his life.

"POWs understand each other, and I think we're probably the closest knit outfit there is."

In 2001, he went back to Germany to the little towns where he had been held captive. He found a nun who knew the two who had carried him up four flights of stairs and even the foxhole where he and his division had been gunned down.

"It was just amazing for me to be able to do that," he said of the trip. "They didn't tear anything down."

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