

Gifford B. Doxsee

Communications Platoon,
Headquarters Company,
423rd Regiment, 106th Infantry Division



This morning I plan to begin the longest letter ever written to you to describe in detail my memories of my experiences during the Second World War, particularly in Europe and most especially during the months I was a prisoner of war in Germany, especially in Dresden. You may remember our having talked about Kurt Vonnegut and his novel, Slaughter-House Five, or The Children's Crusade, which became the most powerful anti-war novel by an American author published during the Vietnam War. Kurt and I were prisoners together in the same Stalag (Stammlager IVB) during our months of captivity from December 1944, until the end of the war in May 1945. The parts of Slaughter-house Five which describe the historical events of those days are remarkably accurate in terms of my own personal memories of the time, though of course Vonnegut has changed names and juxtaposed personalities so as to avoid any possibility of criticism or lawsuits. I have just finished re-reading the novel because I was asked to talk yesterday afternoon to a group of undergraduate students in an English class who are reading it as a course requirement this term, and the course instructor, Keith Rhodes, who has heard me talk about my wartime experiences and about this particular book in history courses he has had with me, asked me to address his students to add a personal dimension to the course. Thus my memories of the book and the wartime experiences have been sharpened again this week and therefore this seems to be an ideal time to write at length to you on the subject.

I will begin by recapitulating briefly my memories of events prior to entering on active duty in the Army and during my first 16 months of military service before going overseas in October 1944. Then, the letter will contain much more detail on the events and experiences during the eight and one-half months in Europe in late 1944 and the first half of 1945. I hope that you will find the letter interesting and informative in itself and that it will also provide an additional incentive for you to read Vonnegut's account in his novel as well as a perspective against which to judge and understand his book. There is language in Slaughter-House Five which you may find offensive. If so, I am sorry, but this is the type of literature read today in a very large proportion of "literary" works devoured by the younger generation, so reading it does have one fringe benefit: helping us "oldsters" stay in touch with what the young are reading and thinking.

My high school education ended in June 1942, with graduation from Freeport High School, Freeport, Long Island, New York. That September I began my college education at Hobart College, Geneva, New York, where I was able to complete my freshman year before going on active duty in the U.S. Army on June 9, 1943. (June 9, by the way is also our wedding anniversary, and it is of interest that Mary and I were married precisely 21 years later, to the day, than my entry on active military service.)

Pearl Harbor had occurred during my senior year in high school, and a few months later selective service rules were changed to permit the drafting of 18-year-olds. This situation encouraged a large proportion of the students at Hobart to enlist in the reserves during the autumn of 1942 in hopes that such an initiative would permit at least the completion of that academic year. Hence, I enlisted in the Army reserve November 13, 1942, feeling that my nearsightedness would prevent my passing the stiff physical examinations of the Navy or the Air Force. The effect of this enlistment was that I did finish my freshman year of college and that when I entered on active duty at Camp Upton, Long Island, on June 9th, it was in the company of many other college student reservists, all of whom were called to active service at the same time. We were all sent South to Fort McClellan, Alabama, for infantry basic training three days after the induction at Camp Upton. After three months at Fort McClellan during the hottest part of summer, most of us were then sent to Alabama Polytechnic Institute, Auburn, Alabama (now Auburn University) for six months of Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), from September 1943, to March 1944, in basic engineering.

Those nine months in Alabama were, in retrospect, a fairly painless introduction to military service. This was my first ever experience in the Deep South, as before that time Washington, D.C., had been the most southerly point our family had ever taken us. Fort McClellan sits in the foothills of the southern Appalachians in northeast Alabama just a few miles from the city of Anniston. The physical training was rugged, particularly at mid-day in the hot Alabama sun, but my fellow recruits were all college men, a fine group indeed. Our officers and non-coms treated us decently, and the elevation of the Fort above sea level insured that temperatures dropped markedly each night, even on the hottest days, so that we always slept under blankets! This was in marked contrast to the situation the following summer in Camp Atterbury, Indiana, where the mid-west heat and humidity were ever-present night and day. Auburn was a delightful small southern college town, depleted of male students in those days except for us chaps in the ASTP. We lived in the dormitory quadrangle that had been built just before the war for the female students, while the gals had to move into fraternity houses in exchange. Our classes were sufficiently challenging to keep us mentally alert and to help in the return to college after the war, though we did have to march to class in military formation, and of course we wore uniforms at all times.

During those months in Alabama I was given 7-10 day furloughs three times, in September between the end of basic training and the start of the academic year at Auburn, during the Christmas-New Year's holiday, and again at the end of our program in March just before we shipped northward to Indiana. On each of these three occasions, I took the train from Auburn to New York to visit my parents, going via Atlanta and Washington, D.C., on the Southern Railroad to the capital and thence, I think, on the Pennsylvania Railroad to New York, from where the Long Island Railroad took me out to Freeport. Trains were always crowded, dingy, tiring, but there was a zest and excitement about travel on the rail in those days whatever the conditions. We were young, flexible, able to endure discomfort, and in any case all of us were in the same situation, so we made do with a chuckle.

[Camp Atterbury, Indiana](#), provided different experiences. The military post is located approximately 30 miles due south of Indianapolis in the flat, fertile agricultural belt of the Middle West. I remember sharply how prosperous the farms and farmhouses

appeared to me on first arrival in Indiana after nearly a year in the poorer parts of Alabama. The black, rich soil and freshly painted homes and barns made a startling contrast. Soft coal was the principal energy source for heating the barracks during the early spring, and the smell of the coal dust and smoke also made a sharp impression on my senses, as back home we had burned anthracite coal or oil. We received weekend passes nearly every weekend at Camp Atterbury, which permitted us to spend Saturday evenings and Sundays either in Indianapolis or in other nearer towns such as Columbus, Indiana, located just southeast of the camp. I was able to establish friendships with several families in these towns whom I met through the church. (I was a practicing Christian Scientist in those days, as were most of these friends.) During the week, from early April until late June, I was given signal corps training in Morse code and communications systems and equipment of all sorts. When that training phase ended, I was transferred into a communications platoon of the headquarters company of the Third Battalion, 423rd Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division, the unit with which I shipped overseas and entered combat. While undergoing the communications training, I was attached to the Signal Corps unit of the Division Headquarters.

During summer 1944, the 106th Division completed training for overseas duty by going out on field maneuvers in the hills at the southern edge of Camp Atterbury, part of or adjacent to hilly Brown County, Indiana, which has long been a noted artist colony because it is the most physically attractive part of the state with its rolling hills and more rugged scenery than other parts of the "Hoosier State." Living in the field for weeks on end built up our endurance and taught us to function effectively as a team, so that by late August we all felt reasonably well prepared for combat.

Then, immediately after the completion of these field maneuvers, the Army dealt our division a body blow. Orders came from Washington, D.C., transferring out of our division virtually every trained infantry rifleman and machine-gunner. All these fighting men, the front-line soldiers who are the heart and soul of the Army, were needed in Europe as individual replacements for divisions already in combat and whose losses had been high. The 106th Infantry Division was reduced to a skeleton~ remaining were most of the officer corps, most of the cadre of sergeants and corporals, and most of the auxiliary units such as the signal corps, the quartermaster corps and the various headquarters companies, of which I was a part. To take the place of the departed trained soldiers, the Army sent us three groups of replacements: over-age cooks, bakers and clerks who had been declared physically unfit for combat service when they had entered the Army much earlier, but who had been reclassified for combat as the manpower needs of the Army became desperate; Air Force cadets on service less than six months who had not flunked out of their training programs but were simply declared surplus because the infantry needed manpower more urgently at that moment than the Air Force did; and veterans of the Army who had spent 30 months on the outer Aleutian Islands guarding Alaska from a Japanese invasion, who had been given their first-ever furloughs home since the war began with a choice of returning to the remote Aleutians or taking their chances on assignment to a Stateside unit in the lower forty-eight states. Those who opted for the latter ended up with us two weeks before we shipped out for Europe! These men were all demoralized when they reached us and learned that we were already packing our vehicles and equipment for shipment to Europe and combat. They never received one day of military training after arrival before we left for our Port of Embarkation and for combat. The plan in Washington

was that we would be sent to a “quiet sector” of the German front where we would be left for two or three months to learn to work as a team before going into serious combat against the German army. This was later termed General Omar Bradley’s “Calculated Risk.” There was simply not enough manpower to meet all the pressing military demands of those days as we were trying to defeat both Germany and Japan simultaneously on opposite sides of the world, as the logistics of supplying such far-flung armies were enormous, and as 13 men were needed in the rear supply and protective and service echelons to maintain one fighting man on the front lines! My point here is that the U.S. manpower barrel had been stretched to the absolute limit. We won World War Two, but at a margin that was so narrow as to be almost miraculous. Few Americans today realize by what a hair’s breadth we came out on top. But the history of the 106th Division is an illustration of my point. General Bradley’s “Calculated Risk” exploded in his face, for instead of our having two or three months to learn at the front what our trained soldiers had learned in months. of arduous training in Indiana, the Germans launched the “Battle of the Bulge,” the Von Rundstedt’s Western Offensive, right around us on December 16, 1944, just five days after we had moved into the front lines on the Belgian-German border only a few miles north of Luxembourg!

To backtrack briefly: we left Camp Atterbury in early October after a month of packing, organizing, and preparing for overseas shipment. Our Port of Embarkation was supposed to be Boston, so we were sent to Camp Miles Standish in southeastern Massachusetts near the western end of Cape Cod. But at the last minute my particular regiment was sent to New York to sail across the Atlantic on the Queen Elizabeth I, filling a gap left by another unit which failed to be ready on time. The Queen, built to accommodate approximately 1,000 passengers, carried more than 14,000 soldiers on that sailing. Our group were assigned to staterooms on A deck, built for two in peacetime. There were 21 of us wedged like sardines into our particular stateroom, in bunks three high, four sets lining one wall, three sets the opposite, with barely enough space in the aisle between for a person to move sideways! In addition to 21 bodies, we had to cram into the same stateroom and bath ~ fl of our clothing, gear, even rifles, that we were taking overseas with us to combat. To say we were jammed in tightly is an understatement, but even so, we were among the fortunate passengers on that sailing of the Queen Elizabeth. In other parts of the ship, soldiers had to take turns sharing their bunks on a 12-hour rotating basis: half the men slept nights and then went on deck during the day; their opposite numbers had the stateroom bunks daytime hours and had to sit on the decks all night. At least we had our bunks and stateroom 24 hours a day!

We sailed from New York Harbor on the Queen on October 17, 1944, arrived at Greenock, the port of Glasgow, a week later, then took trains south. Our particular unit was billeted just north of Cheltenham, England, on the Evesham Road in the lounges of the horse-race course and grounds. That corner of England on the edge of the Cotswolds is one of the most attractive in all Britain, but our sojourn there came during the six weeks of late October and all of November when days were exceedingly short, usually cloudy and rainy, seldom bright with sunshine. I found a billboard in the public square of downtown Cheltenham one day in that perio4 which listed the number of minutes of sunshine recorded daily, and on more than one occasion the local weather keeper had recorded “two minutes” of sunshine in an entire 24 hour period! Hence, our spirits were not the highest, despite the beauty of the nearby landscape in good weather.

We shipped out of England the last day of November, crossed the Channel that night to Le Havre, France, where we waded ashore in the absence of any port or docking facilities so soon after the Allied capture of one of the most badly bombed cities of France. We hiked through the rubble of Le Havre to the eastern fringes of the city where trucks picked us up and transported us to -- a cow pasture on the road between Rouen and Dieppe where we pitched tents in the middle of the night amid the cattle, and where we remained for eight or nine days until the balance of our division caught up with us. Thence we moved to the Belgian-French border region for another two nights of camping in a field under the trees until the Army moved us, again by truck, to the front lines in the German Siegfried Line, just north of Luxembourg. We were assigned to a point of deep penetration into Germany, the most exposed salient of the entire front, a section of the Siegfried Line that the Second Army Division had taken three months earlier as General Patton's offensive across France to the German frontier was nearing its end. We replaced the Second Division, man for man, gun for gun, so that they could move northward to participate in the forthcoming U.S. offensive launched a few days later toward Cologne.

This brings us to another example of the shortage of manpower in that crucial winter of 1944-1945. The Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) faced an agonizing decision at that moment: whether to maintain an adequate defense force along the entire front from Switzerland to the North Sea, to insure against any possible German counteroffensive being successful; or whether instead to deplete the ranks of the defensive forces so that troops could be concentrated at one or two points for an offensive against the German army. Eisenhower, Bradley, and their colleagues at SHAEF opted for the second choice. They decided to attack west of Cologne in hopes of taking that city, crossing the Rhine River there or nearby, and by penetrating into the heart of Germany east of the Rhine, to speed the end of the war. Before Cologne could be attacked, however, it was necessary to secure control over the Roer River dams (not the Ruhr, but the Roer, a small river west of Cologne), which the Germans had mined and which, if the explosives were detonated, would flood a large plain west of Cologne and thereby endanger any Allied forces in the vicinity. To concentrate the troops needed to capture the Roer River dams intact, Allied Headquarters so thinned out the U.S. troops elsewhere that our "inexperienced," "green," "newly constituted" 106th Infantry Division was given the task of defending 27 miles of front against the Germans in a supposedly quiet sector of the Ardennes Forest. There were only three U.S. divisions left to defend more than 100 miles of front! Our Division was compelled to commit every single battalion to front line duty rather than keeping any battalions in reserve, an almost unheard-of tactic in those days. Even so, there were places along the front where not a single U.S. soldier was guarding the front for distances sometimes more than 500 yards long—nearly half a mile with nothing opposing the Germans more than a scattering of mines!

Days and days of stormy overcast skies prevented Allied air flights over the front to report on possible German troop concentrations. Thus, as the Allied armies grouped for the attack on the Roer River Dams and later Cologne, the Germans in a similar way, massed their units some miles to the south, directly opposite us! The U.S. offensive began December 13, and three days later the Germans attacked us!

The Von Rundstedt Offensive, known in the U.S. as the "Battle of the Bulge," began

with a massive artillery barrage at dawn on Saturday, December 16, 1944. Within an hour, virtually the entire U.S. Artillery support for our division had been totally destroyed. The Germans had carefully kept records of the position of the Second Division Artillery pieces, month after month, and our folly of replacing that division, gun for gun, without changing the location of our own weapons, became fully apparent only after our artillery had been destroyed. Then the German infantry broke through the U.S. lines a dozen or so miles south of my regiment and before the morning was out, we were cut off in a pocket completely surrounded by the Germans. We did retain radio communication with our division headquarters to the west in the Belgian town of St. Vith, and orders came from there for us to dig in on all sides and hold off the Germans to the last man, if need be. That was what we did for three days, throughout Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, December 16, 17, and 18. On the morning of the 19th, new orders came through: we were to abandon our positions and fight our way westward to the hamlet of Schonberg on the German-Belgian border, between St. Vith and our present position. An armored column of tanks from either the U.S. Seventh or Ninth Armored Division was to fight its way to Schonberg from the West, meet us there, and provide an escape for us. The plan had merit, but it never worked out, for Belgian civilians who had lived under Nazi occupation for four years prior to their liberation a few months earlier panicked with the returning German troops and fled from their homes westward in such numbers that they cluttered the highways so badly that military movements were blocked. We reached the outskirts of Schonberg by mid-afternoon on the 19th (Tuesday), but only at the cost of heavy casualties as the Germans continued to harass us with artillery (the terrible 88mm guns) as well as by infantry sniper fire. Near Schonberg, we were cornered on a wooded hillside, surrounded by German 88 guns, abandoned by the abortive rescue mission, and then given the option of surrendering within 30 minutes or being blown to Kingdom Come. Our regimental executive officer, a lieutenant colonel, took the decision to surrender the remnant of his troops after the large majority of soldiers in that regiment had already been killed, wounded, or in other ways lost during the preceding three days. We surrendered shortly before dusk, between 4 and 5 p.m. on the afternoon of Tuesday, December 19, 1944. One history of the Battle of the Bulge has been entitled *Dark December*, a most appropriate title, for truly the 19th of December, 1944, was the darkest day of my entire life.

The Germans lined us up, some 150 or 200 of us who were surrendered by our colonel, searched us thoroughly for weapons (in the course of which they found my English-German conversation booklet, which they forced me to throw away, to my profound anguish), and then started us marching eastward into Germany. We were on the border east of St. Vith, Belgium, northwest of Prum, Germany, toward which we were headed that afternoon, and which we reached the following day about noon. We marched east that Tuesday night until after midnight, until we reached a farming village where we were locked into a corral until about nine the next morning, a barnyard surrounded by buildings and fences. Three of us pooled our coats, put one under us on the frozen ground, curled up against each other like spoons, with the other two coats over us for warmth, and slept despite the bitter cold. Next morning, without a trace of food, we took to the road again about 9 a.m., then resumed our march eastward. An hour or so later the road on which we were walking climbed up over a rise high enough to permit a view both front and back for perhaps a mile in each direction. At that moment my heart truly sank, for I could see a line of U.S. prisoners, six or seven abreast, as far as the eye could see in both directions—to east

and west. Thousands of U.S. prisoners were trudging into Germany. It looked as though the Nazis had forced the surrender of half the U.S. Army in Europe! Only at that moment did I begin to comprehend the magnitude of the German triumph in the early days of the Battle of the Bulge. We know now that in fact the Germans captured about 25,000 American troops, but that a month later General Patton and his colleagues took many times that number of German prisoners as the U.S. pincers movement succeeded in closing a trap on many, if not most, of the Germans involved in the push into Belgium!

Several additional aspects of this battle are worth sharing. First, the importance of oil and gasoline in World War Two. I truly believe today that the German lack of adequate petroleum supplies was the single most important cause of the Allied victory in World War Two. The Allies gained air superiority over western Europe by 1943 because of their control over most of the world's oil supplies. Likewise, motorized equipment could be efficiently used in most battle sectors and theaters by the Allies, while enemy forces frequently lacked adequate fuel for full response. The night of our surrender, as we walked into Germany on a secondary road, German troops and supplies were moving westward toward the front almost continuously on the same roadway along which we were trudging. Nearly 90 percent of the German vehicles on that road that night were horse-drawn, and those vehicles that were motorized were emitting the most noxious and strange odors because of the ersatz fuel being burned! I simply couldn't believe my eyes, that in December 1944, the German army which was challenging the best the U.S., Britain, and other armies could provide along the Western Front, was launching this military initiative overwhelmingly with horses! Of course the front-line German troops had tanks, trucks, and motorized vehicles, but the supporting units in the rear were having to cope without gasoline. Ponder that!

One of the principal German objectives in launching the December offensive was the huge U.S. oil depot outside Spa, Belgium, the principal supply source for the entire U.S. First Army, of which we were a part. Ultimately the Germans wanted to take Antwerp and close that port to the Allies, while simultaneously dividing the British troops on the north from the U.S. and French forces south of their invasion route. But the most urgent short-term German goal was the oil depot near Spa. And they came within 500 yards of taking that oil intact! The U.S. Army units defending the petroleum stocks had been sent off, and only a handful of noncombatant soldiers armed with carbines (clerks, cooks, bakers, etc.) stood between the advancing Germans and the precious oil that would have put the Luftwaffe back in the skies over Britain, fueled the Panzer Divisions again, and who knows what else! Minutes, perhaps only seconds, before the Germans laid hands on that oil, someone managed to ignite the depot. It went up in smoke in the very nick of time to deny Germany perhaps the margin of victory. My source of information for this story was a U.S. army lieutenant who was stationed at Spa at the time this occurred. It is no figment of my imagination. The thrilling Hollywood film, entitled "The Battle of the Bulge" which was produced years later, did indeed feature the oil depot episode as the climax of the film, exactly as Lt. Robert Cahn had recounted the story to me at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in the autumn of 1945, a few weeks before my discharge from the Army.

Another insight from the battle: the individual soldier's range of vision in combat is limited to a few dozen yards, to what he can see and hear himself. The Battle of the

Bulge was enormously costly in human life, in battlefield casualties. I personally witnessed several corpses of U.S. soldiers after they had been killed. But fortunately, no one of my close comrades was either killed or badly wounded in close proximity, and therefore there was no scar psychologically inflicted on me in that entire battle. No horrible memories, no nightmares, no screams in the night in later years which evidenced the psychological wounds inflicted on friends of mine. A college roommate after the war used to wake me up night after night with his screams and nightmares from memories acquired in that very same battle, from which I was so blessedly spared.

Thursday morning, December 21, 1944, our German captors placed us in freight cars at Gerolstein, Germany, east of Prum and west of Koblenz. The town of Gerolstein remained intact beyond the moment of our passing through, but a few days later Allied bombers wreaked havoc with the city, and prisoners who were brought to Gerolstein just days after our visit were stoned by the outraged inhabitants. Vonnegut provides a graphic description of the journey we endured in the freight cars from Gerolstein into central Germany. These cars were nicknamed "40 and 8's," because they had been designed to accommodate either 40 men or 8 horses. Our captors crowded 60 of us into each of these cars, however, with the result that we literally could not all find space to lie flat at any one time. At night we slept against one another, spoon like, as Vonnegut describes, but even then some of us had to sleep sitting up with legs spread apart so that another could wedge in between legs. Rows of us slept sitting up in this way, each leaning against the one between whose legs he nestled. Narrow rectangular horizontal apertures (windows) were at each of the four corners of the boxcar, through which we received occasional supplies of water and nourishment in the form of hard biscuits (hardtack) and tinned cheese.

Late in the afternoon of Saturday, December 23rd, our unmarked freight train pulled into the large rail yard of the city of Limburg, some 30 to 50 miles east of Koblenz, where we had crossed the Rhine River on one of the few still-functioning railroad bridges. There was a large prisoner-of-war camp on the outskirts of Limburg, supposedly our destination. Immediately on arrival there, the locomotive pulling our train was disconnected and sent off to its next duty. So short in supply were German locomotives in those days, resulting from months and years of Allied bombings, that these had to be reserved days in advance. But to our chagrin, we learned soon after that the P.O.W. camp at Limburg was overcrowded with prisoners who had recently arrived, taken in the first days of the Battle of the Bulge. There simply was no room for more prisoners, so we were left in the freight yards until another locomotive could be found to pull our freight train to another camp deeper inside Germany. That evening just at sunset the British Royal Air Force came over for an intensive saturation bombing of Limburg. And there we were in unmarked freight trains, sitting ducks, right in the railroad yards in the geographical center of the city! As soon as the red flares were dropped, the signal that bombs would begin falling in moments, our captors rushed off to the nearest air raid shelters. Someone broke out of the train and ran alongside, opening doors to each boxcar from the outside. We prisoners all rushed out pell-mell, running in all directions with one aim in mind, to get away from the train and the railroad yards, if possible, at the earliest moment. But before we got anywhere, bombs started falling all around us in all directions. The feeling of helplessness in such a situation is overpowering. No visible protection, no indication of the location of shelters, no way of knowing where the next bomb would fall. I ran diagonally away from the rear end of our train, falling flat on the ground each time I

heard the whine of an approaching bomb, and just hoping against hope that it would fall somewhere else and not near me. Suddenly the bombing stopped and a profound silence descended on us. All around were bomb craters, but the train was untouched, and gradually most of us drifted back to the train and to "our own" boxcars, since these were relatively warm and the temperature outdoors on that evening before Christmas Eve was grimly frigid. To my horror I found a large bomb crater just 30 yards or so directly opposite "my" boxcar. Had I run perpendicularly away from the train on emerging from it, I would have run right into that bomb, as several other soldiers did! Why I chose to run along the train to its rear and then set off at a diagonal, I'll never know, but that subconscious decision saved my life.

After the Limburg bombing, which incidentally produced a direct hit on one of the barracks in the prisoner of war camp, killing more than 200 U.S. prisoners, we were left in the freight train another three days until a replacement locomotive could be found to pull us to Muhlberg, Stalag IVB, where we arrived late on December 29th, after eight and one-half days on the train. When we finally staggered off the train to go into the prison camp compound, the days of being cramped up and without adequate food and water made their impact felt. So many of us had lost much weight, and our energies had waned significantly. Not until after the war, and for many of us much after the war, would our appearance, weight, and physical strength return approximately to what these had been prior to our capture. In my case, I came out of prison in mid-May 1945 weighing 112 pounds, having lost between 40 and 50 pounds, and with only a fraction of the strength I had earlier known. I quickly regained weight, but it was a flabby fat, without muscle or strength. Not until more than a year later did I feel my strength had returned nearly to normal.

We remained at the large prison camp near Muhlberg, Germany, for about 14 days until sent off to Dresden January 12th as part of an Arbeitskommando or work group of some 150 U.S. prisoners of war. (Vorinegut says that 100 went to Dresden, but I am sure the number was larger.) At the Muhlberg camp there were prisoners of many nationalities, including Russians. Each group was housed separately in different compounds within the larger camp. But somehow it was possible for the differing groups to move back and forth during daylight, and we saw Russians many times come into the British non-commissioned officers compound where we were housed temporarily, seeking food. Russia had never signed the Geneva Convention on treatment of prisoners in wartime, and since the Russian government mistreated Germans held in the U.S.S.R., the Germans felt quite able to reciprocate. Hence, these Russians were literally starving, and to fend off death as long as possible, they wandered into the compounds of other nationalities to scrounge the garbage and leftovers that British and Western European prisoners would not eat.

The British non-coms among whom we were housed during our brief sojourn at Muhlberg were, on the other hand, exceedingly well fed comparatively. They had been captured early in the war, many at Tobruk in North Africa, in 1942 and had learned to adapt to prison conditions. Besides, they had received Red Cross food packages regularly since arrival in Muhlberg and by husbanding their supplies had built up a significant reserve stock of food, some of which they shared with us Americans while we were with them. The German government had enlisted the help of the International Red Cross early in the war by explaining that food supplies in Germany would be inadequate to provide more than a starvation diet to prisoners, and that the only way Western European or North American prisoners might receive reasonably

adequate food during imprisonment would be for the home countries to send individual food packages through the Red Cross. Sweden and Switzerland became the delivery points for these parcels, whence they entered Germany and were distributed to the various P.O.W. camps. The system worked well until late 1944 by which time the cumulative impact of Allied bombing of German cities, railroad yards, bridges, and trains had caused such havoc with the transportation system that the distribution of the Red Cross food parcels broke down as food stocks accumulated in Switzerland and Sweden. We became prisoners just about the time the food was running out. We enjoyed a bit of it at Muhlberg, with the British, but after going to Dresden received almost none. Hence we were forced to subsist on what the German army gave us: a dish or bowl of watery soup each evening together with a section of a loaf of black pumpernickel bread, averaging an inch thick, half of which we were supposed to save to eat in the morning with the cup of ersatz coffee which was all we got for breakfast. Twice a week the watery soup contained bits of meat, and two or three times per week we got chunks of cheese with the bread. But that was all! No wonder we were losing weight steadily from the time of our capture. Meantime, the Red Cross food parcel weighed 12 to 14 pounds net weight of food, which always included two pounds of tinned meat (Spam, corned beef, or similar varieties), a pound of powdered milk (called KLIM {milk spelled in reverse} in those days), sugar, prunes, raisins, M and M candies, biscuits that would swell when soaked in water, and other goodies. Had we received a full food package per week besides what the Germans gave us, which was the intention, we'd have made out all right. As things worked out, I received a full Red Cross food package ~ a half package twice, one-sixth of a parcel once, and one-fourteenth of a package once. That is all the Red Cross food I ever saw in five months of captivity. One of my comrades died from the effects of malnutrition because he had been enslaved by tobacco and traded off his crusts of bread for cigarettes. If you ever wondered why I never took up cigarettes, that is all the explanation you will ever need! (Years later I learned that Edward "Joe" Crone never smoked but gave his food away from compassion for fellow POWs.)

The evening our train brought us from Limburg to Muhlberg; our captors first put us all through a "de-lousing" station. Here again Kurt Vonnegut has provided a graphic and entirely accurate -description in Slaughter-House Five. We were forced to remove all our clothes, go into a shower room naked and be thoroughly showered with hot water, which felt wonderful. Our clothes were sent through a chemical de-lousing treatment room while we were showering, so they came back purified if not washed. But before we could put our clothes back on, we had to endure inoculations, probably a good idea in principle, but one which hurt that time because the needles were put into our breasts rather than in arms or elsewhere. After receiving the inoculations and then dressing, we were taken to piles of overcoats and each given one. I received the coat originally used by a Belgian soldier, unbeautiful but wearable and much appreciated. Only one of the 150 who eventually moved to Dresden together was given a blue coat with the letters USSR painted or stenciled on the back in yellow. That coat made him the single most conspicuous member of our arbeitskommando and it was ironic that he should be the individual later caught by the SS carrying off a quart jar of canned string beans from the cellar of a bombed-out Dresden home, an offense for which he was tried, found guilty, and executed. Details later.

We moved by train again on January 12th, this time to Dresden, perhaps 50 miles at most from Muhlberg. Contrary to Vonnegut's statement that we arrived in mid-afternoon in Dresden, we actually reached that lovely city in the early hours of

morning, perhaps between 4 and 5 a.m. and walked under guard in pitch darkness from the train station to our new home in the Slaughter-House compound of the city on the left bank or south side of the Elbe River, a large open area more than half enclosed by the large bend in the Elbe on the northwest edge of the Altstadt, the oldest part of Dresden. Our new home was a concrete block structure, erected to slaughter livestock. It was rectangular in shape, divided into three main portions. The western and central portions of the building had each been converted into sleeping quarters by the introduction of double-decker bunks, lined up as close together as possible, along with two pot-bellied stoves. Around the walls were concrete shelves complete with piped water faucets, where the actual cutting up of the animals was done. The eastern third of the building had again been divided in half, the front part of which served as a refectory and equipped with tables and chairs, while the back or northeast corner was used as kitchen or storage, into which the hot food was brought daily for our evening meal, such as it was. The entire structure had been circled by a high wall, topped with barbed wire to convert it into a prison barracks. In front was a fairly spacious courtyard, while behind the building was the primitive latrine. The entire compound was designed by our captors, Schlachthof Fünf, or "Slaughter-House Five," the title of the Vonnegut novel.

Four months elapsed from the moment of our arrival in Dresden, January 12-13, 1945, until my return to American control on Mother's Day, May 13, 1945. Those months can be sub-divided into three segments: our arrival in Dresden until the fire-bombing of the city February 13th and 14th, exactly one month; from the fire-bombing which came ironically on both Ash Wednesday and St. Valentine's Day (February 14, 1945) to our evacuation from the city on April 14th, this time exactly two months; and from our evacuation until our return to American hands on Sunday, May 13th. During the first four weeks in Dresden we lived in the Slaughter-House compound and worked in groups of contract laborers with individual German business firms. My group of 15 worked in Konig's Maltfabrik, across the Elbe, about which I'll write in detail below. During the second period, we lived with South African prisoners in a compound on Kesselsdorfer Strasse, several kilometers southwest of Dresden on the major highway toward Chemnitz. During these two months our principal daily activity consisted of cleaning up debris and rubble caused by the Allied bombing of the city. Occasionally during that era, we also had to seek out corpses of German casualties from the bombing and convey these to central locations from which they were moved to funeral pyres set up in varying parts of the city. In the third era, we were evacuated entirely from Dresden to a mountain village on the Czech border called Hellendorf, some 50 or more kilometers southeast of Dresden. There we did nothing but vegetate and wait for the end of the war. There was virtually no food whatever provided during this final phase except what early spring growth of grass, dandelions, and thistles we could manage to scrounge. Literally, eating grass is what kept my life flowing during those last weeks before VE day on May 8, 1945!

Daily work at Konig's Maltfabrik during our first weeks in Dresden was in retrospect the most pleasant part of the prison experience. The Germans had converted most of the malt factory to the manufacture of ersatz coffee, and my work consisted mainly of physical labor helping to unload boxcars of grain and other raw materials when these arrived on the special rail spur into the factory grounds. Most of the time, however, I worked up on the top (fourth) floor of the factory operating a bagging machine. The grain, which was stored in the basement of the factory below ground level until needed, was brought to the top floor through pipes that literally operated by suction

to suck up the grain through several floors of elevation. Another prisoner and I stood at the bagging machine with burlap sacks, each of which held one or two bushels of grain. A sliding door either permitted the grain to enter one sack or channeled it to the second sack. We alternated filling our bags, and while one filled, the other rolled on a wheeled cart his full sack to a storage area in another part of the room. My colleague on this machine was Tom Jones, a young man from Atlanta, Georgia, a devout Southern Baptist, for whom I had an immense liking and respect. I had a Christmas card from him only once after the war in response to my having written him. I've often wondered what happened to him in later years.

Our foreman at Konig's Malt Factory was a German Nazi party member, aged in his 60s, short, wiry, powerful, dedicated, and thoroughly committed to the German work ethic. If I ever knew his name, I have long since forgotten it. He treated Tom and me reasonably well, and we did our routine jobs quietly and efficiently and never gave him cause to harass us. But we also had working with us an elderly German Jew named Altman, or at least this is what our Nazi foreman called him: "Old Man." Like us, Altman was assigned to purely routine tasks, mainly pushing the filled sacks of grain from their point of temporary storage into the funnels that carried the grain to a lower floor where it was mixed with other ingredients and roasted in a furnace until suitable for grinding into the ersatz coffee. Our foreman had intimidated Altman to the point of monumental fear by periodically kicking, beating, and screaming at him. Altman would, when thus attacked, cringe and shake violently, his entire body convulsed with fear. Never before or since in my entire life have I ever seen a human being so cowed with terror of another human being. This was my closest personal contact with the holocaust and the utter, helpless fear it inculcated into individual helpless Jews!

The Konig factory, while mainly producing coffee made of roasted wheat and sugar beet shavings and chicory, continued to manufacture a small amount of sweet malt syrup, its major product before the war. This syrup was cooked in huge vats in one corner of the factory. It was later bottled in jars of glass, liter and half-liter containers, with sealed lids, which in turn were packaged in cardboard boxes containing about one dozen jars each. German civilian women did most of the work in making the syrup and in packaging it. They were sympathetic human beings who quickly realized the severity of our hunger, even though those of us working at Konig's were better off than our other fellow prisoners because we were fed a bowl of substantial hot soup or stew at noon daily that colleagues working elsewhere missed. So these kind German ladies turned their backs on occasion when one or more of us had work that took us through the cooking rooms. We were able on such occasions to dip a spoon into the cooking syrup, let it cool, and then "eat" the sticky substance which had the consistency of honey and which warmed our stomachs and gave us additional energy and the desire to keep living. Once in a great while, one of the 15 of us working at Konigs was able to slip a full jar of syrup out of the packing room and surreptitiously share its contents with the rest of us in some remote corner of the plant. We always ran a risk in either ferreting out syrup or eating it, as such was strictly forbidden. Once I was caught putting back my spoon by the Nazi foreman, and I was pale with fear, expecting the same sort of physical abuse that he dished out to Altman daily. He screamed at me with anger, venom and hate, but he did avoid hitting me, and after he calmed down the incident was forgotten! All too soon the firebombing caused the malt factory to close its doors, not because of a direct bomb

hit in that case, but because the rail lines that brought in supplies and carried away the coffee and malt were destroyed and because most of the workers' homes were equally destroyed, preventing their continued work at the plant.

One final point needs to be made about the Kanig Malt Factory. That is the evidence the work force provided of the skill of German management in utilizing effectively the labor of unwilling workers. There must have been more than 100 laborers employed at Konig's during the month I worked there. Fifteen of us were American P.O.W.s. Another dozen to two dozen were German women, mainly in their 50s and 60s, mainly working with the malt processing and packaging. Another half dozen or so were elderly German males like our foreman, supervising the labor force and providing top management. All the rest were laborers from the far corners of Europe, mainly civilians, but including a few war prisoners of other nationalities besides us. There were Poles, Danes, French, and other nationalities I can no longer remember. Most of these groups were limited to no more than ten to fifteen individuals of each nationality. We all knew a few words of basic, often broken German, with which to communicate fundamental needs, but none of us was fluent in German. So we had not the common language needed to plot, plan, or execute any sort of rising or resistance. The Germans had skillfully divided and conquered their subject nationalities. At the end of the war in May 1945, there were 11 million slaves manning the German economy: slave laborers from all parts of Europe, including the hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war who had fallen into German hands. We slaves were working in mines, forests, factories, as well as on the land doing agricultural labor. Without our muscles and constructive activity, the German economy would have ground to a halt much sooner than it did. Just reflect:

11 million slaves in a total population of no more than 80 million m~"Greater Germany," as Hitler created this by his conquests from 1936 to 1943! What genius! And despite the hostility of the slaves, we really had no alternative but to work along at our daily routine tasks, short of courting execution or exceedingly severe punishment.

The night of the fire-bombing, our guards roused us twice, once before and once after midnight and marched us a few hundred yards from our billets in Slaughter-House Number Five to a storage house on the edge of the Slaughter-house grounds. This rose several stories above ground and contained at least two entire floors below ground level. Our guards pushed us into the lowest level, into a subterranean refrigerator two stories below ground, where we enjoyed an unusual air-raid shelter while the armada of Royal Air Force planes pounded Dresden in the most intensive bombing of any single city anywhere in the world, ever, that night. The destruction far exceeded that wrought at either Hiroshima or Nagasaki, though the American people did not learn this until nearly two decades after the war had ended. The magnitude of the destruction of Dresden was one of the best kept secrets by the American government, not only for the duration of the war but for many years afterward. Eventually the truth came out. It is convincingly told by David Irving, a British scholar, in *The Destruction of Dresden*, and in a chapter in *The Last Hundred Days* by John Toland. Virtually all of the center of Dresden was pulverized, with not a single building left intact over an area covering dozens of square miles. Only the suburbs and the outer fringes of the city escaped total destruction. More than 130,000 inhabitants of the city lost their lives in the bombing that night and the following day, compared to about 71,000 in Hiroshima. (Later accounts reduced the

number of casualties in Dresden to below 100,000.) But even so, this represented only ten percent of the city's population of 1,300,000 at that time, a city whose normal pre-war population had been doubled by the coming of refugees from other parts of the country, partly the regions to the east which lay in the path of the advancing Russian armies.

After the all-clear sounded, toward 3 a.m. on Wednesday morning, February 14, 1945, our guards roused us again and forced us to climb back up to ground level. There we beheld another never-to-be-forgotten spectacle: the entire city of Dresden burning around us in all directions in the firestorm that has been so graphically described by John Toland and others. The guards explained, and showed us, that the building above us had been struck by incendiary bombs and was burning intensely. Their fear, that we had been in grave danger of death through suffocation as oxygen from our subterranean room might have been sucked up to help feed the flames, was thoroughly justified. They had secured a large cart, normally drawn by horses or oxen, into which we threw our meager belongings, and which we now had to push by our own muscle power, from the heart of the devastated city to the South African prison compound several miles to the west-southwest, well outside the city, along the major highway toward Kesselsdorf and Chemnitz (now -Karl Marx Stadt). We pushed and cajoled the huge, heavy, awkward cart yard by yard, alternately avoiding bomb craters and dangling electric wires that might be either dead or alive with electric power. After six to eight hours of excruciating difficulty, climaxed by the need to push the cart uphill for the final five or six kilometers to our destination, we reached the South African camp and found ourselves foisted upon an unwilling, though graciously hospitable group of prisoners who had been in Germany since the North African campaign years earlier, who had had none too much space for themselves even before our arrival, and who now were obligated by their German guards to double up by evacuating one entire barracks to make space for us. Though they really were given no option, and though they did not at first go out of their way to be friendly with us, they did at least accept us peacefully and in time exhibited numerous acts of kindness. Years later I learned that a distinguished South African anthropologist who had become a permanent resident of the United States and an anthropology professor at Berkeley had been among that group of South African prisoners taken at Tobruk and sent to Dresden. He was David Brokensha, and eventually we had an occasion to reminisce together over those days.

Once settled with the South Africans on Kesselsdorfer Strasse, we found ourselves marched daily into the center of Dresden to clean up bomb rubble. From this time, we no longer were divided into small groups of 10 or 15 each, but instead our guards led all 150 of us to a single street where from early morning till late afternoon we moved stone, brick, mortar and dust from the center of the streets and piled all the debris on the sidewalks so that vehicles and streetcars might once again make their way through the city. Even though our energies were ailing, and even though no one of us could work zestfully, with 150 employed, our group did manage to accomplish quite an acceptable amount of clean-up in an 8-10 hour day at work.

During those weeks we seemed to reach a tacit understanding and agreement with our German guards, most of whom were older men in their 50s and 60s, too old for combat duty, men with families, many of whom remembered the First World War. These guards for the most part were very decent human beings, and as they came to know us over time became somewhat kinder and mellow. They certainly recognized

our plight in terms of food, that the supplies had dwindled after the bombing of the city and that during those weeks of late February and March our bread rations were being drawn entirely from stocks baked before the bombing, which became increasingly full of mold. The only way that moldy bread was edible was to toast it on the stove top or stove pipes in our barracks. Anyway, despite the severity of the bomb damage, very few of those sturdily built German homes had been totally destroyed. When the roofs and walls collapsed, the falling bricks fell on the first floor, which in most cases was built strongly enough to hold these immense weights. Hence, once a person crossed from the street over the pile of debris into the courtyard behind, it was possible to enter the undamaged cellars through the cellar ways leading into the courtyard. In most homes, the industrious German housewife had preserved fruits and vegetables which she had stored in food pantries in the basement. Though technically by the rules of war, the taking of anything, even a spoonful of food, was a form of looting punishable by death, we were so desperate for food of any sort that the temptation to eat overpowered any form of conscience or fear of possible punishment. Besides, the tacit understanding with our guards seemed to be that they would look the other way in our eating food so long as we did this only in the basements right where the food had been stored and on the understanding that if we found anything else besides food in those basements, we'd take absolutely nothing, but instead would report all finds to the guards themselves. This arrangement worked well for several weeks, and all of us benefited by having the few additional calories daily provided by surreptitiously eating hastily downed spoons full of canned beans, peas, pears, apples, etc. provided. One day in March, however, as luck would have it, our cozy understanding with our guards blew up in our faces. The prisoner given the Soviet Union overcoat back in December at Muhlberg, had become greedy. No longer was he content to share a few spoonfuls of preserved food in the basement pantries. Rather, he boldly attempted to carry back a quart jar of canned string beans in the pocket of his field jacket, to be eaten leisurely that evening back in our barracks. Just as he clambered over the crest of the fallen debris of what had once been a prosperous German row-house, returning from the courtyard to the street, a group of SS troopers happened along to conduct one of their unannounced periodic inspections. They caught sight of this lad with his field jacket slung over his forearm in a suspicious looking manner. Stopping him, they examined the jacket, found the jar of beans, and duly noted the identity of the prisoner thus violating the laws of war with respect to looting. Nothing happened that evening. The soldier returned with the rest of us to our South African compound, minus his jar of beans. But next morning in formation, when we were being counted in our daily before-breakfast routine called the Countlappel, our unfortunate fellow prisoner was ordered out of formation and escorted away. Several mornings later, four other prisoners were called by name and similarly escorted away. That night the four returned, ashen, with the saddest story we had yet heard. They had been conducted to the center of Dresden. There they found the lad caught with the beans. They learned that he had been given a special court-martial, found guilty of looting, and condemned to death. The firing squad had been summoned. The four were then ordered to dig the grave, stand aside during the execution, and then throw the corpse into the grave and bury their fellow prisoner thus executed. Not only this, but the Germans had carefully searched all their records on us to determine which of our 150 came from the same town or were the closest friends of the sentenced man. They picked exactly the four who would be most greatly affected by the execution to witness it and bury the victim. Of course, the point was to insure that the four would convey full details to the rest of us to insure that no more looting would occur from

our group. The scheme worked! Despite our hunger, that ended our eating of preserved vegetables or fruit, period. Vonnegut suggests that it was Edgar Derby the Germans executed. Actually the prisoner who was thus shot was of Italian extraction and came more closely to fit the description of Paul Lazzaro in the novel than the description of Edgar Derby.

Next to the execution, the other most sobering example of German treatment of our group concerned Kurt Vonnegut himself. On our arrival in Dresden, an English-speaking German captain addressed us and explained that henceforth our guards were unlikely to know any English. Good daily relations with our guards necessitated an interpreter with enough knowledge of both languages to maintain lines of communication. The captain asked for volunteers from among us who would admit to knowing enough German to serve as interpreters. Four of our group volunteered. Each was interviewed by the captain individually, and Kurt Vonnegut was selected and served for most of the month prior to the February 13-14 bombing. One day as he remained in the barracks with a detail of five prisoners to scrub down the refectory tables and chairs and our living quarters, one of the German guards began to press on a prisoner to work harder. The soldier said he was sick, that he could not work any harder. The guard continued to press for more work, finally striking the prisoner. Vonnegut lost his patience at this treatment and under his breath muttered that the guard was a swine. The guard overheard the whispered curse, became furious, and stomped off to report to his sergeant that the translator had insulted the honor of Germany by calling him a dirty pig. Vonnegut was thereupon summoned, given a summary court-martial, found guilty, and demoted to the ranks of the rest of us. That evening another prisoner was selected as Vonnegut's successor as interpreter. - This all occurred within a few days of the firebombing. Henceforth, Kurt had to go out to work daily like the rest of us. After the destruction of the city, when we began the daily clean-up, the only youthful guard assigned to us, a nasty 16-year-old Hitler Jugend, who had been brainwashed in the Nazi Youth corps, took it upon himself to "teach" Vonnegut what it meant to have insulted a German, and what genuine, sustained, hard, physical labor really entailed. Each day, for weeks, as we reached our place of work and the other 10 or 12 guards scattered out among the 150 of us prisoners, the obnoxious kid whom we had nicknamed "Junior," would affix his unsheathed bayonet to this rifle and then follow Kurt Vonnegut around, hour after hour. Whenever Kurt would stop work, even for just a few seconds, Junior would poke him in the rear with the steel tip of his bayonet and at the same time jestfully utter such phrases as "Vonnegut! You are lazy. You Americans are all lazy. You do not know the meaning of work. We Germans are strong. We know how to work. I will teach you how. Get to work!" And along with the taunts would come periodic jabs with the bayonet point. Kurt knew as well as I and the rest of us that Junior was baiting him, daring him to lose control just once, for only a split second. Had Kurt even once during those long weeks of torment so much as uttered a whisper of protest or even suggested raising his arm in a gesture of defiance or retaliation, Junior would have gained his end. He could have reported Kurt as threatening him, or attacking him or the honor of Germany. Undoubtedly there would have been another trial, and Kurt Vonnegut might well have found himself sentenced to execution, just as his Italian-American colleague was shortly thereafter. But Kurt Vonnegut demonstrated nerves of steel. He did not give way. His tension rose day after day, for weeks, and I watched in fascination the trial of will between Junior and Kurt, wondering who would eventually triumph. One morning Junior failed to show up with the other guards, who told us he had been transferred, perhaps to the Russian front.

By that transfer, Kurt Vonnegut's life may well have been spared! I know the bitterness he held in his heart for "Junior" then and later, and for me the publication of Slaughter-House Five came as a revelation, for it revealed an author completely transformed by the quarter century that had elapsed between his own wartime experiences in Dresden and the eventual publication of his most acclaimed writing.

Easter Sunday came in 1945 on April 1st, and I clearly remember that day because for the first Sunday in weeks we were excused from work. Indeed, our guards provided hot water for showers in our compound shared by the South Africans, and for the first time in weeks we all had a thorough washing of our bodies. Indeed, for me that was my first hot shower since the firebombing of February 14th, six and one-half weeks earlier.

On Friday, April 13th, a German workman in downtown Dresden told us under his breath that the radio had reported the death of President Roosevelt the previous day in Warm Springs, Georgia. Another milestone in the history of our nation and of the war. I remember wondering what kind of president Harry Truman would make, and silently praying both for Truman and for our country. That was our last day of work in Dresden. That night our guards told us that the Americans had resumed the offensive and were pushing rapidly into central Germany, that the U.S. Army was on the edge of Leipzig, only 106 kilometers northwest of Dresden, and that at the present rate of advance, American forces would be approaching Dresden in another day or two. Our compound on Kesseisdorfer Strasse was right on the line of march west of the city, vulnerable to destruction either from artillery or from renewed air attack. We must evacuate. So early the next morning we set out on foot for an unknown place of refuge. The guards urged us to take little, as we should almost certainly be released by our own army within a few days at the most. We walked all that day and the next, nearly 50 kilometers in all, southeast along the Elbe River to Pirna, and thence up into the high mountains along the border separating Germany and Czechoslovakia. Sunday evening, April 15th, we reached our new destination, the village of Hellendorf, a bit east of the larger community of Guttleuba, just one or two kilometers from the Czech border. There we were housed on the floor of a large community auditorium on the second floor of a wing of the only Gasthof in the village. We brought in straw from the stables behind the inn to make our beds on the hardwood floor a bit more bearable. Trouble 'was that that straw contained ticks and other vermin, and from lying in it we all became afflicted with lice and other critters that made us less comfortable in our persons than at any other time during our captivity. Besides, there was neither constructive work to do nor any regular supply of food. Our guards let us forage in the meadow behind the Gasthaus or Gasthof each day to pick grass and greens, our main nourishment thereafter till the war ended. Rumors began to circulate almost immediately that the U.S. troops had ceased to advance, a true report, for we found ourselves in the last redoubt, the very last pocket of German territory to come under foreign military occupation. General Eisenhower had concluded an agreement with his Russian opposite, Marshal Zhukov I believe, that the region east of the Elbe should be left for the Russian zone, so the American troops stopped advancing and even pulled back to mutually agreed borders. We were the victims of that agreement, for it meant that we had to vegetate in Hellendorf more than three full weeks, from Sunday, April 15th, until Tuesday, May 8, 1945, celebrated in the U.S.A. as VE Day. We also heard during these weeks in Hellendorf that Hitler had ordered the execution of all prisoners still in German hands. Whether true or not, our guards did not comply, and we lived.

Tuesday morning, May 8th, dawned sunny and mild. Our guards roused us early and announced that they had decided to march us westward to American forces and turn us over to our own troops. We concluded that they were really interested in surrendering themselves to Americans rather than to Russians, and that we were to be their surely in the process. So we set out and walked steadily westward on one mountain road after another from before 8 a.m. till after 2 p.m. Any belief in Western Europe or the United States that the war was really ended did not concur at all with our experiences that day. The Russians interpreted the German surrender to be timed at midnight that night, meaning midnight between Tuesday and Wednesday, May 8-9, not 24 hours earlier as interpreted in the West. Hence, the Russian army continued to pound the Germans throughout that day. We heard Russian artillery in the distance almost without interruption. And much closer we found ourselves forced to fly into the ditches along the roads at intervals as units of the Russian air force came over to strafe us as we were marching sandwiched between units. of the. German army. About noon we stopped in a meadow at a road intersection so that our guards could distribute bread and cheese to us. The bunching-up which this encouraged in that mountain meadow almost proved our undoing. At the height of the food distribution, suddenly a group of Russian planes came in at us over the treetops and began spraying the field with rifle fire and machine gun fire. Fortunately I found myself at that moment at the edge of the field nearest to a solidly built German dairy barn. I joined the many comrades nearby in a bee-line pell-mell rush for the shelter of the barn. Once inside we discovered that the interior had been divided into two rooms: the larger contained about two dozen milk cows all carefully locked into their stanchions. The smaller room at the far end of the barn contained milking equipment and other tools and farm implements. The owner was down in the tool room fixing his gear. Almost at once, after sizing up the situation, several of our group who happened to have cups or other convenient containers, indicated by sign language that we should form a human wall between the cows and the farmer, so that those with containers might begin milking the cattle. We did, and they did, and in moments we were all sharing a few gulps of warm, fresh milk, the first fresh milk any of us had tasted since leaving the United States the previous October. All the while the Russian planes were circling, zeroing in on the field, and sending forth periodic staccato bursts of machine gun fire. Such is the unbelievable juxtaposition of actions in war, those designed to' preserve life intermingled simultaneously with those aiming to terminate it.

As soon as the Russian air attacks ceased, our guards rounded us up again and we resumed our trek westward. This time I found myself near the head of the column and therefore was among the first to note the arrival on a motorcycle of a German officer who came to us from the direction in which we were walking. As he reached our column, he stopped, dismounted, and began an urgent conversation with the chief of our guards. The next moment our guards told us that the road ahead had been cut by the Russians and that we must turn back and find another route. As we began moving eastward, back where we'd just been, I suddenly noticed that all our guards had melted away—into the nearby woods. We were no longer a structured, disciplined column of prisoners under guard, but had become instead a ragged group of clusters of unkempt American and British individuals. In a matter of minutes, as the word spread, small groups broke away until only a dozen or so of us remained. I stayed close to a British sergeant, prisoner for four years,. very self-assured, a natural leader. He argued that our greatest safety at that moment lay in turning around and

going straight back to Hellendorf. 'We knew the roads back, they were high in the mountains and probably not yet occupied by the incoming Russians. We'd be much better off in the village we knew, and preferably indoors, when the Russian troops arrived, than wandering out in the woods, who knew where. His arguments made sense, so Jack Evans and I and a few other friends took his advice and walked back to Hellendorf, a trek that took us until nearly 11 p.m. We found the Gasthof in Hellendorf deserted by its owners and at our disposal. What a change for us to be able to wander freely through that entire hotel instead of being cooped up in the straw-laden auditorium where we'd been for the past three weeks and more. But on an impulse, we did something I still do not quite comprehend. We carried real beds, complete with their mattresses and clean sheets and blankets, from the hotel rooms out into the large second-floor room or community center, or auditorium, where we'd been living so long. And that night we slept in our own room," but in soft, comfortable beds instead of on the hard floor amid the filthy straw! We still needed washing; our clothes must have looked disgraceful; we had no pajamas. But we slept in clean, soft beds for the first time since our capture!

Next morning, Wednesday, May 9, 1945, we emerged on to the main street of Hellendorf to experience the silence of peace. Few villagers remained. Most had vanished. But someone came along almost immediately with the news that the war was over, truly over, that peace had come. Two friends and I decided to go to Czechoslovakia since it was only a mile or so down the road, so off we went, on foot of course. And thus it was that a few hours later when Russian troops sent to occupy that region actually arrived, I actually met these Russian soldiers in Czechoslovakia, the one and only day of my life ever spent in that beautiful and important country of Central Europe. The Russians told us, in a friendly but firm way, to return to Hellendorf and wait there for Russian transportation to take us to the Americans, arrangements which would be completed within- a couple of days we were assured. So that Wednesday afternoon we returned to Hellendorf in obedience to these orders from a wartime ally.

We stayed in the Gasthof for three nights, waiting vainly for further orders. That first Wednesday afternoon some Russian passing through killed, or ordered killed, a pig to provide food for us prisoners. We craved the meat, roasted it in the Gasthof kitchen, and ate to our fill. But our bodies could not assimilate meat, particularly pork and in quantity, after having been deprived of fresh meat of any sort for months. The next day I came down with a severe case of diarrhea, which may have been dysentery, and from that moment until I reached a hospital in Rheims, France, my energies, indeed my lifeblood, began to flow away more rapidly and in a more frightening manner than at any earlier time during the war. How ironic it would be, I began to think, if I should have survived the end of the war only to perish from the combined effects of malnutrition and diarrhea after the arrival of peace!

Such was not to be. By Friday afternoon Jack Evans, our third friend, and I, who had formed a pact to stick together till we got out of Germany, decided the time had arrived to take off from Hellendorf for the U.S. forces, since the Russians gave no indication whatever of planning to help us. The only evidence of Russian activity we had seen since their initial arrival Wednesday had been the continuing round-up of men who were being marched off to the Soviet Union as slave labor (German men, that is), and of all sorts of livestock also being rounded up for shipment eastward. The Russians wasted no time after arriving in our corner of Germany. Within 24 hours

of occupying the region, they began to strip Hellendorf clean of everything moveable that had value. Russia would have her reparations regardless of what the world thought or might agree to. Here was unilateral vengeance personified, and directly witnessed by me for three days prior to our departure Saturday morning from Hellendorf!

The event that triggered our sudden decision to leave the mountains occurred about supper time Friday evening. Two Russian soldiers happened along pushing bicycles which they had apparently looted earlier in the day. They stopped to engage us in conversation, and on learning that we were Americans, suddenly in a momentary gesture of friendship offered us their bikes as gifts. This provided us with transport for two; we needed only one more bicycle for our get-away. Early Saturday morning as we contemplated our next step, we noticed a young Frenchman ride up to the general store in Hellendorf, get off his bicycle and lean it against the wall of the store while he went inside to see what he might find, possibly to loot. The instant he disappeared inside the store, we grabbed his bike and set off for Dresden and the American forces! During most of the morning we were able to coast downhill as we were leaving the mountain heights and following road signs for Pirna. Once down in the Elbe River Valley, however, we found ourselves obliged to pedal on the level valley floor from Pirna to Dresden, which we reached in the early afternoon. Instead of finding a city returning to life, and with American troops in evidence, as we had expected, we rode through a totally deserted, ghostlike metropolis. Only on the western edge of the city, in a neighborhood we recognized from our many days of cleaning up debris in the vicinity, did we meet a solitary Belgian, an ex-soldier and former prisoner. We told him who we were, asked if he had encountered any Americans, and learned from him that no Americans other than individual ex-prisoners like us were in Dresden, that instead Russians were around arresting any former prisoners they could find and putting them back into confinement. They did not trust the Western Allies to return Russian prisoners from West Germany unless they held Americans and other Western nationalities to be exchanged on a one-for-one basis. The Belgian informant warned us that we were in dire jeopardy so long as we remained in Dresden and that we should get away as fast as possible!

We took his advice, resumed our journey westward and now found ourselves again on Kesselsdorfer Strasse, along which we had lived for two months with the South Africans. Now, however, as we left the city, we found ourselves having to peddle harder than before to ride the bicycles uphill. Thoroughly alarmed by the Belgian's warnings, we pushed ourselves to the limit and eluded any Russians who might have been on the lookout for such as we! A bit later at the site of the former South African prison compound, we found the grounds as before, but all the buildings had been burned to the ground. How wise our guards had been to evacuate us in time!

We continued westward for another hour or so, until about 6 p.m. when we were miles away from Dresden, utterly parched and bone-weary from bicycling all day after weeks of inactivity. Suddenly we received a hearty call of greeting from a prosperous-looking German civilian in his 50s, standing with his family in front of a large, solid stone house. He turned out to be a successful engineer able to afford a spacious and most comfortable home. He offered us each a glass of water, which we gratefully accepted. As we chatted while drinking the water, he learned that we were Americans, formerly prisoners, now seeking our own troops. He graciously invited us to be guests in his home overnight and offered to share his dinner and breakfast with

us. He had plenty of room and offered ~is a most attractive guest room for the night. We accepted the invitation with a minimum of delay, enjoyed the hospitality, had a good night's sleep, and then after breakfast next morning indicated that the time had arrived for us to continue westward. At this point the engineer urged us to remain, asserting firmly that an American military truck convoy would pass in front of his house in early afternoon as it had every day for the past week. We simply didn't believe him. We felt he was trying to use us as a protective shield against possible Russian demands to occupy his house, and we politely but firmly insisted on departing.

Shortly after, 1 p.m. that Sunday, May 13, 1945, which was Mother's Day at home, we came to the crest of a hill and viewed a long gradual decline in the road ahead. As we coasted down the hill, gaining momentum, we suddenly saw emerge from around a bend in the road at the foot of the hill, a jeep with the words printed on the front bumper: "Military Police." We waved frantically to the driver as he approached, but instead of stopping as we wished, he waved back and merely continued without even slackening his speed. We felt crushed, but had no option but to continue on our way. Perhaps five minutes later, we saw a huge truck convoy approaching us, dozens of U.S. army trucks, armed to the teeth. Every third truck contained a fully armed, fully manned heavy machine gun crew. This was literally an invasion force, raiding into Russian-occupied Central Germany without Russian consent, to release prisoners being held against their will, no longer by the German "enemy," but now by our Russian "friends" and "allies." Hints of the coming Cold War already yet!

This time my two friends and I stopped pedaling entirely and merely stood along the side of the road holding our bikes and gazing in awe at the length of the truck convoy and the stage of military preparedness for any contingency. We continued to wave and smile, and eventually one vehicle pulled off to the side of the road. A soldier stepped over to us and asked, "Are you guys Yanks?" The question was not so absurd as it might seem, given the rags we were wearing by then, composed of parts of uniforms from a number of different national armies, not to mention our haggard appearance brought on by lack of adequate food, lack of shaving, and lack of opportunities for keeping clean. When we answered in the affirmative, the soldier continued, "Ditch your bikes," and as we did so, he flagged down another truck, a personnel carrier, and urged us to hop in the rear. The driver had thoughtfully stocked the truck with C-rations and K-rations, and we all took advantage of the food by indulging ourselves. A few minutes later I fell asleep, feeling secure in the protection of the United States Army for the first time since the previous December. I awoke the next morning at Erfurt, Germany, having slept more than 12 hours, during which our convoy had passed through Dresden eastward to a castle some miles to the east where Frenchmen were being held by the Russians, having released the French and picked them up, and then having again passed through Dresden enroute to the U.S. zone of Germany in which Erfurt was situated. We were taken to the German Air Force training academy near Erfurt, which had been commandeered by the U.S. Forces as a staging area to evacuate prisoners of war from Germany. Food was plentiful, U.S. Army food, but my system couldn't absorb it, and my strength hence continued to ebb.

Next day, Tuesday, May 15th, the Army flew me from Erfurt to the U.S. hospital at Rheims, France, built during World War One for U.S. casualties in Europe, turned over to the French in 1919, and once again made available for U.S. troops during the latter

part of the Second World War. I remained in the hospital at Rheims for more than three weeks, until strong enough to resume my journey homeward. On arrival I weighed in at 110 or 112 pounds, could not hold any food whatever, and was put by the doctors on a bland diet consisting of baby food and Jell-O. It took four days of such food and heavy medication just to stop the diarrhea. Then gradually the weight began to increase. At the end of 10 days my weight had risen to 137 pounds, a 25-pound growth, really added from the 5th to the 10th day. By June 9th I was able to leave the hospital for Paris and the French coast. I spent 30 hours in Paris, my first of several visits to that beautiful, magnificent city, still showing the effects of war in so many ways that June. Sunday, June 10th, I moved on to Camp Lucky Strike on the coast whence I was able to sail one week later, on the 17th, aboard a Liberty Ship for New York. We passed the Statue of Liberty on Saturday afternoon, June 30th, sailed northward to a pier and went on to Camp Kilmer, which served as our reception center. That evening I had an overnight pass to visit my parents in Freeport, just an hour or so away.

Mother had had a greater ordeal than I as result of the capture. She received word on January 12th from the War Department that I was missing in action. The stopping of my 'frequent letters (at least two letters per week) had alarmed the family, but the War Department telegram was devastating. We had sent Red Cross letter forms from Muhlberg in early January, notifying family that we were prisoners, assured that these would be delivered in just a few days. Mother received two communications from me, that letter and a subsequent Red Cross postal card, on April 11th, the first word she had had that I was still alive. Of course they immediately received my telegram from the hospital in France, but only my physical presence that evening of June 30th could be truly reassuring. Dad said my eyes were still set very deep in their sockets; but that otherwise I looked quite fine. I had to return to Camp Kilmer next day, shipped on to Fort Dix, but on July 4th I received a 75 day convalescent furlough intended to fatten me up and restore spirit as well as body. That July 4th was my 21st birthday! What a tremendous birthday Uncle Sam gave me and the family that day.

The rest is anti-climax. In September I had to return to active duty and was ordered to Asheville, N.C., for physical and psychological tests; then to Fort Bragg till eligible for honorable discharge on Sunday, November 25, 1945.

November 18, 2005 - One of the lucky ones - War survivor shares his story.

MOUNT PLEASANT — Gifford Doxsee said he is one of the lucky ones.

Despite being a prisoner of war during World War II, despite fighting in the Battle of the Bulge and being involved in the bombing of Dresden and despite starvation, he survived relatively unscathed in a war that touched most of the world and killed 57 million.

On Thursday, Doxsee shared his story at the Iowa Wesleyan College.

"My generation had almost nothing to say about the experiences of war for a whole generation," Doxsee said. "It was the publication in 1969 of 'Slaughterhouse-Five' that led me to start talking."

Teachers and professors around Doxsee's town of Athens, Ohio, were assigning the book to their students when they found out Doxsee had been with author Kurt Vonnegut in Dresden. They began asking him to speak to their classrooms.

"I've never stopped talking," Doxsee said.

During World War II, Doxsee was a private in [106th Infantry Division](#) of the U.S. Army, a training division that was sent to the front lines of war on the border of France and Germany in late 1944.

Five days after landing in France, on Dec. 16, 1944, the Battle of the Bulge began with the 106th Infantry at its center.

"On the first morning, we were surrounded," Doxsee said, and after the fourth day under attack, the Germans told them they had 30 minutes to surrender or be blown to pieces.

Col. Charles Cavender decided to surrender.

"That's why I am here today," Doxsee said. "He wrecked his career ... but that's another story."

After surrendering, the 150 men were registered and loaded onto 40 and 8s, railroad cars meant for 40 men or eight cattle. Sixty men were loaded into the cars that were sent into Germany to Dresden.

"We were in that car for eight and half days," Doxsee said. "We were taken to a place called Stalag 4B, a prisoner of war camp for enlisted men."

On the way there, they were told their guards would not speak English; they were older men who had grown up long before the Nazis came to power.

"They treated us very decently for the most part," Doxsee said. "But we had one teenage Hitler Youth who we nicknamed 'Junior.' "

At that time, a captain among the troops said the POWs would need an interpreter, and he asked the POWs if any knew the German language. Four men stepped forward. One was Vonnegut who was elected to the position, which he served for about a month.

At the end of that month, Dresden was bombed.

"The American people never got the significance, the magnitude, of this destruction," Doxsee said. "The thing is, Dresden was a cultural city. It had less military significance than most German cities."

And most of the city was still intact at that point.

However, on Feb. 14, 1945, both Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday that year, Dresden was bombed and reduced to nothing. After the bombing, the POWs were ordered to clean up the rubble and look for the bodies.

"Approximately the same time as the fire bombing occurred, a group of five men were kept back one day to scrub down with hot soap and water and brushes the tables and chairs in the ... dining room," Doxsee said.

One of the five men had a severe case of diarrhea, and the guard in charge kept yelling at him to work harder.

"Kurt explained to the guard that this man was sick and was doing his best," Doxsee said. "The guard refused to pay attention. ... Finally, he hit the soldier and Kurt lost his patience and said under his breath 'You dirty swine.' Well, the German word swine and the English swine are practically the same."

The guard knew what Vonnegut had said, and Vonnegut was immediately demoted from his interpreting position. For the weeks following, Junior followed Vonnegut around as he cleaned up blocks of Dresden. Whenever Vonnegut stopped to catch his breath, Junior would poke and prod him with the bayonet on his rifle.

"He was taunting Kurt and hoping he would lose his patience and either strike back or say something," Doxsee said. "Kurt knew if he did anything like that he would pay for it with his life."

"Kurt came out of the war bitter," he later said.

That bitterness led to "Slaughterhouse-Five," a novel based on Vonnegut's time in Dresden. Vonnegut wrote the novel in 1968 after a two-year residency at the University of Iowa Writer's Workshop. Though most of the book is fiction, various parts of the book are true.

For example, Billy Pilgrim's character was based on a man named Edward Reginald "Joe" Crone Jr., a man who wanted to be an Episcopal priest. Crone died of starvation at the end of World War II.

In the middle of April 1945, when the Russians were advancing from the east and the Americans from the west, the Germans took Doxsee and the other POWs to Hellendorf, a German town near the border of Czechoslovakia.

There, Doxsee met Frau Hinni Hippe, a woman who housed the 150 men during the last four weeks of the war. She and her husband took three POWs who were near death into her house.

At the same time, she snuck food to the other POWs, who were eating grass and

dandelions to stay alive.

"I didn't know any of this at the time of the war," Doxsee said.

On May 8, 1945, the Germans announced their surrender, and on May 13, 1945, Mother's Day, Doxsee was back in American hands.

Years later, Doxsee returned to Germany and found Hippe, who shared her story as well.

"Even amidst the second World War, there were individuals who could rise above the hatred and be humane," Doxsee said.

After the war, Doxsee became a history professor at Ohio University. He's analyzed the war, studied it and is more than willing to offer his reflections of the experience.

"We won the war," Doxsee said, about one of his reflections. "But the margin of victory was a lot narrower than most people would assume."

SHAWNA RICHTER, Burlington Hawk Eye - IA, United States

Last Name: Doxsee	First Name Middle Initial: Gifford B.	Nick Name: Giff
City & State: Athens, OH		
Conflict: World War II	Service Branch: Infantry	Unit: 106th Infantry Div. 3rd Bn HQ co. 423rd Inf. Regt.
Theater: European	Where Captured: Schonberg, Belgium	Date Captured: 12/19/1944
Camps Held In: Stalag IVB; Slaughter-House Five and Gorbitz, Dresden		How Long Interned:
Liberated / repatriated:	Date Liberated: 5/13/45	Age at Capture:
Military Job: Infantryman, Communications Messenger	Company:	
Occupation after War: Professor of History, Ohio University, Athens, OH (1958 - 1994)		

Bio:

I was born on Long Island, New York, on July 4, 1924, attended public schools in Freeport, NY, and graduated from Freeport High School in 1942. I enlisted in the Army Reserve on November 13, 1942 while a freshman at Hobart College, Geneva, NY, and was called to active duty June 9, 1943. I received Infantry Basic Training at Fort McClellan, Anniston, Alabama, during the summer of 1943 and in September of that year began ASTP (Army Specialized Training Program) at Auburn University, then known as the Alabama Polytechnic Institute.

At the end of March, 1944, the army closed down the ASTP programs throughout the country, and most of us at Auburn were shipped to [Camp Atterbury, Indiana](#), where we joined the 106th Infantry Division and received training for combat during the following months. My 423rd Infantry Regiment was shipped to Europe aboard the Queen Elizabeth I, sailing from New York on October 17, 1944. We were housed in Britain for several weeks just outside Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, until shipped to France at the end of November. We arrived at the front, in the Siegfried Line just inside Germany, on Monday, December 11, 1944, five days before the Germans launched the Battle of the Bulge against us. Ordered to evacuate our position and go to a rendezvous point near Schonberg, Belgium, we reached our destination but were not "rescued" as planned. Our Regimental Commander surrendered the remnant of his regiment on Tuesday afternoon, December 19, 1944, to save us from death by German artillery fire.

Processed as a POW by the Germans at [Stalag IVB, Muhlberg](#), I was sent as part of an Arbeitskommando of 150 men to Dresden on January 12, 1945 where we were billeted in Building Number Five of the Dresden Slaughter-House Compound, later made famous by Kurt Vonnegut's classic novel which was based on our common experiences. After the firebombing of Dresden, we were moved by our guards to the suburb of Gorbitz, and in mid-April, our guards marched us to the hamlet of Hellendorf on the Czech border, some 35 miles or so SE of Dresden. There we awaited the end of the war and the arrival of the Russians in whose zone of occupation we found ourselves. I returned to the US Army control on Mother's Day, May 13, 1945, and was given an honorable discharge from the army at Fort Bragg, NC, on November 25, 1945.

After the war I returned to college, graduated from Cornell in 1948, and then began graduate study in the history of modern Europe at Harvard. I received the M.A. degree in 1949 and the Ph.D. in 1966, having in the interim taught for three years at The American University of Beirut, Lebanon, 1952-1955, and subsequently at Ohio University, beginning in 1958.

I married Mary Letitia Cowan, a faculty colleague at Ohio U. on June 9, 1964, and we both continued our teaching careers at Ohio in the city of Athens. Mary had done a year of post-graduate study in textiles at Leeds University, Yorkshire, England, and her field of specialization thereafter was textiles in the Ohio University School of Home Economics. She retired officially in 1982 but continued teaching part time until 1989. I took early retirement in 1993 and retired fully one year later. The University honored Mary at her retirement by naming the assemblage of textiles and clothing the "Mary C. Doxsee Costume Collection."

My service to Ohio University included chairing the Energy Conservation Committee in the 1970's and directing the graduate program in African Studies from 1983 to 1991. Our travels included numerous trips to Europe as well as professional travel to the Middle East and North Africa, the focus of my later teaching. Since retiring, I have served as adjutant/treasurer of the Mid-Ohio Valley Chapter, American Ex-Prisoners of War since 1996, as as JVC of the Department of Ohio since 1998.

<http://www.axpow.org/doxseegifford.htm>

Page last revised 11/26/2006

[Print This Article](#)