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Unknown 106th Unit

Because of all the fanfare and publicity concerning the American hostages in Iran, I thought I would like to share with my colleagues some of my experiences as a prisoner of

war during World War II. I feel I can best do this by describing the time I spent in a P.O.W. work camp from mid-January to mid-April, 1945. In writing about this episode in my life I am breaking a 36-year silence about this very traumatic experience.

I was a member of the 106th Infantry Division when, along with several hundred other G.I.'s, I was captured during the Battle of the Bulge on December 21, 1944. Immediately after being taken prisoners, all our personal belongings were taken from us. This included wristwatches, rings, wallets, pictures, money, etc. Fortunately, the Germans did not take any of the clothes we were wearing. We were also allowed to keep our mess kits and any pens and pencils we had. My infantry training was to prove a great help to me in the agonizing ordeal that was ahead of me.

My first taste of being a prisoner of war was a 95-mile forced march, during which many G.I.'s who could barely keep up with the marching were severely beaten. Practically all the G.I.'s who were captured suffered some degree of frozen feet and hands. After marching all day we settled down for the evening in barns or bombed out factories. During this time we had practically nothing to eat. If we were lucky, we were given a cup of turnip soup a day. After marching for a number of days, we were loaded into railroad freight cars for a very traumatic train ride until we reached our first destination on December 31,1944—Stalag IVB, located on the Elbe River. Here we were interrogated, went through delousing chambers and issued P.O.W. dog tags and identification cards. My P.O.W. number was 314106. On the back of our overcoats was painted, in large white letters, the initials "KG" which was the abbreviation for "Kriegsgefangener" (prisoner of war in German). After two weeks at this camp a number of us prisoners (rank of private and private first class) were sent off to Lager 118.

The lager (work camp) was located in Lutzchena, Germany, six miles north of Leipzig. The camp actually was a converted beer hall. There were 100 American P.O.W.s assigned to this camp. We were all members of the 106th Infantry Division. Our work assignment while at Lager 118 was to repair the railroads that were being destroyed by the American and British air forces. The beer hall was converted into a barrack-style layout. It had rows of bunk beds stacked three high. The beds had straw mattresses, but no pillows or blankets. There were two long rows of tables on which we had our meals. The hall was kept very cold and dimly lit. There were no windows and the doors were bolted shut at all

times. The lavatory had a number of wash basins for our morning wash-up. We were given wooden-handled toothbrushes, which were better than nothing and served their purpose. We were also given tooth powder and face soap. We were able to take a shower on Saturday evenings and our clothes were washed once a week. Lights were put out at 9:00 p.m. and the guards, with flashlights, made a bed check of all the prisoners. You had to sleep with your clothes on and you used your overcoat for a blanket. Being dressed at all times served two purposes—the first to keep you warm and the second to be ready to evacuate the hall during air raids, which occurred quite frequently. No matter what time it was, which was mostly during the middle of the night, we had to go to the air raid shelter which was in the backyard of the beer hall. From our air raid shelter we could hear the exploding bombs in the distance. Our prime concern was that some of the bombs would be off target and hit close to us. When the all clear sirens were sounded, we all gave a big sigh of relief and counted our blessings that we did not get hit and were still alive. The next morning we would have a pretty good idea what railroad station was the target as that place would be our next destination. Our work area included a radius of twenty miles from Leipzig. Our daily routine was as follows: we were awakened at 5:00 a.m., washed and shaved (more often than not with cold water). We used the face soap as a substitute for shaving cream. We then had our breakfast which consisted of a cup of ersatz coffee (no milk or sugar). After breakfast we immediately got ready to leave for our work detail. We put on whatever outer clothing we had salvaged from the front lines. At 6:00 a.m. we lined up outside the beer hall and the guards made another head count before we marched to the Leipzig railroad station, a distance of six miles. To add insult to injury for me, the route of march took us past a chocolate or cocoa factory and the aroma was maddening. From Leipzig we took off by train for various other towns that needed railroad repair work (mostly at Halle and Wurzen). We rode in all types of freight cars, including coal cars. Many times we would be loaded on the train only to be taken off again because the engine didn't work and we had to wait for another engine to be hooked on to the cars to take us to our destination. All this was happening in sub-freezing temperatures. When we reached our destination, or as close to it as possible, we left the freight cars and were marched to our work area. We were then split up into groups and assigned various jobs for the day. The weather was bitter cold, but fortunately there was not too much snow. The guards were middle-aged men who wore military uniforms and carried rifles. They were probably too old for active front line military service. The first thing the guard did when we got to our job site was to build a fire, usually in a steel drum. For the most part the guards supervised our work while standing around the fire. Each day when we started on a job we would always be on the lookout to see if there were any freight cars in the railroad yards. One of the prisoners would then usually volunteer to check out the cars to see if they had anything in them that we could eat. On several occasions, he would hit it lucky and come across a car loaded with wheat. We would then team up in pairs and during the course of the day take turns going to the freight car. One of us would then get into the freight car and fill his pockets with the wheat, while the other person was on the lookout for any patrolling guards. Then the procedure was reversed. This wheat was a real lifesaver. It was a great supplement to our liquid diet. With this kind of existence, we all became scavengers for any food to help keep us alive.

We were also on the lookout for anything we could use. On one occasion, 1 picked up a piece of cardboard measuring about 2 x 4 inches on which I made up a calendar for the year 1945. As each day passed, I crossed off that date. On the other side of this cardboard, I noted all the foods I had a desire for when I would get back home. On another occasion, I found a notebook which was probably discarded by some schoolchild.

In this notebook, I jotted down any rumors I heard and various other tidbits that I thought would, be interesting to read after I was liberated.

Whenever someone couldn't keep up with the group when marching to Leipzig, on our way to work, or tried to relax a little on the job, one of the guards would hit him with the butt end of his rifle on their backside.

Many times while working in the railroad yards, we would see trains loaded with German soldiers and equipment going from the Russian front to the western front. The soldiers looked very depressed—a good sign that the war wasn't going too well for them.

Our job consisted of repairing the railroad tracks that were being destroyed by Allied bombers. It was very hard work, especially considering the weather conditions, the lack of heavy clothing, and the scarcity of food. Our typical work procedure was to fill in the bomb craters, level off the dirt, put down railroad ties, shovel in some gravel and then put the track in position. The track was 25-feet long and it was extremely heavy; it took at least half our crew (50 men) using steel tongs to place the track in correct position. Once that was done, we had to tighten all the bolts with a special tool and tamp down the gravel against the railroad ties. At noontime we stopped work and were given a cup of turnip soup for lunch. After lunch we worked until our transportation came (anytime after 5:00 p.m.) to take us back to Leipzig. Many times our train was a couple of hours late. You can imagine how exhausted we were at the end of the day. When we arrived at Leipzig we still had to march, in the dark, to Lutzchena. Back at our camp we washed up and got ready to eat— which once again consisted of a bowl of turnip soup, and if we were lucky, some meat in it. We were also given a slice of bread. During this starvation diet I lost 60 pounds. I went from 170 pounds to 110 pounds when I was liberated. After supper, we sat around and talked about our future and what we were going to do when we were liberated. We also discussed the news and rumors of the war that the guards, who spoke some English, would tell us on the job. There was no reading material available and even if there was any, the room was too dimly lit to be able to read. One of our fellow prisoners, who was fluent in German, was selected to be in charge of the group. He was able to communicate any messages we had for the Germans or the Germans for us. We all learned some German words to make ourselves understood for our basic needs. Some P.O.Ws talked about trying to escape, but then, realizing how far we were from the front lines, they gave up the idea. We all felt that for our mental outlook, it was better to be in a work camp than to be sitting in some camp without anything to do.

On Sunday mornings, the group assembled together to participate in and conduct our own brief religious services. Prayers became a big part of our living routine. We silently prayed during the air raid bombings at night and also during the bombings while working on the railroad. It seems as if it takes a hellish experience such as this to make one become deeply religious. You have to cling to some thread of hope and it usually is your religion that comes through to supply that light at the end of a dark tunnel.

Everyday we would hear a rumor that Red Cross food parcels were going to be delivered to our camp. We finally did receive the food parcels on March 15, 1945. This had to be one of the happiest occasions of our imprisonment. The food was a blessing and a lifesaver. The parcel contained canned prepared foods, very similar to the "K" rations every G.I. during WWII was familiar with. It also contained cookies, jam and candy. There was plenty of bartering, bargaining and auctioning of various items in the parcels. There were also

three cigarettes in each parcel and some P.O.W. s were willing to give up all their food just for the cigarettes. I traded my cigarettes for a candy bar.

It goes without saying that all the P.O.W.s suffered from malnutrition; the very hard work, combined with the extreme cold, made life unbearable, Fortunately, the weather took a complete turn-about during the month of February. As much as the month of January was bitterly cold —the month of February turned out to be beautiful—no snow and comfortable temperatures. This was a real blessing, as our morale was getting very low and now at least the weather was on our side.

Our greatest fear while working on the railroad was being hit by bombs during an air raid attack. Many times while we were working in the railroad yards, the air raid sirens would be sounded and we would have to run to the air raid shelters. More often than not the planes would be on their way to other targets. On a couple of occasions, the railroad yard we were working at was the target. In one such incident, one of the air raid shelters, about 50 feet from ours, received a direct hit and all the people in the bomb shelter were killed. After the all-clear sounded, we saw the guards carry their bodies out from the rubble. This probably was one of the lowest points of our imprisonment. As the days went by, everybody was beginning to get very depressed. There was that feeling of hopelessness and despair that we would never be liberated. The month of March was quite cold and blustery—it certainly did not help our morale. Our work went on as usual. We worked six days a week and had Sundays off to relax (which was mighty welcome). Fortunately, very few of the P.O.W..s came down with any serious illnesses during these winter months. As "forced laborers" we were paid at the end of each month by the German government for work performed. In January, I received 21 Reich Marks, in February, 31 Reich Marks, in March, 14 Reich Marks, and in April, nothing—for a grand total of 66 Reich Marks for about 500 hours of very hard labor, not including travelling time. During all these working days, we marched approximately 900 kilometers (560 miles) going back and forth to work.

As April approached, the weather turned nice again and there was a feeling that the Allied soldiers were getting closer to Leipzig. We received our second Red Cross food parcel on April 12,1945—this one had to be shared with another P.O.W.

And then it happened —in the early morning of April 14,1945, we were evacuated from Lager 118 because the guards did not want to be captured by the advancing Allied armies. Thus ended my three months in Lager 118 and the start of another ordeal before being liberated by the U.S. 69th Infantry Division at 7:00 a.m. on April 25,1945.

In retrospect, the most agonizing thing about being a P.O.W was that you realized your family did not know what happened to you—whether you were dead or alive. It was not until after I was liberated that I was able to write to my family to notify them that I was still alive.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I don't consider myself a hero—the heroes are the men and women who gave their lives for their country.

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