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Company E, 423rd Infantry Regiment
106th Infantry Division

Combat Infantry Badge
WWII in Europe
Memories of a Tour of Duty
For my wife Phyllis, our family and friends
To ensure that the past is not forgotten
By Earl S. Parker, Veteran

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Introduction

When the invitation for an escorted tour arrived at my parent's home in the Steel City of Gary, Indiana, it included an order to report for induction to the military service of the U.S. of A. The order was not unexpected. I had registered for the "draft" on February 16, 1942 as required by federal law following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The United States was now a full participant in what was to become World War II. I dropped out of my freshman year at the University of Chicago and Phyllis Janet Kean and I set a date for our marriage. Phyllis and I had been co-editors of our high school year book and our continuing friendship had deepened into love.

Following our wedding, Phyllis and I lived with my parents and I went to work as a machine operator in one of the local defense plants. Everyone knew that it was only a matter of time until my induction notice would arrive and that I would become an army soldier. I had already been rejected in attempts to enlist in the navy or coast guard (they had more volunteers than they could handle). Phyllis and I enjoyed the time together and tried to imagine how things would be once the war was over and we could get on with living.

I must say that our parents were great. My father had been born in Austria and came to the United States as an infant when his parents immigrated in 1892. My mother was born in the U.S. of immigrant parents from Sweden making me a typical mid-westerner when born in 1920. Phyllis is of Scotch-Irish-German ancestry but traces her lineage in this country to pre-revolutionary days and is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). Her father died of Landry's Paralysis when she was only two years old and she lived with her maternal grandparents until she was sixteen.

That experience probably was helpful to her in living with my parents for the three years of my military duty. At the time, this was not an unusual living arrangement and became a part of wartime conditions such as food and gas rationing and women in industry.

"You're In The Army Now—"

October 22, 1942 was the date of my induction at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis, Indiana. At Fort Harrison, we were not told where we would be serving, what branch of the army we would be in nor what our occupational specialty might be. These things had all been determined through testing and brief interviews with the outcome apparently a military secret. Cries of, "You'll be sorry" greeted us frequently as we moved through the processing that converted us from civilians to olive drab (O.D.) clad nephews of our Uncle Sam. Tomorrow, when we had become one-day veterans, it would be our turn to do the shouting for the benefit of an uninitiated new group.

A troop train moved the rookies toward that still secret destination. After some hours, the train crossed a large river and eventually halted in a railroad switching yard recognized by some of the men from the area as E-town (Elizabethtown), Kentucky. Almost at once it was rumored that we were headed for Camp Campbell, the new military post on the Kentucky-Tennessee border. This was one rumor that was proven correct when a number of Army officers came aboard and announced that we had been assigned to the newly activated 12th Armored Division at Camp Campbell. Under cover of darkness, the train pulled into the camp and we were housed in the new barracks to await further processing and assignment to specific units. When the confusion of classification was complete, I found myself to be a Private in Company E, 2nd Battalion, 56th Armored Infantry Regiment under the command of Captain Bruce E. Arndt. My request for assignment to an ordnance unit was partially granted and I was entered on the Table of Organization (TOE) as the Armorer for Company E. The position carried a T5 rating and corporals pay. But first, there was basic training to be completed.

I had read "The Soldier's Handbook" on the troop train, had a grasp of military courtesy and memorized the "general orders" so I had a good start in at least some of the things included in basic training.

Close order drill and the manual of arms were yet to be mastered while physical training, road marches, the infiltration course and the firing range remained to be endured. The rifle range provided an insight to the army way of doing things. Our First Sergeant was an old regular army man assigned as cadre to the new division. He was Sergeant Martin and he worked hard to make soldiers of a bunch of former civilians less than half his age. If you are familiar with the soil conditions along the Kentucky-Tennessee border you know that the ground is basically red clay, very dusty when dry and pure mud when wet. The firing line of the rifle range when we were there was wet. The firing positions without exception were shallow puddles with mud linings. I asked Sgt. Martin if we could take blankets to the range to put on the ground so we would not soil our new fatigue uniforms and could stay dry when firing from the sitting and prone positions. I told the sergeant that I would use one of my blankets in that fashion if the army would dry clean it when our range work was completed. With Sgt. Martin's assurance that would be done, my blanket became one used on the firing line.

At the conclusion of our firing for record, the muddy blanket and I visited the sergeant in his office in the orderly room. I reminded him of his word to me about the dry cleaning of the fine woolen blanket and inquired as to where I should take it for the dry cleaning it so sorely needed. Sgt. Martin got up from behind his desk and told me to follow him. Out on the Company street he took the blanket from me, unrolled the mud caked material and instructed me to take hold of the two lower corners while he held the other end. "Now", he said, "move your arms up and down". This caused a cloud of dust to rise and the sergeant let go of his end of the blanket. "That is how you dry clean an army blanket. Get one of your buddies to give you a hand with it", and he turned and limped his way back inside. I was forced to smile at the lesson taught by an old and highly experienced first sergeant while recognizing that a buddy and I would be the dry cleaners in this situation.

With the completion of basic training I was promoted to Private First Class and became eligible for overnight passes when in garrison. Sgt. R. C. Camp, a lanky cadre man from Alabama, PFC Leo Lamb, a college graduate from New York City and I began making plans to have our wives come for a visit. We were successful in securing a promise of lodging in one of the boarding houses in Clarksville, TN where the wives would be company for each other while the husbands were out playing soldier. On the appointed weekend the wives arrived and we met at the boarding house where the promised accommodations proved to be one room with three beds. "C'est le guerre" as the French say. We made the best of the situation but after a week, Phyllis who was prominently pregnant with our first child returned home with memories of a wartime adventure that included helping me sew the PFC stripe on my uniforms.

As company armorer I had a small shop in the motor pool for the maintenance and repair of the weapons of my company. In addition, I attended the division ordnance school where I was given instruction on all weapons up to and including the 105mm howitzer. Completion of that training brought my advancement to T/5 (TCorporal) but I was becoming bored with the duty and felt that I was missing out on the field exercises with the company and activities with other units of the armored force. Captain Arndt honored my request to train a replacement so that I could get into the field. In this way, I became car commander of the company headquarters halftrack and communication sergeant for Company E. In that capacity I was appointed Acting Infantry Liaison Officer and rode in the turret of a tank during field maneuvers with the tank battalions.

One day Captain Arndt came to me with the suggestion that I apply for OCS (officer candidate school) with the Army Corps of Engineers who at the time were seeking qualified candidates. I thanked the captain for his consideration and told him that I had requested and been granted an opportunity to take the examination for the Army Air Force pilot training program when the examiners visited Camp Campbell. True gentleman that the captain was, he did not take exception to my request for the AAF exam and wished me well in whatever the outcome. I passed the exam and was transferred to the Air Force as an Aviation Cadet and there met a young man who has a share in this story.

Porfirio Yvarra and the Cadet Program

Along California's coast about midway between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara is the city of Oxnard, a small town in 1943 and the home of Porfirio Yvarra and his wife Hope. "Porfie" was a short, tan skinned individual of Latin-American descent. He had the blackest of hair and dark expressive eyes that gave evidence of intelligence and ambition. He was just a little younger than I when first we met at Jefferson Barracks, an historical army post near St. Louis, Missouri. Although I have lost track of Porfie over the years, I have thought often of him and wondered about the life that he and Hope have shared since our time together during WW II. With the war in full swing, Jefferson Barracks had been taken over by the Army Air Force as a reception center and basic training camp. It also served as the classification center for personnel transferring as volunteers to become the pilots, navigators and bombardiers needed for the air war on so many fronts. As previously stated, I had initially been assigned to the 12th Armored Division where I earned sergeant stripes in the 56th Armored Infantry Regiment. Successful completion of the qualifying exams (physical and mental) brought my transfer to Jefferson Barracks for further processing and, there I met PFC Yvarra.

Both of us had come from other branches of service and were duly impressed and humbled by our acceptance in the most prestigious of the army's officer training schools. We were on the way to becoming "officers and gentlemen" and could envision the silver wings of pilot gleaming on our uniform jackets. I am unable at this point fifty-eight years later to provide the feeling of those times and the emotional lift that transfer to the Air Force provided after our indoctrination as foot soldiers in ground units. We had a new perspective and a new goal. We stood a little straighter, exercised a little harder and sang the Air Force song with vigor and enthusiasm. Assigned to the same training squadron, Porfie and I had no idea of the experiences we would share.

Jefferson Barracks was only a way-point. A diverse group of individuals had come together as volunteers and become a training squadron to be transferred as a group to one of the colleges or universities the Air Force had enlisted to provide an intensive five month college course. Included were math, physics and chemistry, history and geography, weather, physical training and military discipline but most importantly, ten hours of dual flight instruction as an introduction to pilot or other commissioned officer flight crew status.

Our squadron was sent to Western Kentucky State Teachers College (now Western Kentucky University) at Bowling Green. Since we were to be at that location for five months, many of the married Aviation Cadets arranged for their wives to come to Bowling Green. By writing a military letter to the post commander, Captain Updegraf, each week, we were granted permission to leave the campus after the dress parade on Saturday until six p.m. Sunday evening. Also, the wives could come to the student union to visit after our evening meal. At 6:30 we had to be back in our rooms which served as study halls until lights out at 10:00. It was a rigorous

schedule but very enjoyable. Phyllis came to town with our little son, John, so that we were almost a family for an hour in the evening and a few hours on weekends. One of my roommates, Emanuel Mandelkern, a Jewish boy from New York City taught little Johnny to walk on the dance floor of the "Cedar House" as the student union was called. Hope Yvarra also came to Bowling Green so we had opportunity to meet her and reinforce the connection to Porfie.

The ten hours of flight instruction was given at the Bowling Green airport by civilian flight instructors under contract to the Air Force. Sheepskin lined leather flight jackets marked us as the senior squadron during our last month at Western. We flew Piper cubs or Aeronca Champions for the air work and learned to take-off and land and perform the basic aerobatic maneuvers of stalls and spins as well as the more ordinary but very critical ability to hold course and altitude for later formation flight. The fifth and tenth hours in the air were check flights to determine aptitude and progress. Study of flight rules, aircraft recognition and weather were taught while waiting for others to have their turn in one of the three aircraft available.



At the Field for flight instruction—November 1943



Thanksgiving Day Parade—Bowling Green, KY



End of a cross country run—Western Kentucky State—October
1943



Aviation Cadet Earl S. Parker—January 1944

Porfie and I, having successfully completed all phases of the work at the college, moved on with the rest of our squadron to Nashville Army Air Station for classification. At Nashville we were given many additional tests of vision, depth perception, hearing and recognition of Morse Code signals. In spite of my inability to separate dots from dashes in code, both Porfie and I were classified for pilot training. While waiting for the next pre-flight class to open at one of the Air Force primary flight schools, we were parceled out to various Air Force bases for a type of on the job training. Porfie and I were sent to Blytheville Army Air Station in Arkansas, a twin engine advanced school where I was assigned to drive a gasoline tanker to refuel the planes as they returned from practice flights.

The newly commissioned pilots flew day and night missions so my refueling job included shift work to be certain the aircraft were promptly serviced and ready for the next lucky young lieutenant who would eventually be flying one of the multi-engine bombers. I don't recall what Porfie did during our short stay in Blytheville. To assure us that we were still in the military, we were organized in flights and squadrons instead of squads and platoons but the parade formations were the same with the squadrons on line in ranks of six abreast. The captain of our squadron had been a dentist in civilian life and had been given little training in the fine art of commanding close order drill. He did manage to get our squadron formed up but when we marched smartly to the line, the captain totally forgot how to get that moving body of men to quit marching.

“STOP, STOP”, he ordered but that, not being a recognized command, the squadron marched on across the line and into the parade ground. I had been appointed as Guidon bearer and, seeing the embarrassment of my

commanding officer, called out the order, "SQUADRON, HALT". Succeeding commands restored our formation to its rightful spot on line, dressed down rank and file and with a salute to the captain returned command to a much relieved officer.

On April 3, 1944, the commanding officer at all Air Force installations received a letter from Henry (Hap) Arnold, General A. A. F., Commanding. The letter stated in the opening sentence, "You will return to the ground and service forces all enlisted men who have volunteered from those sources and have been found fully qualified as pilots, bombardiers and navigators but have not yet entered pre-flight school. This action is necessary as a result of critical and immediate need for young, vigorous and well trained men with leadership qualifications to meet the urgent need of the ground and service forces". The letter was read to us by the base commander and we were each given a copy for our personal information.

Needless to say there was little joy among the Cadets at this change of direction in our military careers. After a couple of days of griping about the situation, we quietly awaited orders that would distribute us to our former branch of service. By April 21, 1944, the glamour of the Air Force existence was a memory and Porfie and I were members of **Company E, 423rd Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division at Camp Atterbury, Indiana.**

Back With the Ground Forces

The 106th Infantry Division used the summer of 1944 for intensive field maneuvers on the **Camp Atterbury** reservation in preparation for movement to one of the battlefronts. During that time many of the people who had trained with the Division since activation at Camp Jackson, South Carolina on March 15, 1943 had been shipped out to replacement depots and the ranks filled with former Aviation Cadets and men from the Army Specialist Training Program (ASTP). The ASTP had been closed along with the Cadet program to supply the troops needed on the front lines and to offset anticipated losses in the coming invasion of Europe.

In my situation, I had retained my sergeant's rating while in the Cadet program and having served previously as an infantry communication sergeant, I once again became communication sergeant when my predecessor shipped out as a replacement. Porfie also became a member of the company headquarters section and as such became a part of my total responsibility.

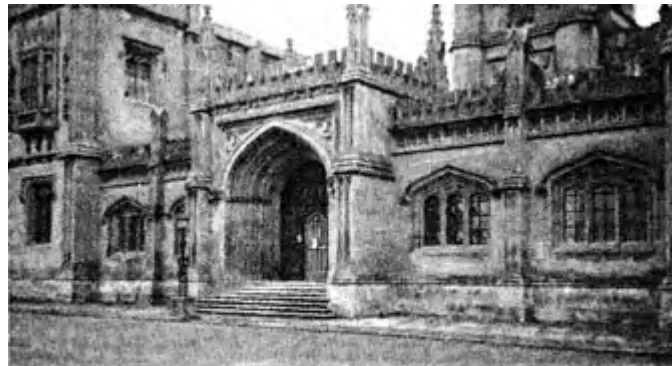
"D-Day" and the invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944 gave added urgency to our training. The summer passed quickly and after brief furloughs we moved to and through Camp Myles Standish in Massachusetts to board the Cunard liner "Queen Elizabeth" for a five day crossing of the Atlantic. Sailing out of New York harbor we had a chance to see the lighted Statue of Liberty and the lights of the great city which were not very impressive to us at that time. The ship was double loaded with some of the 106th personnel and numerous other units so that the staterooms for two had been converted with multi tiered bunks to house 14 men. Even then, one night was spent in the stateroom and the next night on deck behind blackout panels that were installed at dusk to conceal the ship from any lurking submarine wolf pack. The "Queen E" was too fast for convoy and traveled alone during the crossing to Greenock, Scotland. The trip was uneventful until a sub was detected in the Irish Sea and the Queen heeled to a surprising degree at each evasive change of course.

The United Kingdom

Anchored in the Firth of Clyde at Greenock, we were ferried ashore. There we boarded an English troop train to the Cotswold District of England where we spent several days on the grounds of Toddington Manor. The following pictures were taken in October 1985 when Phyllis and I revisited some of the scenes of my wartime tour.



The entrance way to Toddington Manor



Main entrance to Toddington Manor house



Toddington Manor

While stationed at Toddington Manor I purchased a used bicycle so that I could explore the near areas during the limited free time. The nearest village other than Toddington was Broadway, a scenic little place where the buildings were of Cotswold stone which is of various shades of yellow. Henry Ford considered Broadway to be

one of the most beautiful in England and constructed a replica on the grounds of Dearborn Village in Michigan. In honor of my parent's 25th wedding anniversary, I purchased an antique sterling silver mustard pot at one of the shops in Broadway. Phyllis and I are looking forward to our 60th anniversary in 2002 but we still have the little mustard pot as a memento. The following drawing is a reproduction of the Christmas card I sent home to Phyllis as it is a scene of the main street of Broadway.



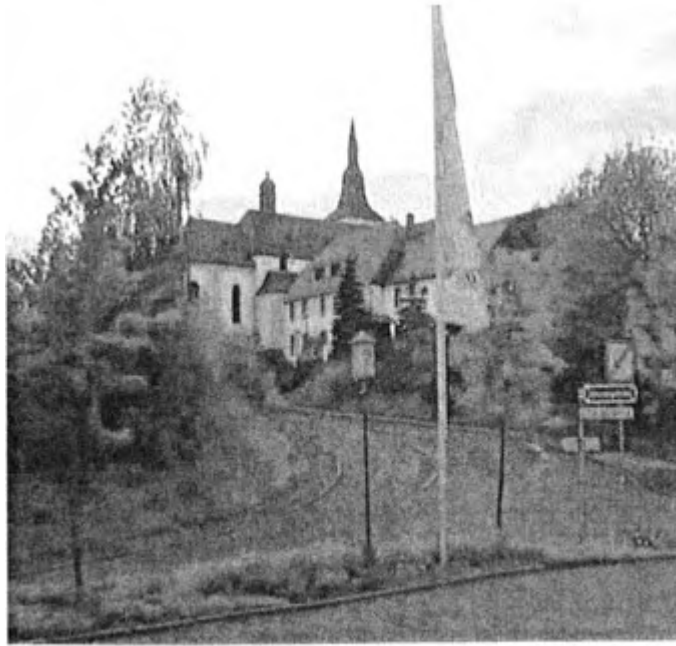
Shops of Cotswold Stone—Broadway, Worcestershire

I had a military driver's license from my days in the Armored Force and thus was able to volunteer to drive new trucks from the port of New Port in Wales for delivery to various destinations in the surrounding area. In so doing, I visited many of the out-of-the-way towns such as Oxford, Stow-on-the-Wold, Banbury, Moreton-in-Marsh, Chipping Norton and Chipping Camden. I enjoyed those days in England.

By the time we arrived in the UK in October, the Allied Forces were nearing the west wall of Hitler's Germany. On December 6, our Division was moved across the Channel and put ashore at Le Havre, France. From there, a long motor march brought us to the Ardennes, the name given to a hilly and wooded region extending from France through southeastern Belgium and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg to the Rhineland of Germany. On the German side of the border with Belgium lies a high ridge running north to south from Monschau in the north to the Moselle River in the south. Near the center of this ridge and opposite the Belgian town of St. Vith is the highest portion of the Schnee Eifel (Snow Mountains). Heavy fighting in September and October of 1944 had pushed the Germans off of the Schnee Eifel and pierced the German Siegfried Line. The former German positions on the Eifel were now occupied by U.S. troops at the point of farthest advance of Allied Forces.

The Ardennes region is well known for its scenic beauty and quaint villages. The countryside is criss-crossed with ridges, ravines and rivers together with some rolling meadows and open farmland. The roads are narrow and winding and the forested areas are dense and nearly impenetrable. These topographic features are obstacles to rapid movement of military traffic since the tracked as well as the wheeled vehicles must rely on the roads and bridges to traverse the Ardennes region. Control of the network of existing roads, road junctions and bridges thus became an important tactic in the defense of the area and a primary mission of the 106th Infantry Division. By the same token, it was imperative to the success of any German counter-offensive that the roadways and major junctions be taken quickly to permit rapid movement through the lightly held rear areas of the Allied Forces.

The following photos are intended to give evidence of the narrow roads and the terrain. The towns of Bleialf and Auv were witness to heavy fighting in the opening hours of the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944.



Bleialf, Germany in the Ardennes
May 1999

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Auw, Germany in the Ardennes
May 1999

The 106th Infantry on the Front Line

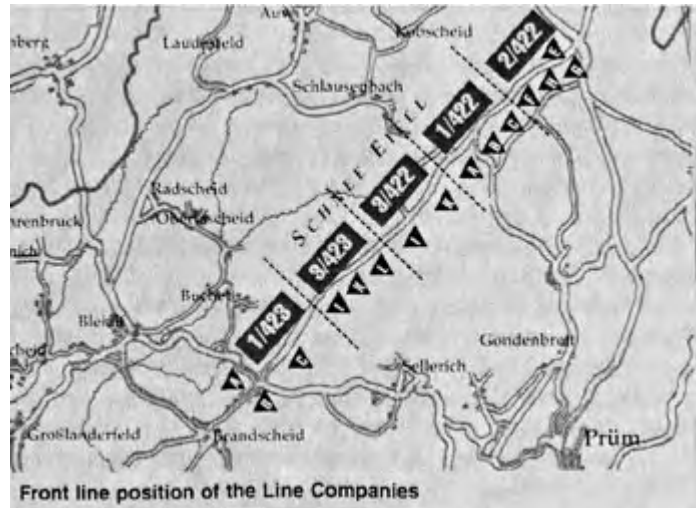


The Ardennes Front—December 1944

From our bivouac site in the mud and rain of northern France, we began a two-day motor march to the St. Vith area of Belgium.

Major General Alan W. Jones established Division headquarters in a wing of the hospital in St. Vith and by December 11 the Division had replaced the 2nd Infantry on a man for man and gun for gun basis. Our front line was stretched thinly along a 26-mile front in a relatively quiet sector of the Ardennes to gain experience in a combat situation. Forward elements of the 422nd and 423rd Regiments were in former German positions in the Siegfried Line behind (east of) the Schnee Eifel.

{Maps, courtesy of Michael Tolhurst, "St. Vith-US 106th Infantry Div'n"}



The 424th Infantry Regiment of the 106th was on line to the right of the 423rd although not so indicated on the map as reproduced on the previous page. In positioning the three battalions of the 423rd, the first and third were on line while the second battalion was held in regimental reserve at Medell, Belgium. As members of Company E, (2nd Bn) Porfie and I were awakened at 0530 on December 16 when German artillery opened fire all along our front line in what was to become known as "The Battle of The Bulge". The quiet sector had suddenly become the scene of Hitler's last desperate attempt at a breakthrough intended to reach Antwerp and thus cut-off and encircle the Allied Forces on Germany's western front.

(The story of the battle is well known and has been the subject of many books, movies and television documentaries. My purpose here is to relate my personal experiences without reference to strategy or tactics. A short list of books about the battle is included in the appendix.)

We were given a hasty breakfast and loaded aboard 6x6's for the move from regimental reserve to front line duty with orders to get to Schoenberg before the Germans. The weather was cold, dark and unsuited to aerial support of any kind for the ground forces. Several inches of snow added to our discomfort. The trucks halted in a forested area until the artillery bombardment on Schoenberg ended and then raced through and beyond the village on the road to Bleialf.

It was already dark by the time we moved into position so that we were unable to see the lay of the land in any direction. It was obvious that the situation was serious as the artillery unit adjacent to us was struggling to get their gun out to a fall-back position. V1 buzz bombs passed overhead as we prepared foxholes for our first night in combat.

As communication sergeant I had been given the intelligence briefings from Division. In the most recent transmission we were advised that—"the Germans are formulating an attack in their rear areas composed of survivors of Rommel's Afrika Korps, Hitler Youth and Volksturm troops"—the implication being that the weakened condition of the enemy precluded any significant or sustained effort.

Now, as I stood alongside my foxhole, Captain Maxey Crews came to my location and while we spoke about the disposition of my men a curious kind of light reflected from the low clouds. The light source appeared to be some distance in front of us and the captain asked what I made of it. Since I had not seen the terrain in daylight, I did not know what lay before me. To my eyes there appeared to be four lights in a line and I took them to be the

headlights of trucks with each truck lighting the rear of the truck ahead. The lights were all at the same elevation giving the impression that the trucks might be on a road along a hillside.

With the dawn of December 17 it became apparent that there was no hillside or ridge to our front and the lights we had seen were evidently search lights being used to reflect from the low overcast to light the battlefield. I believe the German term for this is "ersatz monschein"—in English, "artificial moonlight". I do not think the attempt proved to be worthwhile as the lights were only operated for a short time and no attacks were launched during the time of the glow on the clouds. The artillery and mortar fire that found us when daylight returned was far more effective than any night time infantry assault in ersatz monschein would ever have been.

Following the early morning artillery barrage on the 16th, the enemy poured through a weak point on our left flank. The attack through the Losheim Gap included tanks and self propelled artillery as well as heavy concentrations of infantry. Swinging in behind the out-manned and outgunned 106th, we were cut-off from any form of re-supply and forced to fight a delaying action. We had no tanks or armored force to combat the German Panzer tanks and the weather prevented any hope of aerial support.

M1's and 88's

The standard infantry weapon of the US Army in World War II was the .30 caliber Garand semi-automatic rifle. It had good range, was quite dependable and reasonably accurate. Recruits were drilled for hours on the proper sight picture and trigger squeeze as well as care and cleaning of the piece. Identified as the M1, the weapon provided the infantry soldier with a sense of security and power as both an offensive and a defensive force. However, the Ardennes Offensive as planned and executed by the German high command pitted artillery fire of every description against the shoulder fired rifles of the 106th Infantry Division and the mortars and machine guns of the weapons platoons.

The opening barrage on December 16 was carefully and accurately targeted to do the greatest damage to the "green" troops, their unit headquarters and their lines of communication. 14" guns fired on St. Vith miles behind the front while buzz bombs and rocket firing Nebelwerfer (screaming meemies) added to the unnerving din. The intense artillery fire destroyed the land-lines between outposts, infantry and supporting troop units and Division headquarters. When the barrage lifted, the 18th Volksgrenadier Division with the support of Panzer tanks, assault guns and self-propelled anti-aircraft guns firing against ground troops and emplacements was brought to bear against the 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments of the 106th. In the German plan, the 18th VGD was to encircle the Schnee Eifel closing the ring at Schoenberg and then move on to take the important road junction of St. Vith. This threat to our 105mm howitzers and 155mm gun batteries required that they be made ready for evacuation. Thus, these forward artillery elements were of limited use in the opening phase of the battle though the smaller 57mm guns employed as both anti-personnel and anti-tank weapons gave distinguished service where employed. As a result, the 106th faced a determined enemy of overwhelming fire-power and numbers with primarily the weapons incident to the infantry regiments.

Without reinforcement or air support, the fate of the two regiments was becoming apparent by the night of the 17th.

The Ongoing Battle

Through the day, my company had tried to move in the direction of Schoenberg to deny the enemy access to the road to St. Vith. We were repeatedly hit by mortar and artillery fire as we moved cross country to gain the road between Bleialf and Auw which was known as Skyline Drive because of its ridge-line location and exposure to German artillery fire. In our situation, the M1 was of little benefit. Often we could not see where the shells were coming from and could only press our bodies to the ground to present the smallest possible target. Our losses in dead and wounded were increasing hourly though there were some near misses. Sergeant Ed Janik, a squad leader from Chicago, had his cartridge belt cut away by a piece of shrapnel without being wounded.

In the hours of darkness, Captain Crews led what was left of Company E to the edge of "Skyline Drive" but was turned back by the presence of enemy troops and vehicles lining the road. Quoting the notebook entries made in January 1945, "Dec. 18—Situation still bad and looking worse. We are surrounded but hope to break out. Fall back through Radsheid and are hit by artillery and small arms fire about 1030. We lie on top of a bald hill while those shells rain but I observe that I feel no attachment to it and the men that are killed and wounded all around me seem of no concern. It is altogether different than I had expected".

My runner, Charlie Peterson is lying a few feet to my right and my radio man is a few feet to my left when a shell bursts just ahead of me. Charlie called to me and said, "Sergeant, I've been hit". I moved to him and found that he had been wounded in the wrist, elbow and shoulder. Cutting away his field jacket and shirt, I bandaged him as best I could and told him to try to get to the aid station on the rear slope of the hill. He asked for some one to go with him and I had to tell him that he would have to make it on his own. The same shell that wounded Charlie had also filled the large back pack radio carried by my radio man with shrapnel but he was unscathed. I told him to abandon the now useless radio as it seemed to be drawing fire and would be of no further good to us.

When the shelling let up, we made our way to a wooded area and organized the survivors for a night attack or a sneak through the enemy ring. We withdrew through Radsheid where we rifled the ration trucks and got some canned tomatoes and biscuits. In the dark, Captain Crews sent me to talk with Colonel Cavender, our regimental commander, for information on how we were to proceed. The Colonel was seated in his command car stuck in a line of vehicles disabled by shell fire. I identified myself to the Colonel but he was unable to give me more than an indication that we were to continue to try to get to Schoenberg to protect the road to St. Vith. Reporting back to Captain Crews, he moved his diminished command into a wooded area to await daylight. The strain of nearly three days of combat conditions, the snow, cold and lack of food in addition to the shock of high explosive shelling had created a fatigue that could only be countered by nervous energy. I positioned the remaining company headquarters people to form a defensive perimeter, scraped out a shallow slit trench for myself, and slept for sometime without regard for enemy patrols or infiltrators. I had reached the limit of my endurance. At daylight, Captain Crews was shocked by the inadequacy of his headquarters defense. I did not reveal to him that I had collapsed in my slit trench and was now all the better for a few hours sleep.

December 19, 1944

In the light of dawn on our fourth day of combat, we formed up and began our move toward Schoenberg as instructed. Our path took us along the column of stalled vehicles encountered the previous night. We were physically exhausted after three days of fighting a delaying action, virtually out of ammunition, had not had a meal since breakfast on the 16th and had no way to help the wounded or gather the dead. Without re-supply or immediate support it was obvious that we were about to be eliminated as a fighting force. When we reached the head of the column of stranded vehicles, we foot soldiers halted to reorganize and determine how to proceed. The vehicles stretched bumper to bumper back through the trees and into an open field on the side of a small hill. When Charlie Peterson had been wounded the day before, Porfie Yvarra, by default, had become my runner. The last I saw of Charlie Peterson he was lying on a stretcher on the hood of the medics jeep so I knew he had reached the aid station.

Thinking that there might be some ammunition in the stalled vehicles, I directed Porfie and the radioless radio man to go back along the column and gather all the .30 caliber cartridges they could find. As good soldiers they accepted my instruction without comment and set about the task. They had only been gone a few minutes when the enemy gunners turned their attention to the stalled vehicular column and poured round after round into the area while I lay in the forest and wondered about my ammunition seekers. I don't know how long the shelling continued. It seemed to be a very long time before there was a break in the concussions of the exploding shells.

After a time of relative quiet, I went back along the column in search of my ammunition detail. At the edge of the woods I met an officer that I did not know. He had been caught in the artillery bombardment and while he

appeared to be uninjured he was shaking violently and seemed to be suffering from emotional shock. I lit a cigarette and gave it to him saying that it might help to warm him from the cold. In response the lieutenant said, "Nothing on this earth will ever warm me again". Unable to help him in any way, I moved on looking for Porfie and my former radio operator.

A short distance further I spotted them coming toward me. They didn't have any ammunition and were soaking wet from lying in the snow melt in a ditch to escape the enemy fire. Porfie's first words to me, and he used the double negative for emphasis were, "**Sergeant—don't never ask me to do that again**". Within the hour, Colonel Deshaneau surrendered the 422nd and upon learning of that, Colonel Cavender surrendered what was left of the 423rd. Porfie Yvarra and I were prisoners of war.

Surrender

The order to surrender was given verbally to me by our executive officer, Lt. John Miller. John had been given a battlefield commission in North Africa and as we talked, tears ran down his cheeks when he said, "I didn't come this far to surrender". In view of the situation and with the decision made at the regimental level, we were obliged to obey the order. I dismantled my rifle and tossed the parts of the operating mechanism in different directions, burned my maps and code books and sat down to wait for the enemy troopers to flush us out of the woods and march us to some central point.

I had a Signal Corps wrist watch as part of my kit. In an attempt to hide it, I put it on my ankle and buckled my combat boot over it. After further thought I decided that might cause a future problem so I put the watch back on my wrist.

In passing the stalled line of trucks I had found a little gasoline burning stove which I now lighted, melted some snow and made myself a cup of instant coffee, the last warm bit of food I would have for several days. A wool Army blanket was another item that I had picked up earlier in the day. To make the best use of the blanket, I tore it into wide strips and wound them around my body under my field jacket. More of the watch and blanket later in the story but the little burner I emptied and smashed to keep it from providing comfort to the enemy.

Daylight was beginning to fade when the German infantrymen were seen slipping through the trees, rifles at the ready, to gather us for the march down the hill with our arms held high in surrender. We were led past the self-propelled guns and tanks that had caused the devastation to our regiment. Based on the equipment along our route to the town of Bleialf, it was apparent that the German offensive was an all-out effort far beyond the ability of a single division stretched along a twenty-six mile front to contain.

Herded into a barnyard at the edge of Bleialf we were divested of our steel helmets, cartridge belts, canteens and any packs or shoulder bags. Our clothing was not searched but the items mentioned were thrown in a pile in the barnyard. Because of the sergeant stripes on my sleeve a trooper with a machine pistol in hand grabbed my left wrist. The watch that I had removed and then replaced on my wrist immediately became the property of the man with the gun.

By the time the hasty search and discarding of equipment was completed it was almost dark. The village church was across the road from the farmhouse and we were crowded into the church building. I had heard stories of mistreatment of prisoners of war and that under the Nazi regime, the churches were used as warehouses and hay mows. It was of some concern to me that the building might be burned once we were locked inside. Upon entering I found that at least this church was still furnished as a church and I quickly found space under one of the pews to lie down. I suspect that nervous exhaustion claimed me as I do not remember being uncomfortable on the hard floor. At least I was inside and though the building was unheated it was warmer than lying in the snow.

At daybreak we lined up along the road where we were joined by others who had not been able to crowd into the church the previous evening. With Colonel Cavender and Lt. Colonel Puett at the head of the column we began

our march along the German line of communication and supply. Again, the extent of preparation for the attack was amazing to us. I was surprised to see horse drawn artillery, supply wagons and field kitchens and some officers on horseback.



The Church in Bleialf
October 1985

Our route led us to and through the city of Prum and on to the town of Gerolstein after a march of 30 kilometers without food or water. Arriving in Gerolstein about 2130 (9:30 PM), we lined up seven abreast throughout the night in anticipation of receiving something to eat. At 0930 the next morning we were given German "Iron Rations" of a very hard biscuit and some cheese before being marched to the railroad station in the center of town. There a string of box cars was lined up for the cold, tired and hungry survivors of the two regiments that had delayed the German drive for the road and rail centers of St. Vith and Malmedy for four long days. In single file we moved along the line of cars to the point where the line was diverted to scramble aboard. When jammed full the door was slid shut and secured with no means of opening the door from the inside. We were now truly imprisoned.



Railroad Station at Gerolstein, Germany
October 1985

40 & 8's To Where—

At the time of World Wars I and II, European railroad boxcars were small “goods Wagons” mounted on four wheels and reputed to be capable of carrying forty men or eight horses and so came to be known as “40 & 8's. I don't recall that we ever counted the number of men in our car but there was not enough space for all of us to sit down at the same time. The car was unlined and we had a limited view out through the cracks between boards of the exterior siding. Our car also had a small cupola at one corner of the roof. I think this was intended in normal times to provide ventilation as there were window-like openings in the cupola sidewalls. In this case, barbed wire had been wound around the cupola to prevent any use of the openings as a means of escape.

A small hole had been broken in the floor of the car and although it was too small for a person to wiggle through, the hole quickly became our only toilet facility. The endwall opposite the cupola contained a narrow shelf about five feet long and four feet above the floor. Sergeant Al Rabner, a squad leader from Cedar Falls, Iowa managed to mount the shelf and because of his short stature found room to lie on that slim shelf board but had to warn those below whenever he found it necessary to dismount the shelf.

The cold was partially offset by the animal heat generated in our crowded little box but the poorly fitted siding and the openings of the cupola did little to conserve body heat. The winter wind when parked and the draft when traveling added to our total discomfort. At night we would slump down to the floor with no room for feet and legs which would become part of a pile of body parts. Waking from the pain and crushing weight atop your legs, you struggled to pull from under the pile and add your legs to the top of the heap, repeating the exercise throughout the eight long nights of our rail journey deep into Germany.

During the night the train made it's way to Limburg, a small city about 70 miles east of Gerolstein. The string of 40& 8's was parked on a siding at the edge of the railroad marshalling yard adjacent to an open field of perhaps 100yards in width. Beyond the edge of the field, a steep cliff-like hillside paralleled the railroad yard and the track where our cars were standing. From our location we were not able to see what lay on the high ground though we later learned that a prisoner of war camp identified as Stalag XII-A was situated at that point. One other detail of the cliffside that we could see was a cave or tunnel entrance about midway up the steep hillside. A road or walkway led from the level of the town to the hillside entrance of what was obviously an air raid shelter. We could see the people streaming up and down the walkway as the air raid sirens sounded the alert or all-clear. It seemed that the people would scarcely return to their homes and businesses when the sirens would sound again and they would return to the shelter. This routine went on day and night. The anxiety and frustration of the civilians under the constant threat of aerial bombardment was unimaginable and now we shared that danger without the comfort of a cliffside shelter.

In the course of the day, December 22, the guards would allow the occupants of one car at a time to exit for a short break and to have a drink of water before returning to the crowded box. The next day was spent in the same place and in the same way except that we were each given half a loaf of black bread.

The air raid sirens continued to howl at intervals and during the night of the 23rd, aircraft engines were heard directly overhead. When the "Pathfinder" plane dropped a red flare to provide an aiming point for the bombers we knew that the rail yard was being targeted. The German guards ran toward the rear end of the train shouting, "Das rote kreuss" referring to the flare. We boosted a man up to the cupola and with his bare hands he spread the barbed wire and crawled out. Climbing down from the roof he opened the door and the car quickly emptied.

I went to the car ahead of ours and tried to open the latch of the sliding door. Unfamiliar with the latch keeper mechanism, I had to spend a brief time fumbling in the dark before I could slide the door aside. As a plane would release its load I would continue to work with the latch until the sound of the falling bombs told me that the impact was only seconds away and I would fall face down on the ground until the explosions and then return to the door mechanism. When I succeeded in opening the door the men leaped out and ran into the open field to get away from the targeted rail yard.

Unfortunately, the winter wind blew the parachute flare out over the field and the adjoining ridge and a number of bombs fell in the field and the prison camp above. According to official German records, more than fifty-five officers and twenty- six enlisted men were killed in the camp and sixty-three men of the 106th Infantry Division were killed in the rail yard. Although the rail yard was badly damaged, most of the string of 40 & 8's escaped with only a showering of debris. Perhaps opening the door of that boxcar contributed to the casualties but to have done nothing to help those locked inside would have been unthinkable. When I mentally review the events of that night after more than half a century, I continue to feel that I acted properly under those circumstances.

When the raid was over, the survivors, having no where to go, were quickly rounded up by the guards and returned to the confines of the cars.

Daylight of the day before Christmas revealed the bomb craters and seven bodies visible from our car just a few yards out in the field. We received no food that day but at nightfall on Christmas Eve, we managed to sing a few carols to indicate to the guards that we had not surrendered the spirit of Christmas. Late in the afternoon of Christmas Day we were given a half loaf of black bread for each man. The bodies of our fallen comrades were still lying at the bomb crater in the field. A cold and cheerless Christmas without any sign of immediate improvement. We were beginning to wonder how long we could last under such conditions.



(Picture courtesy of 106th Infantry Division Association)
(and Richard W. Peterson, member)

The slave labor forces in the area were able to repair the bomb damage to the roadbed and trackage so that by nightfall of December 26, our string of 40 & 8's was ready to move. During the day, each man had been given an English Red Cross parcel and told that we would be starting a long trip. After dark the train moved out of Limburg leaving the dead where they had fallen. The next day we were at Idstein, about 12 miles from Limburg. The nights were very cold and my hands became frost bitten, especially the left to the extent that it was a year or more before feeling returned to the fingers of that hand. The train moved slowly with long halts for track repair or more important rail traffic.

During the day of December 28 the train entered the rail yards of Frankfurt-Am-Main, about 32 miles from Limburg. A half loaf of bread was distributed to each man with the warning that it was to last until Saturday, December 30. These were bad days with some slow travel, much waiting and freezing cold all the time with no room to exercise.

Finally, late in the afternoon of December 29, the train pulled into **Stalag IV-B** near Muhlberg, about 280 miles east of Frankfurt-am-Main. The entire night was spent in the process of registration as prisoners of war. We were assigned a POW number, photographed by a Russian prisoner, and stood in line outdoors for hours while waiting to get a receipt for any legal money (invasion currency was confiscated even though it was considered to have no value and was not included on the receipt).

With the registration complete, we were herded into an unheated building that had a concrete floor. There we undressed placing our clothing in a pile on the floor where it was deloused while we were taking a slightly warm shower without soap or towel. My feet had evidently suffered some frostbite as well as my hands because I can still remember that the concrete floor underfoot felt like a deep pile carpet, an odd sensation considering the reality of a cold concrete slab. We dressed in the clothes we had donned on December 16 when the German Ardennes Offensive began.

Introduction to Stalag Life

About 0830 on the morning of December 30 we were consigned to the ugly brick barracks that would at least provide shelter from the icy wind and snow. The buildings were erected on concrete slabs poured directly on the ground. They were double ended in that there was a lavatory room between long barrack rooms. The latrine was across a narrow street and inaccessible after lights out. We were told that the street was a death zone after dark.

Stalag IV-B housed many of the British paratroopers that had been lost in Field Marshall Montgomery's ill fated "Market Garden" offensive in September 1944 (A Bridge Too Far). Alec Redshaw and William Williams had been among those dropped at Arnhem in an attempt to secure the bridge across the Rhine at that point. However, stubborn German defense prevented rapid advance of the front line across the intervening 140 kilometers and after bitter fighting, the surviving troopers became POW's. Alerted to the anticipated influx of American troops from the Ardennes Offensive, our British allies had been instructed to share their space with the new arrivals.

Alec and William welcomed Les Bruch (a member of my company) and me to the use of their double tier wooden bunks and told us of the daily routine. They had also managed to save enough food from their meager rations to have a sandwich and a cup of tea for each of us. The barrack room was cold and dimly lighted by the windows along the sidewall but these acts of kindness warmed and cheered us in the new environment. With needle and thread provided by our new friends, I used the pieces of blanket that I had worn since surrender, to fashion a hat with ear flaps like an aviators leather helmet, a pair of mittens and a small shoulder bag for what ever I might acquire. As a first attempt at garment design and sewing, the hat and mittens were somewhat less than stylish but they, like the shoulder bag, were effective.

We did our best to clean ourselves and our clothing to match the example set for us by our British compatriots. Lacking soap, warm water or towels of any kind, real cleanliness was a problem.

A small pot of about one quart capacity was issued to each of us as a mess kit. Most of these had a wire handle like a bucket and were referred to as "Dixies". I don't know where the name came from but we each had a Dixie for our very own. On most mornings, barrels of hot (read "warm") tea were wheeled along the street outside the barracks and each man would get a cup of the liquid poured into his Dixie. I am not certain what was used to brew the tea but it was warm and for the most part was used for shaving the whiskers that continued to grow. In the afternoon the dixies were again used for the cup of thin soup, usually dehydrated rutabaga, a small piece of bread and occasionally a couple of small boiled potatoes. Our British friends taught us how to make-do with the very limited menu and portions while our stomachs became accustomed to the continual hunger. Everyone lived in anticipation of the next distribution of Red Cross food parcels to supplement the daily diet. Even though they had been prisoners only about 100 days at the time, Redshaw and Williams told us that the food situation had recently become worse due to the allied bombing of the German transportation network. The regular distribution of food parcels had ended and now they were passed out only as transportation could be arranged. Hunger had become a constant companion.

In addition to the dixies, we were each issued a German Army blanket. These must have been designed to form a bed roll that would be light in weight and quickly secured across the top of the soldier's pack. I would guess the blankets were about 42 inches wide and 65 inches long. They were of wool in a thin but tight weave. To gain full benefit of these small covers, we slept spoon fashion, two to a bunk and fully clothed. The bunks were fashioned of wood with bed boards between the side rails to support the thin straw mattress. Since the bed boards were removable, as many as could be spared had previously been used as firewood to heat the barrack room but the gaps between the remaining bed boards made for considerable added discomfort when sleeping or trying to sleep.



Stockpile of Red Cross food parcels—Geneva, Switzerland
Transportation to the prison camps became the major
Problem of distribution due to allied bombing.

(From Time-Life Books—Prisoners of War)

December 31st was a Sunday. A non-denominational church service was held early in the day in an empty warehouse building.

There was no heat or seating in the building and the concrete floor was extremely cold. The service was conducted by a military chaplain and was well attended. We stood closely packed against the cold but no one left

until the service was concluded. I don't remember the text of the chaplain's sermon but the words of the 23rd Psalm continued to run through my mind in those dark, cold and hungry days of captivity. There were no New Years Eve services due to the ban on movement outdoors after dark.

On January 5, 1945 all American non-commissioned officers were again loaded aboard freight cars and after a three day trip arrived at **Stalag III-B** near Furstenburg and Frankfort-am-Oder on the far eastern edge of Germany. We were marched from the train to the camp gate where we stood in the cold while a German officer, proficient in the English language, called the roll. I remember the cold because of the big straw overshoes that the guard at the gate wore to stand his post. I had never seen straw woven to such thickness or used for that purpose. Frost hung like lace curtains on the barbed wire and sparkled in the winter sun that seemed to have no warmth. Again, I had never seen frost hanging on a wire fence before and while we stood shivering in the cold, the German officer made smart remarks when he came to names on the roster like Eisenhower, Bradley, McNamara and Patton.

After an unnecessarily long time in the cold, we were finally admitted to the barracks. There I met and buddied with Sergeant Donald Betlach from Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Don had been a cook in my regiment and though I had not met him before, proved to be an excellent friend and bunkmate. Don's glasses had been broken in the air raid at Limburg and he was very much handicapped without the corrective lenses. We made a good team and continue to correspond at Christmastime each year.

Stalag III-B held a number of American GI's that had been prisoners for quite a long time. Anxious for news of home, these longer term POW's would come through the barracks of the recent arrivals seeking anyone from their home town. In this way, I met several from Northwest Indiana including Teo Esposito and Sidney Weiss. Sid, a medic captured in North Africa, had expected to be repatriated as a non-combatant from a medical detachment. All of his buddies from the medical battalion had been repatriated but Sid was Jewish and the Nazi Army had refused to allow his repatriation—an indication of the extent of discrimination on an individual basis.

Crowding at III-B was less severe and the camp seemed to be run more efficiently. There was a small library and one of the supply of elementary school composition books was used to record the notes I am working with today. The food was about the same as we received at IV-B but the Red Cross parcels were distributed regularly each week with a parcel for each 2-man team. However, to prevent the hoarding of canned food for use in an escape attempt, the cans were opened by the German guards before passing them to the POW's. In this way, the contents had to be eaten in short order to prevent spoilage.



Woven Straw Overshoes
(Time-Life Books)

The Russians are Coming—

In the last week of January the sound of artillery fire was getting quite close. One day, I think it was the 28th or 29th, the sky was full of German fighter planes giving evidence that something of importance was happening. We were later told that Hitler had visited Frankfurt, had determined to hold the line of the Oder against the advancing Russian Army and that the camp would probably be evacuated.

On the 31st, Don and I received an unopened Red Cross food parcel and were told to be ready to leave by 1515 (3:15 PM). After one false start, the column moved out at 2000 (8:00 PM) and marched all night and all of the next day. The weather had warmed enough that the melting snow and ice soaked our feet as we marched through the slush. After twenty-one hours on the road we were locked in some large barns for the night where we slept soundly in spite of the crowded discomfort.

Early the next morning, February 2nd, we were back on the road again. Before beginning the day's march, Don liberated two sugar beets from the field behind the barn. Not the greatest when peeled and eaten raw but they gave us something to munch on and did help to quiet our empty stomachs.

Late in the day we arrived at a farm where there were a number of barns that would house us for the night. I did remember a bit of the German language I had briefly studied at the University of Chicago so I was emboldened and hungry enough to knock on the farmhouse door and ask for something to eat. I had a small bar of Ivory soap from the Red Cross parcel to use for bartering as I knew that soap was in short supply in Germany. The woman

who answered the door was pleased to see the still wrapped bar of soap which she accepted and told me to come back in the morning. At Dawn, I again knocked on the farmhouse door and the woman, recognizing me, placed several small boiled potatoes in the hat I held out to her. One of the soldiers (a Volksturmer) guarding our column was in the house and came to the door with the woman. The soldier wanted to know what I was going to pay for the potatoes but the woman assured him that she had been paid in advance and he stepped back to permit me to express my heavily accented "Danke Schoen". I wanted to relate this incident as it serves to illustrate that even in the wartime situation, there were simple acts of trust and kindness when ordinary people were able to interact. "Me Mucker" (an expression picked up from the British at Stalag IV-B to refer to your best buddy) Don Betlach and I shared the potatoes and the last of the bread brought from III-B.

At one of the breaks in our march of February 3rd, we were given a loaf of black bread for each five men. The distribution was arranged by forming the column into ranks of five abreast. The farm tractor and trailer load of bread that accompanied us was pulled to the side of the road and a loaf would be passed to the man nearest the trailer in our line of march. Next, it was up to the recipient to divide the loaf fairly with the other four men in his rank. It was of interest to me that even a dull and unwashed knife could be wielded so skillfully in the division of the loaf that I never heard a word of criticism directed toward the individual doing the dividing.

On Foot in Eastern Germany

It is claimed that one of the best ways to see a country is to travel on foot so there is time to examine and take note of the countryside on an up close and personal level. One thing that is not mentioned in such advice is the importance of season. February is not a good time to explore the German plain and the same probably holds true for the high country. As Kriegesgefangenen (prisoners of war) our march from Stalag III-B on the Oder River to some undisclosed point away from the border with Poland was becoming increasingly difficult. Combining the effects of a lack of food, poor sleeping conditions, the strain of hours of walking and the total lack of sanitary facilities had taken a toll of our vitality. Betlach and I seemed to be faring quite well in spite of the hardship as we would take advantage of our limited foreign language abilities to barter for a piece of bread or some boiled potatoes. In one such deal Don made with a Polish slave laborer he received part of a loaf of bread for a bar of soap and the woman at the farm where the Pole worked gave Don three pieces of coffee cake still warm from the oven. In such a situation the importance of a good "Mucker" became very evident.

By the late afternoon of February 4 we were near the village of Halbe on the rail line between Berlin and Cottbus. Once again I did a bit of bartering and received some raw potatoes and a link of home made sausage for a bar of soap. In the morning I got some boiled potatoes and sent Don to the same place and he was given some more. By nightfall of the 5th we had covered 27 kilometers for the day and had arrived at a deserted village that was used for training in street and village fighting. There must have been a field kitchen in the area because for the first time our Dixies were filled with a boiled potatoes and cheese mixture that was delicious and warm.

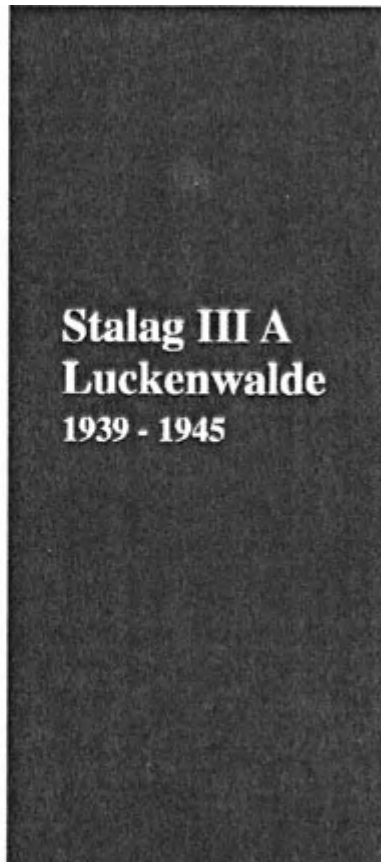
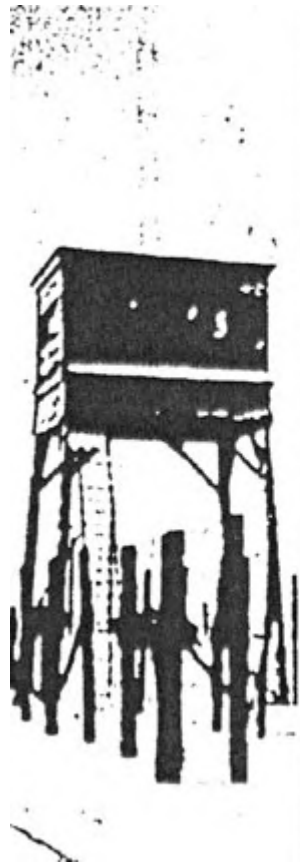
During the night a field kitchen brought a vat of millet soup and Don and I ate all we could hold. We had been given a fifth of a loaf of black bread every day except the first but the strain was beginning to show on the German guards as well as the guarded. Diarrhea was a debilitating problem for many of our fellow prisoners and the brief rest breaks that were allowed did not provide for sanitary facilities of any kind. An open field that could be easily guarded was always chosen for the break and was immediately utilized as a latrine. The short breaks in the cold and damp weather were very necessary but a few minutes of sitting or lying on the ground made it all the more difficult to get back on your feet to continue the march. I don't know how many dropped out of the column or what may have happened to them. One of our group was slow in getting up when the guard shouted "Raus" and as a warning to all, the guard raised his rifle and shot the man there at the edge of the field. Reformed on the roadway, the column moved off minus the lifeless one at the field's border.

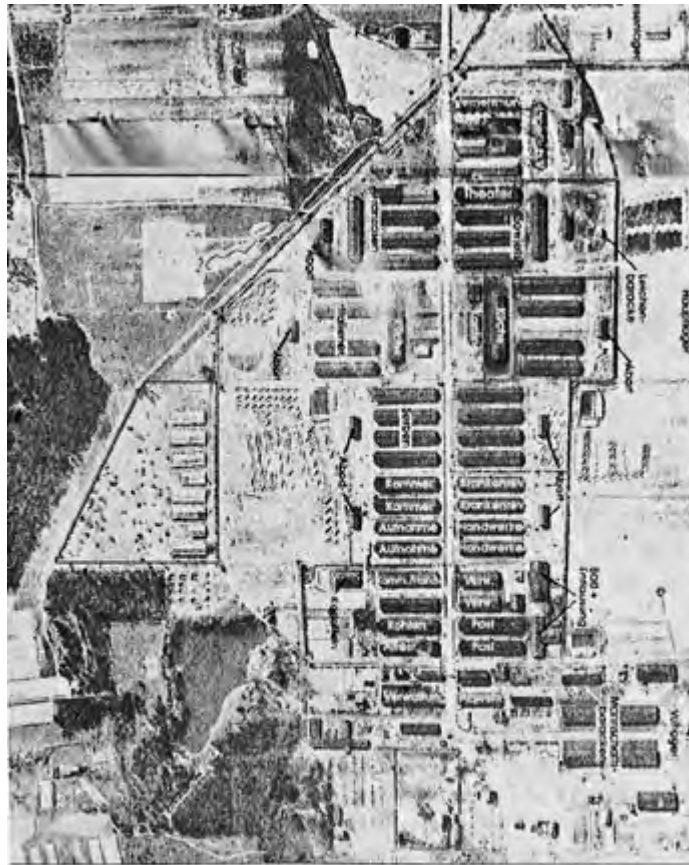
As a counterbalance to that incident of needless cruelty, I was in the file at the right hand edge of the column as we moved through a small town. Along the edge of the street I could see a small boy of seven or eight years watching the grimy column move past his home which stood a short distance back from the roadway. In his hand, the boy held something that appeared to be wrapped in parchment or oiled paper of some kind. Perhaps he sensed that I was looking at him and as we came abreast of where he stood, he moved quickly to give me the

parcel. It was surprisingly heavy for such a small handful, was soft and felt like a lump of putty. I had no idea what it was and asked Betlach if he could identify the substance. Since Don was a cook and baker, he recognized it as brewer's yeast. We shared this windfall and found that eating small amounts created a feeling of fullness in the stomach as the yeast reacted to internal bodily warmth. I do not know whether or not brewer's yeast has any nutritional value but in our situation it helped to dull the pangs of hunger. In his act of kindness did the boy know the effect of the yeast on an empty stomach? Was that knowledge gained through first hand experience? Was he acting spontaneously or was he only the delivery boy for another's attempt to ease the pain of an unknown human being? I wish I knew.

After an all day march on February 6 I wrote the following in my little composition book: "As I write this, I am sitting on the cold concrete floor of a garage in a big ordnance plant just waiting. We are packed in so tight that my sit is more of a squat leaning back against Don. We are supposed to be within 13 kilometers of our destination. Tomorrow should see us there and we pray that it will for our food is nearly gone and we are almost done for ourselves".

Somehow we made it through the uncomfortable night on the concrete floor. Cold, stiff and sore, the march was resumed when daylight returned. Once we were moving we were warmed by the exercise and our joints and muscles limbered in the expectation of finding a POW camp at the end of a long march. Thirteen kilometers is slightly more than eight miles but my notes do not indicate the time of our arrival at the small city of Luckenwalde and the prison camp on the southwest edge of town.





Aerial view of Stalag III-A
US Air Force photo—April 1945
(Outlined area shows location of tents)

Stalag III-A

The city of Luckenwalde is about fifty miles south of Berlin on the main rail line between Berlin and Leipzig and is surrounded by open fields and patches of evergreen forest. In a carefully chosen location close to the city but screened by the rail line and forest, Stalag III-A had been built by Polish slave labor after the Nazi Blitzkrieg and fall of Poland in 1939. Now it housed officers and men from many of the nations allied against Germany. The camp was filled to capacity prior to our arrival.

The barbed wire topped fencing had been extended around an irregularly shaped piece of ground along the western perimeter of the main camp. Within this added enclosure, large circus tents had been erected so that the tent openings faced fencing of the main camp parade and exercise ground. Latrine pits had been dug behind the tents and a water line had been extended to provide two (2) water faucets. Guard towers at the corners of the main camp served to oversee the entire extended compound and a trip-wire had been installed establishing a death zone to prevent commerce or communication between the areas. A guard was also posted at the gate which provided access to the tent city annex. Search lights at the guard towers and an air raid siren completed the set-up.

We were counted and admitted to the tent area where we were installed 400 men to each of the larger tents. At that density, each two-man team had a space approximately 30 inches wide and six and a half feet long. Thus, lying head to head with the team in the next row, a walk-way of about a foot in width gave access from the narrow central aisle to your spot on the bare ground. Two of the tents were shorter and the shortest of these was

used as an infirmary staffed by the enlisted medics in our group. I do not have an exact count but have always considered the number housed in the tents to have been 2,600. Having only two water faucets for that many people required much patient waiting day or night to get a drink of water or to rinse hands and face. The accommodations were primitive, crowded and cold but we had a point of reference and could begin to form some kind of routine. Our first night in the tents, February 7, 1945, Don and I smoothed the ground of our space and sharing our little blankets, had our best sleep since leaving Stalag III-B on the evening of January 31.

Kriegie Life

The life of a Kriegesgefangenen (Kriegie for short) became a daily struggle for survival. There was no question of the outcome of the war. Pressed by the Russian Army advance from the east, the Allied forces from the west and constant air attack from above, the Third Reich was clearly doomed. It was only a matter of time and the chant of "Home Alive in '45" had great significance to all of us. If we could just hold out a little longer we could forget the fences, barbed-wire, discomfort and hunger.

Without even thinking about it, a routine did develop that was based more on the activity of our captors than ourselves. Being totally dependent on German military management of the camp for our food and drink meant that the arrival of anything edible became the important element.

Each morning the cry of "RRRRCall—Outzeit" began the day with a reminder of where we were and of our situation as prisoners. An elderly guard was assigned to each tent and it was his duty to get everyone lined up in five ranks so he could walk across in front of the first rank and count the files, multiply by five and thus have an official headcount. The old soldaten would parade across in front of us counting aloud as he went, "ein, zwei, drie—ein und zwansig, zwei und zwansig drie und—" and one of us in the rear rank would move between the columns, the old man would threaten, the offender would step back in position and the old man would go back to the beginning—"ein, zwei, drei—". By this time the officer of the day would be getting chilled and would shout at the guard for a report. Our enumerator would finish his walk in front of us pointing at each file in the formation, do an about face and report all present and accounted for or what ever the equivalent term is in German. This little game was repeated over and over again so that I question whether or not an accurate count was ever conducted.

With roll call out of the way we would hurry back inside the tent and our blankets to try to shake off the cold while waiting for the morning ration of half a cup of "tea". On most days, a fifth of a loaf of black bread and a cup of cabbage or rutabaga soup completed our daily ration, a starvation diet and we soon began to show the effects through weight loss and reduced stamina. Most of the time was spent lying down to conserve energy. The main topic of conversation was food and dream menu's containing items high in fat content. Once in each of the months of February and March there was a distribution of a strong cheese but the Red Cross food parcels were not available on a regular basis because of the lack of transportation from the warehouses to the camps.

The March winds were troublesome to the canvas tents. We had to post 24-hour patrols around each tent to re-drive the tent stakes and keep the tent ropes tightened to prevent collapse.

It seems a little strange now but under those conditions each of us kept time through the memory of events in our private lives. On February 21 I remembered that it was the third anniversary of our wedding, the 28th was my Dad's birthday and then on March 21, son John's second birthday. The memory of those things from civilian life helped to keep us focused on the need to survive the present in anticipation of a better future. Our morale remained high in the firm belief that it was only a matter of time until we would be free once again.

We had a daily news briefing that was brought into each tent in turn by the "Man of Confidence", an American GI who spoke German and who served as the go-between in any dealing with the prison guards. Supposedly the news came from a clandestine radio

receiver that could pick up the BBC news broadcasts. If a guard came into the compound while the news was being read aloud, the cry of "Air Raid" ended the reading until an "All Clear" could be announced and the reading resumed.

Our first four weeks at Stalag III-A were the most difficult. Living conditions in the crowded tents were extremely primitive. The floorless tents placed us in direct contact with the hard ground until after several days, bales of straw were brought into the compound and we were able to spread a thin covering on the ground of our allotted space. This was of some benefit as insulation from the cold of the ground but the straw was a mixed blessing—it also contained insect larvae that hatched and made nights especially bad. Lacking any bathing, laundry facility or means of pest control, many hours were spent in "nit picking".

The lack of sufficient nourishment in the prison diet caused many problems in addition to loss of weight. Extreme fatigue was constant. Don and I each day would take our little blankets outside one at a time to shake them before lying down to rest a bit before taking the next. Many suffered from diarrhea and other digestive problems. Food was the only topic of conversation during those hungry days. I continue to believe that the Red Cross food parcels kept us from starvation when the first distribution was made on March 5 and again on March 8.

As the man of confidence (more often called the "Dobermacher") could converse with the guards, he was the person to work with in trying to arrange for anything from beyond the fence. I had a Parker '51' hooded point fountain pen that I used to try to make a deal for a loaf of bread. After several days the pen was returned to me because the guard was unable at that time to smuggle a loaf into the camp. I was surprised to have the pen returned when the deal could not be completed.

The Dobermacher also made arrangements with the old guard to take four of us into the forest to gather twigs for use as fuel in the "blowers" that some of the Kriegies had made and brought with them from Stalag III-B. There were numerous designs of these machines based on the materials available. Most consisted of a short piece of bed board to serve as a base with tin cans from the Red Cross food parcels fitted together to form a hand cranked pulley driving a tin fan in a round housing with the fan discharge venting to a short tin stack. An old dixie, its bottom pierced by several small holes sat atop the stack to form a fire pot. A shoe-lace was employed as a belt to drive the blower fan and thus cause a draft in the fire pot. With this "blower" and a minimum of fuel this model of a blacksmith forge created enough heat to boil a dixie of water in a matter of a couple of minutes. A scrap of paper, a few twigs or piece of cardboard from the Red Cross food parcel as fuel together with a bit of the instant coffee from the food parcel and you had a cup of hot coffee for a taste of home. Thus, since we slept on the ground and had no bed boards to splinter, and had gleaned every stick from the small trees in our prison compound, fuel for a borrowed blower was at a premium. A trip to the forest to gather twigs was an event.

With the arrangements made the four of us met the old guard at the gate at the specified time and were passed through the gate. The forest bordered the far end of the fenced area and, as soon we were screened by the underbrush, the old man let one of us carry his heavy rifle to ease his tired body. We sat him down on a tree stump and leaned his rifle at his side while we gathered the "blower" fuel we had come for. The reverse routine was used on the return trip and the gun was returned to the old "posten's" shoulder before we could be seen from the camp. A pack of A enough sticks to brew quite a number of cups of coffee. With both the Allied and the Red armies approaching, escape was not a serious option and would have created a real problem for the grandfatherly old soldier.

In the last weeks of the war it seemed that the day and night bombing raids increased. During the day we could see the formations of B-17's and B-24's passing overhead. When the sirens would sound at night, the old guards would have to return to the tents with shouts of "licht aus" to warn against the flare of a match or the glow of a cigarette. After their daylight tour of duty, the need to spend some of the nighttime hours in the compound was hard on people the age of those guards. The night of the 1,000 plane raid on Potsdam seemed to go on most of the night. It was close enough to us that we could hear the planes as they came over us on their bombing runs.

We could hear the change of pitch in the sound of the propellers when the planes were relieved of their loads. The glow of the burning city was visible to us even though we were 35 or 40 miles away. The end was approaching for Hitler and The Third Reich.

I never did learn the source of our news but the reputed presence of a radio receiver within the prison compound must have been correct. As things happened in the world at large, rumors would sift through the tents and then be confirmed later. As an instance, on April 15, 1945 a story that President Franklin D. Roosevelt had passed away quickly made way throughout the tent city. Later in the day the Camp Commandant came into our area. The commandant spoke English and after we were called to attention he addressed us in a loud "parade ground" voice saying, "**The arch war criminal of all time is dead! The new president is Harry Truman!**" He seemed quite pleased to deliver such a message but our major concern was "**Who is Harry Truman?**" I don't remember that we were ever informed about H. S. Truman but being aware of the American system, we had no concern that the Commander-in-Chief would lessen Allied efforts to bring the war to a close. As things turned out, our lack of concern was fully justified and Truman proved to be a superior commander-in-chief.

Liberation

During the third week of April we could hear the artillery of the Americans to the west and, even closer, the Russian artillery in the east. A few rounds passed overhead but none fell within our fenceline.

Lacking an evacuation route or destination for the protection of the POW's, the German commandant was forced to turn Stalag III-A over to the Allied occupants on April 21. An organizational and command structure had already been formed in secret with each of us assigned to a squad, platoon and company. Without fanfare, the Germans departed and the senior allied officer, a Norwegian General, assumed command. We tore down the fences between the compounds and held a complete military formation of the companies of American and British personnel. Serb, French and other nationals joined the military formation on the parade ground of the main camp. We did not parade but details were assigned and a perimeter guard established to prevent entry of the refugee forced labor people from Luckenwalde and the surrounding farm community. With a wooden club in my hand, I walked guard along the outer fences that first night of freedom. Although our captors had departed, we were still captive to our inability to secure food, medications or services of transportation and supply. We would have to await the arrival of our American comrades for any large-scale evacuation.

The following day, April 22, the first Russian troops arrived in their push toward Berlin. From our compound gate we could see a small pond of three or four acres in area. A couple of the Russian troopers decided to try their luck at fishing in the pond. Lacking conventional tackle or bait, they used hand grenades as depth charges to render any fish that might have been present available for harvest by hand. I do not know if they were able to arrange a fish fry but their methods, while probably effective, left a good deal to be desired in sportsmanship. If there were any interactions between our camp command and the Russian military, I am unaware of them but conditions within the camp did not improve in any real sense.

Beyond the Barbed Wire

Without the glasses that had been lost or broken during the bombing of the rail yard at Limburg, my buddy Don Betlach was greatly handicapped. His vision was so poor that he felt it best if he stayed in the tent area until arrangements for evacuation were completed. Thus when the fences were finally opened, Don remained behind while I explored the now accessible territory beyond the barbed wire.

Stalag III-A was very near the town of Luckenwalde and was the first place I visited. The main rail line between Berlin and Leipzig was just a short distance through the forest from the prison and served to keep me oriented in my wandering. I found that just beyond the railroad highline (the tracks were raised on an earthen embankment) there were warehouses and other buildings that served the town. In checking, I found a grocery warehouse that had been abandoned and quickly made my way inside to see if anything remained that would be of value to Don

and me. The shelves were bare of any canned goods or packaged items other than some envelopes of gravy powders and seasoning mixtures. In the bulk foods section I found some rolled oats and promptly appropriated several pounds. I also discovered an empty wooden barrel that had contained strawberry preserves. It appeared that the barrel had been recently emptied but a portion of the former contents still clung to the interior. Less than elegant, I found that a handful of rolled oats wiped along the barrel's inside wall provided some of the best tasting morsels of recent memory. By the time I decided to return to camp I had pretty well cleaned the barrel of all strawberry residue within arm's reach and had satisfied my taste for uncooked rolled oats.

Back out on the street I passed two Russian soldiers and a school bus type vehicle. The bus engine was running on the fumes from a charcoal burner mounted on the rear bumper but the Russians could not get the engine to accelerate. They had raised the hood and were staring at the carburetor mechanism but seemed unable to determine

the cause of the problem. When I approached they motioned for me to help them. I found that the throttle linkage had slipped on the shaft of the carburetor butterfly so that stepping on the accelerator pedal moved the linkage further in the wrong direction. I demonstrated that the engine could be speeded-up by manually moving the linkage. A language barrier confronted us. I tried by hand motions to indicate that they needed a screw driver to loosen the set-screw, rotate the linkage so that it would pass above the butterfly shaft and then re-tighten the set-screw. It was obvious that

they did not understand what was required, waved their arms in disgust and tramped away toward Berlin while I headed back to camp with my bag of appropriated rolled oats.

The next day I followed the railroad tracks south toward the town of Juterbog. Along the way I came upon a nice looking single story building that had been the local Hitler Youth headquarters and was identified as "The Adolph Hitler Lager". It was immediately renamed "Joe's Place" in recognition of liberation by units of Josef Stalin's army. Believing that any treasure would be buried in the coal pile, I checked and soon found a bottle of champagne under the neatly stacked coal briquets. It was not very good champagne as was found when I shared my loot with McNamara and Bradley, former platoon sergeant and company clerk respectively of Company E, 423rd Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division.

In writing of these adventures in a foreign land under wartime conditions and weakened from a starvation diet, I wonder that I had the audacity to venture out alone. Of course, hunger can be a surprising spur to bold action but in addition, I was curious and realized that this was a one time thing. I felt that my meager knowledge of German would serve to gain "etwas zu essen und ein schlaffen zimmer" (something to eat and a sleeping room). I'm glad I took advantage of the moment as the memory of those times remains quite fresh after an interval approaching sixty years.

Meanwhile, Back at the Camp

The situation had not improved. Don went to the camp headquarters and retrieved the "Personalkarte" that had been initiated for each of us when we were registered as Kriegsgefangenen at Lager IV-B on December 29. I will always be appreciative of this action on Don's part. The record card is a continuing reminder of the shared days and nights on the march and in the tents. Thank you Don. (My card is shown on the next two pages.)

As I started to say, conditions at the camp had not improved. After discussion with five other men it was decided that we would strike out on our own to rejoin the American troops west of the Elbe River. It has since been revealed that the Yalta conference of the big three (Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin) established political divisions of Germany as well as agreement to restrain Allied forces to permit Stalin's Red Army to liberate Berlin. At the time, we did not know of the Yalta decision but from our daily news reports we knew that the American and Red armies had joined at Torgau on the Elbe and that the Elbe had become a demarcation line. Wittenberg, the city of Martin Luther, thus became the nearest point of approach to American troops west of the Elbe. If we could get across the river at Wittenberg we would at least be in the American zone and would be certain to find an American army unit of some kind.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25

Personalkarte I: Persönliche Angaben

313338

Kriegsgefangenen-Nummern:

IVB

Name: FINKER

Staatsangehörigkeit: AMERICAN

Postname: LARK S.

Ort: 597. L. P. 101

Abfertigungsort: 24/1/40 IND.

Lebensjahr: 1917

Religion: PROT.

Beruf: CLERK

Arbeitsort bei Entlassung: ALBANY

Arbeitsort bei Entlassung: 35566521

Wohnort bei Entlassung: LARKLANDSON

Wohnort bei Entlassung: ALBANY, QUEBEC

Eintrittsdatum:

Stellenverlauf:



Stellenverlauf: S. P. Albany, Albany, Que.

Stellenverlauf: 550, SOUTH HANCOCK ST., GAO, IND. U.S.A.

GW-Form v. 10, 1.40 20. Dez. 40

Formular

Produktion bei Druckerei Nr. 1000, 1000, 1000

It was getting late in the day and we were tired. I knocked on the door of a small two story home and using that valuable German word "Bitte", requested something to eat and a place to sleep. The woman answering the door was of about our same age and invited us in. In the course of the evening we learned that she was Frau Krause and that her husband was a prisoner of war in the United States. The home was clean and neat but plainly furnished. A slightly younger woman and a small child appearing to be less than two years old and somewhat retarded were also living in the house. I never did figure out what the relationship might be but there was no question that Frau Krause was the boss.



"Das Karte" from Neues Lager Bulletin Board
(The card in the upper left corner is my POW identification my number was 313338)

In due course we were seated at the kitchen table with the two women, the baby, a boy, was in a play pen in the same room. We were surprised and pleased to find that the meal included a roast of lamb or beef (the first meat we had seen in months), potatoes and other vegetables and a form of ersatz coffee. While we were eating, a Russian officer and a soldier came into the house. The officer sat with us and we made quite an international supper group as we tried to converse in at least four languages. The younger woman was taken upstairs by the soldier and when they came down again, the two soviets went on their way causing us to wonder if they might have been the source of at least part of the meal we had enjoyed. The next morning I gave Frau Krause the remaining rolled oats from my shoulder bag and pointing to the play pen I said "Fur der kleiner mann". She took the bag of rolled oats and we moved on down the road toward Kребitz and Luther Stadt.

The American Woman

Our way led us through the rich farmland of the German plain. We could see for miles in the bright sunshine of early Spring. Instead of farm houses scattered about the landscape, several clusters of houses and barns were visible with names like Nieder Gorsdorf, Deninwitz, Kaltenborn and Wolmsdorf. After passing Blonsdorf, we arrived at Kребitz late in the afternoon and decided that once again I should try my limited vocabulary to seek something to eat and a place to sleep. The woman who answered the door of the nearest house stepped out on the top step after I had made my plea and pointing to a large home at the far end of the street made me to understand that we were to go there to meet the "American Frau".

My notes and my memory are both blank as to the name of the woman greeting us at the impressive home bordering the farm fields but her story was most interesting.

As young people, she and her husband had moved to the United States, become American citizens and were the operators of the florist shop in the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. The husband died in the late 1930's and had requested that his body be returned to Germany for burial. Honoring his request, the wife arranged for shipment of the body and booked passage for herself that she might attend the funeral and interment.

While she was visiting with her husband's brother and his family on the farm in Krebitz, Hitler slammed the door and she was unable to return to New York.

The farming operation involved the growing of cauliflower and, from what we were told, supplied much of Europe with the product. It was obvious that this had been quite profitable and in our guided tour of the farm buildings we were shown a fine automobile hidden under a straw pile in one of the barns. During the war, the farm had been operated by the women with Polish and Italian forced labor. When the Russian army moved through the area, where they had been held but here it had been different and the woman informed us that because of the humane way in which they had treated the forced laborers, they had been spared. At least there were still chickens in the farmyard and a good chicken dinner for the six American GI's on their way toward the American zone.

I must add that in every encounter with German civilians, the fear and hatred of the Russians was apparent. At the farm in Krebitz this was demonstrated for us by a younger woman that I believe was the niece of the American Lady. Slender and neatly dressed the younger woman was very personable. In halting English she asked if we wanted to see what she did when soviet soldiers were about. Asking her to demonstrate, she pulled an old pair of glasses from her apron pocket, placed them low on her nose and tied a dark scarf babushka fashion over her hair and, before our eyes, she became a bent, great grand-motherly aged person with a pron woman as an elderly "bauer's frau" (farmer's wife).

In other contacts with the German people a common statement was, "Alles weg" or "alles fertig" (all is gone or all is finished). This was always followed with, "Tell the Americans to come fast". Words can not possibly recreate the feeling of that time in history. As a poor substitute, let me tell of an incident from earlier in the day that may give some insight to the concerns of the German populace.

On May 5th, rested from our first night in a bed after months on the ground, our route brought us to the village of Blonsdorf about noon. In search of lunch we were directed to the home of the village butcher, Reinhold Meusel. Herr Meusel invited us into his home and after learning that we were Americans on our way to rejoin our army, provided us with sausages, bread and ersatz coffee for our lunch. As we were eating a girl of sixteen or eighteen years entered the room from wherever she had been hiding. Herr Meusel took the girl by the hand and motioning Johnny Dusak to follow they went into the parlor and closed the door. After several minutes the door opened and the three rejoined us in the kitchen. The "fleischmeister" Herr Meusel brought out a rubber stamp kit and on a page of my little black book stamped his name complete with address and telephone number in purple ink. The print was not totally legible so he wrote in pencil:

Reinhold Meusel
Blonsdorf
Kreiz Wittenberg
Lutherstadt

The following is a picture of that page in my little back book. I don't want to tear the page from the book as that would, in my mind, reduce the authenticity of the entry.



Phyllis as a high school girl



Reinhold Meusel's signature

My Little Black Book

Finishing our sandwiches we thanked our host for his hospitality and took to the road to the next village, the village of Krebitz and our meeting with the American woman. As we walked, Johnny told us what had transpired in the parlor. Herr Meusel had selected Johnny as being the member of our group that he could more easily engage in conversation as well as being the only one that was unmarried. Through the medium of Johnny's Polish/Russian language capability Herr Meusel expressed his fear and distrust of the Russians and his concern for his daughter. Meusel wanted John to take the girl with us to give her an opportunity to live outside the Russian zone if we were unable to take her to the United States.

John did his best to explain the difficulty with that as a solution to their problem. He told them of our own uncertainty as to how we would fare in the search for our forces, the trouble he was having with his untended shrapnel wounds and our inability to protect the girl or ensure her future away from her family.

I have never tried to contact Reinhold Meusel but I have wondered many times at the level of concern that would prompt a father to willingly seek to turn a daughter over to an unknown group of tattered and dirty GI's. Perhaps under the surface dirt he could see that we were still "Americans" and the best hope in a tragic situation.

Now let us return to the story.

A Ride in a Russian Army truck

After a good night's sleep and breakfast at the farm in Krebitz we were back on the road for Wittenberg and the Elbe River crossing that we hoped would return us to military control. Shortly after resuming our hike, a truck headed in the same direction stopped and we were offered a lift. The truck was in command of a Russian officer and in addition to the officer and driver in the cab there were two armed soldiers in the open truck bed behind the cab. We identified ourselves as American and explained that we were on the way to Wittenberg and would be appreciative of a ride in that direction. Invited to mount up we scurried aboard and the truck moved on down the roadway. Before we had gone very far, one of the tires on the rear dual wheels blew out. The driver was unaware of the flat tire so one of the soldiers fired two shots from his rifle to alert the driver and the truck was quickly halted to assess the situation. While the driver and the soldiers replaced the flat, we followed the officer into a nearby home where we were met by an older couple and offered chairs in the clean and neat kitchen. With the help of Johnny Dusak and his Polish/Russian vocabulary we learned that the officer was on the way to the office of the Russian Commissar in the town of Zahna. We were told that we must register with the Commissar and would be told how we were to proceed.

When the tire repair was completed the driver reported to the officer and we resumed our travel arriving in Zahna just before noon. The officer directed us to the Commissars office on the second floor of a stone building where we were duly registered and provided with sandwiches prepared for us by uniformed women of the Russian Army. As for instructions, we were told to return to Stalag III-A to await the arrival of transportation to American control. Remembering the conditions at that location, we thanked the Commissar's personnel for the sandwiches, headed back toward Luckenwalde as instructed, made a quick detour around the block and continued our hike toward Wittenberg which now was only about seven miles further to the west.

Wittenberg

It was late in the day when we reached Luther Stadt as the city of Wittenberg is called in memory of the Catholic priest who broke with the Church and founded the Protestant branch of the Christian religion. The road led us to the Elbe River bridge approach. The bridge had been destroyed by the German army or had been bombed by the Allied air force until it was now just a tangled web of structural steel reaching from the east to the west bank of the river. Two soviet soldiers guarded the bridge approach and with their rifles indicated that we could not attempt a crossing. At that time of day and since they seemed determined, we considered it best if we did not force the issue.

There were some good looking low-rise apartment buildings along the river bank that seemed suited to our need of a place to spend the night. On the second floor of one of the buildings we found a nicely furnished but deserted apartment complete with fireplace and velvet blackout draperies. I went down to the basement and checking the coal bin found a two-quart mason jar of mixed vegetables. Who ever had done the home canning had placed the contents in layers in the glass jar so that it had eye appeal as well as nutritional value. A fire in the fireplace and we had a warm vegetarian supper.

Before dark, two Russian soldiers came to the apartment in search of alcoholic drink. The only thing they could find in our space was a small bottle of a medication that, according to the label contained some alcohol. They took the bottle and went on their way in search of other loot while we took down some of the heavy velvet drapes to use as blankets against the overnight chill. For a souvenir of the night in Wittenberg, I added four place settings of stainless tableware consisting of heavy handled table knives and stylish 3-tined forks which I wrapped and placed in a lidded chrome-plated chocolate pot for transport in my hand made shoulder bag.

In the morning, the six of us made our way to the city center to see the doors where Martin Luther had posted his 95 theses in 1517. We perhaps did not see the correct doors but I felt as though I had made the pilgrimage even if I could not confirm the fact.

Now it was time to find a way to cross the river. When the bridge approach was in view we could see that it continued to be guarded by an armed two-man detail. Taking charge of our group I had them fall-in in a column of two's and marched them to where the guards stood. Without breaking step, I saluted the guards and we moved on into the tangle of bridge steel. The guards rifles remained pointed at the ground and we climbed over the steel members to arrive safely on the west bank of the Elbe. The date was May 7, 1945.

The American Zone

When we climbed from the twisted steel of the bridge to the west bank of the Elbe, there was no evidence of a welcoming committee of any kind. Each of the six of us felt relieved to have come this far without further harm. We had escaped not only our German captors but had ignored instructions to return to the Stalag we had left behind and had successfully bluffed our way through what could have been a bad scene with the unknown Russian soldiers standing guard just across the river.

The German civilians we encountered had been helpful and eager for American political control. Of course, by this time, there were no Nazi's or Nazi sympathizers to be found in all of Germany. They had all been victims of

a few ambitious politicians who had seized power and resorted to war as a way to restore the economy. And, those we met were so sincere in their condemnation of the Nazi regime that it was most difficult to believe that the might of Germany had been rebuilt by a corporal from World War I. Our anticipation of better things to come served as a real morale booster.

It was still early morning so we moved westward away from the river. (*Actually, the Elbe flows more or less east to west in the vicinity of Wittenberg but it is easier to think of the separation of American and Russian zones if we use the east-west terminology.*)

We soon found that not all of the Russians were on the other side of the river. Linking of American and Russian forces had taken place at Torgau on the west side of the river on April 25. The road we were following was about 35 miles from Torgau and as we moved through the village of Bitterfeld, we passed a Russian tank parked in such fashion that our backs were to the muzzle of the tank's cannon. That exposure created a most uncomfortable sensation until we passed from view of the tank and its unknown crew.

Toward noon we were in a rural area when we met two armed Russian soldiers coming toward us. They had no difficulty recognizing that we were refugees of some kind. When face to face we greeted them and made it understood that we were Americans and had been prisoners of war. It was obvious that the two had been drinking and were feeling very friendly toward these tattered Americans. We were kissed on both cheeks and subjected to many hand shakes as Johnny Dusak charmed them with his Polish/Russian tongue. It was rather difficult to convince the Russians that we had to be moving on to find an American army unit. We did manage to disengage ourselves and as we turned to move away, the weapons slung on their shoulders rotated swiftly to pointing directly at us. Johnny shouted at them not to shoot Americans but the troopers were uncertain. They kept their guns aimed at us while Johnny explained that the black triangles, painted on the back of our jackets was a mark to identify all prisoners of war. John later told us that when we started to walk away, the troopers spotted the triangles, thought we had lied to them and believed we were French. Had it not been for John Dusak as interpreter, our tour of Europe might have ended on that country road west of Wittenberg. Satisfied with the explanation, the Russians went on their way and we on ours.

A Never to be Forgotten Sound

We had just passed an unmarked intersecting crossroad and were only about a hundred feet beyond the junction when I heard it. It was a motor vehicle on the road we had just crossed. There was no mistaking the purring sound of the four-cylinder engine of an American "Jeep". We ran back to the crossroad and waved the oncoming vehicle to a stop. In the Jeep were two GI's of the 104th Division on their way back to Torgau to recover a machine gun that had been left there in the excitement of the meeting of the armies. The GI's told us to stay right there and they would pick us up on the way back to their unit in Halle. We couldn't think of a better course of action so we made ourselves as comfortable as possible and began our vigil. Now, it doesn't seem that we had long to wait but at the time, it was an anxious period until that welcome sound announced the approach of the Jeep.

Eight adults in a four-passenger Jeep made things a bit tight but no one complained. Riding was better than walking and the driver seemed to know where he was going so we just held on for the trip. We drove through the city of Halle to a large airport west of town. This was the Hermann Goering Aircraft School where the German Luftwaffe pilots and mechanics were trained. Just outside the airport fence, large four-story barracks for the aviation students had been converted to a registration center, message center, mess hall and quarters for liberated personnel. We arrived in time for the evening meal and were cautioned to not over-eat of the nutritious and tasty food once again available to us. After registering our name, rank and serial number we were allowed to send a message to next of kin through the Army Signal Corps and the Red Cross.

Although I had filled in the Signal Corps message form on the evening of May 7, 1945, I note that the envelope carrying the message is postmarked May 26, 1945. This must have been an extremely busy time for the Signal

Corps so that Phyllis first knowledge of my return to military control came through a phone call from the Red Cross.

Signal Corps, United States Army

Received at

NR 1056

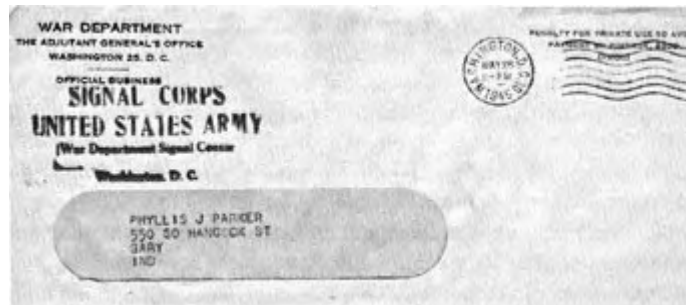
PHYLLIS J PARKER
550 SO HANCOCK ST
GARY
IND

ALL OK LIBERATED 22 APRIL PREPARING TO SHIP
HOME HOPE TO SEE YOU SOON LOVE

EARL S PARKER 35564521

The enclosed message from a liberated prisoner of war was received from overseas via Army Communications facilities without cost to the sender. It is mailed herewith to the addressee designated in the message. In view of the contemplated immediate repatriation of all liberated prisoners to the United States, a reply to this message should be made.

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The War Ends in Europe

On the 7th of May it was rumored that the German military authorities had taken over the government and that "unconditional" surrender was being arranged. The war officially ended the next day, May 8, 1945.

On the morning of the war's end, I was standing in the sunshine at the edge of the former Hermann Goering Aircraft School airfield when three aircraft came in low over the field. In the lead was a German ME-109 fighter with two American P-47's right on the tail of the Messerschmitt forcing the German to a landing. With the former enemy plane on the ground, the American pilots went on with their surveillance mission. The Messerschmitt taxied in from the runway and parked within a dozen feet of where I was standing and the pilot shut down the engine.

I can still see the camouflage paint and the black crosses on the fuselage and tail and hear the crackling sound of the cooling exhaust line. In my mind's eye, I could see the close quarters of the narrow cockpit with the instrument panel within easy reach and the control stick jutting up between the pilot's thighs. He sat there for a few moments as though he was considering his change of status from Luftwaffe flier to German civilian in the military zone of a foreign power. I am certain that his defection (if that is the applicable term) to the American zone was intentional based on what we had learned at Blonsdorf and Krebitz as we made our way from Luckenwalde. Finally, he opened the plexiglas over his head and a young woman stood head and shoulders above the canopy.

I have never figured out how the pilot was able to control that complex aircraft with a second person in the cockpit. I was unable to follow them after they climbed out and down to the ground but I was reminded of Reinhold Meusel and his daughter and the desperate suggestion that the girl join us in our quest for American control.

After all these years, the ink is fading on the letter that I wrote to Phyllis later that day, but I hope that the text of my letter might give some insight to the attitude prevailing on the day the war ended in Europe. Here is the unedited letter of a 24-year old philosopher:

Germany

Tuesday, May 8, 1945

Dearest Phyllis,

I've spent today exploring this large German airbase and there is a million dollars worth of equipment in any direction. War is a costly business for both victor and vanquished but Germany has been dealt a blow from which she will never recover. I've seen ruin on both sides of the lines, behind the Russian and behind our own and, the censor permitting, I'll add that the "Jerries" in allied hands can consider themselves mighty lucky. The Russian comes into a town or a home, takes everything in sight, tears things up in general hunting for more and then says in a grim voice full of meaning, "Stalingrad". Perhaps the Americans are too easy going and forget too soon their comrades who are buried between here and Egypt and in the sea, forget too easily those who have been wounded and, know little of the life of a prisoner of war. You may say it is not the German people but the Army and it's leaders who have caused it all but a people who will permit such a monstrosity as the Nazi Party to come into power and set up such a stranglehold on an entire nation reserves no pity. I am surprised at the amount of German I have picked up in my travels over here. On the trip up here I was interpreter for the six of us who traveled together and can say that we made out very well in every way. But what I was most surprised to find was the professed hatred for Hitler and second to Hitler is Himmler and his Gestapo and SS troops. You cannot imagine the degree to which this country is organized. Everyone is in some branch of the Nazi Party. Army, Navy, Air Corps, Volksturm, Hitler Youth or the Home Front

and there are records and photos in every one of these organizations. Remember the minister at the big church in Indianapolis who said in his sermon a year ago, "Germania dilenti est"? He didn't know how right he was "Germany must be destroyed". The armies and the Air Corps have done a real job in wrecking the buildings and railroads and factories but the destruction I'm thinking of is the dissolution of the Nazi Party and every sort of organization which will ever again unite them into any semblance of power. Yes, "Germania dilenti est".

This afternoon I heard Churchill make his address on the cessation of hostilities in Europe and while I knew yesterday that the war was over I didn't realize until I heard the speech just exactly what it meant. Probably to some of the people at home it means an excuse for a few days of parties, parades and rejoicing but to me it means that now we have only one enemy to dispose of and then perhaps we may all relax and turn again to leading a normal life. I don't know what the future may hold for me and I'm not worried over it at all. Everything has worked out all right so far and I'm confident that the future will be taken care of as well. It's getting late and breakfast comes early so I must close for tonight and "sack in".

Wednesday Morning May 9

Well my dear, the war with Germany is officially over. Now the hard, dull labor of cleaning up and collecting our scattered equipment and setting up a thankless nation must begin. The Army over here has the typical amount of organization and the usual quantity of red tape. Transportation seems to be the biggest problem and I imagine that once that is ironed out we shall start rolling home.

I suppose you are curious to know just where I am and now that the war is "kaput" I may tell you that I'm in Halle, Germany north and a little bit west of Leipzig. I've been in prison camps from the Rhine River to the border of Poland and in the past five months I've walked nearly across Germany and so feel that I have really seen the country. Its beautiful over here and the forestry industry is wonderful. Here on the great German plain you can see for miles and not a single fence. There are some beautiful homes but the greater majority of them are typical old country in style and convenience. Last Monday in Wittenberg I saw the old church

where Martin Luther nailed his theses and started the Lutheran Church.

But now I have seen and said enough of Germany and I want to come home by the fastest means possible and the sooner I start for home the better I'll like it. Tell Johnny his Daddy is all right and coming home to him as quickly as he can. Relax a bit and remember that now and forever

*I Love You,
Earl*

My exploration of the Hermann Goering Aircraft School included a visit to the maintenance shops and the aircraft instrument storeroom. As a former Aviation Cadet with a continuing yen to fly, I made a collection of the basic flight instruments and added them to my hand-made shoulder bag. A French tachometer calibrated in "Centimes de Tours", a sensitive altimeter, an air speed indicator and a turn and bank indicator became a part of my packet of souvenirs. I had hoped to acquire a 35mm camera, a good pair of field glasses and a Walther P-38 pistol but had to settle for what was available to me.

Earl S. Parker

Germany-Belgium-France

On May 11, a flight of three C-47 transport planes arrived, were loaded with the liberated men able to travel, and took off again for Le Havre. The clear weather made the flight just that much more enjoyable as the transports flew at a relatively low altitude and we could see the patchwork of fields and growing crops. At that time of the year, the fields of hops are in bloom and their yellow blossoms add contrast to the shades of green and brown in the landscape. Over Belgium, one of the planes needed fuel and it was decided to set down at a little fighter strip to refill the tanks. Once again my interest in flying led me to stand between the pilot and co-pilot as we circled for a landing. Nothing was said about returning to my bench seat so I stayed right where I was and watched every move. We were the number two ship in the formation with number one thirty seconds ahead of us and number three about thirty seconds to our rear. The approach was perfect. No. 1 touched down and we were right behind in our touchdown and rollout but when the pilot hit the brakes to slow the plane, the left brake grabbed and the plane nosed hard left. I remember saying, "Don't ground loop now, baby", but around we went and as we again faced the runway after a 270 degree swing, the No. 3 ship flashed past the nose of our craft. It was a close call but a quick check of the landing gear did not reveal any sign of structural damage. After returning to the runway and completing the refueling, we were once again on our way to France and the giant tent city known as "Camp Lucky Strike" just north of Le Havre.

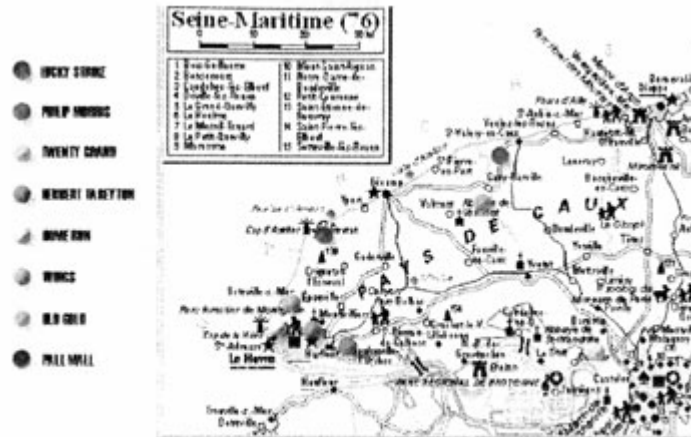
Camp Lucky Strike

After the invasion of Normandy in June of 1944, it was necessary for the US Army to establish transit camps near the harbor at Le Havre to provide temporary quarters for replacement troops on their way to join front line units. These camps became known by the brand names of popular cigarettes. Of these, Camp Lucky Strike was the largest with over 12,000 pyramidal tents capable of sheltering more than 100,000 at the same time. Prior to the war, the site was on the grounds of the Castle of Janville.

With the outbreak of the war in 1939, the French installed a wartime aerodrome on the property. After the Germans took the area, they constructed a 5,000 ft. runway for use by the Luftwaffe bombers and fighters. Although damaged by demolition charges when the Germans were forced to retreat, the airstrip remained a central part of Camp Lucky Strike while the camp served as a replacement center and later as a collection point

for American prisoners of war on their way to repatriation in the United States. (Courtesy of the website, www.Skylighters.org).

The airstrip at Camp Lucky Strike made it possible for the crew of our C-47's to deliver us directly to the repatriation center and the tents that would be our home until we could work our way through the clerical maze and transportation became available for the long voyage home.



The Cigarette Camps

We were each given a tent assignment where we could be reached if needed but there was little to do once the registration and clothing issue had been completed. The clothing issue was arranged in such fashion that any little beasts infesting the clothing worn since before surrender would not transfer to the new. Actually it was quite simple. We lined up along the edge of a bulldozed pit, disrobed and threw the tattered garments in the hole. Clad in our original birthday suits we proceeded to a shower unit and on to the clothing issue line. The scent of mothballs never smelled better nor more welcome.

Scrubbed, barbered and in clean uniforms, we were free of any duty except to get to the dining tent at mealtime. Many hours were spent in sleep as our bodies responded to the nourishing and plentiful food. The Red Cross was there in strength with smiling American ladies serving donuts and coffee at all hours and the Red Cross writing room and library were well used and appreciated.

One day as I walked about the area I met Captain Crews, my company commander back in December. Exchanging a salute of greeting, Captain Crews looked at me and said, "Sergeant, why did I stop on the road that night"? I knew he was referring to the night we reached Skyline Drive and found it filled with German vehicles and troops. It was apparent that this was a troubling matter in his mind. In reply I said, "Captain, you had no where to go". I don't think this was of any help to him but I had no other thought to offer. Attempts to reach him in later years have been unsuccessful. On another day, I met Sergeant Ed Janik, he was the one who had his cartridge belt cut away by a piece of shrapnel without being wounded. Ed had orders to ship out the following day so I gave him my home phone number and asked him to call Phyllis when he got back to Chicago to let her know that I hoped to follow shortly. But, I never did find Porfie Yvarra.

General Eisenhower's plane landed at Camp Lucky Strike one day while I was at the airstrip. The General climbed out on the wing of his twin engined aircraft and greeted the GL's clustered about. He told us that if we didn't mind the accommodations, he would arrange to use every available means of transportation to get us home. I think he instinctively knew that we would not be troubled by such an arrangement. True to his word, we traveled without staterooms or even berths on all kinds of vessels headed for the US.

We were not confined to the camp and some made the trip to Paris. Perhaps I should have made the effort but I was more interested in going home. I did go to Le Havre a few times to visit the harbor to check on ships and swap stories with the sailors. By this time, much of the damage to Le Havre had been cleared away and the harbor was a busy area but there was a lot of rebuilding to be done before the city could return to anything near normal.

The Marine Dragon

To help in the war effort, Henry Kaiser, among other endeavors, had setup a ship building business on the west coast. The Kaiser ship yards were equipped with the latest in steel welding technology and modern methods to speed the design and construction of allwelded "Victory Ships". These were no-nonsense working vessels rather than things of beauty or luxury. They served in both the Atlantic and Pacific to supply the vast quantity of war materials needed for the conduct of a multi-front struggle against the axis powers of Germany and Japan. General Eisenhower's word to us at Lucky Strike was implemented through the use of "—all available means of transportation—" including the return voyages of the Victory Ships.

So, when it became my turn to ship for home, the Marine Dragon had finished unloading and was ready for boarding. Without regret, a number of us were checked off as we climbed the gang-plank and realized we were finally leaving the cold and hunger encountered as prisoners of war and the noise, confusion and perils of combat behind. Now we would face the North Atlantic in a Victory Ship hurriedly constructed in sections and welded together. There were stories of failed welds and cracked hulls but not one of us faltered when boarding the light-gray and rust colored vessel.

The ship's crew was provided with bunks or hammocks. We, as passengers on a working ship, had to make-do with whatever space we could find. We stretched out on top of lockers and on the landings of the stair wells— wherever there was room to lie down— and, there were no complaints. Except for the control bridge and the engine room, we had the run of the ship. The food was good and the portions generous so that we rapidly reached or exceeded our pre- POW weight, our faces filled out and we lost the emaciated look that had characterized us.

Our crossing was relatively smooth in spite of the North Atlantic's reputation for nasty Springtime storms. We made good time and on the 11th of June 1945, landed at Boston to complete the overseas portion of my round trip tour of Europe. It had been quite a trip.

Now I was only hours away from home and family so, for me, the war was over, or as they say in Germany, "der krieg ist kaput".

90 Days at Home

I took full advantage of the ninety-day rehabilitation furlough granted to ex-POW's and in addition to spending time with Phyllis and John, took a Military Air Transport System (MATS) flight to San Francisco to visit an aunt and uncle. They worked at the Kaiser shipyard as their contribution to the war effort of their own. I was visiting with them when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6. Eager to get home again, I caught a MATS flight out of Sacramento and Phyllis and I were visiting relatives on the far north side of Chicago when the war with Japan ended. We took the train to the loop in Chicago and joined the crowd that filled State Street from curb to curb.

Reassignment

The hotels along Miami Beach, Florida had been taken over by the Army to serve as a classification and re-assignment center. Wives were invited to attend the center with their husbands as a part of the rehabilitation process. After a bus ride from Gary, Phyllis and I reported to the designated hotel and enjoyed the four or five days required for the clerical processing. With a desire for a change of pace, and since I did not have the required

number of points for discharge, I volunteered to become a human guinea pig at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland, home of the Chemical Warfare Service. My orders for shipment to Edgewood came through late in the evening and I was scheduled to leave via troop train early in the morning. Arriving at the railroad depot and after boarding the train I did a bit of negotiating with the two GI's sharing my Pullman space and with the train commander. Gaining their approval, a quick call to Phyllis at the hotel together with a taxi ride to the station and Phyllis became the only woman aboard the over-night troop train bound for Washington, D. C. from Miami, Florida. The trip was completed without incident. Phyllis stayed in the guest-house at Edgewood Arsenal for one night before taking the Baltimore and Ohio train back to Gary.

At Edgewood I fulfilled my role as human guinea pig in various medical tests, was promoted to Staff Sergeant and to Technical Sergeant when discharged on October 19, 1945.

It has taken a long time for me to be able to tell this story. I want to thank my friend Gene Engel for getting me started and Phyllis, my wife of nearly sixty years, for her patience over the intervening years of waiting for the memory of my tour of duty to appear in legible form.

Earl S. Parker
June 2001

Appendix

A short list of suggested reading about the years and events of WW II:

St. Vith—US 106th Infantry Division Michael Tolhurst
ISBN 1-58097-016-8

An Un-Anticipated Adventure Gene Engel
ISBN 0-75962-912-9

St. Vith—Lion In The Way Col. R. Ernest DuPuy
ISBN 0-89839-092-3

The Bitter Woods John S. D. Eisenhower
ISBN 0-89839-106-7

A Time For Trumpets Charles B. MacDonald
ISBN 0-553-34226-6

Decision At St. Vith Charles Whiting
ISBN 0-345-01604-075

The Battle Of The Bulge Robert E. Morrison
Ballantine Books, Inc.

Citizen Soldier Stephen E. Ambrose
ISBN 0-684-81525-7



Stalag III-A Site of Tent Area (above) Prison Barrack (below)—
1999

M



Luther Platz—Wittenberg, May 1999



Martin Luther's Reformation Church—Wittenberg, May 1999

About the Author

Earl S. Parker grew up in the dune country of Indiana at the foot of Lake Michigan. Educated under the Work-Study-Play system of the late Dr. William A. Wirt, he served as president of his high school chapter of The National Honor Society, was a member of the band and orchestra and participated in track and field events. Following discharge from the military, he found employment with a major international corporation where he served as Plant Engineer and Manager of Environmental Affairs and Industrial Safety. Retiring at the age of 62, he and wife Phyllis spent the next three years traveling the United States and Canada in their motor home.

Earl has flown his own plane, sailed his own boat and now at age 81 is an active computer user and photographer. He and Phyllis have enjoyed several trips to Europe and Scandinavia and look forward to their sixtieth wedding anniversary in 2002. A continuing interest in the history of the day and the activities of his children, grandchildren and great grand children keep him alert and active.

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