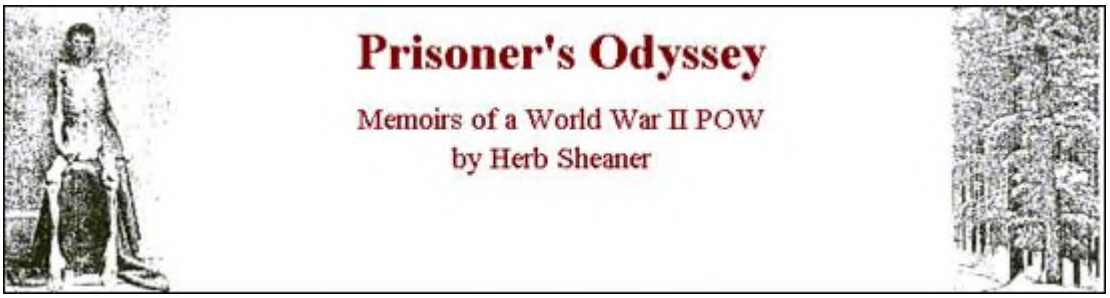
Herb Sheaner

106th Infantry Division

Foreword



1996 - return trip

Once he was too outspoken in public and reprimanded. He lost his command. But now, this "hell on wheels" general of the Third Army was back, feeling his oats in these private quarters.

He blew out a puff of smoke from rounded lips, clinched his cigar tighter between his fingers in his right hand and said, "Let the bastards come to Paris. We'll cut'um to pieces and we'll end this damn thing." His eyes were nearly closed, barely visible, but you could see the sparkle in them behind the narrow

slits. I believe her was smiling, maybe just gritting his teeth...hoping for a fight. Couldn't wait!

"You will end it?" said the American First Army commander, the three star general that sat across the table from the pugnacious looking general that had just spoken.

"With your tanks you will give them hell you say?"

Looking directly in the eyes of the American Third Army commander, "Your goddamn right I will. We know what they're going to do. Let'um do it. We'll chew'um up. I say let'um go as far as they can go, then we'll hit'um and destroy'um. Let'um go to Paris if they can make

" Hold it there, General. " The discussion between the two generals began to 'heat up'. " These are my boys that are up there. You think I'm going to sacrifice my army so you can sit and wait ... and then you come in and chew up the Germans!"

"Gentlemen, we have no intentions of losing any army. After all, we are not positively sure that the Germans plan an attack such has been suggested. But if they do, we want you, General Pat, to be ready to hit them on their left flank with your tanks. You do understand that, General Pat? And not before I tell you to do so. Do you hear that General Pat?" the Allied Supreme Commanding General said, leaning over from his seat at the head of the table, looking the General straight in the eye.

"But what will happen to the First Army and my veteran 2nd Division spread out like it is if we don't act now to meet this German offensive threat? My 2nd Division is right in the path of the supposed massive German attack. Shouldn't we at least close the gaps, bring up some reinforcements?"

"As I said before, General, we are not sure of any attack ... much less a massive attack. Now, as I said earlier," clearing his throat he continued, " Gentlemen, you are here because we have reports, unconfirmed intelligence that say there will be a German offensive in the Schonberg area of the Ardennes Forest. And if that should happen, though it is doubtful, we need to make plans for this eventuality. " Then looking directly over to General Hodge, the First Army Commander, and speaking reassuring to him, " We will preserve your army intact ... in any eventuality... you can be certain of that, General!

Now, Colonel, brief us on the latest intelligence that you have. Gentlemen, Colonel Snead.

Sir, I have on reliable authority, and some not so reliable, decoded information that strongly indicates a German attack has been planned to penetrate our front, in depth, over a wide area, in the Ardennes Forest, reportedly to take place before the middle of December. Intelligent sources tell us that the attack comprises large numbers of armor units with supporting infantry. Our report is that the German offensive was conceived by Adolf Hitler himself and our

information is that it has been given the secret code name of " Watch on the Rhine '. There sir, you have it."

The Colonel finished and stood ... looking directly into the face of the Supreme Commander. Standing and staring presenting assurance that matched his tone of certainty. Then he stepped back and turned his head and let his eyes fall looking at nothing.

Then a worried General Hodge spoke, "If this is true, they will hit the First Army and my 2nd Division's position hard, centered as it is in the Ardennes Forest. I tell you, they are vulnerable spread out like they are.

We will need to close rank and bring up selective firepower support. Reserves will...

" Just a minute, General Hodge. Let me address that."

" A German thrust of any large magnitude is unlikely. At most their advance would be slow. His movements would be confined to the few roads that are in the area. His tanks and mechanized equipment would have to stay on the road to get anywhere at all. It would be fatal for him to attack and expose his armor on these hilly narrow roads. He has to use the roads. There is too much forest and ravines in this area to do otherwise, I almost wished he would. We could end this war a lot sooner with a lot less loss of life." Then he paused for a long while. There was a long silence.

... The war room waited for a decision from him. Then he rose from his chair and walked around the table and stood with his back toward the two Generals. Then he turned, facing them, and said, " I say, let them attack, if they will, We will deal with it ... and it will be the beginning of the end for Germany."

"But General, we can't ignore the possibility of a German offensive and what it could do to the First army that will take the blunt of this attack."

General Pat and I discussed this earlier. We can not and will not sacrifice tank for tank and fight yard for yard and continue losing men like is presently happening up in Aachen."

"General Pat will stay to the south of the possible German attack with his armor and hit them in the flank if they do attack."

"Now, you General Hodge, will move your Army support to the north to form a pivot at Elsenborn Ridge and protect the northern flank in case of a German thrust and you are to present defensive containment."

"But how is that, General. My command is weak in the Ardennes Forest. The experienced 2nd Division, as I mentioned, is right in the Path of the supposed German assault, resting...strung out with no support. My assignment .." General Hodge's sentence was interrupted by the Supreme Commander.

"Your 2nd Division is being moved north to act as the holding Point, the hinge for the possible German assault. The 2nd Division will be placed in position along with and held by the 99th Division. It will conduct a weak limited assault to disguise what they are doing. "

The Supreme Commander of all Allied forces then walked over to a table with a map laid out on it. "Come here, Hodge, your 2nd Division will be placed here at Elsenborn Ridge. For now, it will protect the point of the northern shoulder along this crucial five-mile area. The 99th Division is there now... the 2nd Division will simply reinforce it. A number of your infantry divisions and armored divisions, as you know, are already in this northern sector, off line ... in place for containment ... if it comes to that."

"A newly arrived infantry division that has been in England for the past two weeks will replace your veteran 2nd Division. They will occupy each foxhole, each hut, each position ... replacing each 2nd Division man ... man for man, along the twenty-eight mile front," the General spoke as he turned his face to look straight at General Hodge, trying to catch his reaction.

"But this green division could not alone possibly stop a German attack stretched out over 28 miles," said the intelligent officer, without..." then, suddenly realizing that he was talking out of order, and not speaking to the Supreme Commander alone, as he had often done before, he stopped talking and slowly retreated, backing up to a nearby wall.

The Supreme Commander's voice for the first time became loud and gruff.

"Colonel, you'll be court-martialed and none of you may ever get back home," directing his comment to no one person but for all to hear, if ever a word of this gets out of this room. Do you understand that Colonel?"

"Yes, Sir."

"In the interest of national security, not a word of this meeting is to get out. It would be reason for high treason. We are at war. Europe, even America is at stake. We can not be defeated. If there is an attack, we will prepare for it. If not, we will go forward with our spring offensive."

"General Pat, you will hit'um from the south. And General Hodge, you will hold ground in the north. We will keep them confined to this hilly forest area ... What forest, Colonel?

"Ardennes Forest, Sir."

"Yes, Ardennes Forest."

"Now, are you satisfied with your army General? It will be intact. All your divisions and support units that you presently have will be available to you. You just 'hold'. And General Pat will do the attacking and mop them up. Do we all understand?"

" Yes, Sir."

Then in a lowered, calmer voice he continued, "That new division will be the real hero of the war. But nobody will know it. What number is that division, Colonel? "
"106th Infantry Division, Sir."

"God help them if there is an attack."

"And God be with you Gentlemen. Dismissed."

Officers and aids still looked bewildered as to what had gone on. Still very few knew or understood that a massive German attack was imminent. And quietly they began to gather and work their way to the closed doors at the far end of the room.

At last the Supreme Commander seemed relieved now that he had gotten his message over.

As others moved toward the other end of the room the Supreme Commander walked to the side of General Hodge who as yet had not started toward the doors and softly said, out of hearing range of anyone else, "Oh, by the way, General Hodge, I've something to tell you. The northern command will be given over to General Montgomery if the Germans do make a quick substantial break-through... this will appease the British...They know absolutely nothing about this. We can not allow this to cause a rift between the Allies. Montgomery is ambitious. He will accept this with little complaint. This would be only temporarily, you understand."

General Hodge stood dumbfounded.

" Go, and God speed, Hodge. You do understand don't you?"

He turned and left not saying a word.

The meeting was over.

Upon reaching the doors, Hodge slowly pushed open a tall heavy wood door that open to a long cold corridor ... he passed through and now stood outside in the cold. He began to weep. At first, not so much for the men that he was to sacrifice if an attack did come, but at the thought that his own position as First Army Commander would be taken away from him ... and the more he thought about this the more he was becoming resigned to his possible relieved-of-command and therewith, according to plan, the survival of his newly arrived division.

Then the last General to walk through the now open doors was the Allied Supreme Commander himself. He showed no discernible emotion. He often looked grave and concerned, the same as he did this time. But for the first time

he failed to nod or speak to his two aids standing outside the door in the corridor. They knew something was wrong.

"Maybe he had a spat with Millie last night. I've never seen him in such a foul mood," said one of the aids to the other.

Millie was the Allied Supreme Commander's female aid and for sometime now the constant companion of the Allied Supreme Commander. There were rumors and speculation ... oh well, a man will do what he has to do.

"Women can act strange ... be demanding ... she sure does look young and pretty. It is obvious the General sees that," resorted the other aid.

The two lucky aids didn't have anything better to talk about. And most of that was based on rumor.

Then others, lesser officers, in groups started coming out. The ancient wood-carved doors looked solemn, too. Not a word was spoken by anyone.

After all had passed, one door aide said to the other, Someone died," speaking jokingly.

Then all was quiet.

The war must go on.

The chess game must be played out.

Fact

The 2nd Division was moved and saved.

The new 106th Infantry Division took its place ... and General Hodge lost his command. The United States First Army Command was given over to British General Montgomery.

The 2nd Division was put on line in a two mile front between units of the 99th Division with the rest of the division in rear reserve. To the north behind the 2nd Division and the 99th Division, in support, in close proximity, to the rear, in a east-west line, to cover the northern flank, was the 1st Division, 30th Division, 82nd Airborne Division, 7th Armored Division, 3rd Armored Division, 84th Division, 2nd Armored Division, in line, meeting troops of the British XXX Corps.

In a east-west line, and in the rear, to the south was the 5th Division, 10th Armored Division, 80th Division, 26th division, 4th Armored Division, 9th Armored Division and the 28th Division that retreated into line.

Behind the newly placed 106th Infantry Division was New York City! ...a vacated bulge! Only the 106th Division held...eventually making the ultimate sacrifice.

So few divisions in the front line! Two. So many divisions off the line ... far to the rear.

The American Army did not cut off the German thrust and annihilate it and defeat it as hoped. The American command did, however, allow the German offensive to extend itself and engage it's dwindling manpower and war reserves.

And the glaring obvious fault of placing a single American infantry division in a front line position to cover too far a distance, twenty-eight miles, and face a German massive attack with open gaps of up to two miles within its position seemed unreasonable and without justification lest it be as it was intended to be ... a willingness for the Germans to thrust forward and the thought of a quick way to bring an end to the war.

So, a green new infantry division went to the front lines, replacing the veteran 2nd Division ... unprepared, with no experience ... to face the cunning planning of Hitler's best SS, Wehrmacht, assault tank divisions, and mechanized units that were prepared to engage the new rifle bullets of the mostly young ' fuzzy faced ' teen-aged division.

Even the new division's bullets were limited in most cases to less than a couple of clips of ammunition for many of the soldiers. That meant twenty shots.

It would be a fight between the "rifle bullets" of the newly placed division, overmatched, against the millimeter heavy weaponry of thick plated protective metaled German panzer tanks, German artillery, mortar fire, and hordes of men with automatic weapons accompanied by grinding advancing mechanized machines.

What happened to the newly placed 106th Infantry Division and to one soldier is the story that follows.

The Ardennes Forest...The 106th Infantry Division position. Barely visible is a foot-trail that led uphill, going through the line of barbed-wire entanglement that was the main line of resistance and on to the low crawl-in 2 and 3 man log huts that men occupied. The foot trail was used by men going to the outpost in front of the main-line-of -resistance.

I stood guard duty next to the big tree ... in front of our lines to challenge German infiltrators that scouted the area at night.

The only German language I learned to say was "Hands up." "Throw down your arms." I never had to say it.

The Day Of Capture

December 21, 1944 may never be recorded in American military history as an important day in the Battle of the Bulge. But in my mind, it was. It was an important day in the history of the Bulge Battle and the history of the American 106th Infantry Division 422nd Infantry Regiment. The 422nd Regiment was the most forward American fighting unit that still existed in the Battle of the Bulge in a near front line position nearly a week after the beginning of the German offensive. It was surrounded during the first day of battle. It had become an island of infantrymen engulfed by a flowing ebb of German advances around and behind it.

Was it abandoned? From then, December 16th, to now, December 21st?

After five days of being annihilated, surrounded without food, possessing little ammunition, with no medical supplies, with lost communication, with no artillery or air support, with no reserves, and with no help on the way, and most important of all: no Planned escape route or orders for retreat, this regiment of men had to capitulate. By vote of the officers, late in the afternoon of December 20th, it was cast that we were to surrender to the Germans the next morning, December 21st, 1944 at 8:00 a.m. This date marked the end of the United States' army's most advanced positioned unit that held the middle sector of the line in this great battle. This day should be remembered as the day America lost a valiant regiment of men, though it probably will never be recalled in the annals of the war history of the Battle of the Bulge. To do so would exemplify an infamous decision or the inability of the United States Army

Command to aid and support one of its parts. Thus, this date marked the tragic end of the young sons and men of America that filled this newly arrived " let stand " regiment. The end of an American regiment occurred this day, December 21, 1944.

On the morning of December 21, 1944, at 8:00 a.m., dogged soldiers stood up from the shallow holes that they had recently dug in this long sloping wooded hillside, yet they remain hidden among the trees in this snow covered forest. For a moment their eyes searched through the misty-foggy haze that surrounded them and rose up to a cold gray-blackened sky. They were looking for no particular thing. Just looking out of habit. God knows it was cold! Below freezing. We though hadn't had time to think about it. We knew, be we hungry, with frost-bitten feet, or battle weary, we could still continue the fight, but without effect. Here, where we were, we were not going to win this battle. Death was in this hillside among us... waiting. Now we were ready to leave him there. We had risen, dark figures, and stood there still as tree trucks. It felt good to stand tall, head up and square shouldered. For days now we had squeezed our body into as small a space as was possible when we were walking, crawling, or in a fighting hole to help bide us from the dangers of the enemy. As we stood, our very bones and muscles felt relief. It felt good being stretched out. Then we moved ... and started walking downhill to the agreed surrender area, cutting through the pale quietness of this once meant-to-be hillside battle area, leaving an ugly situation behind. Silently and singularly we were leaving our foxholes and our disassembled weapons with their parts buried and thrown away and walking through the trees going downhill and onto a grassy open valley. There waiting for us in the opening was a squad size force of Germans. They wore their green colored combat uniforms covered over by a multi-colored camouflaged cloth piece and stood steady and gripped their burp guns in readiness. Only thirty minutes earlier I had sit on the edge of my foxhole thinking that I had been on the front lines for only little more than a week and had come to this end. I wasn't thinking about breakfast or the cold snow I was scatting on. I was thinking I would soon be a prisoner. I couldn't understand it. I still wore my steel helmet for I still believed I could come under German artillery fire. The Germans told us the day before that our position would receive artillery fire if we did not surrender. At last it was 8:00 o'clock. I removed my helmet, laid it aside, stood up, and started walking down hill.

I was among the first group of American soldiers to file into the opening. My defensive position was only a short distance from the bottom of the gently sloping hill that leveled into a narrow grassy valley. It was only natural that I would be among the first group of Americans to meet the Germans. As we came out of the forest into the opening we formed a line and we walked in column along side the waiting Germans. There we stopped, not directly facing them. I could feel their presence off my right shoulder and with a glance to the right I could see them staring at us. It was now that we became prisoners. We were theirs and we knew it.

As we stood, stopped, within a couple of feet of the Germans, now exposed in the open terrain, one of the German soldiers suddenly lunged forward, grabbing one of the American's arms near his elbow, running both hands down to his

wrist, stopping at his wrist watch. He found what he was looking for. He proceeded to remove the watch from the American's wrist. We were surprised and drew back a bit in a mild protest. I was watching this German soldier. He was a paunchy round-faced man that to me didn't appear to be a veteran-hardened soldier. I resented his action. I detested

this seemingly cowardly act toward the defenseless American prisoner. And just as sudden, " Nix, nix! " rang out a nearby German's command.

Hardly any sooner had the German taken the wrist watch from the American, when a slender, much younger German soldier, who appeared to be in his early twenties, and wore the insignia of a non-commissioned officer, commanded the older man to return the watch to the American and in German sternly forbid him to touch us again. The commanding young German soldier seemed kind and sympathetic toward his new captive American prisoners. He treated the American captives with respect. We felt at ease and protected with this authoritative young soldier in command.

As we stood, we knew. It had ended for us. The end came here. The seemingly unscathed action that we had gone through would not describe the true picture. We could recall the mortar fire back in the woods that had taken off the head of a soldier that had momentarily removed his heavy helmet. Or we could recall the loss of life from a German tank sitting uphill firing point blank at us as we crossed an opening between the woods. We could recall the Germans attacking with grenades and poled demolition charges in an attempt to overrun us. Death had been present and around us and the threat of finality had become a reality. As I was thinking, the worse moment for me in this battle was night before last, on the side of this hill. I realized then that this may be my last stand. It was then, for the first time, I spoke earnestly with God about my situation. It wasn't a prayer. I wanted him to know that I understood the critical situation that I had gotten myself into ... And I feared I may need his help. It didn't look good ... I realized that the Germans had found us. There was nowhere else to go. We were trapped. I 'knew I would expend all the ammunition that I had, which wasn't much. I hoped that I could see them coming through the tall grass in the valley below me, to my left, to see them before they would reach the bottom of the steep ravine next to me and there climb up its steep slope to reach me. The hill was thick with trees to my right, to my front, and to my rear. Following German artillery bombardment, the yells for medics, for help of any kind, and for water, and afterwards the moans of dying men on this hillside would further attest to the senselessness of the situation. What I feared the most would be seeing the bobbing of advancing helmets in and around the trees, outnumbering advancing Germans with automatic weapons, and hearing the deafening closeness of the rapid sound of the ' Tat-Tat-Tat ' of their burp guns spitting out lead bullets of death, spraying areas in their advance. The sound of guns and bullets would become louder... now mixed in with equally loud sounds of utterances and crying of men. None of this could be stopped. The fight had to continue on until finished ... when at last, only a lesser, quieter, sickening sound of men would be heard. As parts of the hill would be overrun, the moaning from those more distant areas would become more distinct and louder. Only a smattering of shots would now-be heard in those areas, here and there, and the

cries would stop except for an occasional singular cry of a downed soldier that could consider himself fortunate if he were to still live.

From my right, from my front, or from my rear, where would the enemy come from? Now, I had planned my own retreat. Retreat here, where I was. When all of my ammunition was used up, I would remain in my hole and cover my hole with downed timber or snow or anything. I had no more ammunition. I had finished my fight. No doubt, as for me, I had done some killing. But for now, I was finished. From now on, only circumstances and timing would determine whether or not I was to live or die. Would a German hand grenade or a volley from a German burp gun aimed at my foxhole finish me off? Or would I arise as a prisoner? Timing of my actions to survive this battle would be very important if I were to survive.

It didn't happen this way. The next day we were surrendered as our position was too untenable.

Now, lined-up in the grassy valley, we were theirs as we stood still beside the Germans.

More and more Americans came down the hill and out into the open and our line was pushed further downhill, deeper into the grassy clearing. There were many, many more Americans than I had imagined on this hillside.

The number was in the hundreds.

The line of dark-olive-green clad Americans continued to grow longer and longer with disheartened, beaten, tired, hungry worn-down soldiers, now prisoners, as more men continued to emerge out of the darkness of the snow covered evergreen trees that choked the hillside and walk slowly into the grassy clearing at the bottom of the long gentle sloping hill. They too, had left their freshly dug fighting holes behind along with their disassembled pieces of weaponry, mostly buried in the snowy fir-forest silt, to join the now moving column of prisoners. Still, yet , the numbers of men continued to swell coming out of the color mix of snow-white an wooded-green-forest to join the moving snaking line of men that now had crossed over the flat grassy valley and had twisted its way up the side of a far hill now disappearing after making a right turn and going into, a ravine that was barely visible behind thick fir trees. The plodding men looked alike: slow moving, seemingly heavy-footed, weighted down with olive drab colored overcoat, some with an olive drab blanket wrapped around them or over one shoulder, more likely than not, a corner of the blanket trailed through the snow behind them. The men's combat steel helmets had been left behind with their scattered weapons. The disillusioned look-a-likes now wore their olive colored wool knit caps on top their heads instead of the familiar steel combat helmets. They all wore the same tight-fitting

leather combat boots that had been at times thoroughly cold-wet-soaked over the past few days. Still, to-day, it was cold enough for white snow flakes to remain on top and along the sides of the combat shoes as the men traversed the snowy field and filed up the far hillside where each man followed another in a line that crossed the ravine and went up a small embankment to an asphalt road

where at this juncture the line of prisoners turned to the right and followed the road passing over a stone bridge and going into the center of the small village of Schonberg.

Yeah, I thought now, I remember the last communication that we received from our Division Headquarters that was headquartered back in St. Vith. It said we were to attack Schonberg from the one side, while the American Seventh Armored Division would at the same time be attacking Schonberg with tanks from the other side. And all those deep-throated sounding, grinding, moving tanks that we had heard yesterday, coming from the direction of Schonberg, weren't American tanks at all, as we at first thought. We thought we were hearing American tanks. Later we realized that it wasn't our tanks. What we had heard were German tanks that were moving through Schonberg going down this same road that we were now on, passing where we were now walking, going west, going deeper into Belgium. A day earlier they had been on German soil. Then here. Now on beyond US. Germany was only a mile from here, back across the woods, in the direction from which we had come. The tanks had rumbled. They were advancing to a now distant front. By now the front was as far as twenty-five miles in places to our rear. Maybe further. We had been annihilated and circumstances made us capitulate. So, now, the Germans could freely advance to more distant battle areas.

Now, again, a rumble could be heard. Up ahead. Coming down the road was another new tank column, moving directly toward us. There they were, less than fifty yards in front of us, slowly grinding forward, moving in our direction. The German lead tank looked menacing with its extra long spout of an eighty-eight millimeter barrel carrying a built-up heavy-looking muzzle on the end of it, all of which seemed to tilt the tank off balance forward mounted there as it was on the front of this huge square German tank that was leading the column and was slowly bearing down on us. It was the leader of a line of huge square tanks mixed in with German half-tracks and troop carrying vehicles that were moving in column down the road, the Schonberg-St. Vith road. They were on the road headed toward St. Vith, our division headquarters. Now the clanking of metal was real close.

Why hadn't we heard the sound of German tanks before yesterday? Why hadn't we heard American tanks even before then, back when we were told that we and American tanks would unite and take back Schonberg from the Germans? Then we would have had an escape route-and be freed from the trap of being surrounded.

American combat infantrymen don't ask these questions. They don't come to mind. We don't know what's going on! The thoughts of an infantryman in combat are confined to an area measured in feet and yards and to places barely beyond that which he can see. His concern is with what is happening or what might happen within a few feet or yards of him. Only later does he think of the bigger picture.

Two or three days ago I heard mention of an airdrop. We would receive supplies of food, ammunition and weapons. Why were we placed in the front combat line in the first place without adequate ammunition and weaponry to

make it necessary for an airdrop? We all knew we had very little ammunition to start with. We didn't have enough ammunition for more than a very, very short lasting battle. And where were the reserves ... and the backup army support units in this area when we needed them? Or were there any? We needed them for several days now. Why weren't we part of an orderly retreat? Why weren't there Command plans to keep this Division, this Regiment integrated with the rest of the American Army facing the Germans? And where were the army units that were supposed to be there to protect our flanks?

None of these questions came to our minds. After five days without a meal and with little sleep, we were exhausted, subdued, and weary - battle fatigue weary ... weary from continued lack of sleep and food. I was as surprised as the next fellow that I had become a prisoner. Now I questioned. I questioned myself and my regiment. What had I done wrong? What had we done wrong? It was our fault someway!

Shortly after the file of walking men passed over the stone bridge the line was stopped and motioned to move off the road. There we sit, stood, or lean-rested against a snowy road embankment or sometimes leaned against a stone fence or rock building that was along the right side of the road. We were stopped and moved over to give way to the oncoming German armor.

As we rested, our minds had given up thinking about whose fault it was and how it happened we got here. That was no longer important. What is: we're prisoners now. That was all there was to it. We are alive. We are thankful. But, we are prisoners. We weren't going to be the soldiers that we thought we would be.

We were in a different world. It was not a happy one for any of the American prisoners. It was one of despair. We were tired, hungry and haggard. Yet, our minds hadn't allowed us to know this. Our minds weren't thinking much at all at this time. When you are surrounded in a battle such as this ... and engaged in a running, moving, hiding fight with an enemy ... you manage quite well without sleep and without food. We had hope! With each new -movement during these last few days, we were always with the hope that the Seventh Armored or another American force would come to our rescue. The Seventh Armored was supposed to meet us at Schonberg, you know. They never did. So we got to this day without food, with little sleep and a hope that didn't materialize. To the very end, we hadn't given up hope. We planned to survive. We faced everything that came at us or anything that we ran in to. We didn't retreat. We didn't expect to be prisoners. Now we were.

During the first day of captivity, as I stood as one of the prisoners in the column along side the road that wound through the town of Schonberg, waiting for the line of German tanks and mechanized vehicles to pass so we could continue with our walk out of Schonberg and on toward the northeast going into Germany itself, I, at last, was beginning to feel the effects of being exhausted from the past few days ordeal. It had caught-up with me. Up to now, my high state of anxiety had kept me from knowing the true condition that I was in. I was in need of food and sleep and mental and physical recovery.

My mind had been in a subdued-passive-lock ever since I walked down to the open clearing. Then I saw someone that changed that momentarily.

Look there. Up in front of me. The fourth man standing up in front of me was the small-framed wiry combat-wise veteran anti-aircraft soldier from Connecticut. How unlikely, I thought, as I stood looking at him., for a soldier from Connecticut to be so daring a fighter. I thought if he were from Texas or Tennessee or from some backwoods area or from some poorer state, I could understand his stalking courage. But from up east, from

Connecticut, it didn't figure. But, he was the one, the leader, along with a buddy or two, that conducted his own break-out patrols. Probing for a way to get out of the encirclement. He returned, telling- about running into and surprising and sometimes having to kill unsuspecting Germans and feeling disgusted that he could find no way out. There were too many Germans. And there he was, disguised, a quiet subordinate prisoner.

The Strafing

The next day, I began to realize that now it was a fact. I was indeed a German prisoner-of-war along with a miserable group of other Americans being herded back toward the heart of Germany. Now I was more aware of the German guards looking us over on this day. I think I was just more aware of being a prisoner and was getting over the stunning first day of captivity and because of that I became more conscious of the German surveillance. Although we were never searched or relieved of any of our clothing, nor were we given anything or touched in any way, it didn't mean that this would not happen. Now, on the second day of captivity, far removed from the front lines, here in Germany, the guards could freely do what they wanted to do with us. After thinking about this, only now did it occur to me, that deep in my right hand coat pocket I still had the lone live hand grenade that I had picked-up on the battlefield knowing then that I would use it when the enemy closed-in. Here I was, at this moment, gripping a live hand grenade in my right hand, deep in the recesses of the my coat pocket. It was a natural survival weapon. It was a natural thing to do in combat. I still had it and I hadn't let it go. I had better come to my senses and realize I was a prisoner, and get rid of this hand grenade. How did I escape the woods, meet the Germans, and get this far with it? I didn't remember to leave the grenade behind with my rifle. The Germans wouldn't like prisoners carrying grenades. They may not understand that I had forgotten. I had to get rid of it.

What if the Germans decided to search us? Sooner or later they would search. Wouldn't they? I can't be carrying a hand grenade that would be capable of blowing-up a handful of Germans. I dismantled my rifle and buried its parts in the earth two nights ago. But when we walked down to the opening from the densely forested hill I forgot I still had the hand grenade with me.

The next time we stopped walking, to lie resting in the ditch, along the roadside, I knew what I was going to do. I would, with all confidence, take the hand

grenade out of my pocket, slowly and unseen, and hide it in the mud and snow along the roadside. And I did.

They could search me now. I did what I had to do. I didn't need that hand grenade. That's for sure.

Schonberg was a village. But the second day's march to the rear took us through a real German town. It had a town square, bordered with two-story sandy-gray store front buildings. We passed through the town and I never saw a person ... never did I see a civilian. Never did I see a human being. This town was quiet and cold. And dead. This was Germany at war, December 1944.

We didn't stop once in this town. We were on the move. As yet, no where on our march back into Germany had we seen civilians or any movement of any kind. There were no vehicles, no bicycles, nothing on this road that we were walking on but us. And nothing moved in this town.

On the other side of the town was a large railroad yard. It was here our column came to a halt along side a long line of boxcars. The boxcar side doors were slid open and we were ordered to climb inside. This was the first sign of relief offered us by the Germans. Now we would ride back into Germany for detention instead of continuing the tiring walk. We at last would sit and be carried, even if we were herded and crowded into a dark boxcar.

We entered gladly. There was welcomed straw on the boxcar floor and some of the prisoners began to drop their weary bodies to rest ... laying stretched out in the straw. Others would sit crowded, tightly side by side on a bench along the long side of the boxcar. Prisoners continued to enter the boxcar. Soon, there were so many prisoners inside that all the bench seats were occupied and all the floor space was filled with sitting or lying soldiers and the last few men to enter had to stand. There was no place to sit ... and hardly room to stand, lest they placed their two feet through a small new-found-opening between sitting and lying prisoners. They were weary, but there was no place for them except where they were, in a little spot in which to stand.

It wasn't long for us to find out that this situation in the boxcar was getting intolerable. Men had to urinate and some had dysentery, so all this waste had to be deposited on the floor that was occupied to every inch by American Prisoners. This was a new trying experience. It was a very sad experience. A very inhuman experience.

Now, in our solitude and in this stillness, hunger pains began to dominate our thoughts. It did no good to ask the Germans about "essen". Essen means food in German. Today was the 22nd day of December, 1944. This was the second day of captivity and the Germans had not given us any food yet. Today... it would be two days from today that my family back in Texas would gather to celebrate Christmas Eve and exchange gifts and sit down together and eat the customary filling Christmas meal. But I wasn't thinking of them as much as I was thinking: "When were we going to get moving and get out of this boxed-up hell hole? When would we get to some decent place and begin to eat and have some

normality? We remained here, crowded, uncomfortable and hungry, locked-up in this unmoving boxcar.

Even in these conditions it was tolerable as long as we thought that we would surely be moving pretty soon... going to a place where we could eat and rest.

But we didn't move soon enough. And it wasn't dark enough. It was still daylight and as we sat waiting we heard a plane overhead. That meant nothing unusual to us ... but a few minutes later we heard, the shattering of wood and the noise was getting progressively louder until it was right on us and then passed us going in the other direction. It started to our right and came at us and passed on to our left. The loud splintering noise was the sound of fifty-caliber machine-gun bullets being fired into the boxcars from the plane above. It was strafing us. First it was a distant ... then a louder and louder shattering noise.

There was no panic because it happened so quickly. Then a second pass began. We could trace the flow of bullets as the roar of splattered wood became louder. This time there was conscious fear. In reaction, men would draw-up into themselves hoping the bullets would miss. There was no time for a long prayer. Just, "Oh, God".

After the second round of strafing, the smallest soldier in our locked boxcar managed to break-out through the air vent. Once out, he ran from car to car and opened the side doors. The Americans poured out. Some thoughtful leader knew what we had to do and without hesitation the American prisoners formed a big P W in an open snow covered area along side the boxcars. The British fighter plane saw this, circled once, then flew over us and disappeared flying to the south.

After all of this was over, I counted, laying in a line next to the boxcars, ninety-six dead, dying and wounded American prisoners-of-war.

One of the wounded was my First Sergeant. He had been sitting to my left, the fourth person down from me, sitting on the bench. I remember he was reading the small army issued pocket size Bible when he was shot. He was from Georgia... one of the older men in my outfit. I had never known him to read the Bible. He was shot in the upper part of his body. Poor soul. I hoped he survived.

If we had any command about us or authority ... it was used now. We, to a man, said we were not ready or willing to go back into those boxcars. We knew we were headed for the Rhine. And we would just walk there. Walk in the open. We wanted to walk. We wanted to be seen. We didn't want to be strafed again.

The Rhine River was a hundred miles away. We would walk the hundred miles to the Rhine.

It was nearing dark as we started walking north then east away from the train yard. We left behind the ninety-six Americans in the care of the Germans with whatever help they would provide.

The Walk To The Rhine

It wouldn't be long before darkness would set in as we started our walk away from the railroad yard and the German town. In a very short time we were alone again in the treeless western German plains. We didn't go far. The Germans never intended to walk us after dark. And they didn't this day.

Today was December 22, 1944. The fields around us were white, covered over with light snow and the road and roadside had become soggy and damp with snow melt and mud. We stopped and were ordered off the road, motioned to move into the white field to our right. We knew, as before, to drop to the ground and rest ... sleep would easily follow. The thick line of dirty-brown heavily-clad Americans was easily guarded while lying there in contrast to the clean crystal-white, untouched, shining snow. The raggedy column of Americans was unevenly strung-out, laying in the snow resembling a thick dirty old rope, twisted and turning, from one end to the other, laying limp, showing no life, laying there breathless and motionless. The Germans could easily watch the dark figures laving there with the snow as a pure white background. The Germans didn't need to chance guarding a dark prisoner-column walking on a spotty, dark, shadowy road at night. At the first sign of night's darkness, it was only natural for the Germans to lead us off the road to sleep. And we were read for the rest.

The new day was December 23rd. We awoke to a bright, high light blue, clear sky. We were ordered up. Rouse! Rouse! Rouse mit!" We understood. And we started walking. We were ready to move on... and we did. How long could we go on without eating? Damn ... we were a strong bunch! But we couldn't go on forever like this!

It was colder, today. We were walking slower. We were walking to the Rhine. No problem.

"Hey, look up there," someone said.

High above us and off to our left were formations of tiny-looking long-winged silver-gray colored American high altitude bombers, American planes going east, going deeper into Germany. We knew that these Planes were large. They were so high in the sky, they looked to us like a group of small toy planes moving in slow motion. They appeared to be barely moving, high in the sky, with each plane leaving a long white vapor trail behind it as it moved forward at a turtle's pace.

What a beautiful sight! Seeing triangles of American aircraft in formation going into Germany for a bombing. They were moving, ever so slowly, so it appeared. They were noiseless. We knew their bombs would be for targets on the other side of the Rhine. We had never seen any thing like this. And we had not seen a day like this for a lone time. It was a clear day. The sky was blue for the first time that I could remember, since the time we were in England. And that was nearly a month ago. That seemed so long ago.

We learned in a way, in which we wished we hadn't, that American and British fighter planes were looking, for targets: Anything that moved, as well as things that didn't move, such as trains ... anything, and everything- all targets this side of the Rhine. The Germans must have known, and now we knew, we were not safe from strafing by American or British planes as long as , we were on this side of the Rhine. Because of this, we would walk to the Rhine, walk where we could be seen.

Probably, with all the long lasting, cloudy, bad-weather that had sealed off allied aircraft from seeing German ground movement, the Germans chanced putting us in boxcars to take us to the Rhine. This would relieve them of having to guard us, even though it would be with a scant detail of older non-combatant type of soldier. But knowing or chancing, the results were the same: Prisoners-of-war in German train marshaling yards are subject to being bombed or strafed, being concealed in boxcars as they were. Now, when American and British planes strafed German railway yards, it might mean strafing their own soldiers.

The British fighter pilot didn't know. Afterwards he must have had some thought about the death and injury he dealt his fellow comrades. The sorrow of war.

We were on a lonely open road, a long moving column, walking under a clear sky. The flight of any plane could easily see us, and surely they would know that we were prisoners being herded back into Germany. As we looked up in the sky, I knew they could see us too, far below them, a black column snaking along slowly over a crooked road, easily outlined by the snow-white ground below.

Then one of the planes was hit by German anti-aircraft fire. The only way for us to know this was to see it. It slowly began to slide sideways out of the formation and it seemed to hang there, high, in place, as other planes moved on, then gently and slowly: It began to nose toward the earth, only slightly and then softly descend. One, two, three, four parachutes began to open around the back area of the plane. Still, it looked like a piece of tin foil ... floating ... buoyed ... drifting there, high in a thin light blue sky.

"How many more are in there?" soldiers were questioning aloud.

"Come on. Come on. Come on. Get out of there," we were saying. Then in the next few minutes another parachute, and another would open behind the now fast falling plane and we thought everyone was out. They were Americans. We cared about them. Now, all the high flying planes had gone past us ... and were out of sight. Talking had stopped. The only sound to he heard was the sloughing of our feet walking over melting snow on this westward German roadway.

The high flying aircraft gave no sound. The anti-aircraft batteries, positioned in some far-off place that had shot down one American plane.. were too far

distant to be heard. Only we, trudging forward, made a slapping walking sound.

TO BE CONTINUED...

From the Rhine To The Prison camp

The Rhine was a broad deep river that ran swiftly northward. It was a dark river. And the heavy steel bridge that we walked over enabled the Rhineland western plain traffic to reach the river's east bank and enter the old town of Koblenz.

This was a large- town. But still, there was no traffic or sign of people. After all, I should have remembered that it was Christmas Day and reasoned that because of this, the business sector of town fronting.' the river would be shut-down. Nevertheless, everything that we saw was as still and cold as the old two story cream-colored stucco buildings that we were passing as they sit there facing the river. This German town, like the others that we had passed through showed the same signs of lifelessness. Surely, Germans were here? The old, the very old and the very young,...and the women, surely someone is in this town. We hadn't seen a person or a vehicle since the woman with the cookies and the boy on the bike. And if there were cars, there was no petrol for them. Wartime in Germany was far different from wartime in America.

After crossing the bridge we turned right, walking down a street that ran straight and parallel to the river ... walking on high ground that overlooked the moving waters of the river. We walked to the second block where the column turned left in the middle of the block and was led through a large arched opening in a block-long high wall. We entered into a large rectangular courtyard that looked like a military drill yard entirely enclosed by some type of military building. The building faced west, facing the Rhine. It immediately became obvious to us that this was a Nazi school or Nazi training facility or administration building of some sort. Here around us, not in abundance, -,@,-- were--- flags, colorful banners and symbols and the black Nazi swastika displayed on white and red backgrounds, and mosaic art ... all Nazi signs of mastery, conveying Nazi strength- The building and grounds had seen better days ... past days of glory, I thought. Now, it appeared to be only a hull of the past.

The building and grounds were not prepared to keep us. Rather, I imagined , the building was used for the schooling or training of young men so they could go forward and take their learned Nazi skills to other fronts, leaving here, going to the East, West, North and South. The Nazi still were fighting to the west in Belgium, and to the north they occupied Scandinavia, and to the south they were in Italy, and to the east they were fighting along a shrinking front in Poland and on south into Hungary. It was a vast battle front that was being beaten back to Germany itself.

Today, like the rest of Germany that we had seen, this place was quiet. The only signs of Nazi glory and strength were the army symbols and Nazi signs that adorn the once proud teaching area. The few German command personnel that was occasionally seen were making preparations for our final trip to a prison camp.

It was near dusk when we arrived here, and it hadn't been dark long before we were walking once again in a blinding darkness to a close-by railroad siding where we obeyed orders to push into a crowded boxcar.

This time, there was no bench seat, just hay and darkness and bunched-up straggly, weakening American prisoners, some sitting, some standing, 'some laying. We positioned ourselves the best way we could. We wanted in the boxcar ... we entered with the hope of a quick arrival at some rest area waiting for us at some prison camp. Now that we were inside the locked boxcar, we had to endure a wait, endure a prolonged wait. We waited in silence ... in stench ... with everyone starving. It was nearly more than we could take. But we would sustain. We knew we would make it

to whatever destination that had been planned for us. We knew we could wait until the boxcars moved. Even though we were hungry and being starved, we knew we would sit still..-.control ourselves until we would at last reach our destination.

As I sit in human misery, in a crowded locked-up boxcar that wasn't moving, I thought, maybe, it would have been better for us if they had let us stay back there in the courtyard. Yet, what better place for them would there be to keep us, than here, locked-up in sitting boxcars?

Maybe we weren't going anywhere at all. Was it planned for us to remain here locked-up in the dark?

We sit here in a still boxcar day and night: The boxcar didn't move for probably two or three days. We were boxed-up in a still motionless boxcar for two or three days! We sit and hoped for it to move. We were never allowed out. The boxcar door never opened. Most of us during this time, because of exhaustion, would sleep.

The nights were dark. Very dark. Then there was the light of day. Still, the train sit motionless. It was dark again. Then daylight. And dark again, and at last a jolt and the boxcar began to move. We began to slowly move eastward ... then going faster ... going deeper into Germany. Moving eastward, we knew that much. It seemed we would rumble and go, go faster, then slow, and go slower ... then slower, creaking on very slowly into the dark night. Then we would stop. Sometimes for a short stop, but most of the time for a long stop that lasted for hours. Then a jolt and slamming of metal and we slowly moved again. This time it seemed like we were moving back in the direction from where we started. Once we started moving, it was stop and go repeatedly during the first two or three nights.

Many times during the night stops I sensed we were in a railway yard for often times I would hear, other trains pass next to us as we sit still. I would listen to the train's metal wheel's repetitive grinding as they passed over the iron track rails, and think, maybe we were waiting to let them pass ... so we could move again. Usually we didn't.

We were not a valuable cargo, so there was no urgency to move us on.

During daylight hours we were always stopped. Then once, when it was daylight, the boxcar door slid open and a German -guard dressed in his pea-green winter-wool uniform with matching color wool hat, with rifle slung over his shoulder, reached up and handed us a loaf bread. A sergeant took the loaf of bread and handed pieces of bread to the prisoners.

The nights and days became increasingly tiring for our weakening bodies, cramped-up as they were in these boxcars. Then during this one night hope risen. We seemed to be going east-northeast at a faster rate of speed than usual, and we kept continuously moving in this one direction for a long period of time, traveling on through the night. Then, sometime during this night , we came to a stop. The side door of the boxcar slid open and we were ordered out.

"Rouse mit. Rouse mit," was the order. We were under a new command. The prison camp command. The new German guards were cold and hardened to the sight of the thousands of weary downtrodden bodies that stooped and were weary. These German guards were not like the sympathetic German soldier of the front'. These guards were not fit to soldier. These guards were only fit to provoke and guard the dying. These guards that we were now seeing were old hardened men that guarded and commanded German prisoner-of-war camp Stalag IV-B.

We crawled out of the boxcar and dropped to the ground where we lined-up on a hard-frozen snow-covered ground. The ground was hard, cold and frozen...not damp and soft-snowy and muddy like back in the Ardennes. We were nearer the Russian front here. We had come further north and further east, nearer the cold blowing tundra of Russia, I thought. It was no wonder that Napoleon had such a hard time with the weather with his army in Russia. I thought I was feeling now what he must have felt.

This was the huge German prison camp Stalag IV-B that sit in front of us, facing the long line of boxcars now emptied, sitting motionless on the track. A tall impregnable barbed-wire fence ran parallel to the rail line a few feet in front of us. Off to our right was a wood tower structure with a guard perched high in the wood box sitting underneath a gabled roof, poised in readiness , guarding the prison camp's interior along the fence line. Other guards in towers could be seen further down the fence line.

It was dark. It was night. Tower lights softly lighted-up the area along the fence line. We had arrived. We were leaving the misery of the boxcar and forming another line, where we would stand outside the prison fence and wait to move into the German prison camp.

We had been bunched-up in these locked-up boxcars for seven days and nights with no food ... it was time to get out. We had arrived. We were glad to be at a prison camp ... even a prison camp! '-'It would be better than what we had gone through.

We were standing and waiting for the line to be moved into the prison camp. The ground was white-snow-frozen-hard ... a cold like I had never been in before. But we had arrived...and we were glad.

Hell, this was no prom night...standing out here in the freezing cold! And this was no New Year's Eve party that we were lined-up to go to...even though this was New Year's Eve night...we were going somewhere... we were going through an opening in the barbed-wire fence to Re- indoctrinated into a cold wartime German prison camp.

Let's move it! We were ready to get in. We were hungry, hungry, hungry ... cold ... tired ... ready to lay down and rest.

Buddy, do you want to come on with me? You will get hungry as hell, get in a prison camp fight...later to escape out of necessity, then meet up with a German combat soldier, face to face ... and survive.

God, I was glad to reach the prison camp.

A German Prison Camp

At last we reached our destination, a German Prison Camp.

The train boxcars had stopped still and we were dropping to the ground from the floor of the open side of the boxcar. A fenced prison camp set in front of us. It was past midnight and on the other side of the tall wire fence with barbs on the top was a hugh area of barrack like buildings that housed prisoners of war. Looking to my right, as far as I could see, I saw roll after row of barracks, stretching out of sight along the containing high barbed wire fence, disappearing into a dark night, with the distant barrack barely visible, vaguely outlined where it set on the more visible frozen white snow layered ground. And off to my left, the same sight repeated itself. Foreboding wood towers stood silently along the barbed wire containment. This was the prison camp that we had hoped to reach. This was German Prison Camp " Stalag IV-B.

A light shown from the guard tower to our right lighting the white ground around the tower base and flaring out along the fence line. Other towers along the fence line served as watch post for German guards.

The line that I was in had not moved much since it was formed after leaving the boxcars, and when it did move, it moved slowly, then stop again. The slow

movement was to our left and there for a short distance the line turned right going into a narrow fenced corridor leading into the prison camp proper. Here it continued for no more than thirty feet before it came to a dead end then turned right going through an open fence gate that opened into a separately fenced area of perhaps ninety feet by thirty feet in dimension.

This area was fenced on three sides with the wall of a small building now to the left of the line of prisoners serving as the fourth containment side of this small open air compound.

Finally, I moved from along side the boxcars, turned right, moved along the narrow fenced corridor and turned right through the open gate into the small open yard, moving, stopping, moving again with the flow of the line that was entering the small building through a door at it's, far corner.

It was a relief to all of us to get out of the cramped boxcars. And for the first time men were talking about something other than food and questioning if we would ever get to where we were going and wondering if we would get there alive.

Here we were and we were relieved. Now there was hope. Here we believed we would be fed, housed, have recreation and live a more humane life. We had to be a bit cheerful. We were here and we had made it.

Yet, it was cold standing outside like this. This prison camp must have been located in the flatlands near the Russian border, I thought. Here I was experiencing colder weather than I had ever known before. It was a cold Russian-like winter night. But standing was not too difficult when you could see the line enter the building and know your turn would come.

Someone said, " This is New Year's Day." And you thought, I guess it is New Year's Day. Then I remembered Christmas Day being that day back in the small town on the other side of the Rhine. And

1 thought, what a New Year's Day this is! I never had one like this. I remembered what New Year's Eve was like in the States. We always went to a New Year's Eve party. But, here we were, standing, sometimes kicking one foot against the other to help the blood circulate in an attempt to keep them warm, and thinking how different things were with us now compared to past New 'Year's Eves and the start of a new year. I was sure New Year's Eve and New Years Day back in the States were just the same as they had always been. Maybe, someone in my family was thinking about past New Year's Eves and thought about this New Year's Eve of 1944 and thought about their missing soldier and loved one. Yes, we were beginning to think of something other than food and how long it would take to get out of the crowded boxcar.

Still, my thought were not now about my family. I had no thoughts of sorrow and anguish over my situation, but I did have new thoughts; I will, I can make it, I will survive. I will keep mental strength and not for a moment give up to a depleting, hungry body. My soul and body will carry on, on this earth, until the end of the war and I will somehow see freedom and my family once again.

As for my family, their thoughts were nearly constantly on me and my whereabouts. The radio had told the world and the people back in the States about the horrible war and brave soldiers fighting in the snow in the Eiffel forest at the border of Belgium and Germany. The leading radio commentator of the day was and he told the nation about the fierce fighting, about the freezing cold, the trench foot, and soldiers cut off from the rest of the army, naming my infantry division, the surrounded 106th Infantry Division as the unit that was still fighting somewhere out there in the forest, fighting against overwhelming odds and now many miles behind advancing German Panzer, SS and Wermack Divisions. Many American soldiers were left frozen in the snow, dead, others were alive but were battle casualties, others were captured prisoners and others were missing in action.

For weeks and months to come, I was " MISSING IN ACTION." This was the telegram message that my mother received from the War Department. I could have been a body concealed in the deep snow in the frozen forest. I could have been wounded. I could have been taken as a prisoner of war. They did not know. The telegram did not say I was a prisoner of war. It said, " Herbert M. Sheaner, Jr. is reported " Missing in Action."

Now it was my turn to enter through the door and be accounted for as a new camp prisoner of war.

Once inside I found that the building served both as a medical and documenting and assignment center for new incoming 'POWs,., First, we were interrogated. We gave our name, rank and serial number. We also gave our occupation before entering the service and where we lived. I said I was a student and lived in Dallas, Texas. No other questions were asked. Then we moved a few feet to our right where we stood in front of a medical doctor and we were told to unbutton our shirt and pull up our undershirt and hold open our shirt, jacket and overcoat, and stand steady and expose our bare chest. Immediately, a short needle at the end of a round instrument punctured my left breast. I had just been inoculated, German style. Then I was ordered to move to the right and stand facing in the same direction. This time I stood with my shoulders tucked-in, doing exactly as the man ahead of me had done, and waited for the stamp of a red triangle to be placed on the back of my overcoat. Then I was ordered to remove my coat. Then a red triangle was stamped on my battle jacket, then I removed this and the back of my shirt was stamped with a red triangle. This was the marking of a prisoner. All of this was done quickly, in a matter of minutes.

Next, we were given a small brown hard cardboard paper. It was small enough to he concealed in the palm of my band. I was told that this was my number that was printed on the cardboard and I was to answer to it. Your answering number was also your assignment number. I later learned that the assignment number meant that I was numbered to be one of a hundred prisoners to be sent out of the camp to a work area to be assigned to a specific work project. Only privates were assigned to a specific work project. Only privates would leave the large Stalag prison camp, not to be returned, going to another place, to work. The officers and noncommissioned officers would not be sent with us.

We were told that as a worker away from the prison camp we would receive two meals a day. Here we would receive only one scant serving of hot soup ... once a day. When we did leave as a group of a hundred prisoners to work away from the prison camp, one of our hundred was a sergeant. He told the Germans that he was a private so he could get the benefit of the extra meal.

Tonight I was in an enclosed building, out of the winter weather, for the first time in nearly a month. The one exception was the one night when we slept on the second floor of the small two story German school house back on the other side of the Rhine River. That happened on Christmas Eve night.

Things were looking up! Maybe we would be fed and taken care of here.

Then, a small number of us were led out a far door, walking back out into the cold night. We were being led toward the interior of the camp, walking in a corridor between barracks. We only walked a short distance before we turned left and followed a guard into a near dark barrack. The guard pointed to a lower bunk bed that was empty and I knew it was meant for me.

There was a dim light coming from a small wood or coal burning potbellied iron stove that was sitting on a platform next to the south wall of the building. My bunk was in line with the stove in the middle of the room. All the other hard wood beds seemed to be occupied by sleeping prisoners. Only the movement of one or two prisoners near the stove let me know that all prisoners were not asleep.

It felt good to be here. This was the first stove fire that I had seen since leaving our billets in England. Here there was warmth, a place to sleep inside out of the cold and off the ground and out of a crowded stanching boxcar. There must be food- here and life and hope.

I was really here. I was in Stalag IV-B. I was glad I made it here. And I had a bed. And I was ready to accept it. I was tired. Real tired.

The British

I was standing outside that first cold dark night in a light blowing snow when the first impression of Stalag IV-B came to me. This is a huge camp, I thought, although I never really knew since I never explored its perimeter or its space.

But for now, it was past midnight, January 1, 1945, and I was inside. It was here, during that first night, when I laid down to sleep, I gave a silent prayer of thanks, even for this place and for this moment. 'I thought then this place to be far removed from the world, and for the time being, the world removed from it. For the first time in nearly three weeks, I was able to lay stretched out and sleep without fear and without being stepped on, which would have been

the case had I tried to do this in the crowded boxcar. Here, I was laying on the hardwood boards of a bed, slightly softened by a thin straw covering, but without the smell of urine and human excrement that permeated from the straw that covered the boxcar floor.

I said my silent prayer and fell into a deep restful sleep in this sanctuary. Now, at last, I could allow myself to relax and submit to an unguarded peaceful sleep for the first time in a long time. I had capitulated to an out-of-it dead-like sleep,

The next thing I knew, I was hearing music. I was bearing American popular dance music..... *The Dipsey Doodle will get you if you don't watch out. The Dipsey Doodle will...* ", I was hearing the strains of American music being played by an American dance band. It was becoming clearer and plain. I kept hearing more big band ' sounds. First, faintly, then more distinctly. I was hearing music that was popular back in America only this past summer. Just this past summer I was dancing to the sound of these big band tunes. I couldn't believe what I must be hearing. Was I in a prison camp hearing this? Or what? *Milkman, keep those bottles quiet....,* Now, I was clearly hearing this war song. All young soldiers loved the girls. Whether in song or real life, a girl was never far out of a young soldier's mind. This tune about the milkman was a song about a pretty American girl that worked in a war factory. She worked the night shift, and had just returned to her home and gone to bed, just about daylight. It was at this time, during the early morning that the milkman would make his house to house delivery of milk. He would place the milk on the porches and would often times rattle the glass milk bottles in his heavy metal wire carrying tray. ' Mr. Milkman, keep those bottles quiet she would say in the catchy tune.

The war songs, the love songs of the times were memorable to soldiers away from home. It was my first night in Stalag IV-B prison camp and I last remembered falling into a needed deep sleep when I first began hearing American songs that I had danced to with pretty Indiana girls in downtown Indianapolis hotel ballrooms during this past summer of 1944..... pretty girls, pretty dresses, beautiful songs, beautiful memories. I was hearing last summers American dance music even though my too dulled sleeping mind was telling me that I last went to sleep in a cold German Prison Camp. Even so, I knew I was clearly hearing American dance music. What a beautiful sound to a soldier that had gone through what I had gone through. It was a good happy sound of another time and another place.

I have died, I thought. Now, the good things, the good sounds of life were returning to me. Happy times! My misery and suffering and despair was gone. The misery of a German prison camp was of the past.

What would be next in this death journey? What voice would I hear next? Or see? Would an Angel appear? I was experiencing both slight fear and peace, but I couldn't fully grasp what was happening. It was like not being fully awake or asleep. I knew I was hearing American dance music that I had heard back in the States ..... and I last remembered being at the bottom, near the end of life, laying down in a hopeless, dreary blackened out war prison camp.

Was this my time to die? I weakly thought. " Die of starvation? Die of exhaustion? Thinking faded. The music faded. I was again in what must have been deep sleep.

I was awakened the next morning by the sound of a British voice that seemed to be reading from a prepared script. " The BBC also states, the German city of Hamburg received another bombing by squadrons of British night bombers totaling three hundred and fifty planes. To the south and west the fierce ground fighting was continuing into the sixteenth day with the Germans being thrown back all along the front that had penetrated Belgium. It was slow hard fighting, but foot by foot the lost ground was being retaken. The rains and weather conditions for the soldiers on the Italian front kept..... The resounding news report was coming from over my right shoulder and behind my head, and as I lifted my head up and turned it to the right to look behind me, I saw a neatly uniformed soldier, a slender British soldier of small stature, standing on a sort of platform reading aloud to all in the barracks what undoubtedly was a news report. And as I stared in amusement and disbelief, I momentarily lost what he was saying. When I at last regained my concentration, he paused and said in his seemingly professional and authoritative way, " You have just heard the morning BBC News Report for January 1, 1945." Then this astute Britisher stepped down from the platform from where he stood next to the stove along the front wall and walked out of the barracks to go to another barrack to make the same BBC Morning News Report I later learned.-

" What is that?" I asked a Britisher standing in the aisle just behind me.

" You just heard our morning news report from the BBC," replied the English soldier standing near my bed. This soldier, or rather prisoner, seemed to have a dignity about him that you would expect of the English. Indeed, he was neat in dress. His mustache was neatly trimmed and he spoke as if he were in great spirits. He seemed to be well in control'- of himself and the situation that he found himself in here along with the other British in this prison camp.

" You are one of the Americans from the big battle of a couple of weeks ago, aren't you?

I said, Yes."

We heard about you. Welcome to Stalag IV-B, " 'be said. " You look sort of done in."

Yeah, I hope we get some food here. It was hard getting here," I said.

He didn't say so, but I could see by his looks that he was thinking how sloppy and filthy we newly arrived American prisoners looked. He knew too I had mentioned food so he was quick to say, " The guards will bring hot soup at noon and we will share a tin of soup. And, you will receive a Red Cross food parcel, you know, part of the agreement of the Geneva Convention pertaining

to the treatment of Prisoners of War. The food parcel will contain chocolate bars, cans of meat, crackers, powered milk, sugar, concentrated energy food and packages of cigarettes and some other items. You will like this. With this and with what the Germans give you, you will do fine."

" When do you get the Red Cross package?" I said hopefully.

" We will get one Friday," He replied.

" But, why don't the Germans keep these packages for themselves? I asked.

" The package shipment and distribution is monitored by the International Red Cross as set out by the Geneva Convention and to tamper with or cause a breakdown in its delivery to the prisoners by the Germans would lead to serious consequences for the offender. The Germans, you see, as do the British and Americans and French, honor the Prisoner of War conduct code as set forth by the Geneva Convention. Each side has prisoners and act in accord with the Convention rules to assure protection and allow for communication with their own soldiers held as prisoners by the other side."

Then there was a pause and then there appeared to be a strain on his face, and he said, " With the recent, nearly daily bombing of the railways, now, trains are forced to set idle with our food parcels, and move when they can. We don't get them on time, sometimes. Trains can't travel during daylight for fear of being hit. They move only at night. And, there is damage to the tracks. It may get worse."

I was still amazed as to why the Germans whom themselves were so short of food and tobacco and soap and the very things that the Red Cross package contained would not take these away from the Allied prisoners. The British assured us, that these food parcels would be ours and I was just as sure that it would be the food in these parcels that would be the food that would save my life. Save me from total starvation.

" This is a British barracks you are in. I guess you have discovered that by now." he said.

" Yeah, I noticed that things seemed to be well organized. And was that music I heard last night? "

" Oh, Yes," he said. " We thought you new Americans that came into our barracks last night would enjoy a bit of back home music."

Yes, I thought. I had not died. But it was the British that had given us a blast of American music.

Stalag IV-B - The British 14.

I never knew bow they provided the music. Or bow they received the daily BBC, British Broadcast Corporation News Reports.

How did you get the news? " I asked.

The Germans have never found the source of our receiver. And if they did, we would quickly reconstruct another and we would continue on as before. They have given up searching," he said in a matter-of-fact way.

He seemed to be getting bored with the conversation and it was nearing time for us to line up outside for a numbers count by the German guard.

"Get ready to go out this door, " his finger was giving direction as he spoke, " and stand for a German prisoner check. We will all be going out in a few minutes, " he said.

" They have searched all the barracks for our receiver, but they have never found it. They search while we are outside for the prisoner check. They won't find it. " The receiver could have been hidden in any number of barracks, under some floor as suspected, or in another building or place only known to the British in this huge camp.

I know this, the current daily news was received early each morning and read to each barrack without fail.

Soon I had filed out of the barracks and stood in the back line, in the second roll of soldiers, or prisoners, as the Germans counted us. We were now German 'Gafanganans ', German prisoners. I had responded to my first German prisoner check.

The American soldiers were singularly interrogated and one by one we were filtered into this camp during the darkness of the first night. We were 'loners', placed here and there. A defeated, despairing attitude prevailed among the newly arrived bedraggled Americans. And I was no different from the other American prisoners. Just one night here in a British barracks changed that. Suddenly, I began to feel a new attitude of survival. A sense of hope. A confidence that the British had given me. The English prisoners-of-war had control of their part of the camp. They were organized and disciplined. They seemed to be more in control of their sector of the camp than the Germans. Among the British there was no stealing or despairing. They were clean and orderly. Their ingenuity was obvious by the way their BBC news came off every morning. It seemed the Germans never intended to interfere with this report and if it appeared there might be a conflict with a German guard's appearance, the report was just stopped, postponed, so as not to cause a direct confrontation. The British had this place organized as if they had set up camp just outside of Rangoon. They must be experts at adjusting and making the best of a situation for their own benefit.

I must repeat, the British were most helpful and comforting to us battered and demoralized newly American prisoners.

" Say, Chap, do you smoke?

" No, " I said.

" Well, then, you might want to go to a sort of market place, an international trading place of a sort. There you can trade a cigarette or two for bread, or potatoes, or for some canned fish, or for some delicates from Hungary, Egypt, or India if you like that sort of thing.

" Of course, you wouldn't trade a whole pack for much of what they have to offer..

Why? " I asked.

You can buy your way out of Germany with enough packages of cigarettes if you really wanted to.

I believed him.

" By the way, Chap, if you want to go to the market place, just go along the line of barracks," with a finger pointing toward the interior of the camp and a glance in that direction, " you will come to the trading place when you pass the last of the barracks across the way. "

He seemed to have thought of something he needed to do. And then he left for what appeared to be a temporarily forgotten task in another part of the barracks.

I looked at the door that led out to the line of barracks and without hesitation passed through it and moved on toward the interior of the camp.

It was like he said. The market place was a large open space, spotted with canvas tops held up by poles and there were men here and there holding out one thing or another. Foreign looking men could be seen all over the place reaching out with one type of food or cloth or thing from their country to trade with another for something else ... another cut of cloth, or cut of food or trinket, or ring, or shoes, or coat, or hat.

I could trade my Red Cross cigarettes or other of the American Red Cross packaged items with other foreign prisoners in exchange for other food items or for what ever other foreign prisoners had to offer.

The British were not traders. They seemed to be long time residents of this prison camp and had risen above the needs of all the others. It was British ingenuity and sheer stubbornness that separated them from the rest. I would guess they had been here well over two years, guessing they had been taken prisoner in North Africa.

The Indians, the Slovaks and the other shabby appearing people that mingled around the trading area were not as fortunate as the British in resourcefulness or ingenuity or in what they received in food packages from their homeland.

The Americans and the British received the best food packages of any of the prisoners. It was apparent that other nationalities were in desperate straits.

The British were at a level above this prison camp misery.

Being a newly arrived American placed in a British barracks, I found the association with the British effected me in a positive way, more every day.

The trading area that the British told me about gave me opportunity to see and be a part of bartering among men of many nations. I was experiencing something new here in this camp, though not necessarily rewarding, it did take my mind off the misery that I found myself in.

The Russians

There in the same large open rectangular area that set in the interior of the prison camp, one could look beyond the furthest line of groups of men bartering, and see near the far side of the open field, a distinct, visible sunken area in the ground. It had a drop of two to three feet, a width of about ten to fifteen feet, and approximately eighty yards in length.

One of the foreign prisoners told me, in broken English, as I paused and stood looking over the length and width of this not too deep pit, " The Russians are buried there."

There was a long silence.

I continued looking, now with more intensity, perhaps, to see if I could see evidence of a human body here or there, looking for fragments. Looking for anything. All I could see was a long sink hole lightly covered with snow that lay silently cold easily concealing anything that I might have been looking for. Except for a few lightly snow covered clods of dirt, here and there, the ground covering appeared perfectly smooth.

"They died of starvation. Just a thin cover of dirt ... covers the Russians."

I believed what he was saying.

The Russians would not permit Red Cross food parcels to be delivered to the prisoners that they held, nor would they allow a neutral country to make contact with their prisoners. Consequently, Russian held prisoners-of-war did not receive Red Cross food parcels or outside aid. Because of this, millions of prisoners that the Russians had died of starvation. Reciprocally, the Germans treated the Russians in like manner.

I knew after seeing this depression in the ground and hearing what the bystander had told me, that I knew this must be a mass grave for Russian

prisoners. And I felt certain, as a prisoner of the German's, that the Americans and British were receiving humane treatment from the Germans. I truly believed that Americans were liked and I would survive by just being an American. I hoped I was not mistaken in my belief.

Americans held Italian and German prisoners-of-war back in the states in prison camps. There was no doubt, but that the Germans knew that German soldiers that were captured were well fed and humanely cared for by the Americans. Germans had blood relatives in America, and had had for years and decades. These were Germans that moved to America to live. There was a blood-bond of a sort with Americans. So, to be an American meant you were a little 'special' . Being an American here in Germany gave me hope that I had a better chance to survive as a prisoner of the Germans.

And I truly believed I had seen a Russian mass grave that held starved-to-death bodies of Russians. They simply were not fed enough. They died of starvation. I knew that the Germans, the British and Americans abided by the rules of the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners-of-war and I felt I would make it through this prisoner of war ordeal because of this. The Russians that became prisoners were doomed. And the prisoners that the Russians took were certainly doomed.

Although the Russians were our Allies in fighting the Germans, Americans did not trust or understand the Russians. We did not prefer to be liberated by the Russians or to be mistakenly taken prisoner by them. We sensed an animalistic behavior in their aggressive dealings with other nationalities. It was natural to fear them somewhat and want to stay away from them.

Still, as I stood looking at the sunken area, I was saddened at what happened to these human beings. Through no fault of their own, war had brought them to this end. What cruel treatment humans are capable of doing to others of the human race.

This is war. Anything goes. War is death. And the life of a prisoner of war is one of uncertainty.

A Man Of God

On the first Sunday that I was in the prison camp I listened to the sermon of a British minister, and I heard, what I believed, his message to be a promise of my God that I would get through this ordeal. Here on this first Sunday I found an under girding of faith. The British told me of a Sunday service that would be held in a small building on the other side of the barracks that set across from the barracks that I occupied.

"You may want to go to a British worship service. It's Sunday, you know," the Britisher told me.

I had never felt much worse. I desperately needed to seek the help of my God.

We American prisoners had only arrived at this camp a day or two earlier when I attended the Sunday service inside the Stalag. The worship services were held in a small frame building turned chapel for this Sunday morning. Inside were only a few rows of hardwood benches separated By a center aisle. The aisle was no longer that thirty feet and led to a crude wooden pulpit behind which stood a reassuring British clergyman. As would be expected, he was a kind, sympathetic man. He was, truly, a man of God.

I sat on the hard bench with no back rest and gave myself to this man of God, and to God himself, in humble obedience here in this cold faceless small building that served the British as their chapel. I sat there limp in the make-do chapel, feeling alone. There were only a few others in the chapel. Nearly all British, I guessed. I wasn't sure about others. My mind was concerned about myself and my despairing, hopeless situation that I had come to be in and the hope of a spiritual contact with God.

At this time, I felt there was no sure hope for survival. As prisoners, we had lost all the body weight and substance, to near a point, I felt was necessary to live. We may be here forever or until we die, I thought. Even though the British gave encouragement, I still had not received my first Red Cross food package. I was still desperately hungry. And the thought of ever being home or back in America seemed less than real. The hope now was to survive this day on to the next day at this place. To hope to be back in America, that distant place, seemingly in some far too distant time, was too much to hope for, for now. The thought occurred that my continued deterioration would not make any long planned hope a possibility. But I went to this prison service for hope and for any divine encouragement that I could possibly receive. I was desperate for help. I needed a strength beyond myself.

The services began when the British clergyman rose and stood behind the pulpit and faced us to speak. His message was directed to the newly arrived group of American prisoners. And I listened.

He spoke of the boy in the pit.

"Joseph was left to die," the Britisher calmly spoke.

He was let down into the dry pit and left there alone...there to die. He was imprisoned , alone, with no help. He had no food or water ... and there was no way that he could get out of the deep hole in which he had been placed. It was cold. And soon it would be night and there would be complete darkness in his place of imprisonment. He was alone. He was placed there to die.

The clergyman knew that he was speaking to newly arrived prisoners that, like Joseph, felt alone and were faced with uncertainty of imprisonment. Imprisoned. Despair. No Hope.

"A ray of sunlight beamed down the wall to the bottom

of the pit from the upper side opening of the hole. The ray of light is our God. Look up to God. He is <u>still</u> there. He sees you now, in your darkness. Just as he saw Joseph," the clergyman spoke. "He still provides a ray of light. A shining beam of hope. Accept this hope and have faith. Like Joseph. Joseph had complete faith in his God. Even when darkness was about to set in, Joseph had no fear. In his belief in God, and in his faith in God, he knew he would be saved. And in his firm belief in God, and in his trust in God, he believed he would be saved. And he was. Before final darkness set in, a rope was lowered into the pit and Joseph was pulled up from his place of imprisonment."

" He is your light and he can save you as he willed Joseph to be saved from his pit of imprisonment. He knows you are here, imprisoned. He will, as he did with Joseph, take you from the deep depths of the pit. The pit of despair and doubt. Look up to God. Trust in God. And you too will be saved. Just as Joseph was saved."

I believed that. And I felt better, for I felt as Joseph, I too could be saved from my terrible predicament of imprisonment. I was mentally stronger from this day on because of a Sunday service in January, 1945 in the midst of a German prison camp.

Come to think about it, this was the only church service that I ever attended where a collection plate wasn't passed around. This church had no food bank, no money, no clothes, nothing to give. This church didn't have to seek out the needy. This church was in the mist of the needy. Still, this church served by proclaiming the word of God in faith and hope. It was a British church in a German prison camp to serve the spiritual needs of the prisoners. This was the first church service that I had attended while in the army. And I had been in the army now for a year and a half. And I was grateful for this service.

The Second And Last Week At Stalag IV-B

The one thing that surely would save me was the food that I would receive from the food, -parcels that were delivered to this camp by the International Red Cross. My body could not continue to survive with the once a day turnip soup that the Germans would provide. Even then the Germans gave us a serving of only three-quarters of a tin can full of hot liquid along with a single slice of brown bread. It was said that the bread was made of sawdust:, This I do not know. We were hungry. It tasted good to us. It was all eaten.

A German's prisoner's meal was served once a day. In the morning when we awoke, we learned that we would have no breakfast or nourishment. The Germans served us the watery soup in the afternoon, once a day. There was no lunch or dinner.

Thank God for the Red Cross food packages that provided the American prisoners with American canned and packaged food that was good, enriching

and sustaining. We limited ourselves as to how much of the Red Cross food we would eat at any one time. We learned to ration this out over a two week period so as not to run out of food before the next food shipment arrived for distribution. Thank God for the International Red Cross and for the food that they provided US. And thank God for the humane men that planned for this in humanity's sake in the event of war.

The Russians would not accept these life saving food packages from the Red Cross.

The Americans were the most undisciplined and the most 'spoiled' humans in the Stalag. Americans were from the `land of plenty' and for them to hunger was nearly unbearable. One American prisoner, who couldn't help himself, in his hunger, ate the total content of his share of the food package all at one time. He did this in an attempt to satisfy his hunger. Maybe he did. I don't know. I know his belly took the gouging. He became sick later that evening and threw up. For the next two weeks he nearly died for the lack of food.

We were all hungry, all the time. Never were we not hungry. We were "starved to death" and craving for food. We would take only one bite from a Red Cross packaged chocolate bar or take one piece of another food from the box of food to help our hunger. We had learned to ration our food so we would have some for the next day.

The Stalag was a whole new experience. I was adjusting to it. It offered hope and life. And things with me might have become better had I been there longer. But I was one of the prisoners that was scheduled to leave the camp for a work detail.

I would leave the security of the British, the church...the market place? And the protection that the camp might give along with the needed Red Cross food parcels that were being distributed here.

But, the work crews away from the camp would receive two hot meals a day. There would be more food. That is all that counted, to survive.

This camp wasn't so good after all, I thought. Other than the British, I thought of the dirty and the dying and the starving and the misery of the human race milling around in this wired compound. If

you weren't lying down out of weakness, you were down at the market place looking for a trade that didn't mean anything anyway. Nobody had anything. There was nothing else to do.

So, maybe to move out of here for preferential treatment, to go to a work place where you knew you would get two meals just for working, would be the next best thing to hope for.

So it was, by the second week of January, 1945, a group of us were loaded once again into confining boxcars and went with them as they moved slowly away from the fenced prison area of Stalag IV-B.

We were the second work group to leave. We had heard that the first group had been taken to a shoe factory. Or some might have gone to a coal mine. the word got around. Now, it was our time to go to a work place.

It was goodbye to the short stay at Stalag IV-B. And on to better things. Things would be better for all of us away from the prison camp. We all believed this. Let's get on with it!

Begging

A railroad track ran outside and parallel to the guarded, high barbed-wire fence that lined the west boundary of Stalag IV-B. This was the same track that emptied us into Stalag IV-B. Now, waiting wooden boxcars were sitting on the track silhouetted in a cold, snow-covered white landscape to take us to the work place. We filed out of Stalag IV-B and disappeared into the opening of a boxcar, made by a sliding side door, to find a spot where we could sit on the straw floor and rest our backs against the wall. There we waited. We sat cramped. But it would be different this time. We would go to a place where we would receive more food. And we would work.

At last, a jar, slam-bang, and the sound of creaking metal. Then, we began to hear the wheels roll slightly on the iron track, first slowly, then gently faster, until we felt the motion of the car move steadily forward, but in no hurry, to yet another place unknown to us.

Stalag IV-B was now behind us with all its still unknown mysteries. It was cold winter with seemingly everlasting gray skies and ever blowing snow. Only the closeness in sitting with other prisoners and the wool issue army clothing and wool army coat kept the freezing cold from the bones.

Still, we were hungry and needed more food. We were starving. We were quiet. There was no thought or talk in the boxcar as to where we were going. There was no thought as to what kind of work we might do. We had no choice. All along, we had been like a leaf on a running stream of water; we would go with the command. We had completely capitulated to the command of the German plan for our movement and disposition. Any kindness that we experienced with the front line German soldier was missing now. These were different people in command. There was no caring for our comfort or concern about how long we would be detained, cramped-up in a boxcar. There was no caring if we were given food.

Back home, a lone War Department telegram would be received, and it would read: Herbert M. Sheaner, Jr. " Missing In Action" as of December 16, 1944. Now, it was mid-January and this "Missing In Action" soldier was being

taken by the Germans to some unknown destination. Unlike before, this time we would be in a boxcar for only one night and part of the next day before the train would stop for good and the side door would be pushed open and we would leave the small confines of the boxcar, jumping to the snow-covered ground. We were in an open, farm-like area. A single house sat in front of us, across a road, not more than a hundred yards from the track. Off to our left, a couple hundred yards, and in line with the house, sat a large, corrugated metal shed or building. I imagined it was a factory or work place of some kind. We were led to the house and directed to enter. It was a vacant, one-story frame dwelling. There were no other structures to be seen in the flat, frozen farmland other than the vacant house and the large metal structure off to the left.

It was cold, very cold. It felt good to be inside the house, out of a new Russian blizzard that was blowing in from the east. The sky and the ground were full of snow... strong blowing snow... rolling on the ground, whipped up by the wind. Inside we were out of the blowing wind. It was cold inside, but dry. We were inside... leaving the smell of a foreign country's air... a smell of synthetic... a cold air that penetrated up the nostrils... a foreign smell. Here inside we saw the double-deck bunk beds that filled the room, and we knew then that this was a place meant for us.

There would be nothing new here. No more food. No more comforts. And no British to welcome us and provide leadership, order, and advice.

This house would hold us for days. We were nearly totally left without food, and would have been, had not the guards brought us some paper sacks that contained dried sugar beet shreds. At first, the sugar beet shreds seemed like what straw must be like if eaten. But there was a certain amount of sugar-taste bulk that could be gotten out of eating the pulp sugar beet shreds. And we began to like them... naturally, when you have nothing else to eat.

Sugar beet pulp shreds... that would be our food-diet for nearly two weeks.

The sugar beet shreds were hard, crispy-like, dried, glittered cuts of sugar beets that had been processed and the sugar extracted... we had the no-good leftovers.

For two weeks we remained here in this large, single room, eating dried sugar beet pulp, lying around, talking about food, and wondering when and where we would go next. We first thought we would be working in the factory that was nearby. We soon learned that it was a sugar-beet factory. That's where all the sugar beet shreds were coming from. As yet we weren't working in this factory. So, here we were, not working, and not getting the two hot meals that we had been told by other prisoners back in Stalag IV-B that we would receive as workers... and here we were further deteriorating, even more so than ever before. We thought we had already lost as much body strength as was possible... yet, we were losing more.

There was a single door at the backside of the house that opened to a tall, wire-fenced back yard. We had free access to the back yard. A dirt path ran along the other side of the fence, and in the early morning, just after daylight, and

again as darkness of evening began to set in, slave help would walk the trail. First, in the early morning coming from the west, passing along the fence and walking on to the factory, then returning along the trail at dusk, unguarded, walking to their slave home. This was the first slave help that I had seen.

These slave people were both men and women. They looked like (I guessed) they were from Yugoslavia. They were worn and gaunt themselves. But they looked like they were faring better than we were. There was no doubt but that they were a poorly-fed, miserable group of workers with little or nothing to give us. Nevertheless, it wasn't many days after we arrived here that our hunger became so great that we found ourselves lining up along the fence, stretching an arm through the fence, with palm up, hoping for food, or anything, that these poor, passing slaves could give us to eat. We were begging for food. We held our palm up and out, as far as our arm would go through the fence, standing there in the cold, as darkness of night neared, hoping someone would place something to eat in the palm of our hand.

A half dozen, or so, of the prisoners had been given some sugar beet shreds in small, brown paper sacks by some of the slave help as they walked by a day or two earlier. Some prisoners were lucky enough to have received some pure granulated brown sugar. It was eaten by the spoonful. Now, we were all outside at the first sign of darkness. After the sun had gone down, we stood there, next to the fence, with our palms up, fingers extended, stretching our arms out toward the path on which we knew, at any minute out of the near darkness, the slave help would come walking down, returning from their day's work in the factory, going back to their homes. Now they were bringing sacks of sugar beet shreds and brown sugar. There were not enough sacks for all of us. But some of us would be lucky... a sack would be placed in an open hand by slave help.

An incredible sight! Here we were, once part of the best-fed army in the world, and the strongest men on earth, lined-up in tattered clothes, dirty faced, unshaven, weak and bony... turned beggars. Beggars! That's what we had turned into. We were now beggars. You had to be a beggar in hope of surviving, rather than give up and face depletion and starvation death.

It was bad here. There were no more Red Cross food parcels. We received no soup or sawdust bread... just sugar beets... dried sugar beet pulp. What was it good for? And when there were no more dried sugar beet shreds in the house that the German guards brought, we waited until we knew it was time for the slave help to return from work. Only to go outside and wait, and stand by the fence with an arm extended through the fence, stretched out as far as it would go, in hope that one of the slave-help workers would give us some sugar beet pulp from the factory. And sometimes they would. And you were glad. Gee, the weekends in Indianapolis with the girls were never like this. The girls loved the soldiers. But we weren't soldiers anymore. We were beggars.

At times, after they had passed, two or three of us would stay and stand outside along the fence, long after dark, stand silently in the snow, hoping that a slave-help worker would return with food from their house. It was just a hope.

One evening, after dark, a small, black-haired lady, one of the slave-help workers, did return, walking up the trail, bringing with her some 'real food'. She handed another prisoner and me some bread and meat. The two of us that were still standing and hoping there, that cold night, were rewarded for our persistence. God bless this poor woman, that returned to bring us food, even though we knew she had so little food, herself, to give.

Could you imagine, standing there, in the snow by a fence, an American soldier who, back in America, had wrestled three soldiers, one after the other, in succession, and subdued them? A soldier that, alone, dared to take on "a gang" of high school "thugs, bullies"...a soldier steady and keen of shot that was appointed to be the company sniper ... a soldier that could walk for miles and dig defensive positions all night and was strong of body. Now, there he was ... a weakened human being ... with failing energy. Now a beggar...begging to survive. Hoping to get enough food to live.

Things would get better wouldn't they? For two weeks the only thing we had to eat was dried sugar beet shreds...things weren't getting better here! It was getting worse!

Frank

Early each morning, on the road in front of the house, we could hear the sound of a passing, horse-drawn wagon. In a short time, we imagined it to be a milk wagon on its way to a nearby town. Surely, there was some civilization around. There must be. Then my thoughts would go back to the wagon and the milk that it must be carrying. I believed I alone could have drunk half of the milk in the wagon... all by myself. Now, we were becoming delirious.

I don't think we were ever as hungry as we were right now. We might have thought we were hungry during those two weeks in December, when we were first captured back on the other side of the Rhine and we never had a meal. It didn't compare to the hunger we were experiencing now! And, even back at Stalag IV-B, we were doing better. But now, after a month-and-a-half without breakfast, and without lunch and dinner, and with only the prison camp's three-fourth's of a tin can full of turnip soup for a day's meal, it wasn't hard to figure out why we were so constantly hungry.

On one occasion, after hearing the milk wagon pass early one morning, I remember saying to the fellow prisoner in the bed to the front of mine, "You know, I used to drink a gallon of milk a day. Sometimes I would drink nearly a gallon of milk at breakfast... that was back home before I got in the army."

"I would cook a large pot of oatmeal before I went to school. We didn't have a cereal bowl big enough to hold it all. I'd put a lot of water in the pot, and put a lot of salt in it, and let it boil. Then, I'd pour a lot of oatmeal in it." By now, I could see it boiling up in the pot in front of me. I don't know, for sure, if the

prisoner in the next bunk was listening to me. But I was listening as I talked on. And I know he must have been listening because I was talking about eating.

"And then, after three minutes of cooking, I'd pour it in a big bowl. It was a big bowl like one you would serve family potatoes in. In the bottom of the bowl I would put a big hunk of butter. I would put a lot of butter in the bottom of the bowl. In a few minutes you could see the melted butter ooze up through the thick hot oatmeal... all the way to the top. Boy, was it good! I put plenty of sugar on it and poured real rich cream on top and stirred it up. Boy, was it good! I bet I would never stop eating if I had that now."

"And I would make four pieces of toast. And fry some bacon. Boy, was it good! I could drink a whole gallon of milk with it."

"My aunt lived on a farm and brought us big gallon jugs of milk. Boy, it was real farm milk! It was good. All the cream would come to the top and I would use a spoon to dig out the thick cream and I'd put it on my cereal, nothing but rich cream on cereal. I stirred rich thick cream into the buttered oatmeal... I liked Bran Flakes, too. I liked breakfast. It was so good."

"What did you like for breakfast?"

The young farm boy from Iowa responded, "I used to go to my grandmother's, and she would fix a hot waffle, put butter all over it. Then she would put bacon on top of that, and then put another waffle on top of that and then some eggs on top of that and then another waffle on top of that..."

He might have continued talking, but by now I was thinking. Besides, by now, my mouth was smacking. I knew what he was talking about. I loved waffles. And on top of all the waffles, bacon and eggs, and maybe another waffle on top of that, I could see the sweet syrup being poured over the waffles and this soldier eating that. I knew he must have eaten three waffles, one on the top of the other, but as he kept talking, I lost what he was saying, for I was already deep in my own thoughts about eating waffles.

"Did you ever go to the waffle shop at the circle in downtown Indianapolis? Boy, those were the best waffles you ever ate. Boy, were they good!"

We were unaware that all we were talking about was what we had eaten, what Mama used to cook for us, or what Grandmother, a girlfriend, or a wife would fix for us.

You couldn't forget your hunger. So now, all we could do was talk about it. And we talked about it. And we talked about it. And we fantasized about eating. Eating is all we thought about and talked about.

Have you ever missed a meal? And when you did, were you real hungry when it was time to eat the next meal? Say you missed this meal too, and the next meal and the next meal, and you never had breakfast again. No oatmeal, no waffles, no cereal, never, never... and no more milk. After no breakfast, then you have

no lunch, never... and no dinner, never... but as night approached, you were given a little more than half of a can of turnip soup or cabbage soup in a small tin can. If not that, then dried sugar beet shreds, like we had been getting here. And when this goes on for weeks, then you really know hunger. Who would believe this hunger, I thought?

God! We missed our loved ones. And, we missed the food that they gave us.

Still, we talked of food and what it was like. Forget about it reminding us of being hungry. We already were hungry and couldn't forget that for a minute. So, talking about it couldn't remind us of our hunger. We were already reminded constantly anyway. So we talked about it.

This is where I met Frank, a young, teenage soldier like myself. He was from Pittsburgh. When I saw him, I thought he was in worse physical shape than I was. He was quiet. Not aggressive. He was kind and gentle. He stood tall and slender... a dark-eyed, innocent Italian boy. I thought he was "left out"... maybe one that others had taken advantage of. He was good, and absolutely trustworthy. It was time to have a buddy. The two of us began to share, protecting and caring as buddies, to survive through this ordeal until it ended.

There were not enough bunk beds for each prisoner. Two prisoners had to share a single bunk. The Germans meant it to be this way. During these cold winter nights, with the loss of body fat and weight, we needed more than the clothes we wore to bed to keep us warm. Two men huddled next to each other in a bunk could give each other warmth. So it was. Each prisoner shared a bunk with a fellow prisoner and, generally, this fellow prisoner was his buddy.

You and your buddy would share the fortunes of food that one or the other might be lucky enough to receive from a slave laborer that gave you food out by the fence. One of you could be by the fence and take turns standing in the cold for a handout. So it was with Frank and me. Frank was a good person. He was a young, drafted soldier, like me... he wanted to live on, somehow, and get out of this. He, too, had come from a good home. It was a good, Italian home. He Italian... me, Irish and German Swiss. But both of us were thoroughly American... American kids.

Before we would be moved from this place, a pattern had been set. We would share the food from Red Cross packages and share the sugar beet shreds, and any other food that either one of us would receive while begging out in the back, near the rear fence. I was the one that would dole out the food and be responsible for saving most of it for the next day, so we would have food for those days when no food was given us. We needed food for the next day so we could live for another day. I decided what we would eat and when we would eat it. We together would get through this. I would see to this.

Time slowly passed. We had been here for two weeks. We were just here... waiting. After awhile, it became apparent that the sugar beet factory was not to be our work place as we first thought might be the case. We weren't getting two hot meals. We weren't getting one hot meal. We weren't getting any Red Cross food packages here. We got dried shredded sugar beets, and at times,

brown granule sugar from the beets. Most of this we received in outstretched hands through the fence, along with anything else that we might be lucky enough to receive. And this wasn't enough. We had to move on from this place. We were ready to leave this house and go back to the boxcars sitting on the nearby rail track and move on to a new destination. Hopefully, to go to a work place where things would be better... to a place where we would be better fed.

Then, one day, we were led out the front door. We were leaving the slave help who befriended us, and the sugar beet factory, and the confinement in this isolated frame house. The day was February 1, 1945 and it had never been colder. We guessed we must be somewhere in north-central Germany, away from the Alps, the forest, and the mountains of southern Germany. Here, we were on flat farmlands, far removed from the Rhine River. It was colder here. Probably, we were in the eastern part of Germany, somewhere below Berlin, we thought. We must not be too far from Poland.

And now, we were about to take another ride in a boxcar.

Oscar

We were leaving the lost, cold isolated dwelling ...and we were leaving Oscar, a friendly German guard, a different kind of guard. The guards here were not like the harsh guards back at Stalag IV-B. Our guards now were the not-fit-to-soldier type guards, dressed in old, worn, German winter uniforms. Oscar was one of them.

Oscar was a kind guard who was sympathetic toward his young, hungered American captives under his care. He, like one or two of the other guards, could be seen, at times, taking a prisoner to the guard's backroom where he would give the prisoner some food he had secretly brought with him into the prison-house. The German guard's giving food to a prisoner had to go unseen, away from the other prisoners.

Oscar was an older man. He was the only guard that I remember who talked to us...seemingly befriending us.

The prisoners called him Oscar...but not to his face. We didn't know the friendly guard's name, so we named him Oscar.

" Hitler, nix!" he would say, as he circled his right hand around the right side of his head, giving us the impression that he meant Hitler was mixed-up or crazy. And then he would say, " Roosevelt, nix!" We knew he didn't like the war.

In this friendly atmosphere, someone asked Oscar if the Germans would allow Berlin to fall to the Russians or to the Americans. We knew that the Russians

were nearing Germany and that the Americans had already reached Germany's western border.

" Nix, nix ... not Russians, nix ... Americans, ya," slightly nodding his head up and down. " No Ruskie, Americans, ya." If it had to fall, the Germans would let the Americans take it ... but never the Russians.

Americans, ya ... no, no Ruskie. Never the Russians.

I think he liked us.

"Italians, English, Germans all mixed-up in America," he would say, turning his head from side to side, seemingly unable to understand this, and in friendly, mocking disapproval he would make an imaginary stir with a finger of his right hand as it circled the air in front of him. His facial expression let us know he couldn't understand the 'mixing pot' of races and nationalities in America. He was reminding us of the difference of America and Europe. He was questioning and at the same time displayed an amusement at America's mixture of races and nationalities. I think he liked and admired Americans.

He wasn't afraid, being alone with us, and saying, "Hitler, nix." He didn't like Hitler.

Now, we were leaving a kind, friendly guard. Oscar. This German guard could do very little to help us in our desperate situation ... but he tried. The friendly talk, if only for short periods of time, did take our minds away from our hunger-despairing thoughts.

We were leaving to go to somewhere else.

The Second Day of February

On the second day of February, 1944, back home in Dallas, the old electric streetcar approached the end of the line at the bottom of the long, gentle-sloped hill on Worth Street where it intersected with Abrams Road in the Lakewood area of East Dallas. With the squeaking and grinding of metal, and after two or three small jolts, the streetcar came to a stop. The conductor quickly exited the front door to pull down the overhead arm connecting the electric cable at one end of the trolley and raise the arm at the other end of the trolley, fitting it in place over the electric cable in preparation for the journey back downtown. The conductor wore a trainman's uniform, along with the customary conductor's black hat, easily recognizable with its measured stiff brim and hard, rounded bill laced with yellow trim. He was busy outside tending to his trolley cables. The ladies and the few men that couldn't serve in the war were exiting from the single front entry. Only moments before, the men had been standing in the aisle

holding onto a circular, white-glossed leather sling that hung down from an iron rod that ran the length of the trolley, while all the women occupied all the seats.

The car had been crowded with workers, mostly office workers that were coming home from a day's work. Gasoline was rationed. There was no production of automobiles. This was war. Not at all unbearable in America ...inconvenient, yes. The sons, the husbands, the brothers... the men, young and strong, were gone. So was sugar, cigarettes, and most food items. Some were rationed, or scarce, or not available at all.

One of the women to descend was my mother. She was young, pert and beautiful, appearing years younger that her actual age. No one could suspect that she would have a young soldier son in Europe. Her face didn't show it. Only a short two years earlier, her away warring soldier was a schoolboy at home. My, things quickly changed. First to college for less than a year ... then called into service to an army at war, proud and strong. To everyone that knew her, she was cheerful, optimistic, one that never spoke of doom or gloom. She never once told her soldier son to be careful or showed any apprehensiveness. She instead saw opportunity. And now she took the last step off the trolley car and released her hand from the rail grip, turned to the left and began her walk up the gentle hill along Abrams Road to go home. It would be quiet there, away from people at work. It would be a quiet place to talk to God.

The familiar clang of the streetcar disturbed the silence of her walk. Clang! Clang! The conductor pulled the cord once more to let people know he was moving forward and "get out of my way."

That was reality. But yet, she hadn't accepted that her son was lost in the war. She would talk to God more about that, that night, she thought, as she walked toward home. She couldn't stop thinking about the War Department telegram that "Regretfully" informed her that her son was missing in action 16 December, 1944 in Germany. Missing since December. It was now February and she hadn't heard anything different. He was still "Missing In Action." Missing in action since December ... over the bleak holidays, and during all of January, and now it was February.

On this second day of February, she, in silence, thought about her son as she had everyday. She wondered. It was like a loved one toppled from a boat, disappearing in deep water, and wondering how he managed in suffocation, or was it possible he surfaced and managed to survive somehow? In her thought, the boat is there ... the army is there ... but he was missing. What had he gone through? What really happened to him? Was he torn? Suffocated? Hollering for water like dying men on a battlefield? No, it wasn't like that, she thought. She wouldn't think like that about a son she dearly loved.

She never heard me holler. I didn't. I was unharmed.

On the second day of February, the boxcar stopped. We remained motionless inside.

We sit in silence on bits of straw that had been strewn on the floor, with knees pulled up toward the body and leaning against the boxcar wall where we could. Suddenly the screech of metal and the side-door slid sideways until it opened fully, allowing the bright light of a thin, blue winter sky to settle on the huddle of dark figures, squashed, confined in a dark place.

We worked our way to the opening, by heel and butt to palm of hand, inching along the floor until we were there. We then turned and lay our breast to the straw floor and slid from the boxcar coming down feet first to the ground. We had arrived in the German town of Merseburg. We would never ride in a German boxcar again.

We were a miserable group of haggard, starving Americans that were still trying to find their place nearly two months from the start of the winter battle, later to be known as "The Battle Of The Bulge", that had taken place back west of the Rhine. We were dirty and filthy. The same clothes, with the stains of mud, snow, sweat and cuts...urine and strains of dysentery that had somehow escaped our control and had hardened in the cold undergarments...the same clothes, smelly dirty clothes that we had slept in, on the ground, back in December. These were the same clothes we wore then that we wear now. The same socks, the same underwear were with us all the way. We would either die or live on in these clothes ... which ever came first. Our eyes were sunken. Our hair, face, our bodies were raw from the weather. Un-cleaned and unwashed for nearly two months. We were not a sight to see. But neither was Merseburg. Merseburg had been devastated with whole sides of houses being knocked down to rubble by the bomb's blast. The Air Force had been here as it had been over most of Germany. There was a picture I could see hanging from one of the walls of a room's half which was still standing. The picture reminded me of home for a brief moment.

We walked in a single column through Merseburg, first toward the east for a few blocks, then turned south, going through the town. I saw no humans. And they did not see me. This was war. Dirty prisoners of war walking through a dead, bombed-out town. We would be treated no better than the treatment that this town had received. We would be neither mourned nor welcomed. This town had mourned enough already for its dead. We were just a part of this horrible war that saw no end. On we marched through this dead town, walking down a street that couldn't give us its full measure ...where the rubble of houses overflowed onto the street, narrowing its passageway...jagged rubble and dirt piles were all so close. In a lonely and cold quietness we walked through and away from this. We followed the lead guard down the street and after a few blocks we came to a small stone bridge that we walked over, crossing a small stream, leaving Merseburg, entering a village on Merseburg's South side called Meuschau. On the other side of the bridge and to the left, facing the small stream, was an old German Inn, The Gasthaus Bohme. A sign on the Inn told us that the innkeeper was Otto Bohme. A short, narrow, seldom traveled street lay between the inn and the stream.

Our column turned left after crossing the stone-arched bridge, moved down the narrow street, when the head of the column stopped in front of the Gasthaus. But, only for a moment. The column then turned right and was led through an opened fenced gate and we began entering the Gasthaus' high fenced front yard. We didn't stop there.

"Come on, Frank, let's see what's in here." The guards were filing us into the Inn.

There was no Otto Bohme here in Merseburg or in this little village just outside of Merseburg called Meuschau. Not now. There had been an Otto Bohme here, we later learned. He was a prisoner of war ... in America. His wife was here at the Inn. She still lived with this bombed-out town and with this place that once served the public as Gasthaus Bohme. Later, we would ask ourselves, how could she have known that her husband was an American prisoner of war and not care for us a little better? Surely, she knew German prisoners-of-war held by Americans were given three meals a day. Her husband surely must have written home and told her of his good treatment.

Once inside the Inn, we found we were in one large room filled with double-deck, wooden bunk beds. The beds were lined from one end of the room to the other end, foot to head, with two lines of beds pushed up against each other, side by side. There was a corridor to walk in and another double line of beds and another corridor, and yet another double line of beds. The beds were in line north to south.

There was a single entry into the room. It was a front entry near the northeast corner of the Inn. The room was rectangular shaped. To the right of the front door, after entering, was the prisoner's toilet sitting in a small dark room that measured about five-foot by five-foot with the entry door removed. The prisoner's toilet housed a single toilet seat. It reminded me of the old farmhouse outhouse, a large planked-like box, with a hole cut out on the topside covering a pit below. There was no plumbing or washstand. On the other side of the toilet room, along the north front wall and centered in the room, was a large, round-bellied heating and cooking stove.

This would be our prison quarters.

Frank and I took a lower bunk about midway down a column of beds, near the middle of the room.

Outside, and to the front of the Gasthaus, there was a small fenced yard stretching across the front and extending to a small area along the left side as you faced the Gasthaus.

It was cold inside the Gasthaus. The single stove sitting next to the north wall couldn't heat the room. The stove could warm you if you stood next to it. It was still dead of winter and you thought it to be nearly as cold inside as outside in this large, high-ceiling open room. In order to keep warm, all the prisoners slept with all their clothes on. We only took off our shoes. We used our

backpack as a pillow. We placed it at the end of the bunk closest to the north wall. No particular reason except that we felt more alone to ourselves as we lay there at night and could look down into the darker part of the Gasthaus, away from the single night-light positioned by the stove on the north wall.

Each new place brought hope. Maybe it would be better here!

We might be fed ... Three meals a day!

A hundred Americans placed here in this cold, old, dead, bombed, damaged Gasthaus. We matched the cold, dreary insides of this building. All hundred of us, like before, would find a straw bunk in this single room and this would be our night resting-place.

There was no time to rest now, though.

"Rouse, rouse," a guard hollered from the front door. Other guards were moving among us, swinging an arm, motioning us to move toward the front door where others were exiting.

We left our pack and blanket, if we had one, on a bunk bed, and moved with the command.

We were going outside to obey orders that were forth coming. We were here to work! We were here to work and we were going outside to learn of the German plan for our work.

The Gasthaus

We soon learned that this would be more than a work place. This would be a testing arena for survival for American prisoners-of-war. Prisoner-of-war camps, as I had imagined them, would be warm barracks that housed waiting men, men waiting for the war to end. There they would sit in game rooms, play cards, write letters, read ... or play outdoors volleyball, and generally, leisurely pass the time away, dull and sad over their predicament. Maybe it wouldn't be quiet like this, but it would border on this, thought I, a young teenage soldier introduced to war. I remember the movies showed it to be this way. How naive had I been? By now, this thought of how I thought it would be was a long forgotten memory. The reality of now was to survive in this foreboding place.

Some men's attitudes and behavior, because of the continued lack of food, began to change. It appeared that this might become the survival of the fittest ... if one could last that long. This was to be likened to an animal world. We were going to stretch our living limits to survive. Here we would encounter a new threat ... it would be a hand full of Americans. I was forced into change, to adjust ... to be challenged and stand up to, maybe fight, an evolving group of 'no good' American prisoners. You could quietly give in to the new threat, the

aggressors, and the thieves, submit, and hope, and possibly weaken and die ... or you could stand your ground and fight back if necessary.

At this place would emerge from among us, five desperate, undisciplined type prisoners. You could imagine them acting and looking like the 'bad guys' with the unshaven faces in the old Wild West movies ... the 'bad guys' of the Wild West movies!

These five human beings, once American soldiers, would turn into an unruly 'pack of five', like animals. The 'bad guys', here in the Gasthaus, as days turned into weeks, would roam the floor and take food from the weak whenever they could. The rest of us remained passive and tried to preserve our strength and went to our beds after the evening meal of soup, while the 'bad guys', which I call the 'dirty five', would group around the back wall of the room, seemingly planning another theft. Later, we learned we had to lay on, and sleep on, any food that we had saved in order to keep it from being stolen. Still, prisoners would awake the next morning and find that their life sustaining food was missing. "Someone got my food," you would hear a prisoner say. Someone had stolen it! The 'dirty five'!

No one ever admitted to seeing or catching a thief in the act of stealing. But we knew, or imagined, it was one of these five that was doing the stealing.

It couldn't have been much different for the prisoners at the infamous Andersonville prison during those last days of the Civil War. At Andersonville, prisoners were crowded together unimaginably close and a group of dominating, unruly thieves got out of hand. In the end, the Confederate guards intervened and allowed the prisoners to hold trial for the 'ruffian stealing outlaws' that had subjugated and controlled the inside of the prison camp over a long period of time. These Civil War criminal outlaws were called 'raiders' by the other prisoners. This type, among our small number, I called the 'dirty five'.

Our 'dirty five', like the 'raiders', were trying to intimidate and subjugate the other prisoners. They began by stealing and taking from the weak.

It all started well enough here in the Gasthaus, and with our work away from the Gasthaus, with no apparent immediate sign of change in human behavior. But, change did come. Here, to live, we were going to have to endure. There is no need pretending that it was easy. It wasn't. It wasn't like you could wait out the starvation and wait for deliverance and all would be well. Now, in addition to starvation, the bone cold weather, disease, the uncleanness, the privation, and the forced labor, there would come the threat from within... the five unruly prisoners that wouldn't, or couldn't, conform and would become the bullies, the thieves.

We all had to have restraints and controls in times of desperation like these.

In my own desperation here, I would develop the courage, the same courage, I thought, that I would have had back at 'the front', in battle, had the same type of situation presented itself. It was desperate courage spawned of necessity. My courage would be tested later. I would challenge and fight one

of the 'dirty five'. I would confront and threaten to fight another. I would escape. I would escape a second time. I would make a third escape... this time for good. All of the escapes were over food. And the fight, and the threat to fight, were over food.

On the first morning of the first day, the hundred of us at the Gasthaus learned we were here to work. Every day, from that day on, we would rise in the early morning and walk away from the Gasthaus to work during the daylight hours and return shortly before dark for the day's single serving of a cup of soup and a slice of bread. The serving of soup to the prisoners was done immediately upon returning to the Gasthaus.

We would line-up inside the Gasthaus with the head of the line stationed in front of the large potbellied iron stove and as the line moved, and we passed the stove, we were served one large dipper full of hot turnip soup or cabbage soup. We would watch intently as the dipper disappeared into the large cooking vat and surface again full of watery soup. Watching it being poured into a tin can that we gripped in our right hand and hoped that we might receive more than the three-fourth of a small can of soup that was being served us. With our left hand we reached out for the single slice of German brown bread that was offered us. This was our only meal for the day. We had no breakfast. We had nothing for lunch ... ever.

The German bread that was served wasn't white and soft and sweet like American bread. American bread tastes like cake, I thought. This dark, thick German bread contained, or was made of, sawdust, I was told. It didn't matter what it was or what it was made of. It was good. It was food, to go along with the soup.

The meal wouldn't last long. In a few minutes it would be consumed. And we would still be hungry.

With a tin can of hot soup in one hand and a slice of German dark bread in the other hand, we would walk to our bed and sit on the bunk and slowly begin to eat...eating slowly to make it last longer. How good this little bit of soup tasted. And maybe we would find a small hunk of meat in the soup or a piece of diced carrot. Oh, how good this was. There in silence, the dying men would finish the scant serving of watery soup and idly sit for a moment and think of home and what a real meal had been like. Thoughts wouldn't refill this empty can that we were still clutching. But, it was time to think of home...and food. And in silence we did.

We slipped the can in our army pack at the head of our bed, took off our shoes, and laid down to rest for the night and continued to think how good food used to taste. Food ... that was all we could think of now. It was continually on our minds. We would lay still in a silent quietness. Men were tired...thinking...trying to persevere. Then we would reach down toward the foot of the bed and pull the single blanket and the heavy olive drab army overcoat over us, tucking it in over our shoulders, warming us and protecting us from the quickening, darkening coldness of this chilled, wintry room. Now, in a small, soft darkness, a dim early evening light shown behind us on the north wall back by the potbellied

stove. Another much smaller dim light near the southwest corner of the room faintly glowed where the 'dirty five' could be seen standing and quietly talking, while the rest of us would lay in rest for the coming day.

Sometimes we would lay on our backs and look up toward the ceiling and see distant stars shining through the jagged holes in the bomb damaged roof, and think of home. Were these the same stars that I used to see as a kid when I was outside my family's house, standing in the yard gazing up during a dark night and seeing them twinkle? Then, I wondered about the mystery of the stars and the universe. Now, I wondered if my family looked up too, and saw the same stars that I was seeing? In this quietness, we would think of loved ones. These thoughts would again fade and give way to the old thoughts of food and the nagging pains of hunger. Hunger thoughts were ever with us! They never really left us. They were always there. God! ... We must sleep now. Even though the early evening darkness had just set in, we must escape our world of hunger, and as weak and hungry as we were, we must begin to sleep through another night for another day, tomorrow. The Gasthaus kept us for the night. During the day we were always up and away.

Here, there was no Saturday or Sunday. There was no weekend, as we had known it. We never knew what day it was. Every day was the same. Every day was a workday. Yet, every day was different from every other day. What would happen during a workday was always changing and what happened back at the Gasthaus that night was unpredictable.

During the first daylight hour of the first day, two old German guards dressed in their old army winter-green uniform, wearing green overcoats with matching green wool hats with a small metallic emblem attached, gripping the sling of their rifle with their right hand, with the rifle slung over their right shoulder, barrel pointed up, walked down the narrow corridor between the rows of wooden double-deck beds and barked out the command, "Rouse MIT. Rouse MIT," repeating, "Rouse MIT, Rouse MIT." We knew we were to set up. Already dressed, we knew we were ready to move at their command. The ring of still another German command coming from outside in front of the Gasthaus compelled us to go to the single door that opened to the outside and to walk out into the front yard of the Gasthaus. We didn't understand the German command but we knew that it was an order for us to go to the front fenced yard.

We quickly formed a line of single file men exiting through the front door into the small open compound surrounded by the high-wired containing fence. We continued through the narrow compound, and through the open front wire gate, onto the narrow street where the lead guard turned right. The lead prisoner followed to a point of about one hundred feet where he stopped, and stood, and then was motioned by the guard to turn and face away from the Gasthaus. The other prisoners did likewise. Then the middle of the column broke and a second line formed and turned right and stopped in front of the first line. And it, too, turned and stood and faced away from the Gasthaus. We were dirty and ragged standing in a line of a column of twos from east to west facing north. Facing our new command ... a new German face ... standing in front of us in a clean uniform. We were there to obey and survive. We were at his mercy and would obey his command.

We stood on the small side street that led to nowhere, unless you were to turn left and walk a couple hundred feet, or so, to the main road. There, where the small street connected with the main road, you could turn right, cross over the bridge, and enter into Merseburg. If you took a left turn at the main road, you would immediately see black, cultivated farmland off the right side of the road. A few houses lined the road on the left side and they quickly gave way to flat, black farmland that now occupied both sides of the road as it narrowed and disappeared towards the southeast.

To our right, this narrow street on which we stood extended only a few more feet to where the pavement ended. Beyond continued a small, dirt foot trail used by farmers and villagers as they walked on this side of the small creek that ran east to west and cut this village off from the town of Merseburg.

On this first early morning as we stood in line wondering and waiting outside of the Gasthaus, we wondered what would happen next? What were we doing out here? Would we go somewhere from here? What kind of work would we do?

It wasn't long before an old Home-Guard type soldier began passing out metal spades, one to each of us. We were standing, holding a spade with no handle. Now, I said a 'German soldier'. No, this was an old man, a hobbled old German in a German Home-Guard uniform. He wasn't a soldier at all. I hadn't seen a German soldier since the Ardennes Forest. The other guards, for the most part, were old men or hobbled Germans just like this one. It was no different on this day.

Soon, we all had a spade. We heard the order, " March, " and saw the end of the column to our left turn and start walking down the narrow street toward the main road. We all turned and followed. The word 'march' is an army term. We followed the lead guard with more of a walk than a march.

At the main road, we turned left, walked south to a point for about a quarter of a mile where we were led off the road, going to the right. Crossing over black-dirt farmland for about a hundred yards, we reached a strand of small trees that lined a creek. This was the same creek that separated the Gasthaus from the town of Merseburg. The creek had turned and now was running in a southwesterly direction.

We were halted next to a growth of small trees and young saplings. Small hatchets were passed among us and we were told in German, with visual demonstration, that we were to cut a branch from a small tree, or sapling, and trim it so that it would be about five feet in length and tapered at one end. This would be fitted into the open metal sleeve on the backside of the spade. This metal sleeve would encase one end of your newly-created personal spade handle.

You wanted a straight limb. But sometimes you got a bowed limb and you twisted it around to see if it would work. If it didn't, you looked for another limb or small tree, one that you could use for making a handle for your spade. The finishing touches of nailing the limb in the casing to the spade were done back

on the street in front of the Gasthaus. When we had all completed attaching our five foot limb handle to the metal spade, we lined-up on the street again with, more than not, crooked shovels, leaning up and over our right shoulder, pointing skyward as if an army rifle, and ordered to walk back to the main road and back over the black farmland to the same creek. This time we passed the line of small trees and continued walking ... following the creek to a place where the creek had become partly filled with soft dirt, clods of black dirt that had washed into the creek from past rains. No young German farm boys were here to take care of this. They had long ago departed for the Russian front or, just last year, had been conscripted to halt Americans advancing west of the Rhine. Maybe the old man, the German guard, could get us to do this work.

We were halted here at the edge of the creek. We were ordered, in German, to dig into the soft shoulder of the creek bank. Here we were, American prisoners of war, lined up irregularity along the east side of the small creek, and separated by only a few yards. Slowly and warily, we began to test our newly-constructed shovel as we put our foot on the top lip of the metal spade and a shift of our weight pushed it down deep into the soft, wet, damp black dirt. The wet mud clung to the metal spade and held to it as if by suction. It was dead of winter and the day was overcast with a steel-gray cloud cover that easily silhouetted the long line of Americans displacing spades of wet sod from front to rear hardly moving the spade off the ground, twisting their body around to dump their shovel load. The bottom seam of the men's long, olive drab overcoat sometimes flared out with a turn. The thin, standing figures of the working men were hidden behind the soldier's draped winter clothing. Only occasionally a dirty, whiskered, gaunt face would be seen behind the upraised collar of the overcoat and beneath the wool helmet-cap that was pulled down over the ears, and as far down as it would go. It was winter, and cold, and we needed to keep warm. A light, white snow covered the ground. Our feet began to ache in the cold. We had to keep moving to keep warm.

"Depper ... viser", hollered the guard. "Depper ... viser", he would repeat louder. We knew that he was telling us to dig deeper and make the creek wider. Even so, to us, there seemed to be no apparent reason for this digging. We, nevertheless, fitted a hugh, displaced muck of sticky black wet dirt in the ever so slight cupped recess of the metal spade and lifted it up and out of the ground and swung it gently to our left and dropped the load of dirt just to our rear. I never did dislike digging. Even in the States, for me to dig a foxhole, or a six by six garbage pit, I never really minded. I sort of liked it, in fact.

Here, with the weight of the body, the spade would easily sink into the ground and displace the dirt. And in no time, you could easily see what you have changed, what you have done.

So it was with the creek. We were making it wider and deeper. No telling how deep we could have gone. But the guards were always moving us along...stopping and digging and moving again, going down-stream. We didn't stay in one spot very long.

For the first few days, we worked right through the morning...right up to noontime. We thought it was time for lunch. It was then that the guards would

let us stop digging. We were ordered to move away from the creek, leaving our shovels stuck up in the mud, to a place a few feet away, to a less damp spot, where we grouped to sit and rest for thirty minutes, and wait. Wait for food. But there was no food. There was no lunch. After about thirty minutes, we were ordered back to our shovels, and ordered to dig again. After a few days, we began to realize that we were not going to get any lunch. And, we had not had any breakfast!

We had no breakfast. Now, no lunch. Some grumbled and talked of strike. Strike!...for our rightful servings of food. We would strike for food. We wouldn't work unless we got food. We thought working prisoners of war were served two meals a day. Back at Stalag IV-B, we had been told by long-time prisoners, who we thought knew, that it was better to go out and work, for working prisoners received more food.

What food? Maybe there just wasn't any food anyway. And strike? Strike for food, we said! What would we gain if there were no food anyway? Strike? Hell, we were prisoners of war. We weren't regular laborers. That strike talk was just another short-lived fantasy among us prisoners, a dream that we were laborers at another time, at another place, where a strike was possible. We honestly talked of strike. Just talk. It didn't last long. We knew we couldn't do this. Were we mad to think like this? Were we delirious? No, we knew this was the way it was. However it would be, we had to continue on and survive. Obey. I have to admit, I never thought of strike or participated in the strike talk. But, I listened. And honed that the prisoners who did the talking may be on to something to improve our lot. But, in the end, we all knew it wouldn't work ... and this strike talk was soon forgotten.

During these early, wintry, motionless days of February, we plodded out across muddy fields to the creek bank, to dig, to do our work. We would sit thirty minutes at noon, then back to work, plodding back that evening to the Gasthaus to receive our single serving of turnip soup and a slice of bread and go lay down, and get up the next morning, and do the same thing the next day.

By now, we didn't march. We didn't walk. We had turned into slow plodders, with head down, coat collar up, with shovel balanced over the right shoulder to help in its carry. There was no talk. Only at night did we find time to talk... talk of the food we once ate and how good it would taste now. At night, we lay still in our bunks while thinking and fantasizing of food. We never really came to our senses, but in a short time we could let our thoughts go. Turning onto our right shoulder, finding a position where the tip of the shoulder and the right hip bone rested on the hard plank board on which we lay, we let the craving body and soul pass into sleep.

The next morning we knew we must get up. It could be so easy not to move your weary, heavy-laden bones. Not to get up would surely be the beginning of the end ... death by malnutrition. Once you had given up and allowed what little strength you had to dissipate by lying in bed ... you were gone. So we never allowed our minds to think about not getting up the next morning and moving. We knew we had to get up to survive. It would be better outside the Gasthaus. Much better. We were alive outside. We were moving and making it.

I never even thought about a gamble here at this time. You could lie in bed, I suppose, and gamble that the Germans would, through some mercy, make a better world for you. None of us thought that would happen, lest it be for one man. He either was playing the gambling game or he truly couldn't make it out of bed due to depletion of body strength. If it was a gamble, it failed ... he died later in our presence, still lying on his back. The Germans never moved him from his bed.

It was much better to get up ... and keep going.

Cold Days of Winter

All of our early work, during the coldest of the mid-winter days, was along the bank of the small stream that snaked through the flat farmland to the southwest of the Gasthaus. It was here, in the open field, during some of the coldest days, that a new, young, home-front type guard would make a small fire and allow us, one at a time, to sit and warm ourselves. We were allowed to leave our shovels stuck-up in the icy, creek-bank mud, walk over the near-frozen, lightly snow-covered ground to the small fire he had made. We accepted his kindness and crowded the small fire with our feet and body, getting as close as we could. He would allow only one prisoner at a time to sit by the fire. The young German knew our feet were cold-aching ... he was kind ... but, distant and firm. He let us know that only one man could leave his work and go warm himself...for ten minutes, then return to work and another man could take his place by the fire.

This would be the only work area where a warming fire was made by a guard and the prisoners were allowed to share its warmth. At all other times we continued working through the morning until the noon break for a thirty-minute rest. This was the only place where we were given the thirty-minute rest period ... probably giving us time to be around the warming fire. At all other work places, we worked on through the day with no rest period.

A few weeks later, we would be moved from this area and from this bank along the creek. Instead of turning to the right, walking off the road, crossing the field to this creek, we would continue walking south on the road and turn left onto a dirt road, now walking toward the east. After a short walk we would make a right turn, leaving the dirt road, going directly to a not too distant, large bomb crater that marred the otherwise level, black farmland. Days later, we would be led further down the dirt road to a distant wooden road-bridge, not crossing it, but to work on this side of the bridge, to dig, along the bank of this new stream. This distant creek was located to the southeast of the Gasthaus. Twice we were taken to this southeast creek to work. There were thicker clusters of small trees along this creek. They held the soil in place. This creek did not need to be dug deeper and wider like the stream in the open flat farmland where we first worked.

Then, weeks later, we would work due east of the Gasthaus, far out in the countryside, along the banks of the same stream that ran in front of the Gasthaus. Here, a small village sat about fifty yards to the north of the creek from where we worked. To get to this new area, we would leave the Gasthaus, first walk to the west to the main road, then turn right, crossing over the stone road bridge, enter into the southern edge of Merseburg, turn east walking on Merseburg's streets, passing old German white-gray stucco houses. Then, after a short walk, the column of prisoners would leave Merseburg, now generally going in a southeasterly direction, until we came to the north bank of the Gasthaus creek, but at a point some distance from the Gasthaus. When we reached the creek, we turned left, walking along the north side of the creek, going upstream, due east, further away from Merseburg. When we came to a small, two-man, arched-stone masonry footbridge that spanned the creek, we were led over the footbridge to the south side of the creek where part of us turned right and others were ordered to turn left. It was here we were stopped and ordered to dig along the south bank of the creek. On later days, we were stopped when we reached the footbridge and ordered to dig along the north bank of the stream.

These were our different work areas.

It was during our first few workdays, when it was the coldest; we worked alongside the creek that ran through the black farmland, southwest of the Gasthaus. Light accumulations of snow, and patches of ice, covered the frozen ground where the guard would build the small warming fire. At no other time was it as cold as it was here. The earth had warmed by the time we were moved to the other work places.

It was during these early, cold days that we were given thirty minutes off from our digging to sit, and rest, and warm around the small stick-and-timber fire. The thirty minutes of rest was always at noontime. It was lunchtime for Americans, and we thought about this. But, the Germans provided no food. We soon learned that there would be no food or lunch for us. This noon break was a time to stop working ... to rest and warm.

There had been no breakfast for us this day. And still no lunch. Nor would there ever be a breakfast or a noon meal for us as long as we were German captives. We later accepted this and had given up on receiving any food.

Occasionally, during these first weeks, we would find a potato or two along the road, or in the field while walking to work, and pick it up, and during the noon break, throw the potato in the hot ashes of the fire. Soon, the peel would become hardened and black. We would roll it out of the fire with a stick, and sit there and enjoy eating the best blackened-cooked potato that, we believed, we had ever eaten.

It didn't take us long to learn to walk with our heads down and our eyes searching the ground for dropped food or potatoes that might have fallen from a passing cart or wagon that had passed this way earlier. We found a few

vegetables and potatoes this way. We looked for, and would pick up potatoes, carrots, turnips, and anything we could eat that we happened to walk upon.

Many times here, prisoners roasted potatoes for lunch. These were potatoes they had found that day on the way to work.

Once, I saw a dead rabbit along the roadside while we walked to work one morning. I later thought that I would pick it up on the way back to the Gasthaus that night. I was thinking about cooking it over the stove back in the Gasthaus.

I should have gotten it that morning. On the way back, when I reached the spot where it was, it was gone. Someone had already taken it.

It was so cold during these first work days ... the young German guard felt compelled to build a fire for us ... though it wasn't unbearably cold while working. But the warm fire did feel good. Sometimes I couldn't get close enough to the small fire to get real warm. One time, without knowing it, I was too close. I burned a hole in the rubber sole of my right shoe. The smoke from the burning rubber of my shoe was concealed in the rising smoke of the small, timber-wood fire. Two of my toes poked through the hole and became exposed. The Germans later brought me a new pair of American army shoes in exchange for the ones that I wore, which included the one with the burned hole in it. I didn't ask for this. I didn't expect this. I preferred food. But I should have been thankful for some German that saw to it that I would receive a new pair of shoes that probably came from captured American supplies, or from the Red Cross, or taken off a deceased American... it never occurred to me where they came from.

It is hard to believe that you would get so cold that you would get so close to a fire and burn a hole in the toe of your shoe and not know it while it was happening. Most of our toes had been frozen and frostbit during the Battle of the Bulge back in December.

Hell, I didn't worry about my feet and my toes sticking out of my shoe. The cold, the snow didn't bother me... it was the hunger! We weren't complaining. There was no one to complain to. We would just carry on ... we would make it.

Trying Times

As the days stretched into weeks, it was becoming apparent that conditions inside the Gasthaus were changing ... just as were the day's events that were taking place away from the Gasthaus.

Each workday now might find us headed in a new direction, going to a new work area. Outside we were chancing upon a new experience. But, the nights at the Gasthaus changed too. The Gasthaus was no longer just a place that offered a

hard wood bunk on which to lay, rest and sleep ... and a place where we kept our army back-pack that held our meager, saved emergency food ... it became more than that. We were losing what was once a peaceful sanctuary. Now it became a place where we were becoming aware of prisoners missing their food at sometime during the night. It seemed that some starved prisoner was missing some food nearly every night. Now, there was an added responsibility for all of us. Now, prisoners were beginning to sleep on their self-rationed food. They cuddled their food next to their body. They were forced to protect the food out of fear of it being stolen. It was food that they had saved from the Red Cross food package. Or, they were protecting the potatoes they had found on the road that they were saving to supplement the starvation ration of daily soup the Germans would serve each day. It was this little bit of life-strengthening food that prisoners were beginning to feel like they had to lay on, cuddle, or place it in their back-pack and lay on it like a pillow in order to protect it from being stolen during the night. These were trying times.

A thief was never caught. Yet, someone's food was stolen ... nearly nightly.

"Someone got my food," said a prisoner during a morning awakening. It was a prisoner speaking two rows of beds away from Frank and me.

"I had it when I went to sleep last night. Now, it's gone."

This sad, resigned, depleted prisoner couldn't have been any more of a skeleton with or without the food, but he knew that someone had stolen his little bit of saved food that he might need to survive.

Now it was taken... stolen by another American. Don't you think by now that we all knew to protect our food at night?

Fellow, don't think that when you returned to the Gasthaus from a day's work out in a raw, winter day, digging in a German creek after not having breakfast or lunch, that you would return and be 'king of the ward'... sort of surveying the situation, feeling comfortable, and 'shoot the bull' with your buddies in the warmth of the Gasthaus until well into the night when at last you decide to go to bed. Hell no, it was nothing like that! You were cold. You were starved. You were weak and tired. You were alone in your thoughts. Maybe you and your buddy spoke briefly ... or there were a few moments in which you talked about food with the prisoner in the next bunk as you lay lifeless in bed, just before you gave your body up to rest and sleep.

When we first returned to the Gasthaus, you could see the prisoners moving slowly, walking with an ever so slight sway from side to side. Weighted down with winter overcoat, making their way to their bed to get their tin can and join the line that was forming toward the warming stove on the north wall, following its movement to the large vessel sitting on top of the stove. The stove was keeping our evening meal of watery soup warm for serving.

All of us filed out of the Gasthaus to work every day of the month, except for one person, a single American stayed behind in the Gasthaus and prepared

the evening meal of soup. There he was waiting for us... standing on the other side of the vessel next to the stove. The dipper was already in the vessel and he gripped the handle. The first prisoner had arrived and he began to stir the watery soup and he lifted the dipper full of soup. It was his duty, and his duty alone, to serve us from his dipper. He poured the soup into our tin can as it was extended toward him and held steady, and he handed each of us a slice of German brown bread, which we accepted with the free hand. This single American prisoner served us our meal each day.

Surely, he must have been the only American to get all the food he wanted. Surely, he wasn't hungry like the rest of us?

He was the only American that knew what was behind the walls of the large room in which we slept. He was the only American to know the mistress of the Gasthaus. He was a mature, aged man, with a dark handsome face and deep black hair and dark eves. He was doing his job of peacefully and orderly feeding the Americans, and afterwards, he would vanish behind the west wall, going into the kitchen, or elsewhere in the Gasthaus, being the obedient German servant that he had become. He looked well fed and pleased with his new station in life. He was quiet. He spoke to no one.

Strange how things happen. Odd and a coincidence, but true. This was the same man, the same American army cook that stood in line with the other POW along the snow-filled ditch bordering the main road through the war-torn town of Schoenberg. He was the one that I listened to that gave advise and hope to the captured young American soldiers when he said, "You serve the Germans now. You do what they say ... Now, you serve the Germans, you will survive."

An American soldier serve the Germans? Treason! But he was warning us, and at the same time, telling us that under these new circumstances as prisoners of war we must obey a new master. We must to survive. And there he was ... serving us soup. And he was a servant of the Germans as well.

His belief and allegiance to his new German masters had set him apart from the rest of his world and us, and, as a prisoner, would always remain a mystery to us. No doubt, he did look quite healthy and well fed.

We held no animosity toward him. Of course not. He was the one that saw to it that we each were given a tin of soup. The most that was possible. We never missed a day of serving, even thought it was the day's only meager meal.

We would take the scant serving of soup, and the slice of bread, and go back to our bed and sit on it, and slowly eat. It was now that Frank and I shared any extra food that we had found in the fields that we walked over during the day. The extra potatoes or carrots that we had found would taste good now.

The room was quiet. Men sat eating, sitting on their beds, thinking how good it all tasted. But, soon it was gone, and they were still hungry ... and for a moment they sit thinking how good food used to be, and then realize the discomfort and

the ache of their chilled feet. Men began to remove their cold army shoes, rub their numbed toes, then swing their legs up and over the side of the bed and lay them on the thin layer of straw that covered the wood planked bed. Prisoners began pulling their olive-drab colored army blanket over their bodies and shoulders and lay there and think how good food must taste back home or how good it was to eat waffles back at the circle in downtown Indianapolis. It was good to talk to the prisoner in the next bunk about the large amount of food that he had eaten and that you had eaten and all the different kinds of food that you and he had eaten. And he would tell you all about mother's cooking, or about his aunt's cooking and how he had eaten some very special cooked meals. This was all that all of us could talk about … food! Then, I would think… this farm boy prisoner from Iowa in the bunk next to me must have eaten more waffles at one time than anybody I had ever known. He said he used to eat half a dozen waffles at a time … one on top of the other … each with a different kind of syrup poured on it. Some topped with honey, some jelly, some berries, others good old maple syrup. The stack of waffles had become quite high. Now, even I knew I could eat that much at one time. Really, I could, I was thinking. I wished I had them right now, I thought … These were nights of constant talk of eating and food and fantasying about food. But not for long. We had to rest and sleep … preserve our body for work tomorrow.

Except for the occasional movement to the toilet near the front of the room, there was no more movement in the room during the night. Early winter darkness had set in. It would have been completely dark had it not been for the two dim lights at either end of the room, and now, weary hungry men lay dreaming of food until God put their draining, weakening bodies to sleep.

So, you were a strong, good soldier! …Or one that was… Now, you are a ninety-eight pound, bony skeleton. Your dignity and your once proud, strong body has now shrunk to a thin raw layer of tight skin barely able to cover bones that are trying to break through to the outside. You are in a lost, cold Gasthaus. This is no officer's internment where officers write home, sit and talk and have plenty of rest, and are better fed. This is far from being like the internment of the air force captives, who, if they made it through the hunt, and the beatings by civilians, and were rescued by the German Luftwaffe, would receive a kind of special treatment that airmen from one country reserved only for airmen of another country. The German Luftwaffe took care, with a favored attention, of their like kind.

Here, there were no heroes or examples. We were all lowly privates. Less than leadership material. Besides, ever see a hundred and eighty pound man reduced to a human being of less than a hundred pounds, now one that could hardly think straight, turn into a crown prince hero?

At Dachhau, the frail bodies of imprisoned Jews lay and slept two together … two to a bunk. It was like that here. There, men withered and died. Early on here we were frail and weak and thinning, but still living.

By early March here, we were still cut off from the world, alone and lost in this cold place somewhere below Berlin, deep inside Germany, somewhere in its eastern plains.

The great happening that undoubtedly saved our lives was the arrival of the American Red Cross food packages. These packages of food, I have always said and believe to this day, were the reason we survived. We lived. Thank God for the Red Cross food packages that we received.

After about a month at the Gasthaus, we returned one day from work and found brown, heavy cardboard Red Cross food packages stacked one on top of the other along the north wall. It was the Red Cross packaged food meant for us.

The food package was a tightly filled, brown cardboard box about eighteen inches long and twelve inches wide and about eight inches deep. It contained everything American. Everything that some American back in the states knew that some American prisoner of war might need in the way of food. It was packed with good food ... concentrated food...nourishing food ... needed food for starving men.

At other places, some prisoners were receiving a food package a week for each man. It was intended this way. They could live on this.

It had taken a little over a month for the first shipment of Red Cross food packages to find us here at the Gasthaus. Lord, I wonder how the Red Cross ever found us here in the first place? We were lost to the world. We weren't in some prison camp, but in a small German Inn in the heart of a cold, wintry Germany. And, we had made a stop for awhile at some unknown Godly place before we got here. How would anybody know where we were? Especially those who were to make shipment of these precious food parcels to American prisoners of war. And why would the Germans, lacking food themselves, allow these inhuman, animal-like Americans to receive this precious food? These packages contained nourishing food, chocolate bars, powdered milk ... and cigarettes that the Germans themselves hadn't seen for months. Chocolates and cigarettes! With these alone you could buy your way out of Germany. I wondered how we got this food?

It was early March when the first stack of food parcels was passed out to us inside the Gasthaus when we returned one day from work. One food package was handed out to two men to share. We were told the package shipments would arrive every two weeks. Frank and I would share the food package.

We would guard this food with all our life ... all our strength. And preserve it and keep it so that we might not die of starvation. It was precious.

And inside the package was a can of Clem...powdered milk. We would eat a few spoonfuls at night. It tasted delicious. Later we learned from others how to sprinkle a spoon full of powdered milk over the German brown bread and toast the bread on top of the stove in the Gasthaus and the hot bread with powdered milk on it turned into something like a pastry to us. The Red Cross

parcel had M & M's chocolate candy. They were hard-coated, small, different colored chocolate candy drops. Now, we were delicately placing these hard-coated different colored chocolate bits on top of a thin layer of powdered milk that we spread over the brown German bread. After heating the bread on the stove, for a moment we were in ecstasy eating this one slice of hot bread with melting chocolate and powdered milk on it. It didn't begin to fill us ... but it was pure fantasy. It was good. Then, it was gone. But, tomorrow night, after work, we would do the same thing with what we had saved from our Red Cross food package. Brother, we were starved. We were hungry all the time. Our minds danced to the thought of food. And we enjoyed this special treat that we had cooked.

And, there was Spam ... one large can of pressed ham. There were crackers. And packages of cigarettes ... Camels, Old Golds, and Lucky Strikes, and other named brands of packages of cigarettes. This is what the Germans wanted. The German civilians didn't have cigarettes or tobacco. We did.

We had heard that you could buy your way out of Germany with cigarettes. Frank and I didn't smoke, so we were accumulating more and more packages of cigarettes. We may need these later!

There was one prisoner that couldn't stop eating his half of the food parcel. He ate it all at one time in one night. His body couldn't handle it. He got sick. He thought he would satisfy his starvation. He didn't. He really suffered the next two weeks. He had no American food to go along with the German soup. The rest of us would self ration the American food over the two week period, rationing it out, eating it with the single serving of soup and the slice of bread the Germans gave us at the end of the day.

God, thank you for the American food packages. It saved our lives.

The Clem, or powdered milk, was supposed to be mixed with water to make milk. We never had water. We never made milk. We never needed water. Our body had plenty of liquid from the soup. We would eat the powdered milk by the spoon full, or spread it on top of the German bread. The Clem tasted good. It was real good. We would sit there on the wooden straw bunk bed in the dark German Inn gently sucking in Clem from a spoon until it dissipated in the mouth, wonderfully stimulating taste buds. It was something you would have never thought of doing at anytime in your life, except now. It didn't stop the hunger ache, but this little bit of powdered milk, Clem, taste so good as it dissolved in our mouth.

These miniature feasts didn't last long. Then it was to bed where we laid on our saved food, and covered up, and silently lay, and some nights before sleep, once again, look up through the holes in the roof and quietly think of home. Again, I would see some distant stars that I had seen back home on a dark night, I thought. Then, I wondered if my family might now be thinking about me. I was making it ... and I wished somehow that my family might know this. We thought of our families, but soon, our thoughts once again began to remind us how

desperately hungry we were. We must not think. Forget. Forget this moment. Forget this hunger. Go to sleep for tomorrow.

I wasn't the only one thinking of others...And hurting...And missing them. All the prisoners during the quiet of the early evening lay still and thought of someone ... and parents back in America were thinking of their missing sons in Europe.

My mother thought of her son in battle ... her son missing-in-action. She thought and prayed every night. Her son-prisoner had not imagined how much his mother had anguished thoughts over her missing son in battle. The War Department telegram "MISSING IN ACTION" preyed on her mind nearly constantly now, and particularly at night, as she lay down to sleep. It was nearly more than she could take. Her teenage son. Her boy, her only son, was "MISSING IN ACTION" in Europe in the most fierce battle of the war. The Battle of the Bulge. His infantry division had just arrived in Europe a week before the battle begun. She still had the lone last letter that he had written from a muddy field in France. The radio commentators would throughout the day, and for weeks, speak of the big battle, and of the tragedy suffered by the allied army and the division that was lost. It was his division that had been cut off and annihilated in a wintry snow forest.

One of my aunts thought, "He would climb a tree. He would hide from danger."

But there was no word. If he was still out there, in the hilly, frozen snow forest in Belgium, the Germans didn't tell it, and the Americans didn't know.

If he was still out there? " Mother thought. No, he couldn't be! God, help me! Mother prayed. Frozen? Missing? Or .... the word left unsaid. She couldn't think about that.

During one of these nights, in despair, in prayer, she felt the presence of something that seemed to tell her, " Don't worry anymore. I tell you that all is well. Your son is alright." It was then she put aside her worry and had faith from that moment on that her son was alive and well.

I knew my family was well. I hoped that my family knew that I was well.

Some nights, while lying in the wood bunk in the dimly lit still Gasthaus; I would hear night movements ... the sound of heavy diesel trucks traveling on the road going south. It was not a lot of trucks. Just a few trucks headed south on a military mission, I imagined. I thought they must have been carrying supplies under the cover of darkness. They were German diesel trucks. American gasoline fueled trucks don't sound like that.

Other nights I would awake to a winter-cold, silent, still room and see the flickering shadows made by the faint fire light from the stove sitting next to the wall behind me. It was quiet and in my loneliness I would wonder if the war would ever end.

Then, occasionally I would see the movement of one of the prisoners making his way to the single toilet in the northeast corner of the room. Then, at times, I too would get up in the half darkness and make my way to the little five-foot by five-foot room and find the planked bench with the cutout hole. I had dysentery and I knew I couldn't control it. I never had a hard bowel movement. It had been watery for so long now that I don't remember when it started. It didn't bother me though. I was eating watery soup...and it came out that way. I thought that to be natural. I was weak. I didn't know that I was getting weaker. But I was.

There was no water to drink. We never wanted water to drink. There was no water for washing. We never washed our hands ... or anything else. We never wanted to. The clothes or dried mud or wool hat, or anything on us, we wanted it to stay as it was ... to keep us warm. We had no other clothes to change into. We worked in the same clothes, slept in the same clothes, sit and ate in the same clothes, and had dysentery attacks in these clothes. All would dry or harden to the cold ... Hell man, this was misery, but it wasn't all that bad, we were going to make it.

The food parcels always gave us a lift. But until we received that first, long-delayed package, we were just a bunch of raggedy, beanpole, hungry, dirty-looking men hoping to survive...

Most all of our guards here were the old home-front type guard. At times there might be a young guard. None were ever younger than twenty years old and the old ones could have been near seventy-five years of age. And never would a guard be in the Gasthaus at night with us. Only occasionally would a guard enter the Gasthaus. Even then, it would only be at the end of the day's work, when out of humane mercy he would take some food gripped in the palm of his hand and give it to the weakened American that lay in his bunk, too weak and drawn to get up. A guard would do this only on a rare occasion ... and the guard hoped it would go unnoticed ... and he hoped his gift of food to the sick man could be accomplished quickly.

There were a few exceptions to the old home-front type guard that we would see most every day. There was one special superior German High Army Official that came before us about the fourth or fifth day after we arrived at the Gasthaus. I vividly remember.

"Rouse, rouse, rouse mit...rouse mit" was the early morning order from the German guard that entered the single door in the northeast corner of the Gasthaus.

Over we rolled, swung our legs over the side of the bed and ran a hand through the thick matted hair on our head, then looked for our shoes. We leaned over and reached for them. And, in a matter of a minute or two, we were on our feet. With drooping overcoat and sagging shoulders we were filing out the door, passing through the front fenced yard, shuffling onto the front narrow street, there to stand loosely, one behind the other, in a column of twos facing away from the Gasthaus. It was on this morning that the new, splendid high-ranking

army uniformed German appeared before us. This was the first time that we had seen him. And it would also be the last time.

He stood erect and stout and stared down at us. Then he spoke.

"You are American soldiers?" he seemed to question. But it was more of a mock than anything.

He paused and pretended as if he couldn't believe his eyes as he glanced from one end of the column to the other.

His head shook and his face tightened. He was round faced ... clean and neat, looking magnificent in his uniform. He appeared to be an aristocrat. He was well fed to the point of nearly being fat. His middle-aged appearance and superior posture gave him an added air of nobility. He was poised and direct. No doubt, he was a superior officer, a non-combatant one that came to see the newly arrived Americans on this one occasion.

Then again, in very good English, he spoke, "You are American soldiers? Look at you ... Look at you! You aren't like American soldiers that I know". Again he paused. "I don't believe this. You don't look like an American soldier. Look how you stand."

He took a deep breath and said in clear, loud English, "I have a cousin in New York that plays professional football for the Giants. He is big and strong. He is an American! You don't look like American soldiers ... Look at you. Look how you stand."

It appeared that we were smaller than we really were and he taller. Maybe he was speaking from the high point on the road, looking down on a shabby group of beaten, sad, weary Americans. We did look pitiful.

Surely, he had seen some thinning, weak, starved to death men before? Maybe it was a new German plot to treat American soldiers, now prisoners of war, by ridiculing them. And now we were in his territory. Had he never seen such deprived dirty looking Americans that were supposed to have been American soldiers at one time? Maybe not. But there was nothing we could do about it. We had no control over how we felt or how we looked. But he must have thought so.

This was the first time we saw this aristocratic German officer who claimed to have a relative in America, and this would be the last time we saw or heard from him. He didn't come across as a man we feared. Not at all. Maybe sympathetic. Maybe a kind person behind that war uniform.

He had seen us. He addressed us. Then he turned and left, probably convinced that it was useless to talk to us.

As time passed, I thought, perhaps, this noble appearing officer did not come to belittle, but came to witness the captive Americans with a secret

admiration. Then he tried, in his German way, to make us something that we couldn't be. Was he trying to lift our spirits ... make us proud? No doubt, he left disappointed in what he had seen.

In someway, I enjoyed his visit. In someway, I thought I was receiving sympathy. Our minds were aching for it.

In a few minutes, after he left, we had our shovels over our shoulders, turned left, and walked in columns of twos down the narrow street to the road where the column turned left onto the main road. We walked only a short distance to a point where we turned right, walking off the road onto the black winter-hard farmland, crossing the field to the creek to begin a day of digging ... deeper and wider along a creek bank. It was winter. It was cold. It was February, 1945 and we American captives were German prisoners-of-war working somewhere in the northeast central part of Germany about a hundred miles below Berlin. It was cold, and still with days of ever-overcast, slick-laden, silver-cloud covered skies. It was cold, but we didn't have the snow and the blowing winds that we had had earlier in December and January. Still, we needed our overcoats and could use a warming fire during these cold winter days.

Some of the February days, though, would turn much colder and raw. And, it was days such as this that our young German guard would build a small fire away from the creek, a short distance from where we were working. He built the fire with small branches along with one or two large. The guard would go to the fire to warm himself during these bitter cold days.

He knew we were cold, too. Then, he motioned one of us to the fire.

"Ion," he would say, and lift one finger.

He would let one of us warm around the fire for about ten minutes, and then it was another prisoner's turn to warm. When one of us would leave the fire after about ten minutes, then another American would leave his shovel sticking upright in the muddy creek and walk over to sit and warm on the hard, frozen ground, trying to get as close to the small, wood fire as he could, moving the bottoms of his cold, aching feet even closer to the heat of the red flames, as close as he could without scorching or burning his shoes. Occasionally, the guard would return to warm his hands and his feet. He would stand. We would sit.

The young, uniformed German guard was kind to us. He knew we were suffering in this cold, damp, overcast winter weather and he did something that he thought would help each of us get through this miserable, freezing day. He built a fire and let us warm, one at a time. This was working fine until one of the prisoners took all of his allotted ten minutes to warm by the fire, then refused to leave and let someone else take their turn.

"Come on, it's my turn," one of the prisoners said. He just sat there.

"Hey, it's somebody else's turn by the fire. Move on," another prisoner would say.

He just stayed, sitting by the fire, not paying any attention to what anyone was saying. By now, he had been sitting by the fire for a long enough time to allow two or three more men to be warmed.

"You know he'll put the fire out if more than one of us go to the fire. It's my turn now. Come on back," said another prisoner from the creek bank.

"I don't care," he said. "I'm not ready to leave. I'm staying here. If you come over here now and he puts the fire out ... it will be your fault. I'm not ready to leave."

The pleading for him to leave the fire went on. Now, he didn't respond. He just sat there. I don't think he was going to leave.

We all knew the guard wouldn't allow two or more prisoners to stop working and sit around the fire at the same time. He had already nodded and motioned a second soldier away, and in his German and with a shuffle of his feet, he let us know that he would put the fire out if more than one man sat by the fire at a time.

It seems he didn't know when one prisoner left the fire and another took his place. He wasn't a policeman. He wasn't looking for justice. He provided a small fire for us to warm one at a time, and if we couldn't handle it, that was our problem.

We couldn't handle it. The young German guard, as he walked along the line of digging men, just didn't know that this one guy was staying by the fire and refused to leave and wouldn't let someone else take their turn.

Finally, one of the Americans said, "It's my turn. I'm coming. You're going to have to leave."

The dirty, sullen soldier didn't leave. He was one of the Gasthaus thieves, I thought. He was one of the "dirty five".

The German guard saw the two Americans sitting by the fire, warming, not working. "Nix, nix," he said, and began running toward the two men, hollering, "Arbeit, Arbeit," pointing to the shovels stuck upward in the mud along the creek bank. The two Americans got up and returned to their shovels and began digging as he ran his foot through the fire embers, scattering them, and put out the fire as he said he would do.

I remember now. This one by the fire was one of the five that gathered near the southwest corner of the room at the Gasthaus when everyone else had lay down to sleep. He would be one of those that, late at night, would roam the floor and corridors between the beds. He was one of the five that stayed up late ... talking on into the night. And somehow, he seemed to be getting more to eat than the

rest of us. Strange. Someone kept missing food nearly every night. The stealing kept going on. But no one was ever caught.

It seemed like these five might be trying to control the Gasthaus. Maybe bully the rest of us. Maybe they were trying to see how far they could go in trying to take over. Take over what? There was nothing to take over that I knew of.

But, here this guy was telling us, as we dug, that it was up to him to decide how long he would stay by the fire. And he would let the rest of us warm when he was ready to let us do so.

Maybe this was just the beginning of what this gang of five would do. We didn't think anything about it at first. We just thought this was the 'Ugly American'. You have met that kind.

Things were changing in the Gasthaus, and now, away from the Gasthaus. The threat from other prisoners was real.

These were trying times.

Late February

After two or three weeks of working, we seemed to be acclimating to the one-a-day serving of soup. Later, in March, with the one Red Cross food parcels shared by two men, along with what we could find along side the road, our physical condition was possibly getting better, if only slightly. If not, we were holding our own. We were surviving.

We weren't kings of the woods by any means. But, we began to think that we might really make it through this ordeal.

Nearly all of us were sustaining and getting through this better than we first thought, except for two prisoners. Maybe, one morning they decided that they just couldn't get up, much less make it through the day, so they just lay there. These two thin, skeleton-like soldiers just lay there on the hardwood boards of their bed. They lay motionless on their side, staring wide-eyed, with lips partly spread, faintly breathing, as if in a dream, hoping never to awaken, never to move a weak body in an unbelievable place as this. For them, it was time to let this world go and relent to their semi-dazed peace. The rest of us lined up in front of the Gasthaus and soon we 'moved out' for another day of digging.

Did these two men give up? Or did their mind or body betray them and cause them to be immobile? Only with the help of two old guards were they righted and helped through the narrow corridor separating the beds, and walked through the Gasthaus door to outside, never to be seen or heard from again. We were told that they were taken to a German medical hospital for

treatment. The American Gasthaus cook was the sole witness and our informant.

We knew we could not lie there when it came time to get up in the morning and not rise up. We would become too weak if we didn't get up. We knew we must get up and go to work.

These two were older, married prisoners. The married prisoners that were older seemed to have a harder time dealing with hunger and our ordeals. The younger, single prisoners could take this starvation and the treatment much better than the older married men. I reasoned that the single soldier had not had the 'soft life', the 'good life', and the feeding that the married men must have received. Probably, because we were younger, we had more physical sustaining-power.

Still, the most active prisoners, the five that grouped together at night after all the rest of us had gone to bed, were the same 'Dirty Five'. By now, we became more aware that someone was missing food nearly every night. This became very apparent when we had to ration ourselves with the Red Cross food, and eat it sparingly, so we could string out this nourishment over a two-week period until the next parcel arrived.

Our saved food was placed in our backpack and covered over with our blanket, and placed at the head of our bed during the day. All the prisoners left the Gasthaus at the same time and returned together. Only at night was the food being stolen. It became so bad that some began to tie their food to them in someway and lay on it to protect it from stealing hands during the night.

Do you believe that no one ever got caught stealing? No, no one ever got caught stealing, but nearly everyone thought it was one of the 'Dirty five'. They were beginning to care less and less for anyone else in this work group. And only they seemed to have an unusual amount of energy for this place. We all needed to survive. The large majority of us would not take advantage of other prisoners. We would not steal. Our moral being demanded this. Our best chances for extra food were left to fate during a day's work away from the Gasthaus, not stealing from a weakened fellow prisoner who many times couldn't lift an arm in protest if he wanted to. By now, I felt sure, many prisoners lost food to other prisoners, knowing what was happening, but could do nothing about it.

I'm sure it happened here, just as I could imagine it would happen in the infamous Dachhau prison, where some prisoner would pretend to take a sick man his soup but keep it for himself. The sick man would lay in his bunk bed, waiting for the one-day's serving of soup. But it never reached him. I don't know how many times this happened. Frank and I were bunked two or three bedrolls away from the two sick men. I remember, as we sat and ate, the members of the 'Dirty five' were standing in the corridor next to the bunks of the two sick men that lay prostrate. I think they were taking their food.

Discipline? The German guards never gave orders or disciplined any of the men in the Gasthaus. We disciplined ourselves individually. There was no

group discipline. There were no officers or noncommissioned officers in our group to command any kind of order. We were all privates. So, if it came to stealing, there was nothing done about it. Let the bastard beware if he stole from you, if you were strong enough and had the will.

The thief, or thieves, knew who was weak and whom they could steal from and whom they should stay away from. I was one he stayed away from. At least, up to this point in time.

The only other person, other than one of the 'dirty five', that seemed to be getting more than their share of the food was the cook. The American prisoner-cook was the oldest man in our group and perhaps the wisest. He was the lone prisoner to stay in the Gasthaus during the day while the rest of us left for work. The exception was the two weak men who could not get out of bed to go to work. They later were taken from the Gasthaus. The other exception was the third weak prisoner that could not rise and stayed in the Gasthaus until the end. This last weakened prisoner become so weak that he couldn't get out of bed at some point in time after the two earlier sick prisoners had been taken to a German hospital. He was never taken from the Gasthaus. Just allowed to lie there day and night.

Not only did the American cook remain behind, he remained out of sight on the other side of the wall from our containment to do the work of a cook slicing the cabbage, carrots, and turnips, and preparing the soup for the night meal.

I remember, I had been told at the induction center, on my first day in the army, to never volunteer. And, as a drafted teenager, I believed that.

There is a time to act. There is a time to be silent. There is a time to volunteer and a time not to volunteer. There is a time to forget you are an American soldier and a time to serve the Germans. Later, I would hear and remember this bit of advice. This very cook, the American cook that served us here in the Gasthaus, said it. How could I forget that he was the one that lifted us from our despair with his 'fatherly' advise as we stood in line next to a snow covered Belgium road only a few hours after our capture? He had not only volunteered, but he was serving the Germans. He was doing just as he advised us to do for survival.

We were adapting better as prisoners after the first two or three weeks here. We were beginning to look upon the world outside the Gasthaus just a little differently now.

There was a new guard outside the barbed wire fence waiting for us during one of the late February days. He was a young guard. But more than just a guard, we recognized right away that he was a 'real army soldier'. He probably was the only soldier that we had as a guard. He was a combat soldier. We knew that.

He was silent and distant, and we knew not to give him any trouble in any way. He was slender and stood erect. We sensed he was recovering from

injury during a war's battle, He wore a large designed metal on his left breast depicting his action in the battle for Crimea on the far-off southern Russian front. The Germans had been stopped there, although they repeatedly threw in additional forces to break the Russian resistance. The Germans lost heavily and it cost them in manpower and reserves. They had to withdraw. Many thousands upon thousands of Germans died and many more fought and were injured. This new guard was one that survived in battle and, for now, was a guard only temporarily, until he sufficiently recovered, so he could return to fight again. He was with us for only a few days. Then he was gone. Back to the dreaded Russian front?

Most of the guards were old. And, like the Crimea soldier, had little or nothing to say to us. Most of the guards seemed to only stay with us for a short time, like the guard duty was being passed around by some local old-men's militia.

February 1945 was not a good month for us. It was a cold, dreary month. The one meal a day of cup-of-soup was depleting our body. The Red Cross food packages did not arrive until March. The old nondescript guards changed constantly. The surprise visit by an elite German officer and the young war veteran broke the routine of an otherwise dull workday. And, there was the emergence of the cluster of Gasthaus thieves. Even so, we were surviving. We had found a permanent prison home now. We were working everyday and moving around, which was good for us.

A New Direction, Kindness And New Hope

March 1, 1945. On this day, we stood in column in front of the Gasthaus, facing away from it, as we had done every morning during the first daylight hour and, as usual, our column turned left and we began to move down the narrow street to the main road. This time, when the head of the column reached the main road, it turned right for the first time and we followed one another in column, crossing over the stone bridge that span the small creek and entered into Merseburg. Never before had we been taken to Merseburg. We liked this new experience. We were in a city.

Before now, we always made a left turn going out of Merseburg. Everyday was the same, either dig along the creek bank, or continue on down the road, turn left onto some nondescript dirt road for another two or three miles until we came upon the occasional bomb crater. The craters were usually visible from the road. We would file into the black dirt farmland where we would circle the hole and begin to fill it with the ring of black dirt splattered by the bomb around its edges.

I remember seeing a farmhouse in the far distance to the south of the dirt road, one day, as we walked to this new bombed field work area. The next day, when we returned to the bombed field, I remember seeing the house destroyed. Destroyed by a single bomb during the night in an allied air raid. I thought, in all this open, black farmland, how ironic that a single bomb dropped

would fall on this distant house and make rubble of it. One chance in a million, we thought.

Today, in Merseburg, I could see a lot of rubble and dirt piles, the remains of past bombings. We didn't go far into Merseburg, only a block or two, when we were led right on a street that paralleled the creek that we, only a short time earlier, had crossed. Then, our guard led us off the streets supposedly, we thought, to take a short cut to another street, passing over someone's back yard and over and around, one after another, small dirt mounds. Occasionally, a potato or carrot was seen partially exposed, partially uncovered in a mound of dirt. It didn't take us long to know that these soft, man-made dirt mounds stored food. Some of the prisoners began dropping to their knees and began digging. With a little digging, prisoners were uncovering layers of potatoes and carrots. In no time, we all were digging, or reaching down while we walked, for a now exposed carrot or potato.

Somehow, I knew the guard must have known that this would happen if he led us through here. He had taken us this way for this purpose, I began to make myself believe.

There wasn't a prisoner that didn't reach down and dig through the mound of dirt and find a potato or carrot as he momentarily stopped, or slowed, and take it with him as he walked on. The guard led the way. He never looked back. We would be dumb not to take advantage of this surprising event.

We had plenty of room under our shirt next to our underwear to store the newfound foods, resting it next to our body just above the belt line. Nothing could be seen under our hanging jacket and overcoat.

I was surprised that our guard would do this. And I wondered what the landowner would say... if there still were an owner!

This chance event happened only one or two more times. On one other occasion, while walking to work through the southern part of Merseburg, we were led off one street going to another street, again passing through someone's backyard. This yard, like the yard that we had walked through before, was covered with food mounds. The column stopped. The guard stopped our walk right in the yard that was pitted and full of dirt storage food mounds. We were hidden along with the dirt mounds behind a sandstone barn and the rear of a silent house. I believed the guard intentionally halted us so we could search for food. I fell on my knees on top of one of the dirt mounds. I began to scratch and dig with my fingers, look through, feel through the soft dirt mound. Then, at last, I felt something. I unearthed a large orange carrot. I hadn't seen or touched a raw carrot like this for such a long, long time. I dropped back into one of the pit holes next to the dirt mound near the corner of the old sandstone barn, where I sat, resting my back against the small crater, and began to rub off the dirt from around the carrot. At that moment, I felt and heard the sprinkle of some dirt hit my back. I sensed the glare of eyes on the back of my head. A natural fear caused me to look back. My neck twisted to the left and my innocent, blank eyes looked up and over my left shoulder. I looked into the solemn, taut face of the stilled German guard standing directly over me ...

standing on top of the rim of the pit... looking down at me sitting in the pit. I had been cleaning the carrot.

This wasn't one of the old guards that I remembered. Nor was it one of the young replacement guards. This was a new German middle-aged guard. I don't remember ever seeing him, the instant thought came to my mind.

There he stood ... standing rigid... staring down at me. I couldn't make out, or sense, whether or not he was going to strike me. This was happening so suddenly and quickly. I couldn't make out what was going on in this German man's mind. My mind began to swell with the slight tinge of fear and doubt. Had he led us through here to search for food or not, I questioned myself. I wasn't sure now whether he had let us stop, or not. I wasn't sure whether the guard ever intended for us to rob someone's food storage. Fear was setting in.

I was caught. Then, I weakly and slowly lifted up the carrot, up and over my head, toward him with my left hand, offering it to him, and looking for some new expression in his face... my mouth opened, but without utterance. His expression did not change. Before either of us could do another thing, he turned and walked away. My eyes followed the back of the strong-bodied German guard as he began walking alongside the moving American prisoners. The wide, black leather belt that surrounded his trim midsection and the rifle that he gripped slung over his left shoulder with barrel pointing up, and his black combat boots, all reminded me ... he was the soldier, the guard ... I the prisoner. Quickly, I got up and joined the other prisoners in their walk to work. We were going to the creek east of the Gasthaus.

My hungry mind made me think that the guard intended to walk us through the mounds of stored food... and he meant for us to get the food. I wasn't sure when he surprised me. But now, I knew, surely he must have known what he was doing ... and he was doing it for us.

Still, the young American soldier's mind wouldn't accept the fact that the German led us through the mounds of food and allowed us to rob the mounds. Still, we were very much the subdued prisoner and the German the German. In reality, we thought, we lucked upon the food and we took advantage of our good fortune. How ungrateful? How unknowing? How hungry-warped were our minds?

This "stumbled-upon-food" experience was short lived and soon this happening was long gone from our thoughts.

For us, it was on with our routine of digging outside all day during these cold German winter days.

Marching and Singing

March 1945. Once, only once, did we, as a group of American soldier prisoners-of-war, ever resemble what we were at one time.

We were walking back from digging in the area to the south and east of the Gasthaus. I remember, as we were walking back, nearing the Gasthaus in a column of fours, for some reason, we started singing army songs that we sang in basic training. Suddenly, we felt a surge of national pride ... and a feeling of self-esteem ... and the normal slow walk turned into more of a soldier's march. First, it was one and two, then three and four, and then all of us in unison began to sing those marching songs that the young American training recruits would 'sing out' while marching back to the barracks after finishing a field training exercise back in basic training camp. Singing, *" Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah. Someone's in the kitchen, I know, know, know, know. Someone's in the kitchen with D.i.n.a.h, strumming on the old banjo. Fe, fi, fiddle i, o,..fe fi, fiddle, i, o, ..fe, fi, fiddle i,. o, strumming on the old banjo...."* We were marching and singing.

How could we as a miserable group be so resurrected? Maybe most of us were young teenagers like myself... and a youthful exhilaration surfaced. We weren't all teenagers. But it happened. The singing produced a much-needed, happy moment for all of us. Our singing reminded us of the youthful times, the good times, the learning times, the growing times, the playful times that we as young, new soldiers had together during our early army training and marching days back in the red, sandy soil among the warm, whispering pine trees of Georgia. What good times! We sweated. We trained hard ... and we sang during our marching. We were strong ... well fed. We were becoming soldiers ... growing hardened ... getting ready for combat.

How long ago! How long ago it was when we used to sing and frolic as new young soldiers in the hot summer Georgia sun. And today we were marching, not walking, and singing in this cold and treeless, dank, gray-bleak, medieval German setting... weakened and trampy and singing.

The singing started with one or two, and then three or four others joined in, and then, quickly, all of us started singing as we walked down the road no more than a half mile or so from the Gasthaus. We were passing German houses lined side by side to our right. We began to sing louder with our heads held high for the first time since our capture... singing like proud young recruits ... we felt proud and happy for a moment... and we knew for sure we would draw a crowd. Windows of the German houses would be raised and the wooden shutters would swing open and people would look out and say, "Look, they are Americans!"

We did not draw a single person. No windows opened. Shutters remained closed. We were still the same skeleton prisoners. The German sons and men had long ago gone to war. The mothers and daughters were gone too. We saw no one. Germany was dead. This was Atlanta just before Sherman's army was to enter the city. We were dying too, along with this dying Germany. You could look at us and tell that.

What possessed us to sing? I don't know for sure. But, for a moment we enjoyed it ... the joy of being alive and telling those who could see and hear that we were something other than that which they had seen since we first arrived here. We were singing and I was thinking about the times when we used to sing like this. This lasted for only a fleet moment. A fleet hundred yards of singing, that's all that it was during the whole time at this place that was dominated by drudgery and the weight of hunger and weakness and the sight of sunken eyes and drawn faces. There was no way that it could have lasted. In our condition, how did it start in the first place? It was a great feeling ... a great sight and sound, even if it did last for only a short time.

Thank God for the Red Cross food parcel and whoever it was that allowed it to reach us and be distributed. I could never figure out why the Germans didn't take it before it reached us. And thank God for the German guards that pitied us. I know of no guard that mistreated us or took anything from us. Even the guards would try to help us by sharing with us their fire, and giving us, when they could, some of their own food. If it were not for all of this, maybe, we wouldn't make it through this ordeal. Maybe, we wouldn't have been able to walk this day, much less, for this brief moment, march and sing.

The singing had stopped now. A little further down the road our column would turn to the right just before reaching the bridge going into Merseburg and move down the small street to the Gasthaus where we would receive our only food serving of the day.

Once inside the Gasthaus, we would again begin to line up at the north end of the room and pass by the large pot bellied stove that heated the room on which sat the large vat of watery turnip soup. We were served our daily helping of watery soup of about three-fourths a tin can of soup and given one slice of bread. This was our breakfast, lunch, dinner and midnight snack, all served at one time.

Why would I keep reminding myself of this one, small soupy meal serving a day? Because, in America, we never missed a breakfast or lunch or dinner, and now it was hard to accept no breakfast, no lunch, and no dinner like we had known. It was nearly like not eating at all. We were army men that had been served three filling meals a day... all that we wanted to eat or could eat. It was hard for an American teenage soldier to accept this new way of eating. It was a new way of eating. And my body was withering and disappearing. We all were hurting.

It was now March. The war would end May 7, 1945.

March - Desperate Times

New fantasies, real fantasies, would arise again in the Gasthaus with the arrival of the Red Cross food packages. At night, after sipping all the soup the Germans offered us, we would sometimes carefully place different colored chocolate M &

M candies on top of our piece of German brown bread. Then sprinkle on some Clem powdered milk and toast the bread on top of the pot-bellied stove to melt the chocolate. We just knew that what we had before us was the most delicious parcel of food the world had ever known. We couldn't do this often or have very much. Frank and I started doing this after seeing others do it. We would eat only a small piece of sliced Spam (pressed ham), or a cracker, for this food from the Red Cross package had to last for the full two-week period until we received another food package for two.

We were always hungry. Don't think for a moment that a little bit of this or a spoonful of that would fill and satisfy a hungry man that weighed one hundred and sixty pounds and now was down to near a hundred pounds weight.

Just don't give up. Just don't lay down without getting up the next morning. Just keep moving lest you surrender to your weakened body and die of weakness.

Occasionally, a guard, after walking us back to the Gasthaus after a day's work, would enter the Gasthaus' high-wire fence front yard enclosure with us, entering into the gray, near blackening, dusk surrounding the Gasthaus and, in a brief moment, hand some food to a hungry prisoner. It had to be brief and nearly always unseen in the near darkness. With a hundred starving men, the giver could be mobbed for a handful of food. The acceptor had to be quick and steal away into the night, into the Gasthaus. Only occasionally did this happen, but when it did, both the giver and the receiver felt blessed and felt goodness.

Times in the Gasthaus were still desperate even with the arrival of the Red Cross food packages. After consuming the single serving of the turnip soup, or the occasional potato or cabbage soup, along with a bit of food from your Red Cross food package, it was then that we would lie in our beds to rest, shortly to sleep. But now, to reflect on this misery, and again, in the quietness, look up and see the holes in the roof and see distant stars and think of home. And, in silence, you began to pray to your God about your hopes and your loved ones back home. What was going on in the world? Would you ever get out of here? The quietness and the weakened body began taking its toll during this hour. Soon you were asleep. Any anguish was over.

It never occurred to me that I was in any danger at all from allied bombing. Why else would there be holes in the Gasthaus roof? I had seen, and dug around, the bomb craters just a short distance from where I lay. Only last month, I had seen blocks of Merseburg destroyed by bombs as I walked through it. And on February 13, 1945, thirty to one hundred thousand people would die in a single night of allied fire bombing of the city of Dresden, setting about seventy miles to the southeast of us. Leipzig, only about fifteen miles south and to the east of us, would receive the same bombing treatment that Dresden received, but to a lesser degree. We never feared a bombing, even though it was around us and had been near. This is so because we had yet to experience a bombing. Most of the prisoners were asleep in the Gasthaus. Resting their bodies, preserving for the next day. The only exception was the increasing talk and moving around the Gasthaus floor by the 'Dirty Five'.

More and more of the prisoners were complaining of missing some of their Red Cross food each night, even though they were sleeping on it. Still, most thought it was one of the 'dirty five' stealing the food. They were the only ones seen standing and walking around at night. They were the only ones that seemed to be stronger than the rest of us. Frank and I were among those that, up to now, had not lost any food to a thief.

Two American prisoners occupied each bunk. They kept their food there. They ate there. They sit and talked from there. Frank and I shared the same bunk. It was like Aschwald, the infamous Nazi concentration camp for Jews, where two slept in a single, hard board bunk. Frank slept on the inside, facing away from the aisle. I was on the outside, knees drawn-up, my stomach to his back. Each prisoner, this way, received body warmth from another prisoner. It was cold and all the prisoners kept fully clothed as they slept. My right hip side developed a brown colored spot from bruising caused by my right hip bone pointing down onto the hard board and nearly piercing my tightly drawn side skin. My left leg lay on top of the right leg. My fist could move between the legs from my knees to the crouch of my body without touching flesh, before, my legs would come together flush, with no daylight in between. Now, the flesh was gone. My bony legs were hidden in my army wool trousers and government issued long underwear.

You didn't see this. Everyone went to bed with every bit of his clothing on. These were the same muddy, cold, worn, dirty clothes that we worked in every day and the same clothes that we wore when we were captured.

I was deteriorating, but I didn't know it. My dysentery worsened. Late at night, for over a month and a half, I would catch myself involuntarily excreting a small amount of liquid fluid. I would pull myself out of bed and, in a forward lean, walk impatiently through the corridor of lined bunks to the north wall and to the small toilet. There, I would give up all the watery fluid rushing to get out. If I wasn't weak enough, the loss of strength from a month and a half of dysentery surely would further deteriorate a food starved body, enough to have 'done in' a lot of men.

It was late in the night when the strike of dysentery would occur. The Gasthaus was still and quiet. In the semi-darkness, no one moved but me. The toilet board planks and me had become familiar. Afterwards, it was to return to bed to soundly sleep, to arise to daylight, and off to work with no food.

The freezing, winter weather had its blessings, too. The wet pants spots from dysentery attacks would freeze-harden and no one knew the difference, not even me. I was still making it in spite of the nightly dysentery attacks.

I wonder what it was like back in America? I wonder who thought of me? I was lost to the world, and to my family, I was still 'missing in action'. It was possible I would forever be missing in action, I thought. It was possible that the Germans could 'do away with us' or something could happen to us, and we would forever be "missing in action'. God knows, we were at the mercy of the Germans. We had no say so. We had no communication with the outside world. No letters out. No letters in. No radio. No reading material. We were just here,

a group of us at this no-place, starving, with dysentery…just surviving. Still, as isolated and in a vacuum as we were, never gave a thought to not making it. I was going through a strange experience. I fully knew this. I never had a thought, or fear, of not making it. I could still think of home sometimes. But, most of the time I thought of the here and now, at this place, and the trying experience of starvation.

Hey, I'm doing all right. I'm just hungry.

Remember now, you were a young teenager who could eat a half a side of a cow at one sitting … and now you were starving, ever craving for food, weighing between 110 to 90 pounds. Sure, you could adjust. You had to, to get through this ordeal.

Damn, we were hungry.

Before The Fight

By late March, more than ever before, the 'dirty five' were now openly transgressing against other prisoners. Without officers or command there was no discipline except what we, as a group, knew we must place on ourselves for the good of us all.

But the 'dirty five' were becoming more aggressive and disrespectful toward the other fellow prisoners. I hadn't forgotten that it was one of them that wouldn't leave the warming fire that the guard had made for us to share. And it was his refusal to share the fire with other prisoners that caused the guard to put the fire out... and no one got to warm after that.

It was at this time, in late March, that a third prisoner was unable to get up from bed one morning and go to work. We all assumed that he had become too weak to get out of bed. And, after that one full day and night of laying in bed, the little remaining strength that he had surrendered to total, immobile weakness. His body was never again strong enough for him to get out of bed. He had lost his strength for good. Only the month before, two other prisoners had their strength sapped out of them to near death when they lay in bed and didn't get up to go to work. Eventually, they were taken from the Gasthaus by guards. But not this man. They allowed him to remain in the Gasthaus, to lay in his bunk. He was left there alone, by himself, with his body weakening.

The American cook would take his evening soup and the single slice of bread to him. He was grateful for this. This once-a-day, partially filled, small can of turnip soup and a slice of German brown bread alone would not sustain him. He needed more food. He needed more nourishment.

One evening after work, one of the old German home-type guards made a rare appearance in the Gasthaus. The guard was an aged man of small stature... not at all commanding. I followed his slow walk as he ambled carefully down the aisle between a roll of beds toward the bunk of the sick man. He was walking through the Gasthaus, two aisles over from Frank and me. As he approached the sick prisoner's lower bunk, he encountered prisoners standing hovered over it. And now, other prisoners followed the guard. It was more like the following prisoners were curious as to what the old guard was about. They followed to see. And the prisoners standing around the sick man's bed were there like vultures. Strange. Surely, all were glad to see a guard come to see the sick man?

Then, the diminutive, old wrinkled-face guard arrived at the sick man's bunk. He carried a large hunk of bread with him. The old guard had a purpose for coming into the Gasthaus. He had come into the Gasthaus to give food to the bedridden man. He pushed forward into the small crowd of prisoners and thrust his arm, and handful of bread, toward the dying man, leaning forward to hand it to him.

Then, before the eye could see it, the piece of bread was grabbed from the guard's open hand before the sick man's slowly moving, upward reaching hand could take it. One of the prisoners, among the group of prisoners standing in the corridor around the bed of the dying man, took the bread from the hand of the old guard before the dying man had a chance to complete his slow reach upward for the bread. The bread intended for the sick man was stolen from the guard's hand before the sick man could reach it.

The bread was gone before the sick man could take it! The dying man slowly lay back down without the food and without a murmur.

The old guard was startled. Someone took the bread out of his hand. He knew the sick man didn't get it. It was he to whom he intended the bread. He sensed the animalistic, desperate situation among the prisoners. As he was, he retreated to the north wall, turned, and quickly disappeared out of the Gasthaus front door. Never again did he come into the Gasthaus to bring food.

German guards never were in the Gasthaus at night with us, except on rare occasions such as this, when they sought to aid a prisoner. I can't remember another occasion, other than this.

It was one of the "dirty five" that snatched the food from the old guard's outstretched hand. He must have moved to the south wall where, it appeared, he shared the bread with his buddies. This must have been what happened.

The old guard did nothing about the theft. He could do nothing. The rest of us couldn't believe for sure what we saw because it happened so quickly. We were all weak with starvation and it happened so fast. The only active prisoners, we all thought, seemed to be the 'dirty five'. This is proof. They are the ones that are stealing. They are eating other prisoner's food. Now, they openly take from another prisoner. They had taken the bread meant for the dying man.

"They had better not try to take anything from me or Frank," I thought. I wouldn't let this happen. I would fight.

I didn't see, for sure, the actual person who took the food. It happened so fast. Maybe no one saw the individual who took it. But it happened. It was over with. Nearly all of us were laying in our bunks, resting our body, and readying for an early sleep so we could conserve what little strength we had for tomorrow's day of digging, away from the Gasthaus, when this happened. But, those of us who saw the bread, intended for the sick man, taken out of the guard's hand, witnessed a scene from the hunger-desperate situation that we were in.

What kind of a prisoner was it that would take the bread from the hand of the outstretched arm of the old German guard? The bread was meant for the bedridden, dying, starving prisoner... yet a prisoner, concealed in the crowd, stole it away from him.

Vulturous! Desperate. Hungry group we were.

The Fight

Never again did a German civilian uniformed guard go into the Gasthaus to bring food to a dying man, or to anyone else. Like the warming fire, it was stopped.

On occasion, a German guard would still hand a piece of bread, or pass food, through the wire fence of our front yard compound, giving it to a prisoner after we returned from a day's work. And occasionally, a guard would enter the fenced compound along with the prisoners and suddenly take a piece of bread, or some other food, from out of his winter coat pocket and, quickly and quietly, hand it to a prisoner, hoping this would go unnoticed, and quickly turn and leave.

It was on one of these occasions, as we walked inside the confines of the fenced outdoor compound toward the Gasthaus door, that a guard handed Frank a large piece of bread. At the same time, one of the 'dirty five' saw this, and, in that instant, took the bread out of Frank's yielding hand. Frank retreated, backing up toward the Gasthaus door. Frank's mind was kind. He hadn't anticipated this. This behavior was like an animal world! A fight of the fittest! The strong takes from the weak!

I saw this. The same 'protective-caring' instinct that came over me that caused me to sit with the scared youth, to protect him from a gang back home, quickly consumed me again. Immediately, without further thought of consequence, I knew that now, the 'bully', the camp bullies, this thief, had to be stopped...and told them they couldn't do this. I instantly confronted the prisoner who had taken the bread from Frank. I was standing only a few feet away, with my back to the Gasthaus door, when I saw this happen. Instantly, I moved to my left to fully block the entry into the Gasthaus and confronted the prisoner who grabbed

the bread from Frank's hand before he could get into the Gasthaus with it. It was dusk, nearing dark, so the sudden confrontation had drawn little notice. Frank had retreated into the Gasthaus, I believe, and the few heavy-laden clothed prisoners that were still outside would have to stand and wait until this confrontation was over. More likely, they had not seen the theft, or were far too weak to care. The few remaining prisoners that were still outside stood in silence, awaiting the outcome of the confrontation.

"You can't take that from him," I said, speaking with conviction. "That is his! It was given to him. You can't take his bread!"

He just looked at me. His mouth opened slightly as his face began to give the appearance of scorn and disbelief. Then he said, "Do you want to fight?"

"Give the bread back to him. That's his bread," I demanded, in an authoritative voice. "It was given to him."

Frank, like other prisoners, did not, or perhaps could not, challenge back. It would be a case of retreat, relinquish, and forget as if nothing happened ... for Frank, or most of the prisoners especially, if it meant challenging one of the 'dirty five'.

This was for real. He challenged my will to stand-up for Frank. And I challenged his. We grabbed and tumbled to the cold, outside ground. I fell on top of him, somehow pinning his back motionless to the ground. Instantly, I clinched my right fist and held it up above his face ready to hit him. He lay still below me. I had him down and could have pounded my fist in his face, but I couldn't bring myself to do this. My lack of energy and his containment told me that I should not do so. After all, I had accomplished what I sought, and that was for him not to take the bread that the guard had given Frank. It lay beside us. It was mine to retrieve.

I did not hit him. I kept him contained like I did the others back in the Georgia training camp where I had to wrestle. There, I had wrestled three men, in succession, one after the other, into submission without losing. And now I had downed this man. He then said, "Let's fist fight." He knew I wasn't going to hit him as he lay motionless under me. I released him and he began to fist fight where he thought he would have a better go at it. I was confident that I was equally as good a fist fighter as wrestler. One of his wild, right hand swings barely touched, and glanced off, a front tooth where later I would discover a small piece of the front tooth missing from what I would believe was that swing. But, like two wobbly legged, undernourished sick men, with swinging arms, fist fighting as we were, we wore out. Probably with no hits and no hurts, without any kind of a decision other than that this man, one of the 'dirty five', did not walk away with Frank's piece of bread and would never again attempt to take food from Frank, or me. I had recovered Frank's bread for him.

This was the only fight that ever took place in this camp. And it may have stopped the open aggressiveness of the 'dirty five'.

Delousing - Chapter Missing

Good News

Was it Sunday? Was it Saturday, Monday, Wednesday or Friday? I don't know. There were no weekends as we knew it. Every day was a day just to survive for the next day. Every day was the same ... up at daylight, work all day digging, and back by dark. Each day was a day without food, save the three-quarter of a tin can of turnip soup and the one piece of German bread that was given us at the end of the day.

The trip to Halle seemed enjoyable only long afterwards, when you had a full stomach. In reality, hunger and weakness numbed us. Only food and the real hope of liberation and freedom seemed to 'bring us alive'. The trip to Halle meant no more to us than a blind man walking across a room. Food stirred us. And there had been no hope, or reason, to think about liberation and freedom.

Still, there were no people to be seen. I had not seen a single German in my walk through Merseburg and during the trip to Halle. We never saw civilians or army people during our daily walk to work on the roads and side streets of Merseburg. There was no bustle on the roads by traveling cars. Actually, I had not seen a car or truck at anytime. This was a dead Germany near the end of the war in the late winter of 1945.

The German people had paid their price. They were still paying. And we were walking witnesses to the tragedy of a country that had been depleted and was being defeated in war.

If the Germans were to die, maybe we were to die too? Die of starvation? Prisoners from both sides died in prison camps during the Civil War of starvation, particularly near war's end. Russian prisoners had died in Stalag IV-B of starvation. Prisoners dying of starvation were nothing new. But who knew for sure? We could die from stray allied bombs. We were not afraid, but neither were we certain of our future.

One thing for sure, we knew not what the next day would bring. The end was uncertain and the future was not for us to contemplate. We just had to make it one day at a time. And now was not the time to count any eggs before they hatched. And we didn't.

We were coming back from digging on this late winter afternoon, walking in a column with our shovels carried over our right shoulder, when I chanced to pick up a white sheet of paper, or what appeared to be a leaflet laying on the roadway. It displayed various sized printing on it with large arrows drawn over

part of a map. I noticed that there were quite a few of these leaflets strewn and blowing about.

"Hey, Frank. Look at this. This map shows American troops in Kassel. This must have been dropped by the air force." Sure enough, it was a leaflet. A leaflet printed in German, with a map of Germany on it.

The leaflet that I had picked up showed a map of Germany plainly displaying an arrow running from the Rhine river through a spot denoting a town named Kassel, shown on the map, deep in the heart of Germany.

Looking at Kassel on the map, and thinking, I said to Frank, "Boy, Kassel is a long way from the Rhine. The Americans are really moving."

Although Frank and I couldn't read German, we understood what it said. In German, it was telling the civilian defenders not to fight for their communities. The Americans were already this far into Germany and were advancing rapidly eastward and in order to preserve their community and the lives of Germans, the leaflet told the Germans to surrender to the Americans... for the Americans were coming. The Americans had already arrived in Kassel, according to the point of the arrow.

Without knowing the exact distance, we could see by studying the map on the leaflet that the Americans were now about halfway between the Rhine River and us. We also knew we were somewhere south of Berlin by about a hundred miles. This was the first time since our capture near the Belgium-German border that we learned of the whereabouts of the American army. The thought that it could have crossed the Rhine River and be this far into central Germany was nearly unbelievable. But we believed it. For now, though, the thought was placed in a far recess of our mind. Our mind was occupied with the here and now. We were starving and we were still so far away from help.

We already knew that the Russians, with hordes of men, were pushing back the Germans toward their eastern border. I remember what Oscar, our old German guard said, "The Americans to Berlin...the Russians, no. Not the Russians. The Americans, ya." The Americans he liked. The Russians, like all Germans, he feared, hated and distrusted. This was my feeling about how I thought the Germans felt about the Americans and the Russians.

Tell a man dying of thirst that it is raining close by, just the other side of the mountain which he can see not too far away, and he will look up from his prostrate position on the hot floor of the desert and with a parched dried mouth say; "That's good, but I'm dying here. It's there. I'm here." The Americans were there. We were here. Dying. They were still too far away.

We just need to make it through today for tomorrow. The day after or the next week may never come for us.

Those now long ago weekend dances in Indianapolis and the bus ride back to Camp Atterbury, only to arrive in time to make roll call for a full day of army

training. Those all night forced marches must have been good for me ... toughening me ... building my endurance in suffering, for now I surely was in need of endurance.

We didn't dwell on where the Americans were or what it all meant. We were still a bunch of tortured prisoners that had to meet our fate day by day.

Who ever heard of prisoners playing softball, sitting around writing letters, hearing from home and being served food, reading, hearing radios, playing games, generally just sitting out the war? I guess everybody thought this is the way it is.

This is Germany at war. Now as a prisoner, and now deep in Germany, I saw that Germany had slave labor. Entire families of men, women, and children of occupied countries were brought by force into Germany to do the farm work and work in the factories. Men were taken by force from German occupied France to work in Germany. If they were to escape, their families back in France would suffer the consequences. Yugoslavs, Poles, they were all here, as slaves, doing slave labor. Now, we Americans, we, too, were slaves of a sort.

A prisoner of war? Or a slave? Could this last forever? No.

The leaflet we picked up was interesting. Hopefully believable. But we were too weak to put our hope into anything like that. Our hope now was for strength to put one foot in front of another and carry our heavy coats over our weakening shoulders on down the road to the Gasthaus for the ending of another day.

The Good Samaritan

One day, we were led down the hardtop road, in column headed south, walking away from Merseburg, when we came to the junction of the dirt farm road that was coming at us from the east. The dirt road was laid out straight as an arrow, and narrowed and disappeared into the distant, flat horizon. It separated the black, cultivated farmland that clung to it on either side. Here, at its juncture with the hardtop road, it stopped. The column of weary, mummy-like appearing prisoners turned left onto the dirt road and continued their slow walk past occasional bomb craters that were easily visible with their ring of dirt giving evidence of a bomb's puncture of the flat, black land. As we walked, we would pass a bomb crater here and there only a short distance off the road to our right. And there would be an occasional farmhouse sitting in the far distance off to our right that soon passed out of our view and was left behind us as we walked on.

We were now in the farmland southeast of the compound...the Gasthaus. Never before had we walked this far down the dirt road. By now we were all thinking we were going to a new place where we had never been. Then, we noticed in

the not too far distance, up ahead, some iron girders on either side of the road that we soon learned supported a narrow wooden bridge. As the bridge became more visible, we could see various sized clusters of small trees to the right and to the left of the bridge, apparently following the creek bank on this side of the bridge. When we reached the wooden bridge, our column split. Half of the men were walked off the road following the tree line headed north along this side of the creek. The other half of the column was led off the road passing along the tree line to the south. On the other side of the tree line was a small creek. We knew what we were to do here. We weren't going to new exciting workplaces. We were here at a new creek ... another muddy creek bank!

When the last man in our column reached the bridge and turned, following the men ahead of him, it was then, when he was only a few feet distant from the dirt road, that the ringing sound of "halt" echoed through the trees. And we were stopped. Then, we were given the command, " Arbbit... Dipper, Visser." We were familiar with the command and, without delay, lowered our shovels off our shoulders and faced the creek and began sinking our blade into the soft, sloping shoulder of bank that edged down toward the stream of water.

We returned to this creek to work for only one or two more days. The small trees along the creek bank were so numerous that we had difficulty in working in and around the trees to effectively make the creek 'deeper and wider'.

But, this first day proved to very memorable. I was appalled at what I was soon to witness. It would be a pitiful act of desperation demonstrated by this group of early morning, subdued, quiet, slow-motion diggers... American 'dog-faced' prisoners-of-war that were digging along this creek bank. 'Dog face' was a nickname given to American infantrymen. And we were certainly that. And by looking at us, you could call us a lot of things... and it would fit.

We had not been here long when a team of horses pulling a wagon suddenly approached the bridge coming from the east... and then the wagon began to cross over the small wooden bridge. The horse's hoofs pounding the old wooden bridge floor let everyone know that the wagon had arrived and was on the bridge. The bridge was narrow and would allow only a single wagon to cross at a time. And there it was on the bridge. There on the wagon's high board bench sat a Slavic slave holding the reins to the horses. He was astonished to discover in that single moment on the bridge that we were American prisoners digging along the creek bank below him off the roadside. He instantly pulled back on the reins and the horses stopped and the wagon sat motionless in the center of the bridge. He was surprised... and it was obvious to me that he was near ecstatic to see Americans. He must have thought, "It would be Americans that would free him from being a German slave." And, we must have been the first Americans that he had ever seen. He knew for sure that we were Americans when those closest to him began asking for 'essen' (food), 'broat' (bread), even though it was spoken in German.

"Essen, Broat", was repeated over and over by the nearby American prisoners.

He pulled back on the reins harder to be sure he remained stopped. His back turned and he began searching through his cloth pack sitting behind the wagon

bench. You could see in his face that he was elated to have suddenly come upon and now to give some food to some Americans. It seemed that he couldn't believe that he had come face to face with some Americans.

No sooner had he turned around to hand some food to the first American than, within seconds, he was being rushed. Suddenly, it appeared he was about to be engulfed by a human wave of men. A swarm of prisoners, perhaps as many as twenty or thirty, clawing, pushing, running American prisoners, all reaching out, trying to be first there, and each ready to grab for anything... anything in the way of food.

Now, desperate, raggedy, wild-looking men were climbing up the spokes of the wagon wheel, others raced to the wagon tongue to climb up it, all desperately trying to be the first to reach the Slav. All wanted to be among the first there to get the food while there still was some food. A ball of men began to tighten around the Slav.

The beast... the horses.. and the man sitting high on the wagon bench suddenly became startled at the sight of the onrushing mob of men. The horse's eyes widened. The horses began to panic and backup. The man was scared, and out of instinct, he managed to throw a handful of food up in the air and off to the left side of his wagon. At the same instance, he lifted the reins and, in a hoarse utter, was able to command his horses to move.

I had never seen a man appear to be so joyful one moment, then turn so quickly into a man suddenly overcome by such fear. Fear of a wild oncoming mob that seemed destined to trample him as he sat nearly paralyzed. Yet, he had to react to the mob in which each rushing man was determined to be the first there to receive all that he had to give.

Fortunately, he did react... just in time. Part of the mob turned to gather what he had thrown off to the side of the bridge. And the others were brushed aside by the stomping and rearing of the horses. The reins were loosened and the scared horses lunged forward and in one quick thrust they were off the bridge and racing down the road away from the danger of the starving Americans.

"These were mad men," he must have thought, as he narrowly escaped.

I watched the whole thing, standing there along the creek bank. Had I been closer, I would have accepted his gift of food. Had the men around began to rush him, I too would have run toward him for the gift he extended to me. Soon it would be a foot race toward him by all of us... a scramble right onto his wagon.

These were hungry, starving Americans like I had never seen before. These were good men, too. Just desperately hungry men. These were grown, intelligent men that had become like animals in their need for survival.

I was too far from the bridge to participate. I remained standing there and watched in amazement....

One other time when we came to this bridge to work along the creek bank, I remember on this day a new young German guard was with us. He probably needed to be in a mental institution. He wanted very much to impress us. He wanted our attention... and it appeared he wanted to please us at what he was doing. He would kill frogs along the creek and laugh and dance a circle around the frog continually poking a stick at it, all the while making quick glances toward us, looking for our approval. We thought he was crazy. He probably was. We didn't do anything to provoke him because we didn't understand him. We sort of grinned at his addicts.

He continued to smile and laugh and dance around a frog, and look at us to see if we were being entertained. He was trying to bedevil the frog and entertain us at the same time. Yes, he acted a little crazy.

Hell, he was crazy! We were starving to death and we had to put up with this, too?

This was nothing to 'put up with' compared to the black-shirted, wooden-legged 'Nazi' that we would later have to oversee us.

Even now, I can still see the young, crazy guard dancing around a frog, trying to entertain us... I guess you would say he was entertaining us. Now, to think of it, our only entertainment was studying and witnessing the different characters and types of German guards.

A poor excuse for entertainment. But that was the best we could do.

This guard wasn't with us too long.

By the way, we never saw the Slav again. And I feel certain that this 'Good Samaritan' would not go out of his way to see us again.

The American prisoners might have massacred him for some food! At the least, trample over him.

The Man in Black

There was no doubt about it. We were desperately hungry.

Now, sometimes without fear or normal rationale, attempts were made to get more food...like prisoners stopping and digging for food in a German's back yard while walking to work, or rushing a man sitting in a wagon. This would be very true in my case. I knew of no prisoner that had left the group or had attempted to escape... but I did. It was a quick impulse. A chance, an opportunity. It was not planned. It just happened. It was done without fear in search for food. It

was an act of desperation...out of hunger. The chance to leave the group of prisoners would occur. And I would take it.

Never would I, nor would most of the prisoners, violate the rights, or transgress against other prisoners. None of the prisoners intended to violate or take or steal from other prisoners...except for the overt action of the 'dirty five', which for the most part had been held in check.

Food. Food. Food. Throughout the walk to and from work, we would keep our heads down looking for anything that we could eat or hope to find. We learned to spot the small mounds of dirt that stored vegetables. The guards seemed to give their tacit permission for us to dig for potatoes and carrots stored under the preservative mounds of dirt that we would happen upon. We were quick to dig up what we could and rejoin our march before the last man in the column would pass us by. Why would the guard stop us from digging and searching for food when it was he who intentionally led us through the food-stored dirt mounds?

Yet, I knew more valuable than what I could find while walking with my head down, or briefly digging up from a dirt mound, were the packages of cigarettes I had. I carried with me several packages of Red Cross cigarettes. The cigarettes were hidden next to my body, placed there above the waistline, near the rib bones, and filled the cavity of a now shrunken stomach, concealed behind the cover of my wool army shirt, the soldier's army combat jacket and the long heavy outer army overcoat. I knew that cigarettes were more valuable than gold. The Germans had no tobacco. I remembered what I had heard back at Stalag IV-B, "you could buy your way to freedom across Germany in exchange for cigarettes." Surely, I could exchange cigarettes for food? I had my most valuable assets with me, if the occasion presented itself, for me to trade cigarettes for food or freedom.

On this April day, the three or four old guards led us over the bridge into Merseburg. Shortly afterwards, we turned right, walking through the southern outskirts of the city, walking toward the east, as usual. Then, our column turned to the southeast, soon to walk out of Merseburg and onto the flat farming plains, when we came to the creek. This is the same creek that ran in front of the Gasthaus, but now we were some distance to the east of the Gasthaus. It was here we crossed to the south side of the creek, walking over a one-man stone footbridge. Here we were stopped and as usual ordered to dig along the creek's south bank in this distant, forgotten, quiet, flat, black farmland of eastern Germany. Across the stream from us, less than a hundred yards to the north of the creek, sat a small, aged old village.

As yet, we had not seen a German civilian. Not since Christmas day...not until this day, and it was now April. Imagine our surprise. And what an interesting civilian we were to meet this day! It was a true Nazi. In contrast, the guards with us this day were dressed in their colorless, faded, light green-gray wool uniform. They stood slender, tall over average height, mute, nearly command-less, whereas the civilian was colorfully dressed in winter, all- black attire, and was like a cricket, springing about, full of authority. This caught our attention. We could even forget our hunger for a minute. Here came a man all dressed in

black, riding a bicycle out of the village, down the aged, worn footpath that led to the creek and the footbridge. The man in black, riding high on his bike, turned right and followed along the creek bank and stopped directly in front of us. He got off the bicycle and instantly began hollering and waving his arms as if commanding us, and maybe commanding the guards, too. He was amusing. Interesting. Some kind of a harmless, venting tyrant? No, not harmless, our vision and ears began to warn us. We feared him enough to know we shouldn't do anything to draw his attention to us. And we kept our distance. We had come across our first civilian as working prisoners-of-war. We knew this was surely a Nazi. And today would be the first time we would come in contact with an SS man or a real Nazi. And there he was in that black uniform. No, he wasn't harmless, maybe dangerous, a more observing mind began to tell us.

For several days now, guards would walk us out to this work area from the Gasthaus and, shortly after arrival, the tall, middle-aged man dressed in black, with his black hard- leather leggings wrapped around his calves, would ride out of the village toward us on his bicycle. He had come to oversee us and to holler and rant. By now, we all envisioned him as the true Nazi villain. This is what we teenaged prisoners-of-war thought.

Each day he would arrive shortly after we started working. He was dressed the same each time. And his actions were the same. He wore a black trimmed mustache with pasted down black hair. He had piercing, dark brown eyes set in a stern, slender face. After getting off the bicycle, I noticed he walked with one stiff leg. We knew he must have been carrying a wooden, false left leg. And, with his mean glare and waving arms, one hand waving a walking-beating cane, we knew this was going to be an interesting experience.

He was always walking up and down the line of digging Americans waving his cane and giving orders in German. Perhaps we were digging too slowly. No German guard had ever threatened, or commanded us, with our steady, slow manner of digging. We pretended we didn't know what he was saying. And we didn't. But he was saying something to us. At times he seemed to become overly infuriated with us. Nevertheless, we all kept digging at the same slow energy conserving pace.

It wasn't long before we all began calling this guy, 'the villian,' the 'Black Phantom', the 'Black Shadow'.

"Here comes the Black Shadow". The words would be repeated and passed along the line of diggers when the German in black was first seen coming out of the village on his bicycle. He reminded us of the villain dressed in black that we had seen in the Sunday newspaper comic section back in the States. We made fun of him among ourselves as we dug.

Everyday, it would be the same thing. He would show up shortly after we arrived in the morning and leave shortly before the guards would walk us back to the Gasthaus. He always rode his bicycle out of the village to where we were working and, shortly before day's end, would return to the village, leaving us, riding his bicycle to the one visible street dividing the village, and disappear as the street curved to the right behind village houses. Only for a short period of

time during the day would he leave us to go back into the village, and that was for lunch, and then return again.

We knew not to cross him... but the inevitable would happen. Our craze for food would cause us to act without fear and normal rationale, and then be faced with the wrath of the 'villain'. The German guards were 'permissive' and 'unseeing'. The Party member, the Nazi, was the 'devil', the tyrant. Prisoner beware! However, the inevitable was to happen. We would cross him.

There were compassionate Germans. One of the 'tender' Germans, I recall, was the young, slender German soldier, the non-commissioned officer that held his rifle barrel over his head, pointed skyward, and watched us as we left the wooded slope and walked out into a grassy clearing at the foot of the hill. It was the morning of our surrender. He treated us with respect and honor. And when a paunchy German private was seen removing a wrist watch from an American soldier's wrist, the younger German soldier, that was in command, swung to one side and faced the older German soldier and ordered him to return the watch to the American. It was quickly done. We all saw this and there was a new respect for this soldier. Only days before, we would have sought out each other, and if confronted by one another, we would have shot to kill. This is war.

And there were other compassionate people...civilians and guards. But this man in black, ah! He was very commanding. He was one of those true Nazi, we thought. He must have been. The man in black.

Escape into the Village

Spring had come. Or it was near. The grip of the cold winter was gone. We didn't know. We were slaves forever. Maybe. Things were changing but things were the same.

By now, I had grown rich. Rich by standards of a prisoner of war, as we were here in Germany, with all the Camel, Chesterfield, and Lucky Strike packages of cigarettes that I had. I didn't smoke. I was rich with these. I believed I was the richest man of all the prisoners. I was rich, rich! The richest man in hell! Had I forgotten what true riches of life were? Was I going out of my mind? Time would tell!

The German guards of the home front had proven not to be mean. I had survived, and if anything, had now developed a bolder, surer mind at this point.

It was not planned. My first escape to freedom was a quick, unplanned reaction. It was much like my last three days, State-side pass, before we were to be shipped overseas, that I went to an Indianapolis Army Air Base thirty miles from my training camp, Camp Atterbury, and hitched-hiked or air-hiked a ride in an Army-Air Force cargo plane to Mississippi.

On that day, it was the lone plane headed south. They said, "OK, come on." And I went. I hopped aboard. We taxied. The propeller revved ...we moved...and off we went, leaving Indiana behind. Was I smuggled aboard? There was no red tape. I just asked. And here I am, riding high in the sky...going south.

I was the lone passenger in an empty hull, stretched out on my back, lying there on the side bench that ran the length of the main interior. Lying there, having left Indiana, and now flying over the Southern skies headed for Mississippi. Huge, white cumulus clouds floated outside my window and I thought they looked like thick, suspended pieces of Dixie. Lying there content with the world, with the hum of prop engines lulling a lazy untroubled mind into fantasy. I'm on my way back to Dixie!

The two pilots were in the cockpit on a mission knowing they were carrying a lone soldier back down South. Life was never better. I had a three days pass "on leave" from camp, and if I chose to go half way across the country and back in three days, it was OK, just as long as I got back.

Indiana today, then to Mississippi, and on to Alabama by night...in a couple of days to Birmingham, catch the "Chattanooga Choo Choo" to Chattanooga...and on to Indiana. I would have flown home to Dallas, but a flight wasn't going that way.

I dare to go, knowing I could do it...go so far and return in just three days. So it was with this escape. When the opportunity came, I would take it. And get back...knowing I could do it. It never occurred to me that I couldn't do it.

On this particular day, we were working along the south bank of the same creek to the east of the Gasthaus. There across the creek was the same familiar, quiet little small-walled village that we had become accustomed to seeing for several days now as we worked along the banks of the creek. I was at the end of the line of diggers working along the creek bank that stretched to the west and away from the village. Suddenly the groan of air raid sirens began to fill the sky. The sound of the sirens was getting louder and more demanding with each minute. The German guards began to react in near panic. And at a quick pace, motioned us to move, move quickly.

"Tempo, tempo," they would holler in German, commanding us to hurry. We left our shovels in place and filed toward the small old stone arched footbridge, directly across from the village, where hardly more than one could cross at a time. The head of the column of prisoners had already crossed over the bridge. Other prisoners were rushing to reach the column and close up ranks. I was rushing too. The lead prisoners of the column had entered into the village and had not disappeared around a bend of the street in the village headed north. From where I was, I needed to move much faster to catch the fast moving column of American prisoners. The "Black Shadow", in his black uniform, had already bicycled into the village ahead of us and had long disappeared out of sight. By the time I reached the bridge and crossed over, the guards had all disappeared with the main lead part of the column of prisoners. I could have,

with persistence, caught up to the last man of the prisoner column as it turned and disappeared around the bend of the street in the village. But I didn't.

No, this was a chance to remain alone and look for food. Let the others go. I was free. I was free for now. Let them go to the air raid shelter or wherever else they were going in such a hurry. I would take my chances here…alone…unguarded…in this village. I had cigarettes. I could barter for food. And I would sneak into the column of returning prisoners when they returned from the air raid. That's what I would do. Now, I was alone. On my on. Free.

The Americans had gone through the village to somewhere. But I turned right at the first street and went directly to the door of the house sitting on the corner across the street. If I was going to barter with my cigarettes, I was going to do it now, in a hurry. Someone may corner back or a guard may see me. So while everyone, maybe everyone, was in a shelter hiding, hiding from bombs, I approached the first house on the corner, briskly walked up the four flights of steps onto the porch, and knocked on the front door.

A German lady of middle age, maybe older, with weathered face and gray eyes, dressed in a long, colorless, loose housewife dress, opened the door, and I said quickly, "Broth for cigaretta?" And just as quickly, I showed an unopened, full pack of American made cigarettes in the palm of my hand pushed towards her with my outstretched arm in front of me and, without hesitation, she said, "Ya."

She disappeared from the door and nearly immediately came back with a large, round loaf of fresh German cooked bread. This looked like the best thing that I had seen in my whole life. A big, round loaf of bread! I gave her the American pack of cigarettes and she quickly handed me the bread. We each wanted what the other had. She asked no questions and was not alarmed. This was strictly a business deal for me and for her. She didn't care where I had come from or where I was going.

I said, "Danka," thanks in German, turned and exposed the red triangle that the Germans had stamped on the back of my overcoat which revealed that I was a prisoner-of-war for any that care to see. I knew she wanted the cigarettes and she must have known that I, a desperate, starving man, needed her exchange of bread.

She shut the door and, to this day, nobody but she and I know that this exchange was made between a loose prisoner-of-war and a kind German woman. I was on my way back to the work area.

There was nowhere else to go. And the leaflet said that the Americans were deep into Germany across the Rhine. I thought it best to just "stay put" and wait, stay here at probably the safest spot, stay as a prisoner and wait for the Americans.

Rather than wait for the returning American prisoners and try to sneak into the returning column unseen, I quickly walked back through the village toward the creek, crossed over the small, stone walking bridge, and walked down stream

to the spot where I was digging. There, I sat down, staying in a low profile, not moving, with shovel in hand, hoping to go unnoticed.

The bombs did not fall. Not here. Not anywhere near here. Shortly, the American prisoners came pouring across the bridge and scattered out to their shovels, standing stuck in the mud.

I sensed that the "Black Villain" might, just might, have some suspicion of some of us getting food during the air raid. Maybe, the German lady would tell authorities about the escaped prisoner and the Black Phantom found out about it. Surely, he would search prisoners for the large loaf of bread. And if he found it on me? I couldn't take the chance. I knew I didn't want to get caught with this prized loaf of bread. I wanted it too much. While still far removed from the guards and the Black Villain, I saw my chance to remove the loaf of bread from inside my shirt and place it under some weeds and brush near where I was working. I would hide the bread and pick it up before leaving for the Gasthaus.

The suspicion and threat of the guards, or the Black Shadow, was unfounded.

The real threat of loss of the bread came from one of the "dirty five". One of the prisoners, one of the "dirty five", had seen me put the large, round loaf of bread in the hiding place. He must have seen me hide the bread, taking it from under my shirt and walking away from it, leaving it on the ground, hidden among the sticks and a clump of tall, dead winter-gray grass. When I returned to my shovel, I saw one of the "dirty five" leave his work place along the creek bank. He began to pass other digging prisoners, headed straight toward the grassy hiding place. His eyes fixed on the hiding place, as if he was trying to be sure of what it was I had placed there. All the while, he continued his slow, steady walk toward my loaf of bread. Behind him, in the sloping creek bank, the handle of his shovel stood straight up just as he had left it after sinking the metal spade deep into the soft mud. I knew he had only one thought in mind...this was the large, round loaf of bread. He had to check this out. And he was headed right for it. He would take it, too. I couldn't let him get to it.

He was a bigger man than the one that I had challenged and fought back at the compound. If you ever saw a western outlaw type, unshaven, like the ones in the movies, this was he. This one, I could sense, thought he had spotted "a find" as he continued on, but now at a slow amble, yet still moving directly toward the brush pile to see what he really could find underneath it. His curiosity and desire were getting the best of him. If he got to the bread and took it, I may not be able to reclaim my loaf of bread.

On he came. He was getting closer. Now, I could see the smirk on his face and I knew that he was thinking about taking the bread for himself. I know he must have seen me pull out this large loaf of bread from under my shirt, and he must have thought he would take it for his own. I didn't take the risk of getting the bread for this to happen. He had to be stopped. None of the other prisoners would take my bread. But this was one of the "dirty five".

Only a few more feet, and he would be at the clump of grass and the hiding place. I had to act. Act now. I would not let him take my loaf of bread. I jumped

from the side of the creek, lifted the metal spade of my shovel over my head and moved between him and the loaf of bread lying there in the grass behind me. I was dead serious. And I challenged him. I was desperate and I knew he would take it.

"Don't touch that bread or I'll knock your head off." My eyes were set and firm. My shovel handle was held across the front of my body, angled up over my right arm with my right hand slightly above my right shoulder gripping the handle near the metal blade ready to axe his neck just above his shoulder should he move any further toward the bread. I used my shovel as a weapon. I was ready to use the wooden handle and metal spade as if it were a rifle in the same way that I was trained to fight in close combat, using the rifle as a swing weapon. Damn, dirty thief!

He stopped. Half smiling, with his eyes looking halfway down toward the ground and glancing from one side to the other, contemplating, his head began to turn from side to side, as if it was telling his body to back away from this confrontation. As painful as it was to do, he forced his desirous mind to change course, and he slowly turned and walked back up stream to where he had left his spade buried in the mud. I could not let him steal my bread although he had come to take it...We were all starving.

Frank and I enjoyed that bread for several days. A pack of cigarettes was a high price for a loaf of bread. Twenty dollars for a loaf of bread. But I would have given more. The German woman knew she, too, had made a good deal. A loaf of bread back home cost fifteen cents. A single cigarette was worth a dollar in war Germany. A pack of twenty cigarettes was worth twenty dollars.

I had escaped. It was out of desperation. And I had returned. I had escaped safely and made it back safely...

This was just another workday away from the Gasthaus. Back at the Gasthaus that night, like most nights, I would say some encouragement to Frank.

"Let's go to sleep. There will be another day tomorrow."

The Second Escape, The Beating

There wasn't any news. Things were pretty much the same. Everyday we were up at daylight. That was no trouble. We had plenty of rest and sleep, going to bed at dusk and rising at daylight. The winter nights were long and dark. And we rested. Our bodies demanded this, so that the energy we did have could serve us during the day.

The routine was the same. The sound of the whistle from outside started us in motion. We would throw back the U.S. Army olive-drab blanket off our shoulders and toward the foot of the bed, swing our legs over the sideboard, and with the

left arm, push the upper body up from the lightly strawed bed. Sit and put on your shoes, then slowly rise to a full stand in the aisle next to your bed, then turn to the bed, bend over, and with your right hand, pull up your heavy, wool army overcoat toward you, shaking it away from your blanket. It served you well as a second blanket during the night. You stood for a moment, already fully dressed, knowing you were hungry, and then the sound of the whistle repeated itself, and now the guard's repetitive command, "Rouse mit, rouse mit." And in no time, we had our overcoats on over our clothes and we were heading for the door to go outside, without drink or food. We knew we wouldn't eat until we returned to the Gasthaus at dark. So, without hesitation, we walked through the Gasthaus front door outside and through the small-fenced front compound. On through the open wire gate to line up on the narrow, lonely street outside the wire fence in front *of* the Gasthaus, with shovel, and stand shoulder to shoulder, facing away from the Gasthaus, waiting to be led to some creek bank. Sometimes going to the creek to the southwest, and sometimes going to the creek to the east, or to the more distant creek to the south and east. Sometimes going to the open fields to the south and east of the Gasthaus to fill-in bomb craters.

Today, we were going to the creek to the east to dig near the village. We had been working here for several days now. And as usual, soon after our arrival, out of the village would come the "Black Phantom", the Nazi civilian overseer who commanded both the guards and the prisoners. How villainous he looked riding out of the village on his bicycle as he approached us, so strict and always dressed in solid black. He would be out of character if he did not have his offensive whipping cane. He was so demanding, arrogant...like a mad master daring and watching over his slaves. It was no wonder we called him "The Villain", or the "Black Phantom", or "The Shadow". With our heads down digging, we got the word that he was coming as it was passed along the line of diggers by other prisoners.

Here we were, dog faced, drooped with the weight of our winter coat and all the heavily weighing olive drab, mud-rain-snow stained winter clothes. These clothes were just as dirty as we were. We hadn't washed our face, our backs or hands, or cleaned our feet or body or hair, since when? England? That was months ago. Brother, how many clothes, or changes of socks or underwear, do you think they let you pack when you're taken prisoner on a battlefield? Hell, you're glad to be alive in one piece and lucky to have with you what you've got. The army blanket, the long, olive-drab overcoat, the soldier's combat field jacket, the wool shirt and wool pants, the G. I. underwear topped with the long winter underwear. The army wool olive-drab scarf that most of the time you pulled down over your head, over your ears, and knotted under the chin, tucking the loose ends next to the ears under the scarf, pulled tight, covering the ears so as to provide more protection from the cold. The top of your head covered over with the wool knit cap that you wore in combat, underneath the heavy steel helmet. These layers of clothes may make you look normal, but by now, we were nearer boned skeletons underneath this hanging mess.

We weren't sick and out of this world. We were making it. We might be starving. We might have dysentery. But we were still carrying on.

What the hell, so what if you had dysentery and a small stream of excretion had become frozen, or dried stiff, down a pant leg? It was still winter. The spring thawing had not taken place, and the flies and all the crawling things that come alive and eat on you were still dormant. All this had not happened. Not yet. Thank God for this. It was still winter.

And the work wasn't hard. It seemed a relief to move around and dig into the mud, move a full spade from one place to another. It passed the time and kept you moving and alive.

It was a late winter day, up stream by the village, while digging and being watched over by the ever-moving, surveillant "Black Shadow", when the air raid sirens began to wail. "Tempo, tempo" hollered the two guards as they moved up and down the line of men along the creek. The two ends pulled in toward the crossover footbridge, with the center of the line of working prisoners already having crossed over the bridge, forming a walking column headed into the village. Frank and I were part of the flow leaving the creek headed for the air raid shelter. Again, the Black Phantom had long disappeared ahead of us on his bicycle.

We had never been in a bombing yet. The way the Germans took off, this must be serious, I thought. But the American prisoners had never taken this as a threat, or as something serious. Hadn't we remembered how the buildings were half standing back in Merseburg? Hadn't we remembered seeing all the rubble along the side of the street? Nope! We were too hungry. Food was all we thought about.

Nevertheless, we would follow the guards into the village. This wasn't a big village. It took no time to walk through it and to a large barn sitting on its northeastern outskirts. It was large and heavy. The massive walls of the barn were made of thick mortar, rock and stone. The ground floor was dirt. It had a wood loft nearly full with hay. The barn sat to our right, sitting barely off the west-east road. The big front wooden doors were open and all the prisoners were led inside. Once we were all in the barn, the doors were closed. We were alone without guards. We had free rein to go to the hayloft or stay on the dirt ground floor. Frank and I, like others, choose to go to the loft and rest in the hay.

Was this a safe place for us during this air raid? None of the guards were here. Where were they? Down in a real air raid shelter underground? At least we were shut in and would have some protection, unless there was a direct hit on the barn.

Things were mighty quiet. Nothing was happening. We weren't there long before Frank and I heard excited voices below us on the ground floor. And, within minutes, word spread like grass fire that there were potato mounds outside, near the backside of the barn. There was an open side door on that side of the barn and all you had to do was walk out and go a few feet, and you would be among the many dirt-storage potato mounds.

“Frank,” I said, “Let's go get some."

Frank was a little reluctant and a little slow to respond. But then, I saw some of the prisoners returning with potatoes. We could see the ground floor from the loft from where we were. I knew we had to go. Most of the prisoners were afraid to go and wouldn't take a chance on leaving and being caught.

Frank and I hurried from the loft to the ground floor and made a dash out of the barn, passing over and around dirt mounds to a couple of mounds that we thought might not have already been robbed of its potatoes. Prisoners were still outside on their knees, digging frantically into the mounds of dirt. Frank and I fell to our knees over a mound, pushed our hands into the soft dirt, moving our fingers in search for the hard, round potatoes that were buried deep in the mound. We hurriedly moved from one mound, then to another. Most of the time, we found no potatoes. Either they weren’t there or other prisoners had already gotten them.

“Hurry,” I said to Frank. “The guards may be coming back in any minute.” All of us had to hurry. None of us wanted to be caught. If one were caught, surely, we all would be searched and we would lose the potatoes that we had found. And what would happen to us then?

The heavy front barn doors were slowly forced open from the outside. Then the two guards stepped inside and pushed against the inside of the doors to further widen the opening, allowing bright sunlight to enter and allow easier access from the barn.

Frank and I, and a few of the other prisoners, were still outside searching through dirt mounds when we were alerted by other prisoners that the guards had opened the front barn doors. Immediately, we stopped digging in the mounds, stood up, and rushed back into the barn through the rear side barn opening, and slowed and began walking with the other prisoners headed for the now wide-open front doors. We had placed the potatoes that we had found underneath our overcoat, under our field jacket, under our shirt, under our winter underwear next to our undershirt, hiding them behind this mass of clothing just above our waistline. We left none exposed or bulging out from our pockets.

Surprisingly, Frank, in all his effort, didn't find a single potato. I had a lot.

“Frank," I said, in near disgust, with disappointment, " If I find them, you have to carry them."

I had gotten back to the Gasthaus with the hidden loaf of bread under my shirt. It was his time to take back the hidden potatoes. It didn't matter who carried them. I was going to share the potatoes equally with him. We always had shared our food and always would. Who knows, I might find some more potatoes, I thought. I could not safely conceal more on top of what I was now carrying. So

we transferred the potatoes that I had found from underneath my shirt to hiding places under his clothes.

How in the hell could Frank not have found some potatoes? He was out there with me and the other prisoners, digging for potatoes as long as we were...and we found potatoes...and he didn't find a single one. Still, this seemed like Frank. He was a willing partner. He would do anything you said. He was trusting with dependency. And I felt the need to take care of us together for survival. He was the tall, quiet Italian. He was probably younger than I was. How could he be? I was one of the youngest soldiers. Still, if I said, "escape", he would do it. He trusted in me. He and I were like brothers here. Frank was a good person. Innocent. You needed a good "buddy" in a place like this.

I never thought of the likelihood of our being searched. We never had been searched before. Not the time I hid the loaf of bread under my shirt or any other time when we chanced upon food... which had been quite often. But we never before had the "Black Shadow" to deal with either.

There were a lot of happier prisoners for this air raid. We felt good going back to work, knowing we would eat better that night.

No sooner had we crossed the bridge and began to dig along the creek bank, when a frantic wild-acting man on a bicycle came riding out of the village hollering and waving a cane. He was dressed in a black uniform...of course, it was the "Black Phantom".

He got off his bicycle in front of us, and in a near uncontrolled, high-pitched voice began giving commanding orders in German to the guards.

The two easygoing, somber-faced guards half willingly summoned us from the creek bank, appearing less than anxious at what they were about to do. They lined us in a column of twos. There we stood, head up, standing tall and still, facing away from the creek...and we feared what was coming.

We were going to be searched! My God, I thought, Frank had all the potatoes. What would happen to him?

The "Black Phantom", the Nazi, backed away from the line of standing Americans and stood with arms crossed and watched as the German home-front uniform guards started down the front row of men and began to search each one. Frank was in the rear line, standing next to me to my right. We were not far from the end of the line. By the time the searching guard had reached Frank, not a single American had been found with potatoes.

The guard reached Frank and with open fingers felt in Frank's pockets and pressed over his drooping clothes. He felt nothing. Found nothing. He passed on to me. Then the next man. Then on to other men, until he reached the last man.

It was amazing. Unbelievable. God was with us! The guards found nothing! They found not a single potato on any of the Americans. We all knew that at least half

a dozen or so of the prisoners were chucked full of potatoes hidden there underneath their clothing. Then, it became apparent to us that the guards didn't want to find anything. I know the Guards didn't want to find anything! Or they would have. Why, it was our guards who, at different times in the past, would walk us through the area of potato mounds and vegetable mounds, knowingly stop us there, if only briefly, so we could dig for food. They didn't watch us. But I know they must have known they were giving us a chance to unearth some food. And then, we moved on, moved on to work.

No, the guards didn't find anything when they searched the prisoners.

And the Nazi couldn't believe this.

He became furious and waved his cane over his head and walked forward, pushed the guard aside, and then briskly walked to the end man on the front row standing to my right, and he began a search for himself.

The Americans remained standing at ridged attention. To stand tall might aid the potatoes in further filling the deep recesses of the stomach, and escape detection. With all the clothes we had on, they might pass undetected.

He began to search one man, then the next. We all knew there were prisoners with potatoes. And Frank was one of them. There was nothing we could do but stand there and wait for the "Black Phantom", the uniformed Nazi to come down the line of prisoners and stand and wait to be searched. Surely, he would find potatoes on prisoners. And he did. He found potatoes on a prisoner, then another, and another, and another. Each time he would order the guard to remove the potatoes from the prisoner and command the prisoner to step forward from the ranks and he would raise his cane over his head and beat down on the prisoner. Again and again.

Innocence. It was just two years earlier I sat in a square room in a line of square desks...an innocent schoolboy, regimented to move with hundreds of others as a high school student to another room at hearing the sound of a shrill bell... Now, just two years later, I was standing here, in Germany, still regimented, but now I was hearing the sound of the whish and thump of beatings. Innocence lost.

Frank was standing in the second row, the back row, with me.

"God, help Frank." The "Black Phantom" had reached Frank. He began to search him. He felt over him...but found nothing.

How could he have missed feeling and finding the potatoes? But he did. Thank God. The phantom moved on, found other prisoners with potatoes, and beat them like he had the others. Even so, the beatings didn't injure or really hurt anyone. With the layered clothing and the thin wooden cane, the beatings were, fortunately, bearable.

Frank and I ate better while the potatoes lasted. Thanks be to God.

Today marked my second escape, even though it was a brief one. In the third escape to come, I would never return to be a prisoner like this again. Although, I would encounter threatening confrontations that gave me doubt as to whether or not I would survive to remain alive.

What was going on in the war? Would it ever end?

Americans in Erfurt

In America, it was a real treat for a young soldier to go back home on leave and get behind the steering wheel of the family automobile and drive. After weeks and months of walking in infantry training at an army base, and when not on duty, getting around by bus or walking, this was one of those great feelings, driving an automobile. Gasoline was rationed in America, so even when you were behind the wheel, you had to have rationing stamps to buy gasoline. And there were very few rationed stamps available...so you didn't get to drive much, or far.

I remember the Good Luck service station down on Lamar Street back home, where I could buy black market gasoline. That was the only place in Dallas, that I knew of, where you could buy gasoline without gasoline ration stamps. But, at a high price, illegally, I might add. A young soldier or sailor like me didn't worry about that when he had a date, a girl to court that night. A single serviceman on leave had long dreamed about nights like this. This sort of night back home. It was one of the real pleasures of the time for a soldier to go back to hometown America and have a car to drive around in, and a girl with you in your automobile, and later, to court when you drove to that certain spot. The automobile was as much a part of America as anything I knew of.

Once, a sailor that I had met while home on leave dropped by my house to bring me a five gallon can of gasoline that he had taken from his base, the Dallas Naval Air station. He knew I was desperate to drive the family automobile. I had a car, but no gasoline to drive it. He was a young serviceman too, and he knew what it meant for me to drive a car while home on leave. No problem...he brought some over from the navy base. How he managed to get it from the base, I don't know. My aunt questioned this and wondered if I could get in trouble buying gasoline like this...buying gasoline for the family automobile from a sailor...gasoline taken from a naval base.

I was, by now, a trained killer. I may soon be in Europe, or the South Pacific, to do just that. So, did it bother me to buy gasoline like this when I was home for a few days on leave? No.

There were cars at home, in America, and gasoline, albeit it was rationed, unless you could find an illegal black market and buy it like I did. Here in Germany, I

saw no cars. Not any. No Volkswagens. I saw the bicycle, the inside of train boxcars, the Merseburg-Halle trolley car, German army assault vehicles, German mechanized personnel carriers and tanks at the front line in the battle area and the horse drawn wagon on the little farm road south of Merseburg. This was a death struggle for Germany and it was easy to see that the Germans were depleted. I had yet to see a single private passenger automobile anywhere I had been in Germany.

Sometimes, in the depths of night as I lay in bed in the silent Gasthaus, on occasion, I could hear the movement of a vehicle or two. I could follow their sound as they came out of Merseburg, passing over the nearby bridge, and motoring down the road traveling to the southeast. I knew it was an army vehicle moving in the safety of darkness. On a rare occasion, I would hear the sound of seemingly muffled, deep throated sounding, heavy diesel trucks that seemed to be in short convoy, pass down the same road in the darkness of night, headed in the same direction. The smell of the diesel and the sound of the diesel were a strange and new sound and smell to me. This wasn't like America with its gasoline. It was a different world here in Germany. And I wondered in the quietness, in this stale room, where the German trucks were going...and about the lost vacuum that I was in.

Germany looked weary and old to me. It was a country with slaves, human slaves brought to Germany from neighboring countries, here with the other American prisoners and me. We had seen them. We had seen more slaves than we had Germans. It was a country with old stone and masonry houses and barns, stone walkways and stone walls and old stone buildings, and old dirt walk paths that led to ancient stone arched bridges that crossed over the streams and rivers to the villages and to Germany's old cities and towns. I thought of the feudal ages. This place seemed centuries old. And here, I was taken back in time. God, how different and modern America was! America, in contrast, was vast, fresh, wild, untouched, new, young, moving and growing...it was great!

Today, we didn't return to the creek near the village to work. We were taken to the same road on which I had heard the trucks traveling south last night. We walked in the same direction for a short distance, then turned left off the hardtop road onto the dirt road and walked another short distance. We were led off the road to the right, onto the black farmland, walking in a flat field that revealed the distortion of an occasional bomb crater. We were again directed to circle a crater where we finally positioned ourselves just inside the crater, below the inner lip of the circling dirt mound that we knew, to move down, into the depths below us.

The "Black Shadow" was not with us now. We were out of his territory. We were away from the village and away from backyard vegetable and potato mounds.

Filling in bomb craters wasn't as interesting or time passing as was working in a creek bank. It didn't seem like we made much headway in filling a wide, near perfect circled crater hole.

"Never mind, Frank, about how tired and hungry you feel. Just wait until we get back and we'll boil a couple of potatoes and mash them in with our soup. We'll

eat well tonight," I said as we left the crater to start our walk back to the main hardtop road and on back to the Gasthaus, our prison home. When we reached the main road we knew it would be only a short distance more until we would turn off and go to the Gasthaus...and as usual we kept our heads down and looked for dropped potatoes or anything else we hoped to find that we could eat. This is when we noticed leaflets strewn around on the road like we had seen the one other time, and like before, I picked up a leaflet.

It was an American dropped leaflet!

" Look at this Frank. This map shows the Americans to be in Erfurt. Look at the headlines, 'AMERICANS IN ERFURT'. Look, that's not too far away from here," and putting my finger at the point of an arrow on the map as I spoke. Like the other American dropped leaflet, it displayed a map of Germany with arrows running across it depicting American and British army advances.

"Boy! ... They're not too far away from here. They've come along way from Kassel... where they were in the other leaflet. They are really moving. One thing, they are a lot closer to us now." At the time, I didn't realize just how close the Americans really were.

A lot could happen to us before the Americans carne, if they ever came. We may be prisoners like this forever, I thought. I couldn't weaken and look forward to freedom. I could not allow myself to fantasize. The Germans would do with us what they wanted to, and we didn't know what that would be. We had to keep moving and going...just to survive day-by-day. We couldn't depend on hope. We didn't even think about it for long.

Still, Erfurt was pretty close, I thought. Yet, so far. Would they ever come? . Would they ever reach us? A few more steps down the road and we all had forgotten the leaflets, like they had never happened. We had to get back to the Gasthaus for the little more than half a can of soup serving which was our day's meal. We hadn't had a thing to eat or drink all day. Our body needed that soup. We were weak. God, we needed that little bit of soup after working all day without food. It didn't keep us from being miserably, starving hungry. We went to bed and to work every day, miserably starving.

Erfurt. That was like Sherman being in Atlanta. Still the prisoners in the Confederate prison camp in Andersonville, just down state in southern Georgia, were not liberated. Not then. The starving and dying continued. The starving would continue here, too. And dying surely wasn't far off.

We would never see the American army here. We never thought we would. Yet, the Americans were in Erfurt, the leaflet told us...but a sick, starving mind could not comprehend this.

Filling A Bomb Crater
and Singing "God Bless America"

Our guards seemed to always be changing. We hadn't seen the "Shadow" for over a week now. We would never see him again.

The guards were never mean or commanding. But you never knew, since we were confronted with so much changing of the guards.

Maybe it was the occasional hope that surfaced with the thought that maybe the American Army was in the nearby German city of Erfurt. Or, maybe we felt the nearness of spring... maybe thoughts of home surfaced... but for some reason, while we dug around the bomb crater on this April morning, we started singing, first one, then two, three, then in unison we began singing, "God Bless America".

I remember the soldier off to my right, working at the side of the crater, singing loud and clear. Along with the rest of us, singing, "God bless America, land that I love, stand beside her, and guide her, with the light from"... when I heard a swish and crack...and he stopped singing. We all stopped singing. A new, young guard was standing over him, standing on top of the circling mound of dirt, looking down at him to be sure he had stopped singing. He had swung fiercely and hit him across the face with his walking cane, his upper lip split wide, crossways, gushing with blood. It was a nasty cut. The slender German guard stood ridged with his arms straight down by his side, holding his cane out with his right hand, his scornful eyes fixed on the bleeding soldier.

The American stood head down, trying to stop the flow of blood with the left sleeve of his overcoat by holding and pressing it against his mouth. We saw this and dropped our heads, and our eyes turned to the metal spade as it sank into the soft dirt below us as we continued on with our digging. We forgot what made us sing. Suddenly, we slipped back to what we had been for the past few months...quiet, humble, mummy-like prisoners.

Another thing I realized here in Germany was that the American flag meant nothing.

We had all been raised under the American flag and, during this period in American history, all the people in America respected and loved the sight of the American flag, and to see it wave in the wind meant something special to them. And now, to think that I was in a place where the American flag meant 'nothing'...absolutely nothing!

We never saw an American flag there. Maybe we will never see an American flag again. This was a strange thought for me. I should have known and accepted these things, being a prisoner as I was. But, all these drastic changes in my life, after becoming a prisoner of war, seemed incomprehensible, still unrealistic. Could this really happen?

Today, I learned that the song, "God Bless America", was not to be sung. Not here. Singing it caused a beating. We young, American prisoners should have known better. But we didn't.

The Last Bomb Crater And The First Laugh

Erfurt wasn't very far from Merseburg. Maybe fifty miles. The map showed it to be not too far from the center of Germany. The American army had advanced to Erfurt, that far into Germany. Even though there was a slight mystic feeling about the American's nearness, it was a strange feeling that we kept suppressed. Even now, there was no real feeling for optimism. Our minds told us the Americans were still like being millions of miles from us. Never did we dream or think we would be saved from this place. If only someone would say, "Just let'um leave us here. The Americans surely would come up that road one of these days." But none of us believed that. So, no one said it.

Today, like yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, stretching back for several days, we again circled around a bomb crater in an irregular line out on the flat farmland. Weighed down with heavy coat and all our winter clothes, slowly moving the rim of dirt, pitching it into the bomb hole below. I didn't know at the time that this would be the last bomb crater I would ever dig for the Germans. Frank and I would never again dig here, nor would we ever again sleep in the Gasthaus. By noon we would walk away from the Gasthaus and our digging forever.

But for now, it was around mid-morning, I can't recall ever laughing out loud like I was now. This was the first time I laughed in months. The last time I remember laughing was when old, blind Fusie had led part of a column of American soldiers off the Belgium road when he was walking to the front line. It was dark. He walked over the road shoulder and disappeared down a steep embankment vanishing into deep snow and nearly a whole squad of men followed him and vanished down below in the fog and snow and a growth of young pines. The soldiers were following the man to their front, and when Fusie left the road, they all followed Fusie. Fusie should have been classified as blind. He couldn't see past a foot ahead of him. And if his glasses fogged, he couldn't see at all. The men disappeared with Fusie going over the embankment like a line of falling dominoes. As pathetic as that was, I had to laugh about the disappearing column of men, momentarily lost in a snow bank, and then to see them reappear and scramble back up the steep incline onto the road. "Thanks, Fusie," the misguided soldiers must have thought.

And here, at this place, I was witnessing an old crippled-looking German guard trying to catch up with an American half running around the bomb crater. It looked like the tortoise trying to catch the hare. I had forgotten my hunger and I was laughing. Actually laughing!

The old German guard that watched over us, as we filled the crater, looked a lot like my native Swiss-German grandfather. He was a small man with a large,

round belly. He didn't look too much different from Santa Clause in his seventies. And for some reason, the soldier across the crater from me had somehow, I thought, playfully provoked the old guard. The guard started chasing him around the bomb crater, waving his cane, in an attempt to catch him, and with raised cane it seemed he would hit him with it if he could catch up to him. At least he was waving his cane over his head and chasing after the American circling the crater. Probably he was only pretending to threaten the American with his cane. Just playing. Maybe. Maybe, the old guard was amusing himself, and us too, with this horseplay. I thought it was horseplay. This seemingly mild funny old man had no chance to catch the fleeing American circling the crater. He surely did remind me of my old grandfather... just like him, with his stern, European, no-nonsense horseplay.

My grandfather was really good natured, and well liked, but, "By God..." he would say in his stern, broken English and German accent, starting a statement attempting to startle us with his playful gruffness. The sight of the little old German chasing the American around the crater, first one way, then the other, caused me to laugh out loud. I don't remember when I stopped shoveling dirt into the crater and raised my shoulders and stood there and was actually laughing for the first time in months. I saw a playful humor in this and I began grinning and laughing louder.

Then the old German guard saw me, standing and laughing. He raised his cane a little higher and he started running around the crater toward me, eyeing me the whole time. It was then I let off my shovel and started running away from the old man, running around the crater with my left arm held out behind me and looking back all the while, trying to tell the guard in English that I didn't do anything.

Was this a young kid playing with his grandfather? Or was it a grandfather playing with a missing grandson that had long since gone to the Russian front? Was this play? Or was it serious? If it was serious, we hadn't felt the fear of what was taking place.

The game was stopped just shortly after it started by a rapidly approaching young boy, a uniformed, home front, boy soldier that appeared to be coming directly toward us down the dirt road on bicycle. He was. He stopped at the crater and with heavy breath, in a high pitched voice, quickly and nervously spoke something in German to the old guard. And just as quickly, he turned his bicycle around and pumped as hard as he could go, back in the direction from where he came. Immediately the old guard excitedly directed us to leave our shovels and at the same time began swinging his right arm motioning us to leave the crater and move to the dirt road that led back to the main road and on to the Gasthaus. All the while, in German he was repeating, "Tempo, tempo," meaning rush, rush, and we began a brisk walk down the dirt road back toward the Gasthaus. Before we were halfway back, we began to hear a constant sound of what sounded like thunder off to the southwest...in the direction of Erfurt. It wasn't thunder. The sky was clear blue. It was a booming sound. Booming. Repeated booming in the distance. It was a distant, deep, low "rump" sound. Then, another "rump" sound, then another, a continued "rump" sound.

What was that? Is it thunder?

Someone said, " Artillery."

Yes, that's what it is, artillery...American artillery.

"How far away is it?" someone was heard to ask.

"Twenty miles," said another prisoner who seemed to know.

American artillery. Oh, boy! My mind was excited.

IT WAS ARTILLERY. IT WAS AMERICAN ARTILLERY. I never heard anything that sounded so good. A distant thunder. But the sky was clear blue.

What a day this was! Laughing! And now the sound of American artillery! What was next?

Yet, we were still like mice being played with by the cat. We were weak, weary and hungry, and prisoners, and could be devoured in a minute. The German guards led on to the Gasthaus. What would happen next? We wondered? What were they going to do with us?

Pick up the Dying Man and Leaving the Gasthaus

Never before had we been led back to the Gasthaus before the end of a long workday.

The pace was brisk and we didn't mind. We knew something was happening. We didn't know what. Even though we had seen the leaflets that showed American advances into Germany and had heard the repeated booming in the distance that someone said was artillery; we gave no thought to seeing Americans. Rather, we obediently went with the flow of the German command, clinging to this as if it was our surest way of survival. We had been subjected to such hunger and were so depleted that we knew, or thought, of no other way. We weren't happy. We were just carrying on. The booming had stopped long before we reached the Gasthaus.

It had taken very little time before we reached the Gasthaus. Something big was going on, we knew that. The American army was coming and they weren't too far away. This must be what is happening.

Not a one of us expected any miracles or gifts, or rescues, or abandonment. Not now. The only thing we expected, and knew to a man, was that as prisoners, we

would remain prisoners and be moved...moved on to somewhere else. What else?

So it was to the Gasthaus, pick up our blankets, our backpacks, all our belongings, and back outside to line up for marching. We were leaving the Gasthaus for good. Never again would we see the Gasthaus, or Merseburg, or the village, the potato mounds, the creeks and the mud and shovels, and the flat farmlands pitted with bomb craters. We were leaving for good. This time we had an added man as we left the Gasthaus to begin our walk back down the same hardtop road that we had just walked over, coming to the Gasthaus. We were headed south, then southeast, on the road walking away from Merseburg. Soon, we passed the familiar dirt road that ran off to our left and, for the first time, we continued on down the hardtop road going into new territory.

The added man was the weak, dying man that had lain bedridden in the Gasthaus for the past few weeks. He was too weak to walk. He was raised and carried in his bed just as he lay, with prisoners at each corner supporting the bed with an arm and shoulder, carrying him high over their heads, walking in the column that slowly moved down the road away from Merseburg...

We never heard the booming anymore. Maybe we were getting too far out of hearing range. Or, the booming just stopped. We kept walking all that day. Now, we were walking more toward the east than south. We had left the distant, advancing American army behind and somewhere during this day we had also left our weak, dying comrade behind. Before mid-afternoon, he had died as he was being carried. He was set down. Set aside. Left there alone on his wooden, straw bed. He was carried no more. We walked on silently...

We knew not to lie down and not get up. We thought we could make it if we kept moving...

Without having a square meal for months, the thought of food had long ago become a fantasy. Maybe the leaflets showing American army advances into mid-Germany, and maybe the booming sounds, had been fantasies too.

There was no whooping and hollering that we would soon be freed. We felt no immediate prospects of our being freed, not now.

Would the next day bring a bullet, a bomb, a gas chamber, or death by starvation? We didn't know how death stalked us. What would the next day bring? No notion other than we would, in the end, make it back home... alive.

There was no fear. We just had to do what we had to do. Just do what the Germans told us to do. Our minds were conditioned to think of the moment as it was, as it was with us now. We knew to survive we must care for ourselves even now, today, without thought of Americans coming to our aid. The thought of Americans coming to our aid never really entered our minds. Healthy men surely would have thought of this. As we walked farther and farther away from Merseburg down the lonely hardtop road with late afternoon drawing near, we

were beginning to realize, with surety, that our confinement in the Gasthaus was gone forever and, just as sudden, we realized that winter, too, was gone.

There was a chill in this early spring afternoon in central Germany and we were being walked first south, then southeast, then east down a German road, away from Merseburg, to where next? We did not know.

Remembering The Past

I was thinking. The hot, hot days and the long, exhausting, sweaty marches down South in Georgia during my infantry basic training, left me feeling, I thought, just like the Yanks and the Rebels at a day's end, with their thoroughly soaked, sweaty army uniforms. The salt had gone from the body. Rings of white residue left large circles on my green army shirt under my armpits. The forced marches left my shirt wet with sweat, only to quickly dry in the above hundred-degree summer temperature. This repeated several times until we could sweat no more. By now, we were "done in". By nightfall, the shirt was stiff with salt-sweat starch, and smelly. Here, in the sandy red clay of central Georgia, among the southern pines and hot nights, we camped. With bodies resting, sitting, laying on the thick mat of fallen, burnt-red colored pine needles... I knew I was experiencing the same hot, exhaustive feelings that the soldiers of the civil war must have felt during their long, sweaty struggles of war in these same hot, piney woods.

And now, as starving, dwindled prisoners of war, this group of American prisoners, straining to survive, knew also what the many thousands of Yankee and Rebel prisoners had gone through in starvation in southern and northern prison camps, with thousands upon thousands dying of starvation.

War is hell. Being a prisoner of war is torture... living hell. This is war.

If ever the war would end, the civilized world would leap with joy. Joy would be overwhelming. There would be no joy like it. Suffering, pain, fear and loss, sacrifice, and all abnormality would disappear if only the war would end. Until then...until the war would end... we would suffer and strain. War is hell. Being a prisoner of war at this time, at this place in Germany, was close to being out of the civilized world, as I had known it.

All would cheer if this would ever end. Folks back in America would climb the light post and shout with joy if it would ever end. We prisoners surely would give thanks for having passed through the valley of death, back to the civilized world.

The war was still on. And the march out of our imprisonment in Merseburg, away from the advancing Americans, was just as weary as the march by the

sickly, starved, bonny American prisoners from the advances of General Sherman on Atlanta.

We knew how they felt. We hoped we would not die, as many of them did, before they were liberated.

War is hell. Being a prisoner is nearly indescribable for us. A pitiful thing. A pitiful looking bunch of human beings that were once robust American soldiers.

So it was on our march away from Merseburg, to no telling where.

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The Road Back Home

We didn't know it at the time, but we had started our journey that would soon lead to home. Home to America.

We had lost the bedridden, sick man on our first day out of Merseburg.

There was not much on the road. If it wasn't for us and the shadows from the tall, evenly planted trees that lined the right side of the road, there wouldn't be anything on the road that we traveled this day.

The slender line of trees stood serene and firm with every limb being pulled in close to the trunk, pointing to the heavens, appearing stately and permanent with its clusters of long, green leaves. But, surely in their splendor, they must be weeping at what they had seen. Germany had been at war since 1939 when it first marched in this same direction into Czechoslovakia. In the past six years, the war had taken Germany's lifeblood across the blue Mediterranean into northern Africa, into nearly all of Western Europe. Deep into frozen Russia. To far away Leningrad and the outskirts of Moscow. Further into Russia, past the Ukraine, far to the south to the Crimea. All the Balkans and Italy were taken by the Germans. And past Greece to the islands in the Mediterranean went the Germans. North into Scandinavia and out to sea.

What was left to move down this road? It had already gone many months ago. The number would run into the millions of those who would never come back to travel over any German road, much less this one. We were just passing by, too. Never to return. We were going home, but we didn't know it.

We were in a pocket. A vacuum. What Germans were left were already to the east and north, fighting a losing struggle against an onslaught of steel and tanks and guns, entrenched and retreating and being overcome by overwhelming numbers in their defense of the capital, Berlin.

Another quarter of a million German military men were being rerouted and processed as new Allied prisoners of war in the Ruhr Valley in the northwest of Germany. And the Americans were nearing the heart of Germany just as

Sherman neared the deep southern city of Atlanta. Still, the war went on. The Confederates refused to surrender. The Germans were still not conquered. Not yet. Not completely. So the war went on.

As the road bent eastward and the trees gave way to a clearing, off the road to the right sat a small, two-story building. It was a small community hospital. I think the two sick men from weeks ago were taken here.

How would it be to just stop here and seek refuge at this place? Nope, this wasn't our destination. There were too many of us. We were kept moving down the road until the late afternoon light began to fade into twilight. Then, we were led off the road to the right where we were huddled in groups on the ground, cuddled up into an overcoat or blanket, and smell, in lonely quietness for the first time, the cool spring fresh-air of this fresh, green grassy farmland in which we lay. We were alive. And there was a feeling of peace. And spring was here. And things may be like they used to be. There was hope.

It was night and dark now and we lay weary and ready for sleep in this old continent that looked centuries older to us than what we had known in America. Hey, the Germans hadn't fed us all day! What else is new? Still, we had the presence of mind to feel spring. And it felt good here for the moment.

To Leipzig, Eilenburg on the Mulde, and Farther

We awoke to a cool dampness. It has been daylight for at least an hour. We slept well. We needed the rest. We had slept since the first hour of darkness. So it was no problem at all to rise fully clothed and instantly begin our walk, following the road as it turned slightly toward the northeast. Of course, we had no breakfast, expected no lunch, and now we were receiving no food in the evening from the Germans. By midmorning, our walk took us by a sign setting off the right shoulder of the road that said 'Leipzig'. Soon, we were passing a few houses that sat apart, neat and adorned with wood framed flower boxes underneath front windows containing the first bright colors of spring... they contained beautiful, blooming flowers. I believe they were tulips... red and yellow, brightly colored tulips. New growth. New season. New mysterious hope stirred in us, but remained suppressed.

Leipzig was a big town. I knew this. Just the glimpse of the outskirts was all that we saw of Leipzig, for we were now headed due north to slightly east, walking away from Leipzig. We could have been led onto a road going into Leipzig, but we continued on this road and quickly left Leipzig behind us, and we were once again walking in flat, desolate farmland. Alone.

Later though, sometime past midmorning, we began to pass some road traffic for the first time. It was moving toward us and past us. We were walking north on the left shoulder of the road, while on the road and to our right, going south, was a group of young German militia that was bicycling toward Leipzig. In a few moments, all the young bicycling soldiers had passed us. There had not been a

lot of talk with this meeting of their group and our group. Not any talk at all between us, as a matter of fact. We were just dragging along and they didn't seem to be faring a heck of a lot better, especially in the lack of displaying any enthusiasm for what they were about. At least they were wearing clean uniforms in contrast to our tramp dirty, stale, hanging clothes.

The booming had long been silent but, no doubt, this booming caused the movement of both our groups.

Not long after the kid German soldiers had passed us on their bicycles, we saw a small group of walking men coming down the road toward us. As they got closer, we could see that it was a group of prisoners being led by the usual old home-type German guards. Our guards and their guards stopped us for a moment when we came astride of each other.

"Americans?" asked one of the prisoners that had stopped beside me, and stood looking over the lot of us.

"Yes," I said. They looked better than we did, I thought. They are better clothed. Cleaner, healthier... I could tell from his accent that he was British.

"British?" I said. "Yes," He replied.

"Where were you captured?"

"In December, before Christmas, with the 106th Infantry Division, near Schoenberg, Germany." I didn't know at the time that Schoenberg was in Belgium, not Germany. "Where were you captured?"

"At Arnhem," he replied.

"Were you one of the paratroopers that dropped on Arnhem?" I questioned.

" Yeah."

"Your bunch had a rough time of it, didn't you?"

"We made it."

I could tell that he was something special, and he stood out wearing his paratrooper's camouflaged jump jacket with its large pockets, the jacket nearly fully covering him, hanging down from his shoulders. He could see that I was admiring his paratrooper's jacket.

"Want to trade for this jacket? A pack of cigarettes?" He said, looking me in the eye.

"Sure," I said, without hesitation. I unbuttoned a single button on my shirt and stuck my right hand under my overcoat and wool shirt and grasped a pack of

cigarettes while he, at the same time, was pulling the paratrooper jump jacket over his head. I gave him the pack of cigarettes and he handed me the British jump jacket.

I hadn't looked up from the jacket that I held in front of me before his group was moving on. I liked this British jacket. And the Brit was happy to be rid of it in exchange for the cigarettes. It was spring. It foretold of the changes to come.

While we were stopped, I hardly noticed our guards and the guards of the British POWs talking up near the front of our column. I was too busy looking over the British prisoners and talking to the paratroopers.

At the same time, the British prisoners started moving down the road, our guards turned our column left, walking us off the road shoulder onto a field, where they stopped and set two large cans on the ground. We continued our walk toward the two large, gold colored tin cans. The lids had been removed and I saw that the cans were solidly packed with hunks of red meat. This was German army field-issue canned meat. As we passed the cans, each of us was given a handful of horsemeat. The German guards had asked the British guards for food for their prisoners. They were given the two cans of horsemeat. We had never been given meat like this before. It served as our meal for the day. We liked it. It was good.

After we finished eating the happened-upon cans of meat, we once again continued our slow, steady walk northward. It wasn't long afterwards when we noticed that we were approaching a village sitting off the road and to our left. As we got closer, we could see old men and young boys at work digging trenches and defensive holes and hastily making dirt fortifications along the southwestern approaches to the village. They were preparing to defend their village against an enemy that they believed would come up the same road on which we were traveling. These were mostly old men, old men and a few young boys, preparing a place from which to fight and defend their village from the incoming American armies.

This was not an army that we were seeing... it wasn't the German army that was preparing to defend and fight for this village. These were village people, the old ones, that must have been told, "Hold... and fight for the Fatherland... with ever ounce of blood..."

The "Thousand Year Reich" was crumbling.

How futile, I thought.

We passed the village and the frantic workers behind. Soon we were in Eilenburg... Eilenburg on the Mulde. We quickly walked past houses, and now we were downtown in the center of town, the business part of town, passing two and three story buildings. This was a real city, an undamaged city. Here, there was no bomb damage. There were people. Not like Merseburg, where we saw no people. Now, we were seeing civilians for the first time.

Throngs of them stood and watched as our column snaked through the streets, first north, then northeast, then due east, walking toward a street-wide, old stone arched bridge that crossed the Mulde river. The bridge had no steel girders like the one that we walked over back at the Rhine. This was the "old town stone bridge" that has stood here for centuries allowing the people to cross over the Mulde. It had been here long before steel had ever been thought of.

We were going to walk over the bridge to another part of eastern Germany. Maybe this water barrier of the Mulde River would be just enough to stop the American advance? Crossing the bridge seemed to be, maybe, just what the Germans were looking for, for us; just the thing that would remove us from possible freedom... keep us from the advancing Americans.

Just as we were approaching the bridge, and when we were a few feet from the bridge, off to the right, from the crowd of people standing on the sidewalk, we heard a booming voice directed at us. Someone said, "It won't be long now, boys! It won't be long now." It was repeated loudly for everyone to hear in perfect English.

Not a one of us said a word. None of us showed any emotion as we continued our dull, death-like walk.

He repeated, "It won't be long now, boys."

It won't be long now. I turned my head to the right, stunned, curious to see who this was that said this. There he was, a German military officer standing among the crowd of German villains... a stout officer dressed in full, colorful German military uniform with colorful braided insignias on the uniform and collar, standing erect with robust chest, watching us pass along with the others. He was an aristocrat of a soldier. He, again in clear English, said in encouragement, "It won't be long now, boys. It won't be long now."

I would not have noticed him had he not spoken out. I saw that he was the only German officer standing, watching amid the throng of German civilians... mostly women and some old men... all well dressed. And his was the only voice that spoke out.

He was telling us that the war was nearly over. In our misery he was trying to encourage us to continue on... the war wouldn't last much longer. He was shouting to us that our misery was about over. "It won't be long now, boys. It won't be long now." These words were from a friendly-faced German military officer.

Oh, God, how great those words sounded. I repeated them in my mind, over and over, long after crossing the stone bridge and leaving the German officer and a curious mass of German people behind, as they stood silently, several bodies in depth, and watched as if they had never seen prisoners. They seemed both awed and sorrowful for what they were witnessing. I could see the sorrow and sympathy in some of the women's eyes. We were a near non-existent bunch of human beings... and they must have known it. They could see it. Not only could

my mind still hear what the German officer had said to us, but also, I could still see him as a "beacon light", standing out in the sea of curious people.

As Eilenburg on the Mulde faded out of sight behind us, so did this German and his words. We were still on a journey and we in our minds did not know how long it would be or where it would take us.

This was the first word of encouragement that I had heard since the day I attended the church service back in Stalag IV-B when the British minister told of the saving of Jacob from the well. He was a prisoner meant to die. But he was saved. Trust in God.

No one had spoken English like this since I had been in Germany and he spoke friendly and convincing. We had crossed over the bridge and the road turned south and east, and along it, we went out of sight of Eilenburg and away from the mass of people in Eilenburg and the German Officer that told us, "It won't be long now, boys!"

And we were starved to death.

Do you really think it won't be long now?

I think I was beginning to believe the German Officer.

It sounded good.

The First Rocket Plane And The Piggy Back Plane

More than three-quarter of a million people died in Leningrad from starvation during the Nazi siege. This was war. A world war. Suffering in cold. Suffering in heat. If civilians were suffering and dying, surely, the prisoner of war would suffer and die too.

Thank God for the few potatoes, the packaged food we took out of the Red Cross food-box and the packages of cigarettes that we carried concealed under our clothes and in the pack on our back. Thank God for the food that we had rationed for ourselves for these days when the Germans would provide no food at all for the prisoners. The best-fed prisoners in the world were the German prisoners in America. They stood firm and strong and whole with three full meals a day. What else but three meals for the prisoners in America?

Less than a year ago, the Germans stood alone and supreme over most of Europe, having command of nearly all of western Europe where they had the Allies bottled up in England and were holding and fighting a slow, mostly stalled, Allied advance in southern Italy. And the Germans were still far to the east of

Poland and deep into Russia, south of Kiev. Such a short time ago, with such distant conquered lands under control of the triumphant German armies, it didn't seem possible that this mighty war machine, even through it had been pushed back to and within its own borders, could lose its might.

Even the Allied High Command feared that the Germans may continue a longer struggle by fighting from the hard to get to places in the south of Germany, in the Bavarian mountains. Or German scientists would, during these last days of struggles, unveil a saving, new war machine that might be so destructive or feared that it might tilt the fortunes of war in their favor.

I remember, during our walk north from Leipzig, we had seen what we thought to be an airfield with an air hangar in the far distance off to our right. The roar of an airplane across the sky confirmed this belief. When I first heard the aircraft, I would look up, but could never find it. Several different times, I heard the noise of an aircraft passing overhead. I would look to my right, in the direction from which I first thought I heard the aircraft. Then, I searched the sky straight ahead. I still couldn't find it. Then someone pointed out a fast moving, rocket-looking plane skimming the treetops, moving away from us. Now, it was in the far distance to my left. It was then that I saw for the first time. It passed over us and was moving rapidly away from us. It was the first jet aircraft that we had ever seen. We had never even heard of a jet aircraft... now, we were seeing one for the first time. When a distant air raid siren would shrill out, the swift moving rocket plane would head back east for its base, and land for cover and hide.

The single rocket plane was the only plane in the sky and I suspected it was the only one of its kind, or one of a few of its kind. It wasn't ready to take on, or to be seen by, the unchallenged, outnumbering American aircraft that were free flying the skies to the west. The rocket aircraft didn't have propellers. All the Allied fighting aircraft had propellers. The propeller planes were slower. In the States I had never heard of an airplane that didn't have propellers. And this mysterious German airplane, or rocket plane, without propellers, flew so fast I couldn't find it in the sky. It would pass by before I could pick it up.

Also, during this day, I saw another strange thing. I saw a large box-like, slow flying, German propeller plane flying with a smaller plane sitting, riding on top of it. For what purpose? I had never seen anything like this before. What an eerie sight... a little plane sitting, mounted on top of a large, slow moving plane. *(See the "perhaps" explanation of these paragraphs - below)*

Would this war end soon enough? The Germans had bombs and rockets that could be fired into the air from Belgium and land on London. Would they be firing shells all the way to America next? And rocket planes that could fly so fast you couldn't even see them. The Americans didn't have anything like this... no jet aircraft... no rocket planes... no destructive missiles or bombs that could be fired for long distances like the Germans. Imagine, firing a bomb across the English Channel, aiming at and landing in London. The Germans could do this. We couldn't.

The Americans must come on and bring an end to this war before it's too late. Still, deep down, I knew it must be too late for the Germans, with their scientists and their rockets and long range, flying missiles, and their strange rocket-jet aircraft and piggyback planes, and whatever else.

People in America didn't know about these strange things that I had seen this day. As a prisoner, I saw them today. The war must end quickly.

Still, I dismissed in a moment all the strange new things that I had witnessed, knowing subconsciously that they had come too late to help Germany. Our thoughts were too full of hunger, physical weakness, and thinking there must be an end to this lost vacuum in which we were in.

Surely, the war was coming to an end? Surely, the Americans are not too far back there somewhere? They better hurry, and bring this to an end.

Following is an educated guess of what the soldier actually saw, in hindsight. It is contributed by German Aircraft expert, Richard Corey.

Looking through some of my books and an old atlas, we can take a guess on the following:

The POW's were heading into the interior of the ever shrinking Reich. Most likely towards the general area of Berlin, which was still considered secure until the Russians surrounded it at the very end. Berlin being about 90 miles, slightly North - West of Leipzig and 90 mi. (ruler on the atlas measurement) being a fairly reasonable distance (to the Germans anyway) for a forced march. The main road North in this case would have Wittenburg as a half way stopping point. That is assuming that the Germans would have used a main road to march POW's.

He mixes up the terms, rocket and jet. We'll consider that of the three a/c in use at the time; the ME-262, HE-162 and ME-163, the only one that fits the description of "rocket looking plane" would be the rocket powered ME-163 Komet. I feel sure in this guess as the only airfield in the general area of the line of march that based any rocket or jet a/c (and off to the right) would be Brandis. This was the base of JG 400, who were flying the ME-163.

The second sight he saw with the small plane sitting on top of the larger plane would be a combination known as the Mistel. (Mistletoe - code name) This was a war-weary JU-88 bomber, whose forward cockpit section was removed and replaced with a shaped charge "Grossbombe" weighing in at about 3.5 tons of HE. Perched on top was a Bf-109 or FW-190 a/c guiding the un-wieldy combination to its target. After putting this craft into a shallow dive towards its target, the smaller a/c would separate and fly away. The hollow charge warhead was reported to be able to penetrate 60 ft. of concrete.

Several operations were planned with the super-secret KG-200 flying these monsters, but few were used operationally.

There were two bases in the general area; Merseburg was one, but this was close to Leipzig and nowhere near to Brandis. The extremely short range of the ME-163 being a factor here. Its doubtful that the POW would have seen both a/c in the same day. A closer base would be Burg bei Magdeburg (literally, Burg near Magdeburg) which would be appox. 70mi. S-E of Berlin according to my ruler.

A note here; The city of Burg is just a little North of Magdeburg in my old atlas and I am guessing that this is the general area in which the base was located.

I wonder if the POW saw a operational mistel with the warhead or a training a/c that still had the cockpit section attached to the JU-88?

In The Pocket

Eilenburg was behind us. Once again, we were walking down a lonely road, walking toward the southeast, occasionally seeing a village far off to the right, and then another far off to the left. The day was turning colder, cloudy and misty. There was no beauty. It was dull and long. A hundred or so weary Americans on a long walk. We were in a void, in East Germany, maybe a hundred miles south of Berlin, in a pocket between the Mulde River behind us and the Elbe River to the front of us. We didn't know for sure, but you could sense it... the Russian army was not too far away, approaching the Elbe River from the east, while the Americans were just as close, approaching the Mulde River from the west.

We were in a pocket maybe not more than twenty to twenty-five miles across, from one river to the other.

It was sometime about mid-afternoon when we came upon a wooded area and a truck trail that led off the road to our left, going into the woods. Here we turned and we were led down the trail, coming to a high wire fenced compound. Immediately we could see that it was filled with hundreds and hundreds of what appeared to be slave help and displaced persons of all nationalities.

The wire gate swung open and in we went. If there were other Americans or allied fighting soldier prisoners-of-war here, we didn't recognize them. Nor would they have recognized us, most likely, with our battered, dirty clothing and thick, matted hair and dirty, sunken faces.

At this place, one couldn't easily distinguish between an American, Italian, Asian, Indian, or Slavic person. All were equally displaced here in this fenced compound hidden in this wooded area. I looked, but I don't think that there were any American or English soldiers imprisoned in this compound. I was almost certain of that. This appeared to be a civilian prison encampment.

We were in a pocket, placed in this compound, here to stay. I knew that this would be our final destination. They could machine gun the whole bunch of us. This probably wouldn't happen. But in this fenced, thick sea of sick-beaten humanity, a new test for survival was surely facing us.

God, who and what is this strangely dressed, down- trodden sea of humanity? Most were wearing weird looking hats. They were dressed in unfamiliar looking native clothes. They were strangers to us. They did not know us... nor did they welcome us. They were speaking all languages but English. Could we survive in this mix? It was obvious that there were many different nationalities imprisoned here.

They were crowded... squatted down on the ground... squatted around little fires here and there, heating or cooking something in their oblong cooking vessels. Puffs of white smoke from the many fires could be seen going up through the pine trees that shared the crowded containment with the humans.

It was getting colder and cloudier and the mist began to thicken, making it more miserable.

The march to where next was over. Now we knew. We had arrived at our final destination...starving American prisoners of war placed in a crowded, foreign-civilian, high-wired prison compound.

The Last Theft

Frank and I entered the tall, wire-fenced compound to find it full of sitting groups of straggly-looking men, most sitting around small fires, warming or preparing a day's meal. These were not soldiers of war ... not American or English... these were foreigners, displaced men, captive civilians, not Germans, dressed in their native winter clothes, most wearing worn coats with their peculiar, native wool hats covering their heads and protecting their ears from the cold. They were heating soup or cooking whatever it was they had in their oblong metal pot containers that they held over the small fires. Our American cooking pots are round, but theirs were different. Their cooking vessel had a distinctly different shape, being nearly rectangular.

Here, these men were in a forest, living among the trees. The ground was cleaned barren around them. And we were placed here among them. They had constructed primitive, hut-like shelters in this place that resembled small, two-man pup tents. Their crudely made shelters were small, two to four man huts made of a frame work of sticks and limbs covered over with a layer of sod. Layers of top ground growth with a dirt depth of about two inches was dug up and removed and laid over the limb and stick framework. We use cloth or canvas for the covering of a tent, where they used dirt held together by mostly grass and grass roots.

When we first entered the compound, we noticed small groups of men sitting, cooking around small fires, and the crude, tent-like, mud-dirt huts... and the ground having been scraped clean.

This was a miserable place, and they were a miserable lot. But they seemed content enough... living in a prehistoric manner like this, in a forest.

The light mist had turned into a light rain and it was getting damp. Not far from the front gate and to our front and right and in the midst of this sordid surrounding was a fairly large canvas tent and, to get out of the rain and mist, Frank and I headed for the tent. Once inside, it occurred to us that this could be a hospital tent, or a place for the sick for these people. Still, we weren't sure. We weren't sure about anything here.

We were lost in this sea of displaced persons. The American prisoners were dispersed in this group of humanity, each seeking shelter or finding a place to settle down wherever he could, wherever they chose.

How in the world was this place managed? When and how would anyone be fed?

There was misery with misery here. God help us.

Frank and I had moved through the front opening of the tent and moved in a few feet to get farther from the mist and dampness. We stopped and looked for an open spot where we could drop our backpack and blanket and claim a spot for ourselves. We saw an open spot to our left ... a small, open spot surrounded by countless numbers of sitting, laying men. The whole tent was full of motionless, sitting, laying men extending far back to the other end.

For the first time this day I felt relief from the weight of my backpack as I removed it and set it down behind me. Then, I slid my left arm from my overcoat and swung the coat around, then removed my right arm, and turned to drop the coat on my backpack.

My backpack was GONE! ... All the potatoes ... All the Red Cross food that we had saved for weeks was gone in a single second! We had no Red Cross concentrated chocolate bars to sustain us! We had no powdered milk! All the food that we had saved was GONE! All of our food was in the backpack. Someone had taken the backpack!

My eyes scanned the whole area. Nothing moved. Nothing had changed, except the backpack was gone. I didn't see it. I couldn't find it as I stood searching for it ... looking for it.

More anger than anything set in.

My mind flashed back. It happened just like when my blanket was stolen, when it mysteriously disappeared from behind me when I laid it down that Christmas Eve night back in the small German schoolhouse. Someone stole it as I laid it

down. Now, someone had taken my backpack, like before, when I set it down behind me, and before I could turn around and put my hand on it.

There were no Americans here ... just countless numbers of silent, motionless, sitting, laying, sick, dirty foreigners. Nothing looked different. Everything looked the same. Just our cloth backpack full of food was missing. It was all we had to eat. And it was gone.

"Damn!"

"That's it, Frank. We're getting out of here," I said, impulsively.

"Let's get out of here. I mean, we're getting out of this place now."

There was no other decision to be made ... or debate, or questions asked, or pondered over. It was an immediate reaction to what had just happened. We were getting out of this place. Getting out now!

We still had our packages of cigarettes under our shirts, and with them, we could buy our way out of Germany, we had been told. And, I thought about that. Now, we were going out there and see about that! And I had escaped before. It would be better away from here, where we had no food. At least we knew from what direction the Americans were coming, and we were going back in that direction. I was determined to get out of this wire compound and do it now!

When we entered the wire-fenced compound, I saw an old German guard escorting some of the foreigners outside the wire gate and followed them into the woods, and let them gather sticks and limbs and return with them so they could make a fire for cooking and keeping warm. I had seen others returning through the gate with firewood. I knew foreigners were being permitted to go outside. I saw this happening.

Not a minute had passed before we walked out of the large tent and approached one of the old guards near the front gate, and I asked him to let us go out the gate to get firewood. In sign language, and by pointing and mentioning "essen", which meant food in German, there was no doubt in my mind but that the old guard instantly knew we wanted some firewood for cooking. It was nearly a walking conversation-request by us of the old guard who, at the same time, started moving toward the gate with us as we headed that way. As we reached the gate, the old guard pushed it open and this allowed us to move out and start our walk into the woods. It was more like we were in command. We were confident and determined with this chance to get away from here and escape.

He opened the gate and on we went. He followed. We moved on into the woods, walking progressively faster. Probably, he thought we were some of the civilian displaced persons, not knowing we were two American soldiers, prisoners-of-war. I didn't think of what he might have thought. I just wanted to convince him that we wanted to go out to get some firewood and would return to do some cooking.

We walked through the open gate. We were outside of the fenced compound. At first we walked slow, but still faster than the very slow moving guard, then faster, and faster, and faster, turning this way and back that way, always moving further away from the compound, appearing to be looking for wood, continuing to move on deeper and deeper into the woods. We never stopped. Whether the old guard had stopped after going a short distance outside the gate, or continued to follow us with his slow careful walking pace, I don't know.

Soon the noise and sight of any human being was gone. There was nothing behind us that you could see except the depths of a dense forest. Now, we turned and headed straight north, walking on through the woods ... and we kept going...still moving at a rapid pace.

Nothing was behind us except a quiet, thick, dark forest. We had escaped. We left everyone. We had left the compound behind us. We were alone and on our own.

This last theft was too much. We couldn't stay in the compound with no food and with no known way to get food. We, along with these displaced persons, might have been left there to make out for ourselves the best way we could for how long, no one knew.

I had escaped before and had been free in Germany, and after this theft, I was sure I would escape this time for good, knowing I would not return. Going through the woods, I knew we were gone forever. We weren't going back. We were on our on. We were free in Germany.

We weren't elated. We realized we were newly escaped prisoners-of-war ...and there were still hazards out there to be encountered. We would deal with that as they came up. But now we were going back to meet the Americans! We would reach them somehow. So we were going to start out and do it! We were sure of ourselves and not afraid.

We kept walking north on through the woods, knowing now that we had actually escaped.

We were no longer in German hands. We were on our own!

We were a long way from Dallas, Texas and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but we wanted to get back there ... but first, we had to find the Americans. We were headed for them.

A Clearing

Soon, we came to a clearing. Here, we stopped, still concealed just inside the edge of the woods. We needed to survey the situation and consider our next

move. An S- shaped hardtop road was right in front of us and bordered the edge of the woods. Off to our left, at the far end of a curve in the road, was a small stone bridge that spans a small creek. Directly in front of us, across the road, was a large, long white house...probably some kind of country villa, or country hotel or Inn...and next to the Inn, on either side, were two or three smaller houses. The creek ran in an east to west direction behind the houses, and nearly parallel with the road from where we were. It was quiet and serene. We could see no one.

We needed to cross the bridge and follow the road back toward the north and west, I thought, toward Eilenburg where I felt sure the American soldiers would be headed. We sat momentarily near the edge of the woods, pondering whether or not to expose ourselves by walking onto the road, in full view of the cluster of houses, and in the open on the bridge. Our deliberation was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a long, brown army command car carrying what appeared to be German high command military officers. It had passed over the bridge and sped passed us, headed toward the southeast. Not for a single moment did an officer turn his head in any other direction other than look straight ahead, down the road on which they were traveling.

These were officers wearing hard, patent leather billed hats, sitting rigid, not talking, dressed in their full-dressed distinguished military uniforms being escorted in this long three seated open air military car with its convertible canvas top neatly rolled and resting over and behind the rear seat. And when it passed, I remember seeing the large, shiny, circular, tan metal encasement that held the spare tire attached to the rear of the car. Above it, I could see the rear of the wide, black bands of the officer's hats, and the rear of the high front peaks of their hats. This was Nazi Germany. We had just witnessed polished German officers passing by us as we lay in the edge of the woods. They appeared distinguished, sitting in their long, magnificent, open-air machine. It was a breath taking sight. And quickly, it and they were gone. The war was continuing. It was April 21, 1945. It was on this date that we escaped...and we just witnessed some high-ranking German command officers passing by us. They were going somewhere with urgency. But the end was getting closer...Germany would surrender May 7,1945.

That was a German command car, all right! We didn't want to see them. And we sure didn't want them to see us!

Now, our decision was made. We wouldn't get on the road to cross the bridge. We would go through the woods to our right...stay in the woods, and cross the road out of sight of the houses, and then, head back in a northeasterly direction.

We reached a place where we would cross the road. It was quiet and still. The whole area was void of life. There hadn't been any other traffic on the road other than the one command car that passed by us. We crossed over the road, leaving the cover of the dense forest. Now, we were in the open, in predominantly farmland, with only a scattering of trees. We continued our walk, now going in a northeasterly direction. Soon, we came upon a small creek. It was the same one that ran behind the houses. We knew we had to cross it. Here, its banks

were lined with small trees as it bisected an open field, out of sight of the Inn and the houses.

We walked down stream for a short distance to where the water width had narrowed to about five to six feet across. The creek banks were of gentle slope. This was the easiest place to cross.

From our side, one small tree limb extended over the creek, extending across to the other side.

"Hey, Frank. This will be easy. We can swing across on this limb."

I was amused at what I was contemplating on doing, and how I had "given in" to thinking how difficult this would be... to cross over this narrow stream. I knew that, in the past, I could have easily jumped flat footed over this five to six foot distance, and with a running start, I could have jumped three times as far. But now, my physical condition wouldn't allow me to do either. I chuckled to myself about my present inability to jump over this little stream of water.

We had to cross this creek and keep going. We knew we would do this. But how, without getting wet?

The limb was the clue. I would catch hold of it and swing across to the other side.

Our planning was to no avail. I had no strength. I couldn't swing and hold myself up by my arms, nor could I hold my feet up out of the water. My feet dragged in the water. I couldn't reach the other side without getting wet. My grip loosened and I dropped down, into the creek. I was much weaker, and my strength more depleted, than I had thought possible.

We crossed the creek, but not without me getting my feet and pant legs wet, and we continued on walking across fields headed in the direction of Eilenburg and the Mulde River. So far, during our walk, we hadn't passed near a village.

Later though, during this walk, I remember seeing, at quite a distance off to our right, a huge, huge two story masonry barn sitting on top of a clean, gentle sloping hill. It stood out in the distance like a beacon in an otherwise nondescript countryside. It was the pinnacle of a small village, with a cluster of houses sitting down slope from it.

"Wouldn't that be a good place to hide in?" I said to Frank, meaning the barn. "We could hide in the hay and wait for the Americans."

But, we didn't want to wait... and hide. We had cigarettes. We had no food. And, we had escaped not to hide, but to go back toward the west, the north, toward the Americans... to meet the Americans... to be freed. We were going to meet the Americans! We were going to meet the Americans! That was the dominating

thought we had on our minds at this time. So, we continued walking across the open fields in the countryside.

By now, we had left the distant barn far behind us, and it was beginning to get dark. Still, on we walked, onward toward Eilenburg and the Mulde, so we thought.

As it got darker, we began to realize that the escape fantasy was over and reality was setting in. We had nothing to eat. We had to eat. We were hungry.

Ahead of us, and off to our left, was a small village. We continued walking directly toward it and on toward a small, white wood frame house. The house sat directly in front of us. It was neat and looked friendly. It had a small wood picket fence around its front yard. It sat alone on the eastern outskirts of the village. Our walk didn't slow...on we went, going directly to the little house.

We were hungry. We had cigarettes. So this was the house we chose to go to for food. Cigarettes for food.

I opened the picket fence gate and we walked straight up to the front door and I knocked. I had done this before, back at the village near the creek where a trade was made and no questions were asked.

Now, I must do the same.

A Nazi

I knocked, and the door gently opened. First a woman, then a second, younger woman appeared at the door, and I said, "Cigaretta ... essen?"

The women were startled. They seemed surprised, compassionate, and fearful all at the same time. Without saying a word, they backed up to reveal the man of the house that, in my imagination, appeared to be dressed in black, and I thought to be dangerous. He was a Nazi. Might he be like the "Black Shadow"? Had I escaped to come to this end? Had I knocked on the door of the very one that would be my worst enemy?

Now, we were inside the house by invitation of the mother. Neither she nor they offered us food, nor accepted our cigarettes. They looked and listened as we talked in compassionate tones and showed pictures of our mothers and families that were in our billfolds. My mother was young and pretty and leaning against her late model American automobile, and smiling directly at you as you looked into her face. Surely, these pictures would reveal to them that we were decent, good men from warm, loving families such as they must have known.

Fear began to settle in. Would this Nazi understand our plight? We meant no harm. We can offer cigarettes for just a little food.

Boldness was not always the sane thing to do. Only a few weeks ago, a Swedish diplomat, whose name I can't recall, was boldly saving hundreds of Hungarian Jews from the Nazi by providing them with false Swedish citizenship passports so they could present them to the Germans and escape the Nazi roundup of Jews in Budapest. Almost certain death would have been their fate in a German concentration camp if not for the forged papers. The Swedish diplomat confronted the Germans face to face with false papers and received their permission, allowing the Jews to remain in Budapest, falsely declared as Swedish citizens. Then, the day the Russians came to Budapest, he was summoned by the Russian command. He would face them like he had the Germans. His sureness and boldness and the risk he had taken before would not help him this day. He was taken by the new conqueror, never to be heard from again. His luck ran out. Could that happen to me? Had I tried my luck once too often?

I sensed the aloofness and coldness of the older man. I honestly, for the moment, was gripped with fear. Maybe we had gone too far, I thought to myself. I trusted my luck too much! Why didn't we hide out in the big barn where it was safe, I was asking myself. All of these thoughts were flashing in my mind at the same time. What had I done here? For the first time I was scared.

We stood silently now... looking at them with our family pictures held in our hands. We realized they weren't taking our cigarettes in exchange for food. I could see that the women looked at us as if we were some kind of wild animals. All conversation had stopped. The women backed up, still staring at us, when the 'party man' stepped forward and motioned us to follow him out the door, and in German he said, "Come here." And we followed.

This man took us captive. Escaped prisoners of war can be shot. Under articles of war, escaped prisoners out of uniform can be shot. I wasn't wearing my American uniform...not entirely. I had on some sort of British jump jacket.

Out the front gate, and to the right, and down toward the village, this man took us.

I remember the German family saying, "Burgermeister" as they spoke to each other in their conversation, and I thought that probably we were being taken to the town mayor.

All the while, this man seemed like a Nazi to me. He seemed cold and ominous in his action toward us. I felt it, being near him.

On toward the very center of this community we went with our captor, not having any idea about our fate. I wasn't scared now. Not at all. The fear of him being a Nazi had run its course. On we walked, the three of us, toward the center of the village.

The Mayor

During our stay in the house, someone must have phoned the mayor. The village we were entering was small, yet there was a red brick, two story building sitting in the center of it. As we approached the building, we could see outside the building, standing there on the sidewalk in front of a glass front door, a man facing us... watching as we neared the building. He seemed to be anticipating our arrival. He was a man of authority. He was the burgomaster... the mayor. The three of us stopped in front of this man. Frank and I stood still, in silence... waiting to see what would happen to us next. For a minute, the scary Nazi and the burgomaster talked, and then the Nazi turned and left us standing alone with the burgomaster.

I could see now that the building we were standing in front of was a two-story hotel. The door in front of us opened to a stairway leading to the second floor. That I did see. I didn't look close enough to see if there were German soldiers inside the hotel, standing in the lower floor. But I'm almost positive that there were. I wasn't interested in making eye contact with them, or them with me. So I didn't look in that direction any more since I was beginning to feel almost certain that there was a crowd of German soldiers standing just inside in the lower floor door.

No sooner had the Nazi left than a German army first sergeant came out the hotel front glass door and stood outside the building, standing on the sidewalk beside Frank and me, and looked directly at the burgomaster, and they started talking in German. He was taller than Frank and me and the burgomaster. Still, Frank and I stood silent, awaiting the end of their conversation, and wondered what they were saying... not one bit alarmed or anxious at this time. From the beginning, we felt no anxiety about the burgomaster. He seemed to have dispatched the Nazi with ease and let him know that he would take care of this matter. And now, with the same type of ease, the burgomaster and the German first sergeant spoke in calm tones about the situation and us.

The German first sergeant, after this short conversation with the burgomaster, turned to me and questioned, "British?" He had recognized the paratrooper jump jacket that I was wearing as being British. Maybe he had fought the British in the battle of the Netherlands.

I said, "No, American."

Nothing else was said. He turned his head and spoke again for a moment with the mayor and then left, entered the hotel door and disappeared. Not at any time did he show anger toward us, nor was he threatening.

The mayor turned to us and said in mixed German and English, "The commanding sergeant said the Gasthaus was full of German soldiers. I asked if

you could sleep upstairs. He said, 'No. It is filled with soldiers'. He said there was no room for you."

He seemed a little apologetic. Frank and I felt some relief when it sunk in that we might have ended up sleeping in the same hotel with German soldiers. We didn't want to stretch our luck and sleep with the German army!

We were at war with the Germans, you know!

Then he said, "Come with me." He turned, and we walked away from the Gasthaus, and we followed. He led us farther down the street.

A block away, at the next cross street and across the street, was a walled yard. We turned left at the cross street, then turned right at the next street, and half way down the block, on the right, we came to a large wooden gate that opened into the stone-walled yard. The burgomeister pushed open the two wide, wooden doors and in we went. After crossing a large open courtyard he pointed to a pile of hay and said we could sleep there, in the hay. By now it was nearly dark. The burgomeister turned and walked back across the courtyard and left here alone.

We dug into the haystack feet first. Quickly we were completely covered with hay and hidden out of view except for a little space above our face. This had been a long day! We were ready for sleep and rest. From our hidden bed of hay we could see the front of a barn a few feet to our left and extending behind us. We could see outside steps that led to a small platform and door that entered into a second story loft. At ground level there were several open, partitioned stalls.

As we were looking at our surroundings, a young looking girl, probably in her late teens or early twenties, walked down the outside steps and passed near our hiding place. I whispered from within the haystack, "American."

She stopped and peered in my direction…startled…examining in disbelief.

"American soldat," I repeated.

Then, in great joy she rushed to the haystack and knelt down right on top of us, looking down into the loose hay and repeated, "American? American soldat?" You could tell she couldn't believe here ears. She was happy. She was exceedingly happy.

"No, American." She said doubtingly.

"Yes, American gefangener," I said.

The joy left her. But before I had said gefangener, she couldn't get her face close enough to the straw to peer in the darkness at an American she could not

see. Her figure outline against a wine colored sky was magnificent. The most beautiful girl in the world I thought…this beautiful girl leaning over me.

Then she rose up, turned, and left us alone and walked up the barn steps. I knew then that the upstairs entry led to the living quarters of a family of Polish slave labor.

Soon she returned, this time bringing food. We thanked her. Immediately she turned and disappeared up the steps.

I was sorry we disappointed her. We weren't American soldiers like she first thought. She was to remain laborer of the Germans and we… lost in a war that waged all around us. We both were looking for the Americans. And we both hoped to see them soon.

The last shadows of the evening's dim light soon faded and night turned into a cool darkness. Frank and I dug deeper into the haystack for warmth and sleep. We had no idea what tomorrow would bring or what we would do. Our only thought for now was to sleep and rest. We were dead tired and immediately we dropped off to sleep.

Thank God for the food that the slave-help girl brought us.

And thank God for the Mayor that brought us to this haystack for a quiet hiding place of refuge.

The Tanks … The Young Army

We couldn't believe that the mayor left us here alone. I think Frank and I both believed that it was better for us to be here than back in the hotel full of German soldiers. Some combat soldiers may not be as kind to enemy soldiers, as the first sergeant and the mayor were. Even though we were prisoners, we were enemy soldiers. They could be mean.

"And the Mayor left us alone here! What do you think about that, Frank?" I said.

"I don't know," he said.

We both thought the same way. We didn't know.

Then, about midnight, we were awakened by the heavy sound of grinding metal passing over the barnyard cobblestone. The barnyard gates had been swung open and a half a dozen large German tiger tanks swung through the opening making a slow, deep, heavy metal on cobblestone, grinding noise as they moved inside the walled courtyard. Their powerful, chugging engines were shutoff and the idle tanks were with us here in the courtyard for the night. Some had settled down just a few feet away from us. As they sit motionless we could see their

long, powerful eighty-eight millimeter guns casting long shadows on the cobblestone. The quiet, dark courtyard with its lone haystack had turned into an eerie scene, now harboring combat tanks, looking ever menacing as they sat silhouetted among the flickering dim lights that the young German tank soldiers carried around with them as they traversed the courtyard.

Frank and I were exhausted and had been through enough for this day, so a few unexpected German tanks settling down a few feet away from our hiding place in the haystack didn't matter to me. We would just stay quiet and in place and everything would be OK. I wasn't concerned one bit. We were too tired and half-asleep to know fully what was happening.

After the last rumble of the moving tanks ceased, the shrill of young, high-pitched voices were heard all around us. The young voices came from young Germans, newly recruited soldiers, kids not old enough for their voices to have changed. They were the tank crews. They responded to one singular, deep, bullhorn-type voice. The older man was their commander. He probably was an aged instructor and this, his last group of young trainees.

Even so, I was still half asleep. Yet still, these tanks and young soldiers didn't seem to bother me. I just wasn't thinking or planning on what daylight, the next day, or the future, had in store for us. I was still too tired and too much asleep and I was hidden.

But had I been less exhausted, I might have sensed just how close those little German fingers were coming to touching Frank and me as these young German soldiers were taking arms full of straw off the top of us to carry away to make a sleeping place for themselves. They were making straw beds in the open sheds underneath the barn.

As the first signs of daylight approached, Frank must have sensed the urgency and the danger of the situation more than I did, for he awoke me and whispered, "What are we going to do?"

By then, I knew we must not stay here. In full daylight, these young combat soldiers surely would spot us. The mayor could return.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

We were in uncharted enemy territory. Maybe, we shouldn't be here among the German tanks. Hey, the Americans could air strafe. In a firefight, we would be vulnerable. Hey, we didn't even think about this. Instinctively, I knew we had to slip out of here.

We silently raised ourselves from the hay and walked steadily toward the large, solid wooden gate, swung it open slightly so we could pass through... and out we walked from the barnyard filled with German tanks and fighting men. The long gun muzzles of the tanks stood silent and still as we pasted by them on the way to the gate. Everybody was asleep. Everything was quiet and still as we moved through the courtyard like we belonged, leaving the slumbering German

soldiers and tanks in their rest. Not a single German saw us. At least, no one challenged us. We thought we could make it. We had to. We silently walked on toward the gate. We made it out and not a soul stirred and not a noise was heard.

Once outside the courtyard my thought was on the large barn that we passed the day before. How nice that would be, I thought, to hide in the hayloft in that large barn and just wait and hide until the American soldiers came. So at the very first sign of daylight we were walking away from this situation back to a new hiding place.

I could only wonder what the mayor thought when he couldn't find us the next day. Did he think that maybe the young soldiers that bivouacked in the courtyard knew something about our disappearance? Nobody knew where we were. We were going back to hide in that huge barn that we had seen yesterday. A cock just started crowing.

Backtrack To The Barn

April was to be a monumental month for the world and us. Frank and I didn't know that then. We were young. We had gone through many new experiences as young, drafted army soldiers. Most were exciting. We were teenagers still maturing. We were growing in an army at war. We hardly knew the world that others had known ... being in the army as teenagers in the States and now prisoners of war in Germany. Still, we were young and unencumbered. The future was bright, full and ahead of us ... if only we could survive to get out of this situation.

April, indeed, was a monumental month for the world and for Frank and me. We did not know then what was happening in the world, being isolated, pinned up like mice in a box... we were completely void of what was happening in the outside world. I did not realize that it was during this month of April 1945, that America's fervent wartime leader, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had died on April 12th of natural causes. Benito Mussolini, the Axis leader of Italy in wartime, would be killed, hung by his heals in April by Italian partisans... and the leader of Nazi Germany, "The Fuhrer", Adolph Hitler, would die by his own hand, taking poison on the 30th of April. And on April 25th, we were going to be liberated from the Germans. We were going to be free. God help us reach April 25th. Surely, this would have been my prayer had I known that this would be the day. Still, we had every confidence that we would make it. Prayer was not necessary. Without question, we felt our destiny safe in Divine Providence. The young feel that way. The old would die. The young have a life to live.

So, "Let's get out of here, Frank", I said, and we lifted ourselves up and broke up the last bits of meshed straw and hay with our heads and shoulders as we arose from the hidden hay bed and stood erect. As exposed human beings in the cool early morning, we started our walk across the courtyard, away from the German tanks, in the beginning of dawn's ever-so-faint light to the slight sound

of breath-of-sleep from the German soldiers around us. They could not be heard as we walked. The soldiers and the tanks lay mute.

Frank and I looked neither to the right or left as we passed the muzzles of the tank's long 88mm barrels, and left the shadows of the tiger tanks behind us along with their sleeping crews.

What if someone had said, "Halt! Comen Se hier!" as we were leaving the bed of tanks?

We looked neither to our right, nor to our left. We just walked out in the very early twilight of the beginning of a new day.

Once we passed through the wooden door and out of the walled barnyard onto the street. We turned right, knowing not to go left and back into town, past the small, two-story Gasthaus where we left the German sergeant and his housed German troops, and certainly not past the house where the Nazi lived. We turned right and were quickly out of town when we turned back toward the southeast. We were alone again, walking across deserted, cold farmland. Shortly, we reached the small village with the huge barn.

The old stone barn stood on a high point on the terrain, sitting lengthwise east to west. The barn sat on the north side of an open, brick floored square. Across the square from the barn, sitting on the southeast corner, was a two-story, white-masonry building or inn, and in the middle of the square, between this building and the barn, sat a small structure about four feet by four feet that served as a public, one-person restroom.

It was the barn that we were going to. We thought we could hide in the barn. During this early morning journey, we had no trouble reaching the barn and walking into it undetected. Here, we stayed in hiding for three days and nights until that eventful day, April 25th, 1945.

During the early morning of April 22nd, while it was still too early for the rising of the German people, we reached the large, walk-in opening to the barn that centered on the barn's south side. The opening faced the bricked courtyard. We walked inside to ground floor and found it partitioned with stalls. Each stall for the length of the barn housed a large milk cow.

We passed through the opening, going into the barn, where we came face to face with the only other person up and about at this time of the morning. He was a tall, scary, Frankenstein-like man that must have stood at least six feet six inches tall. He stood there in front of us with his back to the interior of the barn and we stood looking at him with our backs to the barn opening. We knew he was a slave laborer, as always was the case with this type of farm help. As we stood looking at each other, he gripping the handle of an apparent milk bucket with his right hand and showing no emotion of any kind, I said, "American gafanganans (prisoners)," and at the same time, pointed up toward the hayloft, suggesting a place to stay and hide.

He didn't say anything. There was no change of expression on his face. Then, at last, he slowly nodded his head up and down a time or two, turned from us, and entered one of the small stalls and began milking one of the cows.

He showed no emotion at all. His dark eyes were sunk behind large cheekbones. His mouth stayed partly opened, revealing the fullness of his large lips. He could be scary... but I couldn't get scared anymore... not now, not with what we had gone through. I think he might have been partly mentally retarded. I know I would want him on my side in case of a fight. Maybe some past event had taken a part of his mind, to leave him empty. He would be neither foe nor friend. He didn't seem to have a feeling for us. Yet, he did leave a full bucket of warm milk on the floor as he made his rounds. We knew he left it there for us to drink. We could drink all the fresh milk we could hold. After drinking milk until we could hold no more, we climbed a ladder to the upper loft and went to the far east end of the barn and dug a hole in the hay and stayed there in peace, resting for the remainder of the day.

Near the end of the day, a medium sized man walked through the barn and found us in the hayloft in the east end. He brought with him bread and hot soup, giving it to Frank and me. Each evening, he did this for three days. We never spoke. We didn't know each other's language. He knew we were escaped American prisoners and we knew he was a foreign slave laborer that had been forced to work here in Germany.

In the early morning hours, we would drink the hot milk that had been left for us on the barn floor, and afterwards, we would retreat to our hiding place, going back up to the hayloft to again hide in the hay during the day. And just before dark each day, he brought food by the head of a slave family that, like others, was one of the thousands of slave families here in Germany.

One morning, I walked out of the barn into the open, and over to the tiny, square public restroom, to rid myself of the large amount of fluid that had built up in me as the result of my unrestrained consumption of the warm milk. And in part, I needed relief from my uncontrollable dysentery that I knew I had to deal with... and it wouldn't wait. I walked to the small outhouse and locked myself in.

A few minutes afterwards, a young German soldier walked across the open, brick-floored courtyard from the Inn to the public restroom that I was in, and attempted to open the door. It didn't open. I had it locked. I was inside. The German soldier was outside. I could see him through the perpendicular cracks in the door. He had come from the inn. The inn served as a bus stop. It was a place where the bus picked up passengers and let them off. Small, touring type cars and small buses would pull beside the inn and passengers would exit the bus and enter the building and, after a short stay, the passengers would return to the bus and the bus would leave, going on to another destination. This young German soldier was one of those passengers who was here for only a momentary stop over.

I had just locked myself in the restroom and had no intention of unlocking the door soon. Especially, not now! For some reason it didn't seem important to me

whether or not a German soldier was outside wanting to get in. He stood there for a while waiting for me to come out. I wasn't. Before I had a chance to seriously think about it, he was gone. The bus passengers were being loaded on the bus and he was one of them.

As for me, real or not, I felt partly safe because of the clothes that I was wearing. By now, my army clothes, not having been changed or cleaned since my capture months ago, seemed to blend in with the clothes of the slave workers. I felt that now I could go nearly undetected as an American prisoner of war and pass for another displaced person.

Here, in Nazi Germany, a hundred miles below Berlin, was a conglomerate of perplexed, desperate, unhappy people. A mixture of foreign workers and displaced persons... subdued, passive, compassionate German civilians... a few civilians both young and old that would still fight for the "Fatherland". And the occasional staunch Nazi and small groups of mostly scattered, hiding German soldiers, mostly young kids, that gave no evidence of their wanting to participate in a fight... and prisoners of war still guarded in hidden places here and there. And then, there are two escaped prisoners of war, Frank and me, that had come face to face with all these types of people over the past two days.

I felt I had learned, by looking at a person here, to tell whether or not this person would be a threat to me. As the war was nearing an end, this type of threatening person, be it a civilian or soldier, was quickly disappearing. I knew to beware of a person dressed in black. The young soldier outside the outhouse was not threatening... not in my mind.

We shouldn't forget or be misled... there remained a deadly, cruel, punishing war going on out there. Over two thousand German tanks were being destroyed as they fought in the present, fierce, ongoing battle for Berlin. Nearly three times as many lost by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge... and in less than a third of the time it took for their destruction in the Battle of the Bulge. Even now, during these days, thousands of soldiers and civilians were suffering and dying in battles. And the conquering Russians were cruel and unmerciful. Hate and killing was near... still it had been quiet here. I had no desire to be liberated by the Russians. I wanted to be liberated by the Americans where I would be treated humanely and I would get to go home.

This pocket Frank and I were in provided a false lull for an uncertain future in our hopes to meet the Americans safely. Our main threats to life were a weakening body due to starvation and a tragic misfortune as we tried to reach the Americans near war's end.

I remember the German first sergeant at the hotel back at the other village saying to us, after talking to the mayor, "British?". "No, American," I said. Now, I remember that, over all my clothes, I wore a British jump jacket like the ones the British paratroopers wore in their unsuccessful jump into Holland back last September. This veteran German command soldier back at the hotel knew a British paratrooper jacket when he saw one. Why weren't we British?

With the mixture of British and American clothing, and being dirty nearly beyond recognition as a soldier, I easily blended in with the dress of slave help, I thought.

When I finished in the outhouse, the young German was gone. I unlocked the door and walked out, crossed the brick-floored yard and disappeared into the barn. The tour cars continued to come and go during the day. Frank and I remained in hiding, staying put.

I wondered what the girl must have thought happened to the two Americans as she peered down from the family room above the barnyard and scanned the walled courtyard that now housed the tiger tanks. She could see dozens of young German soldiers.

And did the mayor dare inquire about our whereabouts? He, too, must have wondered.

We were safe and out of reach... hiding in a distant barn.

April 25th, 1945
The Day The Americans And Russians Met, And The Day We Meet the Americans

We were in, up to now, an uncontested German pocket between the two German rivers, the Elbe River to the east, maybe ten to twenty miles away, and the Mulde River that we had crossed at Eilenburg back to the west no more than ten to fifteen miles away.

The Russian army had reached the Elbe by April 25th and had stopped there. The American army had reached the Mulde and were sending jeep patrols across the Mulde and penetrating the pocket that we were in, daring to go as far as the Elbe, hoping to make contact with the Russians. And they did, on this day, April 25th, 1945. Before this day, the American armies and the Russian armies had yet to make contact with each other, although they were getting close to each other with advanced units in their thrust into Germany.

On the morning of April 25th, 1945, the captive German middle-aged slave help, that had brought us food each evening, came running into the barn. He stopped abruptly on the ground floor near the east end and looked up into the hay loft where we were hiding and, in short pulsating breaths, hollered up to us, "American, American soldats... come, come, come," he repeated rapidly, excitedly.

We knew by the tone of his voice that he wanted us now to hurry, to come down. We knew by his excitement that he had seen American soldiers.

We went quickly down to the floor of the barn and the three of us headed out of the barn through the south opening and turned right, walking fast together, headed toward the west. When we reached the west end of the barn, he stopped and pointed to a village directly in front of us, farther to the west. It was half way down the long, sloping hill and lay between the flat valley and us.

"Go. Go to the village. Go to the other side of the village. Go beyond the village. There is a crossroad. The Americans traveled down the crossroad. Go. You will catch them when they come back. Hurry! Go!", he directed.

Even though we did not speak his language, this occasion was so monumental that he, in mixed German and English, and in his own native language, along with physical sign language, conveyed to us exactly the message that he wanted us to hear and understand. And in this situation, we understood. We understood in a hurry. It doesn't take much in any language for one to understand that freedom is down there at a crossroad when one is as desperate for freedom as we were. We understood. We were going like he told us to.

This was farming, grazing land. There was no forest here. We could easily see the village and we knew we could easily find the crossroad once we passed through the village.

"Danke you. Danke you," we repeated to our friend. Danke means 'thanks' in German. He knew what we were saying. He nodded his head and we turned and started walking away from him and the barn. He remained standing and watched us as we walked down the descending road toward the west and toward the village.

We believed him. He was too excited not to have seen the Americans.

We were going to meet the American soldiers! I believed this. We would be prisoners no more! We were going to be liberated! Glory be!

We walked straight down the road, losing elevation. Then, the road made a bend to the right, then turned back to the left and went straight through the middle of the little village in an east to west direction. We had seen no one so far, and now we were in the center of the village. There was no sign of life anywhere. The windows and shutters to houses were tightly closed. On our left, partly on the sidewalk and partly on the road, was a pile of rifles and guns that resembled wood logs stacked for a bonfire. It was a stack of rifles reaching nearly as high as my head. To our right was a house flying white flags. Sticks extended from second floor windows with white cloth hanging limp from them. Was this the way Hitler's "Thousand Year Reich " would end?

Frank and I could capture the whole town, I thought. They already had surrendered! Nobody was here yet to take them! It was too quiet... and weird. We wanted to pass through this ghost village quickly and get to the crossroad.

We continued walking down the street, passing through the village... reaching the other side where the road took another downgrade, and turned slightly to

the southwest. Now we could see the crossroad about half a mile away. There was another road going southeast to northwest, crossing the road that we were on. This was the crossroad that the slave help had told us about. This was the road that the Americans were seen traveling south on. The Mulde River was off to our right, up the crossroad going to the right. The Americans would come back this way, going back to the Mulde. We knew that the slave help had seen a jeep patrol... a motorized reconnaissance team.

We were told this is where we could meet them when they came back. God! This was the road where we would meet the Americans!

This was it! This is heaven! This is paradise! Can you believe it? Americans! They are here! Americans will be coming back by here, I was thinking. My mind was running wild.

"Let's go Frank," I said. "Let's go on down to the crossroad."

Our pace quickened. We were coming back from the missing. We were going to the crossroads to meet the Americans!

The Crossroads

We were at the stilled, quiet crossroads. At last... at last, we would meet the Americans! We were here, ready to meet the Americans... this very afternoon, April 25th, 1945. We would, wouldn't we? We felt like we would. We would meet them here at this crossroads, we thought ...haggard, tired, skinny... two weary, teenaged American soldiers... depleted. It had been such a long, long time since we had seen an American soldier... and we were starved... and up to now, we couldn't allow ourselves to think about seeing Americans, but now we could. This was no fantasy, no dream, no hope-for... now it was real... we planned to see American soldiers. We really felt that American soldiers were out there and they would come back this way... and we would meet them here. And, at last, we would be free. Free and go home. At last! At last!

Frank and I had arrived and we were here at the northeast corner of the crossroads. A slight drainage ditch ran along both sides of the road. It was here we would wait and sit on top the dirt bank of the ditch facing the road. The road was no more than five or six feet in front of us. The Americans had to pass by us on their return trip to the Mulde. We would sit here and rest, and wait until they came back.

Across the road from us were two young boys wearing some type of Italian military uniform. They, too, sat off the road, with their backs lying against the ditch bank. They were not directly across the road from us. Rather, they were sitting off the southwest corner of the intersection while we sat at the northeast corner of the road crossing. Obviously, they were trying to get out of the war and had given up soldiering and they, too, were resting and waiting. I imagined

they wanted to go south... back home to Italy. They looked to be about fifteen years old. Probably, they had nowhere to go. They were just there. You knew though, these two young kid soldiers wanted to go home. What were these Italian kids doing here in Germany? Maybe they had been part of a Hitler youth group.

Frank and I sat no more than forty feet across the road from the two young Italian soldiers. Neither they nor we acknowledged the others presence. Neither of us felt the desire, the need, or was in a mood to do so. They just happened to be there. And we were here... for a purpose. We were waiting for the Americans to come back down this road.

We were the soldiers, we thought, although not too much older than they. And they, youths in a Hitler youth program of some kind, we thought.

We were combat soldiers of the 106th Infantry Division, the United States Army of America. We had seen combat. We were captured in the battle back at the front, back in Belgium. We were surrounded and help never came. We waited and survived and waited and moved from one place to another and help never came. Then we were captured.

Surely, the Americans would recognize us now. We were the ones that they had been trying to save all along. At last we would be saved.

We were part of the surrounded 106th Infantry Division that was so badly placed on the front lines... and now, at last we would be rescued. Wouldn't they remember that we were the ones that held up the last big German offensive of the war?

"Look down that road, Frank," I said, as we both peered off in the distance to the southeast, following the road as far as we could. "Don't see anything yet... do you? He said they would be coming back ...a motor patrol of Americans. Can you believe that?"

"They'll be back," I said, in anticipation.

We sat, waited, and watched, looking off to our left and to the south for their return.

Surely, we would see them... they would come back this way? I really believed we would see American soldiers this day. We knew we would, any minute now.

The Americans

Frank and I had no idea what was happening in the war. We did not know that the Russians were as close as they were. Off to our east, the Russians had stopped at the Elbe River, and the Americans were even closer to our west,

unchallenged and stopped at the Mulde River. We did not know about the Elbe River and how the two nearby rivers had become temporary barriers.

This we did know, we knew that the war was going on. We knew we were escaped prisoners in an unconquered part of Germany and we felt certain that the American Army was not too far away from us in their drive across Germany. First, we found American-dropped leaflets that showed their advances, then the booming of artillery and the sudden, unexplained march from the prison Gasthaus. And then, the German officer at Eilenburg who told us, "It won't be long now, boys!" All of this led us to believe that the Americans were close by. This was something that the outside world already knew.

Even though we didn't know we were in a pocket, a pocket of nonresistance between two great armies, we sensed the collapse of Germany. We believed that an American jeep patrol had driven down this road. We sensed that both American and Russian forces were near.

We wanted to see Americans. To be freed by the Russians would be like "not being free". We believed the head of the slave household, the polish slave laborer, when he said, "Come, Americans...come. You will meet them."

And now, we sat on the northeast corner of the crossroad that lay in the open farmland and watched the straight road that ran south for nearly a mile before it disappeared in a bend to the southeast.

The two young conscript soldiers, sitting huddled in a diagonal ditch across from us, appeared tired of this warring world and were ready to submit to the new conquerors.

Still, there was no great excitement. We weren't consumed with overwhelming joy. We had yet to see a free American. We still remembered seeing a German command car traveling on a road such as this, maybe this very road, just four days ago. And the German tanks? Still, we believed the next person we would see would be a liberating American soldier.

At that moment, it would be like the last day of school. Remember how great the last day of school was? It would be like all the last days of school put into one moment. It would be like a long awaited furlough. It would be as joyous as Christmas, like all the excitement of all the Christmas days you remembered as a kid. It would be like reuniting with a long-missing friend, a relative, or loved one. The excitement, the feeling, would be indescribable if this were to happen, if we were to see Americans, Americans in a jeep. Joy would be overwhelming. We would be spellbound. It would be unbelievably wonderful to see Americans.

First, it was the sound of motors that got our attention. Then, from the south appeared first one, then two, then more jeeps with American soldiers in them, driving up the road, speeding, coming right to our crossroads. God, glory be! What sweet music, hearing American engines getting louder as they came nearer, and the noise that the jeeps made. It was the sweetest thing my eyes

had seen in such a long time. My mouth opened in disbelief. I was stunned and paralyzed.

My God, here I am... an American starved to death... and here come the Americans.

Now, I knew more what it was like to see those fresh, healthy, full bodied, giant looking Americans as they came into full view. It was like coming back into this world from the dead. It was like coming back to life. What a glorious feeling. Going to heaven must be like this... from death to life. This feeling surpassed all other feelings that I had ever known.

The excitement, and the beauty of this sight of American human beings, left Frank and me in awe, frozen in amazement and wonderment. I never believed that a human being could look so good. My first thought was that these are giants, and so self-assured. We looked as the first few jeeps in a line of jeeps sped on... passing by us. Still, we were unable to comprehend what we were seeing. It didn't occur to me that they wouldn't stop to pick us up, we, their fellow Americans. It was as if they didn't see us or know who we were. Surely, they cared. And Frank and I were too excited, too unbelieving, to utter a word or to move, other than to stand and stare and try to see what our mind was having a hard time believing. These were Americans! These were American troops in American jeeps! These were our liberators!

Before the first jeep even arrived, we stood in awe, standing shabby-tall with an arm raised over our head, and stared as in a coma, still in disbelief as in a dream. The first jeep sped past us, as did the second, the third, the fourth, and the next. Then, just before the last jeep in the column of jeeps approached us, we at last moved, and broke the hypnotic-like spell. Fear...and the reality of what was happening... finally struck us. This was real, and we began to realize that it was really happening. These were American soldiers in a jeep and they were passing us by. And we must do something!

First, our fingers in our raised hand began to move faintly. Then, both arms reached up skyward, as if in an unconscious plea to heaven. Yet, we were too paralyzed to put them in a waving motion. Then, as the last jeep was passing us, at last, out of frantic desperation, and only now for the first time, were we able to break the trance that had stricken us at the first sight of Americans. We began to holler, "We're Americans! We're American soldiers!"

But that last jeep passed by, not even slowing down. Our heads turned to follow it, still in a half daze. As yet, it hadn't occurred to us that they wouldn't stop. But the last jeep had passed. Our thoughts were still consumed with the happiness of seeing the Americans. We couldn't think straight or fast enough.

Then, about a quarter of a mile up the road, the last jeep stopped, turned around on the road, and came back!

The first word I heard from an American was spoken by a sergeant from Pennsylvania, who was sitting high on the rear seat, when, as the jeep approached, he said, "See, Captain, I told you they were Americans!"

Obviously, there had been a debate over who we were. The sergeant won out. They came back. We never thought that they would pass us by. But, we never thought that they wouldn't recognize us as Americans, either.

"Hop in," the captain said.

"What outfit are you from?" he asked.

"We are part of the 106th Infantry Division... taken prisoner back in Belgium."

"You didn't look like American soldiers. We thought you were some more displaced persons."

After that, the captain turned back toward his driver and ordered full speed ahead to catch up with the other jeeps.

Frank and I sat on the rear seat of the jeep, next to the sergeant, I to his right, behind the captain. I turned to the sergeant and said, " Where are you from?"

He said, "Pennsylvania."

I said, "I'm from Texas. Frank is from Pennsylvania, too."

He sat and looked down at me with a smile, feeling pleased. I knew he was thinking that he was the one who recognized and rescued two American soldiers, and I could tell that he felt good about this.

There was no more conversation with the captain, or the other two in the jeep. They were on duty and working. Their heads were full of their mission during this day of war. Our heads were spinning with dreams. A fairy-tale of life comes true. Besides, by now, with the full hum of the motor, and with the constant rush of wind by our ears, riding in this topless, open-air jeep, it was nearly impossible to carry on a conversation. Anyway, each of us was interested in our own thoughts, they in theirs and we in our own "dream thoughts"... our thoughts of home... we're going home. My thoughts were on all that I loved back home... "dream thoughts". I'm going home to see my family. I made it... dream on soldier, you're free.

It didn't matter that this very day was one of the most important days of the war. It was on this day, April 25th, that an American jeep patrol penetrated a German pocket and made contact with the Russian army at the Elbe River. This may have been that very same jeep patrol. It was an important day, indeed, for a warring world, and for Frank and me. Frank and I were a part of that most wondrous day. And we were back in American hands. On we went at full speed, riding an American jeep through this unsecured German territory.

They sped over the rough road and didn't even know that, with each bounce, I thought my tailbone would tear through my tight rear skin and protrude out. With each bounce, I caught hold of the jeep side and rear railing and lifted myself, as best I could, to protect my rear end from being cut open by my tailbone. I had lost my flesh in the prison camp, and even I did not know what a skeleton I had turned into. With our hanging clothes, the liberating Americans in this jeep had no idea of our skeleton-like condition.

Still, we raced on. I needed to ask them to slow down, hit the bumps lightly, but I couldn't, and I wouldn't. They didn't know. They thought I was riding comfortably, when all the while my bony body was being bounced around like a ping-pong ball in a washing machine.

Oh hell, what pleasure it was, this challenging, bumpy ride... "Going back home," I thought to myself. "Going home. Let's go!"

And then, we hit another bump. My bones rattled. I felt no pain. I could yell for joy. Every minute, every moment of the ride, I could have yelled for joy like a lunatic. But I kept it all inside of me... I loved it.

"We survived, Frank. We're going back to American forces. Wow!"

Even our thick, long, uncut hair came alive as it danced around our ears and blew with the wind.

And on we went, toward American lines.

Back Over The Mulde

I hardly remember the trip back to American lines. My mind had been full of thoughts of home. All I knew was, I was completely safe and free in American hands. No German would threaten me again. Yet, this jeep patrol was in German territory, not quite home free, not yet... but this did not occur to me.

Just four weeks earlier, American General Patton had sent a combat team of three hundred men into unsecured German territory, such as this, on a mission to go a distance of thirty-five miles to liberate a prisoner of war camp. One of the prisoners was the General's son-in-law.

Of the three hundred combat soldiers that set out on the mission, only fifteen survived to return with just a hand full of American prisoners. The sudden appearance of aggressive, once again invincible, German soldiers and armor blocked the way back to American lines for the would-be rescuers. This jeep patrol knew it could happen again, as we sped on. But, as for me, I knew I was free forever.

Before I knew it, the jeep stopped in front of a rather plain, steeped-roofed, white-frame house. It sat off to my right, facing the street, perfectly balanced, with wide front steps leading up to a large front door. Large plate glass windows on either side of the door overlooked a covered porch that welcomed it's visitors and gave the appearance of having once been someone's "very own livable home". The house sat just inside the eastern edge of a town.

Frank and I exited from the jeep, following the sergeant up a walkway to the German house that had, only recently, been commandeered by members of this patrol. I didn't remember crossing the Mulde. But I knew now, we were back behind the front line troops... safe and secure, and free here, in this town and at this house.

On our first night of freedom, Frank and I stayed here with the squad that had picked us up. Someone in the squad took Frank and me to a small bedroom centered in the middle of the house and pointed to a room-filling narrow bed with a huge, high, fluffy mattress and said, "You can sleep here."

It was near dark and it was our usual time to go to sleep. Our weakened body demanded it, and to sleep in a 'real' bed would be another sudden fantasy come true. We undressed for bed for the first time since December. Taking off layers of clothing, down to our underwear, and pulled back the bed covering and gently laid on the bed, on our side, and sunk slowly down in an air-like, deflating feather bed that allowed the bagged feathers to slowly, softly cushion around us. We were in a real bed! A feather bed! No longer on the hard board planks of a prison bed, or hiding in a straw pile. This was our first night of freedom and in American hands... and at last, we could rest... and sleep in peace. I had never before seen, much less slept, in a feather bed. As I lay there, I remained awake for only a few moments, but I remember the feathered sides seemed to come up around me and swallow me... serenity prevailed.

We missed the evening meal. We had missed so many meals; it was becoming natural to us. And besides, in less than a minute in this bed, we were off to a solid sleep that lasted for more than twelve hours. And why not, after this exciting day. Our mind had played out. It needed the sleep, along with the rest of our body.

When we awoke the next morning, we joined the other GI's in the living room sitting around to wait breakfast.

Naturally, our main interest was food and eating. We were served breakfast just like we were one of the other GI's. Nothing out of the ordinary, and we were not treated any differently.

I remember that on this first morning of freedom, I asked the Texan cook if he could make cream gravy to go along with his biscuits. Being a Texas cook, and a Texan like myself, I felt he knew what an "Ole Texas farm boy" liked... it was cream gravy poured over hot biscuits to go along with the rest of his meal.

I remembered, as a kid growing up back in Texas, living in the country, that I loved to eat biscuits with cream gravy poured over them for breakfast. When I asked him if he could make cream gravy, he didn't say he would. He didn't say he wouldn't. I didn't ask again. It was like he might or he might not. I don't think he knew how Frank and I had starved for so long... he didn't make the gravy. Hey, this was my first breakfast since December, and here it was April. I'm not complaining. I loved it.

I think that on this first day and morning of freedom, our liberators thought of us as being two, healthy American soldiers that had just been freed. Not for a minute did I think they realized what a deteriorated physical condition we were in.

I remembered, just yesterday, I was looking at American soldiers for the first time since last December, and thinking to myself, what a giant of a people these Americans are. All of them are such beautiful and strong giants. It was easy for me to see that they didn't realize what a blessing they were receiving, being in full body and in good health. I had experienced the living, shriveled, near-dead person. I had been among them. I was one of them. And now, suddenly, I was back with and witnessing the masterpiece that God had created in whole.

Back To Battalion Headquarters

The patrol that took us in during our first night of freedom needed us like they needed a knapsack tied around their neck. They didn't. They weren't about to mother hen us. As soon as breakfast was over, we were in a jeep headed back to Battalion headquarters. They really didn't know what to do with us. And we didn't care. We were free, and we were enjoying any and everything.

The jeep pushed on westward, going deeper into the town, when it turned left at a cross street. After going a short distance more, we turned off the street to the right and stopped in an open area that was partially enclosed by two long, low wood buildings, one setting to our left and the other to our front, that came together at a right angle.

"You're at Battalion headquarters," the driver said. "The mess hall is down there," he nodded, straight ahead. "And headquarters is over here," turning his head to his left.

We weren't responsible to anyone, and we liked it this way. And now we knew to get out of the jeep, and we did. The jeep circled and left, going back the way it came. We were left alone.

We walked to the long, narrow wood building to our left and entered through the door closest to the street. We weren't looking for any particular thing or person. This was our first morning of freedom and we were free, and it was indescribably great just to be around Americans. So, we were just wandering...

looking around. Sooner or later, we had to find someone who would give us a cot, find us a place to sleep, tell us where to go, or what we were to do, as two American soldiers just freed from captivity. But, not now... we weren't looking for someone who would tell us what to do... we liked the feeling of our new freedom we were experiencing by just being among Americans here, safe in German territory controlled by Americans.

Here, at Battalion headquarters, we were walking among medics, supply personnel, and headquarters men. We told the few privates and non-commissioned officers, who asked who we were, that we were liberated prisoners of war. Someone told us we had been repatriated. That's the word, repatriated.

We happened to be in the medic section of the headquarters building when a young medic asked me if I would sit on his examining table and let him examine me. I was happy to oblige. Then, he softly and gently began to examine me. At first, a slight smile showed on his kind face as he looked at and felt of, a first for him, a reclaimed American prisoner of war. Then, I thought I detected an expression of bewilderment as he continued to do whatever a medic knows to do. He clasped his hand around the bone in my lower left leg. I could see that his hand was completely around the leg where he had placed it. He removed his hand and repeated this a time or two. I knew this was something that he had never been able to do before with anyone. Only now did he begin to realize the condition that I was in. His hand would go completely around my leg bone like it was my wrist. I could see that he was amazed at this.

"Do you want me to take a picture of you?" Meaning a picture of me as I was in this bony body. "You can have it if you want it," he said, looking at me sympathetically.

I was too embarrassed, far too proud, to be seen like this. I said, "No." I couldn't let anyone see me looking like this. I couldn't let my family see that I looked like this.

"If you don't mind, I believe I'll go over to the mess hall and see what's there to eat," I told him.

"Of course," he said, agreeing with me as if that was exactly what I should do.

Frank and I left the medic room and this building, and began our walk across the open area toward the mess hall. We began to pass one person, then another, as they were walking away from the mess hall and we walking toward it. When we were about halfway there, I noticed an American officer, a colonel, walking briskly toward us, but I didn't think anything about it. And then, he suddenly stopped directly in front of me, blocking my walk, and as a private, I stopped too, standing, facing him. With consternation, he said abruptly, "Where is your helmet, soldier?"

I was stunned by this sudden confrontation and questioning, and my mind went blank. My mouth opened, but nothing came out... I was shocked. I tried to search

for a response to such a question. My mind wouldn't respond. This would be like, "Where is your rifle?" I was surprised. Surprised so much, I couldn't answer. I didn't know what to say. I did know I felt hardly strong enough to make it across this open area to the mess hall. Yet, he called me a soldier. Could I possibly look like one? I couldn't... this thought flashed across my mind. But, to him I must look like a soldier, I quickly reasoned on second thought. How odd?

Now, at last, I recovered to answer him as he stood rigidly in front of me, awaiting my answer. I remembered what they said in the headquarters building.

"I... I... I am, I am repatriated," I said. "I lost it back in Belgium." Then immediately, still stone-faced, he turned quickly away, and walked off without saying another word. I should have remembered all soldiers are required to wear their steel helmets in combat zones. But it seemed such a long time ago.

They called me repatriated. I remembered that. In my mind, I was 'recaptured'. I was an American soldier taken prisoner. I was surrounded and left there to die, or be taken prisoner, back in the forest at the Germany-Belgium border. I was still an American... a prisoner recaptured. I was captured back by the Americans. I am an escaped American prisoner at that. What was this word 'repatriated'? I always was an American. I didn't have to be 're' anything.

This was terminology, but to me, I felt like an American soldier that had been liberated. I was an American, and always was an American.

I could see that I was taking exception to this word 'repatriated'. Like it meant I had to be accepted. Without knowing it, I was feeling guilt at being a prisoner of war. Would America, or the army, make me feel guilty?

Yet, the war was still going on. There was still heavy fighting up north, near Berlin, and no telling where else. And soldiers don't go around in a combat zone without helmets on. And besides, Colonels don't let straggly looking soldiers just walk around without being challenged for their seeming disregard for military discipline.

Naturally, as shabby looking as we were, it was only reasonable that the Colonel would be on us like flies on a dead horse. And seeing us dirty as we were, wearing the same dirty clothes that we had worn and never changed for four months, was enough to make any colonel 'raving mad'. He pounced on the 'missing helmet' first, and after his stern question, sometime during this period of seemingly long silence waiting for a reply, he must have observed that something was wrong here. Then, my reply and he walked off.

This colonel didn't know that I was an escaped American prisoner of war of less than twenty-four hours, and he didn't know that I was still walking around in my new "dream world", and he didn't know that I was a sick, skeleton-like, depleted man. The colonel did not say another word. He turned and left us standing alone.

Frank and I were still free, without command, wandering around behind American lines. And we were enjoying every minute of it. Heck, meeting up with the colonel was a freak accident that really didn't mean anything. We were still free.

"Let's go and eat, Frank."

"I didn't know that we were the only ones without steel helmets on. Did you, Frank?"

The Regimental Scout Team

At the mess hall, we met some "free-wheeling" regimental scouts that said they had room for us at a place where they were staying. So, we took them up on their offer and off we went with them, riding with them in their jeeps, going deeper into town. We didn't go very far when the jeeps stopped in front of a gray, two-story apartment building.

"This is where we're staying... come on, we'll find room for you," one of them said, as he jumped out of the jeep and headed for the door to the building. We followed.

Once inside we found it bare and drab. That didn't matter, we were enjoying this new adventure of being with these seemingly less disciplined "scouts" even though we knew we would be here only temporarily with this regimental scout team. We reasoned that these soldiers were here, well behind the lines, for a deserved rest. With their jeeps, they would do advance scouting and reconnaissance in front of fast moving units. Now, they were resting... doing R & R.

When I say resting, I don't mean 'lying around' resting. They were busy going here and there and doing what a behind-the-lines soldier does with his free time in a conquered German city. Frankly, they had little time for Frank and me.

"Hey," one of them said. "Would you like to have a watch?" He opened up a cigar box and it was full of German watches.

"Did you get these along the way?" I asked.

"Yeah. Take one if you want one."

I did. I took a round, silver looking cased pocket watch. All of them looked cheap. But it was a real German watch. And I took it. I didn't ask how he got so many watches... but he sure had a box full.

"Thank you." I said.

“How are the Germans?” I asked, meaning the German civilians.

“ Fine.“ he said.

“And German girls?” God, what is more important than girls, even German girls, especially to young American soldier boys?

"Uh, there is no problem meeting frauleins. They want to meet us as much as we want to meet them."

My imagination grew wild...perhaps unrealistically so. But one soldier can con another soldier easily on matters concerning women... and exaggeration of events can easily occur and imaginations can quickly exceed all bounds.

“You meet a lot of frauleins? And you aah... "

“Yeah. There are plenty of women... They are friendly... Like I said, they are looking for us as much as we are looking for them." At least, this was the way it was, according to this wiry, young group of scouts. I stood there wide-eyed. I wanted to hear more. Was a natural instinct returning now that I was free and had been fed?

They weren't interested in talking anymore about this subject. And I got the answer to my question about the German people. So we moved on to something else.

" We're going downtown. Do you want to stay here or go?"

" Yeah, we sure do. We'll go."

Downtown was like any city with its buildings and shops. This town hadn't been bombed. Downtown was open and alive. And there were people. This was a real bustling little city. God, it was great to be alive again. And here I was free to do things like I used to do when I was in a downtown of a city. Frank and I were walking the streets. We came across one downtown building that housed an army operated Western Union station. It was on the ground floor and the door was open. I walked in and asked if I could wire a message home to let them know that I was alive and tell them that I was now free and that I had been a prisoner. I was told the Western Union service was here for American soldiers to use for that very purpose... to send messages back to America, and yes, I could send a wire. And I did. I sent a simple message back home, to Dallas, Texas, saying that I was free and in American hands and that I was all right.

Directly across the street in another building at ground level was an American dispensing medical station manned by army doctors and nurses. It was on a casual second thought that I decided to walk across the street to the medic station to tell them of the persistent running of the bowels I had for the past two months and ask if they could help me with this problem. After a few minutes

of examination and consultation with a doctor and a nurse, I was told to sit over there, on a bench centered in the room, and wait.

In a few minutes the doctor returned and said, "When the next ambulance arrives, you're going back with it to an army hospital." The doctor told me in the tone of an order. I didn't disagree with this. Maybe there they would give me something for my watery bowel movement. I felt all along I was too weak, and my body too frail, to continue like this, acting like a normal, healthy person. I wanted their help and they were going to give it to me.

"You have severe dysentery. It has to be taken care of."

I had never heard the word dysentery. But that was what the doctor said. I had a near uncontrolled watery bowel movement every day for over two months, maybe three.

Soon, an olive-drab colored army ambulance arrived outside and parked next to the curb. I could see it through the plate glass windows. For a moment it sat still with its customary large Red Cross plainly displayed on its side. It was the familiar rectangular-looking, box like and windowless army ambulance sitting over huge rough tires. Yet, I knew it as a caring vehicle, a vehicle of mercy. Then the rear doors of the ambulance swung open, and it was about this same time I was told to go to a stretcher that was lying on the floor next to the wall and lay down on my back. Then two orderlies picked up the stretcher and carried me out of the building, going to the rear of the ambulance where the stretcher was lifted up and the stretcher and I were slowly moved into the ambulance. I laid there enclosed, knowing that soon I would be in the caring hands of the best doctors and nurses in the United States Army, somewhere in a rear hospital.

"Good-by, Frank," I said, as I lay on the stretcher, being carried past him where he stood outside on the sidewalk.

"I'm going to a hospital." He looked, and his eyes followed me as I was lifted into the ambulance. He looked surprised.

I was surprised. I was as much surprised as he was at this new and sudden change of events. A few minutes ago, we were walking down the street... now, I was on a stretcher about to leave in an ambulance. I didn't know if I was coming back here or not. Probably not... Yet, we were both happy... very, very happy... because we knew we had been freed and now we were both going home, even though it seemed we were going home separately in different ways.

It was time to stop wandering around. It was time to go home. And my homeward bound journey was just about to begin. And surely, Frank's would be next. We were too ecstatic about our freedom to feel any other way than to feel happy. All that we did or would do, and all that was happening to us or would happen to us, would be wondrous. I knew I was being cared for and I would be going home. We had helped each other to this point. But foremost, we wanted to see our families back home. The misery that we had suffered together had

ended. We must now part and begin our journey separately toward the day of ultimate happiness... that day when we would reach home and see our family.

I didn't know I was this sick. Had I known, and had I given in to my weakened body anytime earlier, I could have died.

Now, I was on a stretcher, and would be on a stretcher or bed, for several more weeks before I was to recover.

I was free, and now, my body would be unchained from the self-imposed discipline, and it would begin a recovery to its former full strength under army medical supervision.

The ambulance slowly tugged forward and started its journey to a larger city further to the rear where there was a large hospital ready to take me. I was soon lulled into an out-of-it peaceful sleep, occasionally awakening to the deep hum of the powerful motor that was taking me to the hospital, and feeling at peace with the world, and content. I was going home. I was going to see my family and they to see me. Alive. I had made it through this war!

"Hush, mind. Dream on about home." Then, off again in deep sleep I faded, letting this ambulance take me to wherever it was going. No cares... No worries... No pain.

"Roll on ambulance, on this bumpy German road, take me home."

How great it was!

"Roll on."

And I was asleep again.

On The Way Home

I awoke to find that I was lying on a cot in a line of cots that extended both to my right and to my left. Dim lights faintly veiled that I was in a long tent, and past the foot of my bed was a corridor, and on the other side of it was another line of cots. Nurses and orderlies were occasionally passing along the corridor taking care of the sick and wounded. To my left, past a bed or two and behind me, was an open entrance to the tent. I later would discover that the opening faced some wide steps set a few feet away from the tent that led up to the main center section of a large, brick three-story German hospital.

The German hospital was full of patients. The large canvas tent had been placed in the rear of the hospital to handle the overflow.

For the first four days and nights, as I lay here in the tent, I did not know day from night. I slept nearly continuously during this time. I was being fed nourishing soup and they brought me liquids at all hours, and they hand fed me custard and Jell-O when they could catch me awake. They took my temperature and were watching over me. The nourishment and the attention that I was receiving, and the clean bed with its white starched sheets, all seemed very special to me. For me to be receiving this kind of treatment after being on a forced prisoner-of-war march, starving, and laying in the open, cold fields, bony-ravaged just a few days ago, made this all seem unreal.

During one of the rare moments of awakening, I vividly remember an army nurse. A Captain... a beautiful, healthy, full-bodied blond, dressed in her clean white uniform, looking down at me as I lay in my cot. I felt she must have wondered when would I ever awaken and stir around. I think she was a supervisor. A male nurse or orderly was caring me for. But here in the hospital, at last, I could surrender my body to their care. My self-sustaining resistance to fatigue had been replaced by the care and life sustaining efforts of the nurses and doctors at this United States Army Hospital somewhere in north central Germany. Still, I lay in bed and slept day and night, being awakened only to take liquids and nourishment. How could I have suddenly come to such an immobile state such as this?

The only time I remember being fully awake was when I went to the restroom at night. The night orderly asked me why I was constantly getting up all during the night to go to the restroom. I didn't know. It was up and down. Up and down. I guess they were giving me so much liquid that, out of necessity, I had to continually get up to relieve myself.

The restroom was in the large German hospital. I remember leaving the faintly lighted tent, going outside, walking a few feet and carefully walking up the steps, and entering into the brightly lit main hospital entrance hall and going through a door to my right to enter the men's restroom. The restroom was spacious and lit up bright as daylight with a large marble-like floor. It seemed like it was always being mopped and the fixtures being cleaned by old German women every time I went there. It mattered not to them whether I was in the restroom to relieve myself. They never deterred from their job. I wasn't accustomed to women being in the men's restroom with me.

Over and over each night, I was getting up and going to the restroom. The nights outside were very dark. In contrast, the restroom was brightly lit. And the women mopped. And I had to urinate. And I did. And I carefully went back down the hospital rear steps into the darkness and entered into the dimly lit hospital tent, and onto my cot where I laid down to sleep, only to repeat this journey in half an hour.

I always had a 'good feeling' in my nightly walks between the tent of beds and the main brick hospital. The air outside was fresh and cool, April-crisp and thin. The bright light from the hospital blinded me from seeing anything but a blackened, dark blue sky above. It was clear, but I could see no stars. I hadn't seen a bright night light for months. And the hospital's bright light was nearly blinding. And out of the cold hospital, I would return to a warm clean bed,

knowing I would be watched over and cared for. On each trip, I would remember these things and feel extremely fortunate and happy to be here. And I thought of my recovery and home.

After the fourth day, I was told I was going to be taken by army ambulance to a nearby airfield, and there, be placed in an army hospital plane and flown to England.

They weren't releasing me!

It wasn't something with me that they could fix in a quick visit to a hospital. Now, I was going to England to a hospital.

Was I in this poor of a condition?

I was, and I hadn't realized it.

On To England

I had put down my guard and surrendered my body. I was weak and near helpless. Had I surrendered to lying down or giving up my body while a prisoner, I would have died. But now I was under the care of a United States Army hospital and I let my guard down and I gave my body to their care.

Why, all of a sudden was I so weak and helpless? I believe, as a prisoner, I knew I must get out of bed in the mornings and walk and dig to keep moving around. I could not allow myself to think any other way than that I was going to "keep on going" and survive this ordeal. Now that the ordeal was over, the rest, the nourishment, and the recuperation overwhelmed me to the point that my body needed more and more and I couldn't get enough, particularity rest and sleep. Now, I didn't have to get up and work and miss day's meals. My body was receiving and resting, and doing what it needed for recovery.

They deemed I was too weak to walk. On the morning of the fifth day, they carried me on a stretcher out of the tent hospital to a waiting army ambulance. There, I was placed inside. I lay on the stretcher and waited for others to be loaded in. Soon, the rear doors shut and the motor started, and we were off to an airfield.

It was a cool spring day with a sprinkling of clouds set beneath a thin, light blue sky. Why was it now suddenly spring? I don't know. This was all so wonderful.

We had gone some fifteen or twenty miles when I first noticed that when we hit a bump in the road, my stomach would inflate. At first, just a bit. And as the ambulance would hit more and more bumps along the cobblestone road, my stomach continued to inflate and expand more and more, and become larger and larger with each bounce of a bump. At first, I thought nothing about it. But

then, as we continued traveling on the bumpy road, I began to feel the skin around my stomach tighten as I watched the stomach bulge out larger, larger, larger, filling with gas or air. I turned and attempted to look through the glass window for the driver, looking into the driver's compartment, knowing that I might have to knock on the glass and ask for help. By now, my stomach was much too large... almost to the point of eruption. My stomach looked like a pregnant woman's. I was getting concerned and apprehensive about this. Could it split? Could I make it to our destination? Could I take this much longer?

My fears partially subsided when, in the nick of time, we turned left off the road, going into a level, grassy field and wheeled around and stopped. The rear doors were swung open and each man was carried out on his stretcher. The stretchers were placed on the ground. There, we lay on our stretcher on our backs. Nearly immediately, after my stretcher was set down and I was still, my bowels responded and opened, my stomach began to empty of air. It sounded like and reminded me of air spouting out of the opening of a just-released, overfilled, child's balloon. It continued hissing and deflating... on and on, unabated for the longest time, until at last, my stomach returned back to its old sunken size. The noise and receding of my large, blown-up stomach was a beautiful sound, and a sight of relief to me. What relief! What a strange thing to happen to me. Why would this happen? Maybe a Doctor would know. And I didn't have to call for help. Thank God, I didn't blow around like an emptying balloon. Maybe I would have, with all the pressure built-up in me, had I been much lighter.

We had been placed on the ground next to a single grassy-strip runway. There were no buildings here. There was a large single plane parked and waiting a few feet away from us. It was a light green, twin engine prop, military hospital airplane. My stomach had hardly settled before we were lifted again and carried over to the aircraft. There, we were lifted up and moved inside and positioned in place. In a few minutes we were all inside the plane. The engines were rived and the plane moved forward slowly, then faster and faster until we were airborne. Lifting up, I could feel the plane slowly bank, gently turning to the right and circling back, now heading west, with the sun behind us, flying high over Germany on a steady course, going to our destination in northern England.

Across The Atlantic

My stay in the low, single story silhouetted hospital somewhere in the northern English countryside lasted five weeks. It was an unmemorable one. I was doing nothing but eating and sleeping during this whole period: mostly sleeping, and eating when awake. I was eating four soft meals a day now. Shortly after I finished a meal, I was hungry and ready to eat again. Between meals I was being given malted milks to drink. And when I wasn't eating I was laying in bed sleeping with no cognizance as to what was going on around the world or me. During this time, my stomach pouched out noticeably while the rest of me remained bony and weak. I learned to clasp my fingers together and extend my arms below my stomach and support its lower side, holding my stomach basket-

like, as I walked from the dining hall to my bed and then back again to the dinning hall.

This was May 1945. Germany had surrendered. And as for me, I was physically less able to do what I had done just a month ago as a prisoner of war. Near the end of May I was told I was going to be flown home to America, aboard another hospital aircraft, and be taken to another army hospital in the United States.

During the first week of June, I left England on stretcher aboard another hospital aircraft. This time the flight was longer. Patients were stacked two and three stretchers deep for the length of the plane. None of us needed an attendant. We all laid there in silence, listening to the drone of the motors as we flew over the vast expanse of water below. We were at peace, knowing we were flying home.

We landed in Iceland to refuel. The stay was brief. We remained in place on our stretchers in the plane. Then the plane took off again for its final leg to America. We landed in Long Island for an overnight stay at a military entry installation, probably a hospital reception center for servicemen returning from combat areas. Here I walked around a bit. I wandered into a basketball gym and touched and played with a basketball briefly. It's a wonder how much my senses and health improved when I touched American soil... I was on the way to recovery... for sure! Here I was given a choice of selecting an army hospital near my home in which to recover.

By now the excitement was setting in again. I knew I would be home soon. I chose Ashburn General Hospital at McKinney, Texas, thirty miles from my home in Dallas, Texas.

The next day, we were flown from the Long Island hospital, headed "down South", going to Dallas, Texas. The first day out we flew halfway to my destination. We spent the night in a hospital in Alabama. On the second day, we landed at the Army Air Transport Command at Dallas Love Field. It was hot. It was wonderful.

The plane taxied and stopped near one of the army buildings and the airplane's side door opened and we were passed through the plane opening on a stretcher and let down on the ground as we lay on the stretcher.

I knew I could walk. I had walked fairly well up in Long Island. My family was waiting, standing outside the military building, and was watching, and saw me as I was taken from the plane on stretcher.

I arose and stood up next to the stretcher. A welcoming special service army captain came over to me and said, " Let me help you, " and he gripped my right upper arm to help steady me and aid me in walking over to my waiting family.

Then I saw my family standing there, looking, and wondering... Unconsciously I jerked my arm away from his hold and said aloud, "I can walk. Let me alone!", sounding nearly defiant.

My emotions were out of control. I looked at them all the way and walked steadily on toward them. And light mist began to cover my eyes. And I was walking on air! A southern breeze caught the bottom of my army seersucker bathrobe flipping back a bottom corner revealing the fu1l length bottom of my pajamas.

I was proud and happy and overcome with emotion. I didn't want them to think anything was wrong with me. I wanted them to think of me as the strong soldier-boy that they had last seen. I could walk. There was no disrespect intended toward the captain. The excitement of the moment caused me to tear loose from the captain and walk to my family on my own. I wanted them to know that I could walk alone and that I was all right.

The captain understood and he let me go alone to savor this wonderful moment.

Normally, I would have run. But in my condition, I could only walk slowly toward them. My eyes fixed straight ahead on them and then they began to swell with water. I was home. My body was blubbery and bloated. But I was alive. I reached my waiting mother and family. We...hugged... loved... looked... smiled... touched... and gripped each other again... talking, saying something all the while. I don't remember what.

We sat and talked of my experiences for a few minutes. Then I was placed in an army ambulance waiting to take me on stretcher for the thirty-mile trip to Ashburn General Army Hospital.

My family followed the army ambulance in their car to the hospital where we continued talking about what had happened to us during those dark winter missing-in-action days of the recent past. The joy, the wonderment, the love... it was all here and we were experiencing it.

I was young and proud... and glad to be back home. Now, with every breath, I could feel I was gaining back my old strength. I was home. I was getting strong again.

Let the sun shine! Let it shine!

It was great to be back in Texas in June!

The weather was beginning to get hot. And I liked it. It was like old times.

Discharge

The war ended in Europe on May 7,1945 with Germany's surrender. The summer of 1945 saw the war in the Pacific proceeding on with certain victory for the United States. American troops were Island hopping, closing in on Japan itself. Advances were slow and were hard fought with lose of life being certain. For my

part in this continuing war, I was through. I was now a patient in an army hospital in northern Texas, recovering rapidly as this world war was winding down.

What a remarkable recovery was taking place. I was feebly walking when I arrived in Texas, yet it seemed that in a matter of days, I was my old self, active as ever. I was given every assist by the army hospital to attain this rapid recovery. I did not have to wait in a line to be served a meal. Every day, I was given a special pass allowing me to pass the serving line and go directly to an area where I would receive a special serving of steak. No one got steak everyday, but I did.

Now, I was walking more... and soon, I was given a three months furlough from the hospital. After that furlough, I was given another three months furlough.

During this summer and fall, I was spending all my time at home in Dallas. I was happy to wear the light cotton khaki, summer uniform on furlough at home during these semi-hot early days. I was proud to be a soldier. I wore my multicolored combat ribbons and the combat infantrymen's badge with pride, pinned to my shirt over my left breast.

I remember, in Dallas, I would go to a restaurant and order two meals from the waitress, although I was the only person sitting at the table. I wanted two complete servings of bread, salad, crackers, and all the works for two complete meals. I wanted everything that would come with the order of two steaks for two people. Most of the time the waitress didn't understand that I wanted two complete servings of everything and she would only bring me two steaks. So, I learned to say, "I'm ordering for a friend as well as for myself." This way, I would receive the complete food serving for two people. I would first eat all the food served me for my complete meal, then I would move over to the next chair and eat all the serving of the food for a complete meal for my "phantom" friend. I wasn't stuffing myself. It took that much food to satisfy my hunger.

I enjoyed eating two complete meals at one sitting. I never could get enough food while in the England hospital, even though I was receiving sometimes six meals a day. Of course, those meals were soft, digestible, light meals.

Gosh, I was happy to be back home... nothing bothered me. Nothing! It was a happy time.

If I had a flat tire on a car, and I did, I was just as happy while changing a tire on my car as I was feeling the soft, warm southern breeze hit my face while driving down the road with my car window down. I could have had a flat tire every day. It wouldn't bother me. It wouldn't matter where it happened. Nothing bothered me. I was too happy being free and being back in America.

Sure, I was happy, even with the old pre-war 2-door light blue Plymouth with a rear convertible rumble seat that my family found for me... even though it did

have a busted block, and wouldn't go over thirty miles without getting hot and stop running. It was a thing of paradise. I was deliriously happy.

And it was fun playing "Air Force games" in this old car with the rumble seat.

"Pilot to Co-Pilot," I would give mock orders, looking back to a former high school buddy sitting to my rear in the rumble seat. He had just returned home from Karachi, India where he served in the Air Force, and I had returned from Europe. We were doing the natural thing, making up for lost time... driving around Dallas in this old Plymouth, escorting young, beautiful Texas girls. He in his Air Force uniform and distinctive, droopy-billed hat, and me proudly wearing my bemedaled army infantry uniform. We were impressive in our uniforms. And we enjoyed it. We were all young, and we were having fun... we, the young servicemen and the pretty girls.

Yes, the stars were bright at night in Texas!

Then, the atomic bomb exploded in Japan, and the war ended September 2, 1945. Before the bomb dropped, there was talk of assigning me to serve with the military police in Dallas. This, rather than going back to the infantry. I couldn't keep getting three months furloughs. Now, with the war over, it was only a matter of time for me before I would be out of the army... discharged.

The Real World

After the two back-to-back, three-month furloughs, I was receiving continuous three-day passes. I would have to return to the hospital to receive another three-day pass. At one end of the hospital was the checkout room. This was where you were issued your three-day pass into town. My pass listed Dallas as my destination. It was good for the thirty-mile trip.

One day, I was waiting to receive another three-day pass, standing on the side of a counter. On the other side of the counter from me was seated a large, fatty-looking, stateside, middle-aged sergeant. He was in charge of issuing passes, and as I stood waiting for him to issue me my three-day pass, I noticed he continued to look over some papers, taking longer than usual. Then he looked up at me momentarily and said, "You are being discharged."

Is that what he said?

Then his head dipped back down and he began to put together some papers.

Hell, I'd been in this fighting army nearly all my life and he said I was being discharged. Is that what he said?

Just like that, in one quick moment, I think I learned that I would be no more part of the army. For all my recent, young life it seemed like I was geared for

orders and war, and then this sudden announcement that I was "being discharged" and would be no longer a part of this 2 1/2 year war experience. It came as a surprise.

The war was over and now my military duty over! Now... at this moment! Is this really happening? I'll be wearing civilian clothes again! I don't even own a suit!

"What?" I said. "I am being discharged?" I questioned aloud, in an uncontrolled, searching response.

"You say I am being discharged?" I repeated my question to him in a kid-like exuberating after not receiving a reply from him to my first question.

This must have angered him. With obvious displeasure, he looked up at me with an expression as if to say, "Young soldier, don't make me say it again!"

Then, in a belligerent tone, he said. "I said it once. I don't have to say it again!" as he looked contemptuously at me. Then he dropped his head and continued on with his paper work.

Sure, he was pulling his rank on a young soldier like me, and besides, he must be too busy to be talking to a young, low-ranked, kid-looking soldier like me. He wasn't about to reassure me that I had been discharged... not without my prodding.

Another milestone. Out of prison camp. Now, out of the army.

Funny, how this fat states-side sergeant would arrogantly talk and act like that to a young, kid-looking soldier that could have killed another man had he attempted to take a loaf of bread from him. Or a soldier that had escaped, to be loose in enemy territory braving capture... or a soldier that braved the uncertainty while being surrounded by the enemy in a snowy Ardennes forest. I was ready to kill a man... I could have looked down the barrel of a cold steel rifle and killed a man. I would have. I was cornered in that foxhole that last night in Belgium before surrender... I would have killed... I could have easily killed a bully prisoner that threatened to take from me the bread that was mine... the bread that I had bartered for during escape. I was ready to challenge and fight. I wasn't taking anything off of anybody in that desperate situation. I was a killer. I was desperate.

But now, here I am, returned home to America. I was challenged. My questioned challenged but now I have returned. I am returning to my old self... changing. I meekly reached over the counter and took the papers that the sergeant handed me, without another word being spoken. Here we were now, he the bully... me the kid.

He didn't know who I was, or who I had been, or where I had been. I was back in his world... the real world. And I would change. This sergeant wasn't going to

put up with this young soldier who couldn't understand him the first time when he said, " You are being discharged."

Just as I stood my ground against the Germans, and stood firm against the challengers of prison camp... here I stood too, in silence... and accepted my discharge papers without another word spoken.

So, welcome back to the real world, young soldier, whoever you are. This day was December 5, 1945, the day that I was discharged from the army.

"DON'T FENCE ME IN". It was the most popular song of the summer in the United States... that long ago summer of 1945.

I turned from the counter... headed for the hospital rear door with my discharge papers in my hand.

I was in love... in love with the world. I was happy. I was free.

As I walked toward the exit door, I started singing...

"Oh, give me land, lots of land under

starry skies above. DON'T FENCE ME IN.

Let me ride thru the wide open country

that I love. DON'T FENCE ME IN.

Let me be by myself in the evening breeze,

listen to the murmur of the cottonwood trees

send me off forever, but I ask you please

DON'T FENCE ME IN.

Just turn me loose, let me straddle my old saddle

underneath the western skies, on my caboose let me

wonder over yonder till I see the mountains rise.

I want to ride the ridge where the West

commences. Gaze at the moon 'till I lose

my senses. Can't stand hobbles and I can't

stand fences. DON'T FENCE ME IN."

I had sung this song all summer long.

I exited the door, still singing... a liberated man.

Page last revised

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