

**Raymond Ahrens**  
*Company C, 424th Regiment*  
*106th Infantry Division*  
*Stalag 11-B*

I, Raymond Ahrens, was an ammunitions bearer for 30 caliber light air-cooled machine gun.

I joined the 106th Division at **Camp Atterbury**, Indiana, in the summer of 1944 and shipped over on the English ship, Aquitania. I was quartered down on C or H deck, became so seasick, I must have dehydrated about the middle of the ocean. I was moved to the hospital section of the ship. There I improved rapidly, got sea legs, and walked down the gang plank in Glasgow, Scotland, feeling like a million dollars. In a short while I started feeling strange. I looked down at my legs. On solid ground I was swaying back and forth. For, two days I had a terrible headache along with an overall rotten feeling.

I went by train to Danbury where I remembered the little poem, "Ride A Cock Horse To Banbury Cross," etc.

About the first of December we left Southhampton, England, and crossed over on a small vessel. We had a small one-eyed Indian cook. We also kept our eye on a small dog that stayed in the kitchen. We joked if it came up missing we would be wary of any soup.

We came ashore at LeHavre, France. The town was dark, the bombed out buildings with walls and open windows with no thing but the sky behind them was a foreboding scene. We were soon loaded onto trucks. A convoy quickly formed and we were making our way across Northern France. We made several rest and lunch stops. On one of these stops the lieutenant said, "My Ahrens, you wear your food well"

I looked down and on my jacket front was a gob of food. I was impressed much more than if he had chewed me out. I am sure we passed through or near Reims. Toward evening we stopped and were ordered to set up our tents. We were on pasture ground, flat and wet. We looked enviously at a barn where we could see straw. In no uncertain terms we were told to stay away from it. I believe we must have laid our raincoats down for a ground cover.

We had been issued overshoes several days earlier. We were asked to turn them back in for the troops up at the front, I thought that was better than being asked for my presence there. Several days later we were at the front and no overshoes; Ah, well.

Deep into Belgium we camped in hilly woods where we were ordered to wash our feet to prevent frostbite or frozen feet. When we built some campfires to warm the water, heavy chunks of snow lodged in the tops of trees would plummet down often putting out the fires.

In the morning we were on our way, curvy roads, up hill, down hill, truck engines whining and growling, trying to maintain a close convoy. We passed signs that said, 'You are now in sight of the enemy.' It passed through my mind that this is the end for which we had

prepared, or perhaps the beginning. With some small comfort of mind, I learned our **Company C, 424th Regiment**, was to be in reserve.

We were in a small village with a good size stream running behind it and rather high cliffs or hills behind it. At night our artillery up in the hills behind would light up the sky like lightning flashes. In later years I thought it must be Steinbruck by the Our river. I may be wrong, please correct me if I am. The first day we were there, in the middle of the afternoon, we heard a machine gun fire off a burst. Surprise: Upon investigation, we determined that a gun mounted on a jeep had flipped down and the impact of the gun against the mounting post started it firing. When it was all over, it was funny.

I, and members of my squad were quartered upstairs in a farm house. This house was situated if you started with your back to the stream and hills or cliffs, and started walking away from the stream, it was about 200 feet. It seemed like the last house on the right. It had several steps in front of the door. When you stepped through the door, you were in the corner of the barn or livestock quarters. Turn to the left, you go through another door; turn to the right and upstairs into our quarters.

When necessary at night for relief, I would borrow a 45 caliber pistol to carry down and outdoors. Luckily, there were no scares. Being nineteen years three months old, I was not plagued with having to shave often. I do remember a buddy and me getting water from the stream and shaving near it.

Across from our quarters was a building which had our mess kitchen set up in it. Back at the house, I noticed that for a broom they had bundled small twigs around a larger stick.

We had not been there more than a couple of days and were in the morning chow line, as I recall the residents were conspicuous by their absence, when word came that the Germans had broken through the front lines. We dropped our mess kits. We were handed two C ration cans and two hand grenades. I was issued two boxes of 30 caliber ammunition.

Quickly we loaded into trucks. As they were covered, it was difficult to tell how far we went. We stopped in a village, Eigelschied and piled out of the trucks.

We had moved part of block when we got our baptism of fire. Hugging the street, I started to pray the Lord's Prayer, 'Our Father who art in heaven. " I got to "Thy will be done," (to this day it comes back to me every time I pray this prayer) when the sergeant yelled, "Ahrens, go to the jeep and get the pintle." It connects the machine gun to the tripod. In that rain of death, I got up with my ammo boxes, and crouching very low, I ran back to the jeep. I rummaged around until I found the pintle. When I got back the sergeant yelled, 'Move out, -- We scurried out of there to the edge of the village and cut down across a pasture and into woods so dense that the back half of the squad was left behind. I was sent back to get them. I found them in a few minutes, did an about face and, to my surprise, returned exactly to the squad. We proceeded through the woods and across another clearing and up against another woods where we came under shellfire again. Pulling out my pick-shovel, I tried to dig in. ...whack a rock....whack a root. The thought calmly came to mind, "if I'm going to die, I might just as well die rested." So I laid the shovel down. The shell fire grew heavier. A captain said, "I am going for help." He may have been my captain as we had not been together long enough to really get to know one another. I have found out that our Captain Miller was killed.

Shortly thereafter, Sergeants John J. Gribbins and Spence led a retreat under fire to Winterspelt, Germany. This gave me an awful feeling like I was letting my country down; like I was a coward and letting down my fellow soldiers. It is of little comfort that I was following the machine gun with the ammunition. We took up defensive positions in the southwestern corner of the village. Our position was across the cobblestone street from the last stone building in the picture I am including. We set up our 30 caliber machine gun to the right of the Winterspelt sign and just across from the stone building. About ten to fifteen feet beyond that is or was a cave in the side of the road bank. I believe it was for fruit and vegetable cold storage. That is where we stayed when not manning the machine gun: the two sergeants, myself and another GI. Sergeant Gribbins was a platoon sergeant. Sergeant Spence, the other GI and I were all that were left of our squad. During the night the Germans sent up flares lighting up the whole area. The best thing one could do was to remain motionless. I was in the rear of the cave and the sergeants took up positions next to the door. A truck pulled almost in front of the cave. It was so dark we could not see it, but we heard German voices. They passed on in a few minutes.

In the morning, again I was in the rear of the cave, we could hear hobnail footsteps on the cobblestones. The sergeants positioned themselves on each side of the cave door. Closer and louder the footsteps came until finally almost as one the MIs cracked. With that the sergeants dashed from the cave and across the road. I followed carrying the two boxes of ammunition, taking a look at the crumpled bodies of the German soldiers. I made a slight detour around them and proceeded along the far side of the stone building.

The other GI with us grabbed my sidearm, a 30 caliber carbine, pulling it off my shoulder and saying, "Let me have that." Why I did not resist, is beyond me or how he got it down over the ammo box I don't know either. Just as I got to the corner of the building, there were explosions out in front of me. I turned, saw a door in the rear of the building, yanked it open, and almost dived in. I didn't dive far. It was a toilet. I thought it was about as safe as I could find in a hurry.

When the explosions stopped, I stepped out proceeding along the rear of the building until I came to the last door in the rear of the building. I entered. Across the room was a GI leaning against the wall, rifle leaning beside him. He was smoking a cigarette. I yelled at him, "Why in hell aren't you firing at the Germans?"

His answer, "I don't want to draw fire.

With that I picked up his rifle and said, "What is the elevation and windage on the rifle sights?"

He replied; "I suppose it is the same as yours. " I told him that I hadn't carried a rifle for months .

I stepped over to the window that had been boarded shut with about an eight by eight inch hole cut in the center of it. For protection from enemy fire I quickly stacked firewood, that had been piled next to the furnace in the corner, around the window hole as high as I could stack it without it falling down in front of the opening.

I commenced firing at vehicle traffic on the main road running through the village. We started using ammunition from the boxes I had been carrying. We pulled the armor-piercing rounds out first. We hadn't been firing long when a GI stuck his head in the back door and yelled,, "Do you have any ammo?"

I said, "Sure do." I reached down and pulled up a length of ammo belt, whipped out my jack knife and whacked it off, handed it to him, and he was on his way. Soon other GIs were coming for ammo. This went on until late in the afternoon of Sunday, December 17.

I had paused, firing for a few minutes when I heard German voices. Very carefully I peered out of the hole. I could only look for a split second or risk being seen.

The best I remember there was about five or six German soldiers on the road in front of the building. The thought flashed through my mind; "Rifle too unwieldy through that small hole, too slow rate of fire, I must resort to a hand grenade."

To use it because they were so close I had to get rid of some of the five seconds on the grenade fuse, so I held the grenade in my right hand, pulled the pin, let the handle fly off in the room while starting the count: one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, two seconds to go - I threw it as hard as I could through that small hole.

Sensing that my time or luck had run out, I started for the back door with the other GI. Leetz was his name, right behind me. I. got about two steps outside the door and turned to see other GIs alongside the building already in the process of surrendering.

Before I could take another step, KerWhoom ! It was a German grenade thrown over the roof. I suppose in response to mine. I felt a pain in my right thigh. I was thrown back toward the door and lifted into the air somewhat. Leetz was thrown backwards into the building with a wound on his nose - it was not bleeding hard.

We followed the several GIs in front of us. The lead one was already in the street next to the Germans. As soon as we were all at the street, we were checked over for weapons.

We were taken to a place on the east side of the street about halfway between the curve in the road; just west of the stone building and the main road running through the village, where we were checked again. My wristwatch, not-being fancy, didn't interest them the jack knife the same, as the blade was shorter than three inches (Geneva Convention war rules). Of course, we gave the usual name, rank and serial number probably the only thing they didn't know.

We then proceeded to the main road where there lay a dead bloated cow. Just to the northeast of it was a gap in the woods. About that time, a lone P-38 Lockheed Lightning fighter plane passed over the village. I now know the gap in the woods was a road that led to Grosslangenfeld.

As I turned to the east my eyes came to rest on a dead American soldier lying in a half-curved position with his head laying in a shallow puddle of water. My thoughts were, "Even the dead should not be that way." My next thought was, "Did they booby trap the body." That is, put an explosive charge under the body so that when the body was moved

it would explode killing or injuring some more soldiers. The Japs did this often as well as many other sadistic acts.

About then I was motioned to move toward a captured Dodge weapons carrier. We paused for a bit; my hands were getting cold; I reached in my field jacket pocket and pulled out one sock. I held it up out in front of me and motioned for the German guard to cut it in two which he carefully did. The two halves felt good on my hands.

By this time the Germans had gotten their wounded together. We mounted the weapons carrier, the wounded Germans serving as our guards. This they did by laying their rifles across their knees and pointing them right into our mid-section; not a choice situation which became even more scary as the truck roared to life and jerked into motion down the road. Obviously the driver was unfamiliar with the vehicle.

I looked out alongside the road and noticed out in the field there were holes appearing in the ground. I realized that it was American artillery fire. The truck engine noise was covering up the incoming noise of the rounds. My thoughts were this, "further away - no closer"

We went on toward Germany. Just out of Winterspelt the road turned a little and headed down hill. Just then we met an ox with large horns pulling a cart. The road was narrow and as we met, it caught it's horn in the side of the truck. It's neck was twisted around until I thought it would snap. Just then it came loose. We went down the hill winding through the woods and dismounted at the bottom. We were herded into a line for first aid. The line was an indiscriminate mix of German and American soldiers. As the line shuffled along, I looked ahead and saw the men being given shots. I thought, "What are those?" It seems everyone was getting them so I didn't have any choice. I came to the conclusion that they were tetanus shots. They put a paper bandage on my hip.

We were, loaded onto a good-sized bus. The seats were benches running lengthways of the bus. There were a couple of lights in the ceiling, just light enough so we could see one another. The bus windows were blacked out. On the bus we were mixed German and American without order. As the bus engine came to life, you could feel the bus go around curves up and down hills.

Before long, I dozed off. The bus made a lurch; I woke feeling my helmet moving against steel. I tipped my head back away from the noise. What had happened? I and a German soldier had dozed off, as we did we had tipped together and were resting against one another. The strangest feeling came over me. Here we were just two soldiers reduced to one common level, I have wondered so many times what a snapshot of that would look like.

The SS men were passing out cigarettes to GIs, strange as they were feared even among the Germans.

At no time on these rides or marches did we talk: It was almost absolute silence. We sat side by side or walked like men without voices.

We were taken farther into Germany to the village of Gerolstein where we were kept in a building with a large room. It was dark when we arrived.

In the morning the door opened and some more prisoners were brought in. I sat upright. One of them was Duane Anderson, A GI who in basic training was one of three of us who made a pact to cure ourselves of foul army slang. I had not seen him since basic training in Camp Fannin, Texas. I quickly motioned to him to come over where I was sitting. I think he was glad to see someone he knew. He had taken training as a clerk but wound up a gunner of a 30 caliber light machine gun in another regiment. A shell had hit so close that it destroyed the machine gun. He had wounds on his legs as well as both hands bandaged.

While I was moving around the room, I was approached by a German army officer, a very handsome, neat-uniformed man. He said to me in perfect English, "What is your name soldier?"

I replied, 'Ahrens, Sir. My pronunciation of Ahrens was----Airenz .

His reply, "'Ah; Ahrens,. (his pronunciation was Ahrnce), that is a good German name." Not being very sociable I did not reply. His pronunciation was really correct. He also said we were doing the English's fighting for them. I gave him no answer. I now wish I had talked with him, however, to take notes or names, which I didn't consider, could have had some dangerous consequences for both of us. I never saw him again.

This is where I saw German soldiers fondling a Colt 45 and a carbine, while back on the American side I knew they were fondling Lugers and P-38 pistols as well as a few other varieties of handguns.

It was here that another GI switched his wool knit cap under our helmets for mine that was better than his. Whipping him would have been no problem, but I restrained myself thinking, "Wouldn't the Germans enjoy that." As it turned out it was the wise thing, we both could have been shot, and I did not want to give comfort to the enemy.

Late in the day we boarded a train with a short shrill whistle and the train moved out when it was dark so I did not see this town. The trains had to run at night as in the daylight the smoke from the train could be seen for miles and they were strafed and bombed by Allied pilots. We were all wounded, however, at this time the Germans were sorted out.

This was a passenger train compartmentized with benches crosswise facing one another with a side door to get off the train. We huddled together for warmth. A sign caught my eye, 'Nichts Rauchen', No Smoking.

The train made its way through the darkness coming to a halt in a rail switch yards. A sign we had passed said Koln (Cologne). The city was being bombed close enough that the bomb flashes showed the rails next to our train. There was a hole where the rails had been. The rails were bent upward in huge circles as high as our railcar. Vibrations rattled our car as the train moved out into the night. I was glad.

The next morning found us deeper into Germany. The train stopped about the middle of the day. The Germans asked for volunteers to help distribute soup. I sent my helmet out from our compartment and we ate our meal out of my helmet. This is my first recollection of eating or drinking since the Dec 15 evening meal, Many GIs ditched their leggings, helmets etc. I ditched nothing, a result of upbringing as well as service training. This served me well.

I don't exactly remember doing a toilet. The one that stuck in my mind was a pole 24" horizontally off the ground with a slit trench under it. No place for modesty here.

I guess we were on this train approximately four to five days. Several days later the train stopped and the Germans again asked for volunteers. As usual, the sharpies, they're in every crowd, rushed forward before our compartment could get a man out. The distribution started. Through the high window opposite the door came several loaves of hard brown military bread and some cans of meat. We couldn't believe how much food we were getting. We soon found out when the distribution ended and we heard the GI distributors returning to their respective cars. Within a few minutes there was cussing and fists beating on the partition wall between us. They had gotten the compartments mixed up and shorted themselves while giving us more. They didn't dare raise too much ruckus without risking bringing the Germans down on themselves. So much for human nature. I helped my buddy, Duane, with his food. I sliced the bread with my jack knife. The blade actually squeaked as I worked it around the loaf, the blade being too short to go entirely through.

The Germans passed out fold-over postcards. I studied the German letter forms with interest. I wrote a short letter home, and then wrote a letter dictated to me by Duane to his folks. It went something like this. Dear Folks, - Just a note to let you know I am okay. Hope you are all well. Don't worry about me I will be home soon. Love, Duane

After the war, I looked up Duane. This, I had to do through the Armed Forces Regional Office. I wrote them that I wanted to get in touch with Duane Anderson, so they forwarded my letter to him. He, then, got in touch with me. The reason for the roundabout route was that in some cases a GI would seek a person out to harm or kill them for some personal reason. I asked Duane if his folks didn't worry when they saw the handwriting.

One time we were traveling in daylight and late in the afternoon the train stopped on an overpass in a small town. I was looking out the window and down the street came a German civilian on a bicycle. Tied to the bike behind him was an evergreen Christmas tree. This scene, too, was much food for thought. He passed directly under us and was gone.

At one point we were deloused. I could not quite understand why as we had not been without opportunity to bathe. Anyway the procedure was: undress, put clothes in a basket, they were put in fumigating chambers. A German was sitting with a bucket in front of him with a swab on a stick. As we passed facing him, out of the bucket came the swab with the deft of a person with much experience and one circle motion around the genitals. It burnt. We hurried to the shower room; drops of steaming water came from numerous nozzles on the ceiling. Trying to cool the swabbing was fighting fire with fire. In a few minutes we were out, our clothes were brought to us. Someone made the passing remark that we should be glad we weren't in our clothes when they were fumigated. How

little did, we realize. Sometime in the night we arrived at Follingbostel. Raus! Raus! We stumbled out into the cold night air. We were herded over to flat bed trucks, trucks with virtually no side boards. We crowded onto them in standing position. I must give the German truck driver credit for his careful driving. Had he lurched just a little we would have toppled like a mixture of dominoes and bowling pins. At the camp, **Stalag XI-B**, we dismounted and were herded to barracks. Duane and I slept together in a one-person wood bunk. We were each given a blanket; however, each blanket was about three by four feet. We laid them end to end over us with a little lap. Underneath were the bare boards of the bunk bottom. To make matters worse, because I was wounded on my hip, we could not turn over.

We had just settled down a little bit when the doors were thrown open. Raus! Raus! Out into the night we stumbled. We were searched. Rumor was that someone had a pistol. I don't remember that one was found. We filed back into the barracks where we were warned to be careful what we said because the Germans could have "Stoolies" amongst us. There was another word, but it escapes me right now..... maybe later.

One night I woke up and had to have a bowel movement. I looked at the place at the end of the barracks where we were supposed to do that. Due to diarrhea and I believe just plain blasted carelessness or sloppiness, feces was on the wall and on the floor. It was such a mess that I chose to go outside. I went to the door, opened it and called to the guard "Porten. Posten." He turned his head toward me. I then said "Scheisen, Scheisen," translated "bowel movement," About ten feet away was a small ditch or gutter running past the front of the barracks. That is where I squatted with stars for a ceiling and the darkness for walls. No place for a magazine.

We were sparingly given Red Cross parcels or parts of them. In them were dried fruits, chocolate bars, powdered milk call Klim, cigarettes, vitamins, salt and pepper packets and meat. A small group of us had divided a chocolate bar, the problem; it came out odd, there was one 5/8 inch square left over. While we were discussing how to divide that small piece, the fellow holding the odd square all of a sudden said, "What are you arguing for?" and slipped it into his mouth. If looks could kill, about five of us would have been guilty of murder. I saw a GI offer fifty dollars for a chocolate bar. I think he was told he could use it for toilet paper. You know what value money had; Gold top Parker ink pens were hot trading items for food as well as Solingen straight razors.

At Fallingbostel the Germans were putting up large tents in the prison yards. I saw that they were putting straw in them. Usually the grounds were lighted except during air raids. I waited until one night the air raid sirens started wailing their foreboding sound. The lights went out inside the barracks as well as all outside light. From bomb flashes I could see just enough to dash to the tent, grab up a large armful of straw and run back to the barracks and to the bunk. If the Germans would have caught me, I might have been shot on the spot. If other GIs would have seen what I was doing, soon it would have gotten out of control, and then who knows what. Of course, thereafter, our bunk was much easier to lay in. I still don't know how I got away with it. Dumb luck, I guess. One thing that was noticeable by it's absence was talking; practically none at all at any given time.

I am so thankful for the good clothes we were wearing: long woolen underwear, insulated field jacket, good shoes, leggings, wool knit helmet liner. I still have no idea why I had no gloves. I think that it was not quite cold enough so when the break-thru or Bulge started,

they were in my barracks bag. I simply had no time to get them. Also in the barracks bag was a small Bible, given to me by my Aunt who was my Godmother, with steel plate.

On Christmas day the Germans gave us a half a glass of beer. It tasted kind of good. I figured that there might be some food value in it. One afternoon we were invited up to a large hall, where some British soldiers were putting on a musical program. It was very entertaining. The one number that stayed in my mind was "Alexander's Ragtime Band." They loved to play it and we loved it too.

One sunny morning around the first of the year we were told to form ranks outside the barracks. Every so many men got a can of meat; every so many got a loaf of bread. This was to be shared among the groups. Soon we were at the railroad. This time we would be riding in plain boxcars. We were put in with sufficient room to sit down. No sooner was the car full and the lock clacked on the door when we heard fighter plane engines growling for all they were worth; machine guns rat-a-tat; and winds screaming past wings. We could not see out. There were two holes about seven inches by sixteen inches up about six feet in opposite corners of the box car. We sat huddled up against the sides of the car. Up to this time I was afraid for my life many times. This time, however, after several fighter plane passes, I had calmly resolved that I was going to die. I stopped being afraid and assumed that like in the movies there would be holes ripping through the boxcar and then right through me. As we took no hits and it grew quiet again, I became nervous again. It was rumored that they were only going after the engine. Ah. Bless rumors. At times they feed hope. I am not sure, possibly the train didn't move until night fell.

I will stop the story at this point.. If you wish the remainder of my camp experiences and our march west from New Brandenburg in March 1945, to get away from the advancing Russians, let me know. I now think the Germans marched us for their own good. I am not sure about ours. Generally we were not treated badly by the Germans, however, in talking with other ex-POWS I've learned we were somewhat the exception.

My son, Gary, was in Belgium in 1980. He said the Belgium people were very grateful for the Americans driving out the Germans. This, I appreciate very deeply. Also I want to thank the Belgium government and the people for awarding us the Belgium Fourragere. I am proud of it



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