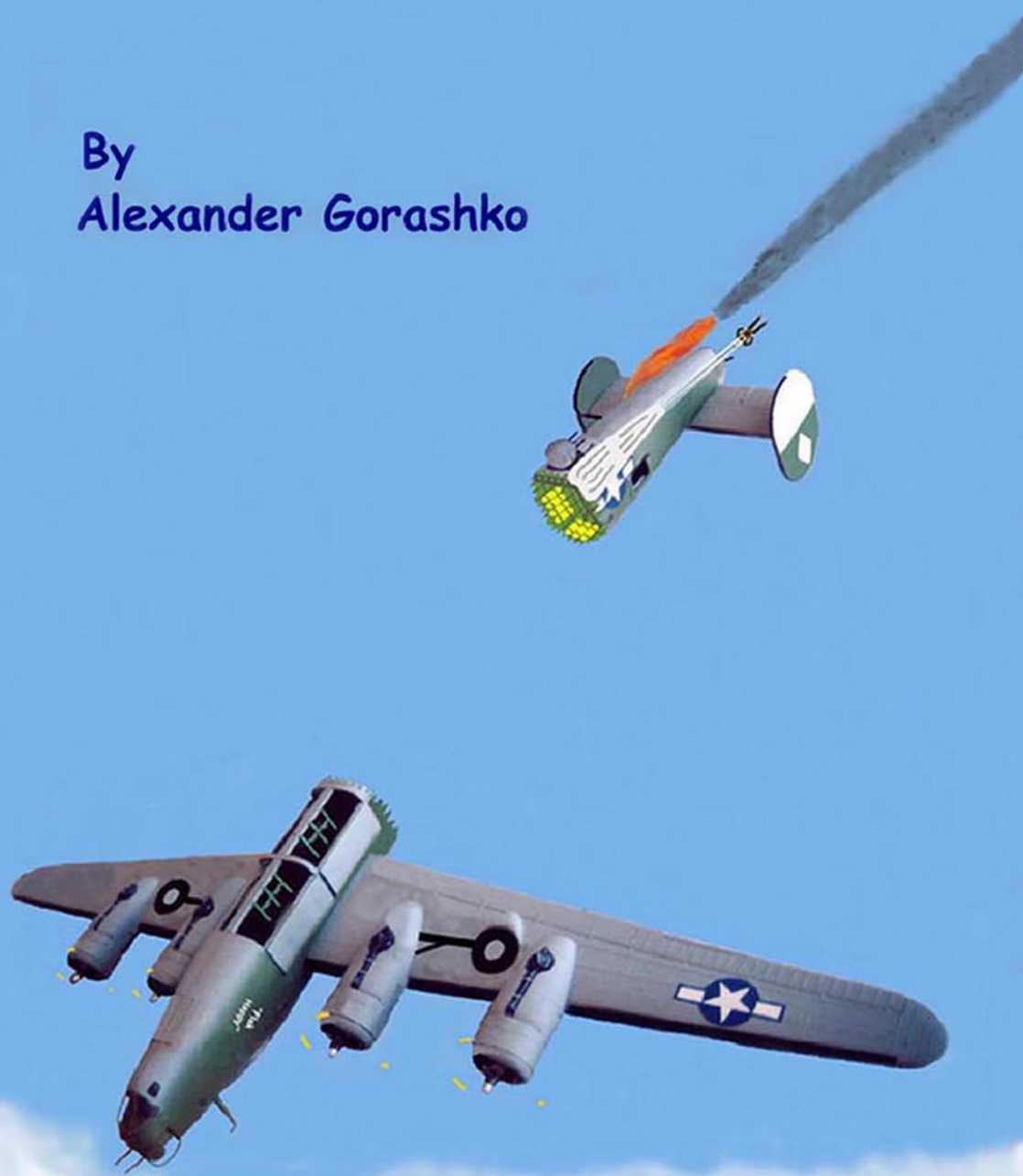


By
Alexander Gorashko



SURVIVAL

**An American Airman's Miracle
Survival and POW Ordeal During W.W. II**

“SURVIVAL” by Alexander Gorashko - B-24 tail-gunner

A young eighteen-year old draftee who likes flying takes you along as a new recruit wanting to become a radio operator on a bomber. He survives being shot down over Hungary and losing eight crew-members. He and his surviving crew member are captured, incarcerated in the Budapest prison and shipped by railway boxcar to Germany's Stalag-Luft IV prison camp for Allied Airmen. After processing, they were taken to the B lager (compound). The regular barracks were overcrowded and they were led to some low-roofed huts that would be their new home. Each hut barely had enough space for ten men to sleep on the floor. There were no lights or toilet facilities. They were not locked in at night, but were allowed to step outside to urinate. Doing so, one had to be careful as police dogs patrolled the lager. The POWs called themselves “Kriegies” coined from the German word, “Kriegsgefangen, meaning to be detained because of war.

Later, they were moved to a new C lager and into a barracks with ten rooms. It was twenty men to a room and they had to sleep on the floor. The food ration was a sixth of a loaf of a soggy, dark bread and two meals a day, one was a cup of cooked potatoes and the other was a cup of a kohlrabi stew. They were always hungry. Later, they began to get Red Cross parcels, four men to a parcel. It was a dull existence, what made it bearable was the camaraderie of fellow Americans. Each room had a small stove and when it got cold outside they were allowed twenty briquets of coal to last 24 hours.

In late December of 1944, the Russian armies were entering Germany from the east and in early February of 1945, the German High Command decided to evacuate the camp, by force-marching POWs West and away from the Russian front. It was one of Europe's coldest winters. It was walk all day, sleeping in lice infested barns and eating what potatoes they could steal from the farmers. Some guys walked for 86 days. Once away from the Russian front, Gorashko's group of POWs were shipped by railway boxcar to another POW camp, Stalag 357. Soon, about Easter Time, the American and British Armies were getting close and again it was decided to evacuate Stalag 357 by force-marching POWs, walking Northeast. As the fighting front came closer there were instances of POW groups being strafed by our own planes. Caught between two fighting fronts the captors kept the POWs in smaller groups, walking around in circles, and moving them every few days. Finally, at the end of April the Germany Army could no longer put up much of a fight, the POWs were liberated in small groups just east of Hamburg and the war came to an end. It was a feeling like going to heaven.

The story is in two parts. Part one: touches on basic training, technical schools, gunnery school, off-duty recreation, cross-country flying, arriving in Italy, and flying combat where your next mission could be your last. Part two: is about the POW life in the prison camps, forced marches, liberation and arrival in New York.

The book is unique in the fact that the author has written many details of prison camp life using the same dialog as was used back then. Historians or someone wanting to know what their aerial-gunner, uncle went through will possibly view this book as a classic.

It is printed in a 6"x 9" format and is 158 pages long.



Aerial Gunner Wings

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TIDBITS FROM THE SURVIVAL STORY

Budapest . . . The first Mission

I was in the tail section getting my things organized when a waist-gunner introduced himself as the man who was responsible for me. He explained, when we get to the IP, (initial point, and the start of the bomb run) he would come back and help me put on my flak suit and steel helmet. Also, after the bombs are released the plane will be put into a dive to get away from the flak. The last thing he told me was, not to move unless he came back after me. A truck came by and dropped off two large cans of juice and ten boxes of K rations for our lunch on the way back. The officers arrived from their briefings and we were ready to go. The sun was starting to come up.

Everyone, except the pilots stood off to the side while the engines were being started. The flight engineer stood beneath each engine with a fire extinguisher, as it was started. After a warm-up, we all climbed in. Soon, we were in a line of planes ready to take-off. Take-off position for the men in the rear part of the plane is in the waist with our backs against the bomb bay bulkhead. We swung out to the middle of the runway and not stopping, the throttles were opened wide and we began to pick up speed. Soon the steel-matted runway became a blur. We picked up more speed and became airborne at a height of about six or eight feet before the runway ended. It was just enough to pull up our wheels to get more speed. We slowly circled, gaining altitude, taking about forty-five minutes to rendezvous with the other planes in our squadron. We were the last plane, called, "Tail-end Charlie," the worst position in the formation and traditionally reserved for a new combat crew.

We flew east towards the Adriatic Sea. As we gained higher altitude, it began to get colder. I now got out my electrically heated flying suit, which I called a "bunny suit," because it was blue and resembled long underwear, with heated booties, boots and gloves. To put the bunny suit on, it was necessary to remove my Mae West life preserver and all outer clothing. Putting my clothes back on, I also had to put my Mae West life preserver back on. (It is inflatable, but normally is flat). Every crewmember had to wear one, as on most missions we had to fly ninety miles across the Adriatic Sea, and in case we had to crash land in the water there wouldn't be time to put it on. Every B-24 bomber also had two self-inflating life rafts in the upper part of the fuselage just behind the top turret that could be popped out in case of an emergency ditching.

I got into my tail-turret and plugged in my heated bunny suit, throat mike, earphones and oxygen mask. Turning on the turret power switch, I felt the surge of 1,200 pounds of hydraulic pressure. I swung the guns back and forth, up, and down. Satisfied, I turned my attention to watching for the Yugoslav coastline to appear below me. We crossed the coast and the foothills and began the climb over the dark-looking mountains. It was time to test-fire our guns. One by one each gun position fired their guns and reported in to the pilot.

With the mountains behind us, below was a patchwork of fields. We approached Lake Balaton in Hungary and flew parallel with its shoreline. Over the intercom, it was announced that we were approaching the IP. The waist gunner came back, held up the flak suit chest piece and while I leaned backwards, he placed it across my chest, then with me leaning forward and holding it in place he brought up the back piece and we snapped them together with straps going over each shoulder. After handing me the abdomen piece, he slapped a steel helmet on my head. He yelled in my ear "if anything happens, I'll come back after you."

He got back to his gun position and began throwing out bundles of "window" which were tinfoil strips to confuse the ground radar. Minutes later all hell broke loose. Flak was going off in puffs of red with black smoke. Some shells exploding only twenty-five feet away. I had been told what this was going to be like and thought I was ready. I hunched down frozen with fear and with gloved hands together I began praying and wondering "how can anyone come out of this alive?" Perhaps ten minutes passed by. "Bombs away" was heard on the intercom. Almost immediately, the plane went into a turning dive to the right. I was lifted

slightly out of my seat with a new fear...is the plane out of control? Remembering my instructions, not to move, gave me some confidence. This maneuver is called "evasive action." so the gunners on the ground can't get your altitude for setting fuses. We leveled off and headed for Italy. Behind us the smoke had risen to our altitude and below was the Blue Danube River, only it was brown.

Prisoner of War

At a road intersection, two soldier guards examined my things, relieving me of my wristwatch and the chocolate bar from my escape kit. In a few minutes, a large wagon pulled by two horses came along. On the front seat was an old man with a stubble beard and two young girls. He stopped the wagon and in Hungarian asked the guard about me. As soon as the old man heard that I was one of the flyers bombing his country, he stood up and cursed me loudly, shaking fists in my direction.

We moved on. The afternoon sun was warm, but carrying all my heavy gear was making me hot, and my feet were beginning to hurt for the electrically heated booties had no arch support, and weren't meant for walking. Up the road, a boy came half-running, curious to see what was happening. He showed no fear as he began walking alongside and offered me an apple. I shook my head for there was no way I could eat an apple and carry all my stuff. He saw that the heat was getting to me and began carrying some of my stuff. I really appreciated that. I think he was in hopes of getting some sort of souvenir.

Shortly, we came to another intersection with a few houses nearby, and stopped to rest in the shade of a tree. Here people of the neighborhood quickly gathered and formed a circle around me, curious as to what an American flier might be like. They attempted to communicate in a friendly way, but there was little I could say in response, as I knew only English. I showed them my pocket bible and made the sign of the cross, and they indicated that they too were Christians. When I pointed to my mouth and said, "aqua," one brought me a glass of water. Another brought me a sandwich. After ten minutes or so, with these friendly people, we moved on again.

We came to a decorative wooden fence alongside the road and behind it a complex of buildings with a courtyard at the center. I had the impression it was a private school. Through a gate, we entered the complex, now evidently a military headquarters, as the only people I saw were Hungarian soldiers. I was taken into a building and put in a room with a large window facing the roadway. The room was bare except for board-covered sawhorses for sleeping or sitting. Another American flier was already there. He was not from our crew.

An older military official of high rank looked at my dog tags and said, "Russky," which I knew referred to my Russian ancestry. But, I said, "American." He repeated, "Russky." I countered, "American." That ended it. Soon other captured Americans not from my plane were brought in, so I knew other planes had been shot down. Several hours later they brought in Charlie, our waist-gunner. Someone else from our plane had made it out. I was glad for now I didn't feel so alone. We spoke in hushed tones while looking out the window at boys hanging on the fence. We understood their motioning at us to mean they wanted a souvenir. "Did you see anyone else get out?" I asked Charlie. "No, I didn't see anybody, not even you," he replied. I said, "George was standing next to me in the bomb bay. I wonder if he got out...you know, Lard-Ass didn't have his chute on. I don't think he had a chance." It was an awkward situation, trying to talk with Hungarians coming in and out, curious as children to see these captured Americans.

When it began to get dark and no Americans had been brought in for quite a while, Charlie said, "Well, it looks like we're the only ones that made it. In my mind, I thought, I had barely survived and the chances are, no one else did. As George, the other waist-gunner, had been standing next to me, I had to assume he was caught just as I was, and couldn't get free. So it was just Charlie and me - captured, and in another phase of the war. Altogether, I believe there were about fifteen of us captured Americans there.

As darkness came, a bulb of small wattage came on, dimly lighting the room, and the parade of Hungarian soldiers wanting to see Americans finally ceased. We tried to get some rest, but under these conditions, there was no way I could sleep. I lay there with my eyes closed, hoping this was a bad dream.

In the early morning hours, I was shaken by a Hungarian soldier, a non-com apparently of low rank, a corporal, I assumed. He sat on the edge of the board I was lying on with two privates standing behind him. Something he said gave the privates a laugh. Then he held a pistol to my stomach, said something, and again they laughed. I managed a weak smile, trying to make this treatment as some sort of joke. With a smirk the corporal again said something, and the two privates laughed appreciatively. When they got tired of the game with me, they turned to the 2nd lieutenant lying next to me. I closed my eyes with relief. Soon our tormentors left the room. We didn't get the rest we badly needed that night.

In the morning we were given a thin soup made from the leavings and peelings of potatoes, tomatoes, onions, and such, then taken out into the yard, and lined up. A tall civilian was looking us over and talking to the Hungarian soldier in charge. The Hungarian yelled out in English, "Are any of you Jews?" No one answered. The civilian pointed at a dark-complexioned American officer. The officer smiled meekly and laughingly said, "No, I'm English." The matter was dropped. Maybe the civilian was from the local Gestapo, doing his duty. Through the Hungarian translator, we prisoners learned we were being transported to Budapest by train that afternoon, with food and water brought on board for the trip.

At a nearby pump we were allowed to wash our face and hands and stood around in the sun a while. I requested aid for the burns on my hand and face and was told that I would get it "as soon as possible." One at a time, we were escorted to a room for toilet purposes. When my turn came, I saw no toilet in the room, just a four-inch hole in the floor. Had the toilet been removed because of the war? I wondered. No, for there were no anchor holes. When everyone had a turn at the "toilet," we were put back in the guardhouse for the long wait for the train. The only thing that relieved our boredom was looking out the front window at the boys, the boys hanging on the fence, the boys wanting souvenirs.

Later that afternoon they were ready to move us. We were taken outdoors and lined up in rows of three. There were plenty of young Hungarian guards, believe me. Our formation started down a dirt road; after a short ways, it became brick and we entered a small town. We began to see more and more people as we got near the center of the town. As we approached, the townspeople gathered along the curb to watch us pass by. Some spat, some yelled Hungarian curses and insults, but most just stood there glaring at us ...making us thankful for the guards...for our own protection.

We were halted on the platform of the railway station, then went single-file to a railway car. It had three rows of benches where we sat in the straddle position. We occupied one-half of the car and the Hungarian guards the other half, facing us with machine guns in hand. The boxcar door where we entered remained open. This was to be a waiting game and we waited and waited. We didn't dare talk or joke with the Hungarian guards staring at us as if we were going to make a break for freedom at any second. Finally, a train pulled to a stop on the next track. Minutes later, it moved forward, stopped and backed into our siding and hooked us on. Then, we waited and waited. This was going to be a long trip!

When the train finally moved out, the sun was casting long shadows. As we reached the edge of the town, we saw a sign telling us that this was the town of Nagykanizsa. Later, just before dark, the tracks began to follow the shore of Lake Balaton, the lake that served as a landmark on many of our missions and now we were seeing it up close. The guards passed around thick pieces of dark bread, one slice for each man and immediately after, a can of jam and a knife was passed around. It was a simple, but filling meal and I began to feel that our captors were human after all. It finally got dark, thank God, for I was tired of looking at the glaring faces of those young Hungarian guards. Our butts were getting sore from the hard benches we were sitting on. Sitting in the dark, along with our thoughts, all we heard was the noise of the train.

After many hours of traveling, the train came to Budapest, a blacked out city. Occasionally, streetlights casting a small circle of light on the pavement below were seen. We crossed a river on a railroad bridge and shortly later entered a railroad yard with a station, blacked out, except for a couple of small lights shining down on the railway platform. The train stopped and we were ordered out. Several vehicles looking like ambulances with red crosses painted on the sides were waiting. They loaded us in and drove off. Our military escort stayed behind. Minutes later, we pulled up to a large building.

It was the Budapest City Jail. We were taken inside and down a flight of stairs and split up in twos. My partner was a young 2nd lieutenant. We were placed in a small cell with a sleeping mat on the floor. From being shot down, not getting any sleep the night before, and the train trip, we were at the point of exhaustion. We lay down, and immediately fell asleep, not once waking up. Daylight came too soon.

The Hungarian jailers spoke broken English and seemed friendly enough. Pieces of dark bread were passed into the cell. The lieutenant wouldn't eat his. Later, they passed in two canteen cups of ersatz coffee, which was something new to me. It didn't taste too bad. Because of our situation, the lieutenant and I never said two words to each other. After breakfast, they let us out of our cells and we went upstairs to a waiting bus.

An agent dressed in a civilian jacket and pants and wearing a pistol on his side was herding us into the bus. Nowhere were there any guards. After we were all in, to our surprise he got in, closed the door, started the engine and drove off with only himself as our guard. A few people were early morning shopping. He drove like a madman, driving fast, tooting his horn and not stopping for anything. Jews on the streets with the Star of David sewn on their coats and jackets had to jump out of his way. One Jewish man was standing on the edge of the street ready to cross and this bus driver deliberately steered the bus to the side trying to hit the man. To have that much hate, I figured he must be a German Gestapo agent.

About fifteen minutes later, we pulled up to a steel door in a high brick wall surrounding some buildings. The driver tooted the horn repeatedly and turned to us with a big grin and said, "prison for Hungarian gangsters and American comrades."

Budapest prison

One at a time we were taken to a cell and locked up. This was the beginning of our solitary confinement. My cell was about five feet by ten feet with solid masonry walls, a solid steel door with a covered peephole and a high barred window at the other end. For our comfort, a crude bed with a straw-filled mattress, a container of water, a rusty shit-can and no lights. I saw no one, heard only the noises in the hall and had nothing to do but think. Each morning a trusty passed in a military canteen cup of ersatz coffee and a small loaf of bread that was to last the whole day. In the afternoon, we got our second and last meal of the day. It was usually a thin soup made of vegetable peelings. The only time I saw anybody was when the door was opened to pass in food, pick up the empty utensils or empty the shit-cans.

The food was served in a rectangular aluminum container that looked like it was part of a Hungarian Army mess kit. There were names scratched in the aluminum. After I ate, I had time to study the names. They were names of American airmen, wanting someone else to know that they were here. One lieutenant had been in solitary for forty-three days and wanted someone to know and report it in case he disappeared. At night, I could hear knocking in Morse code on the heating pipes passing through our cells. I could never decipher any of it. (Note: The Germans particularly chose fighter pilots for this type of treatment, as they could provide the most useful information. Back at the pilot's base in Italy they were aware of this and to avoid long solitary confinements for shot-down pilots, it is my understanding because, the Luftwaffe was just about finished, downed American fighter pilots under duress were allowed to tell the Germans anything they wanted to know. I don't think this was official policy. As far as gunners are concerned, what little we knew sure wouldn't help the Germans much. At gunner's briefings, on occasion we were given false names of targets and bombing altitudes, so even if an airman told what he knew, it only served to confuse the

Germans even more.) (In my story, the names German or Jerries are used interchangeably, they mean the same.)

With nothing to do, I read my bible a lot and after a while it became tiresome. Air raid sirens sounded every day, but I never heard any bombers or bombs going off. Because my cell window was so high, I could only see the sky above. Several times a day, German Dornier 217 dive bombers would fly over coming back from the Russian front, which was now in Eastern Hungary, and occasionally I got a glimpse of a plane as it flew over. I slept well at night, but was bothered in the morning when I woke up and saw bedbugs crawling up the wall full of blood, my blood. I killed many, but they never ceased to torment me. After five days of solitary, the cell door was opened and I was taken to an office on the second floor. This room was a little warmer than the rest of the prison, but very plain. A German officer in the blue uniform of the Luftwaffe was seated behind a desk. He was of medium height and build and perhaps in his late 20s and wore glasses.

He asked me in excellent English, "won't you have a seat." After I sat down, he asked, "would you like a cigarette?" "No thanks, I don't smoke" I replied, then asked, "where did you learn English so well?" "I lived in the States for a while and went to school in Boston," he answered. "Now," he said, "I have to ask you some questions for the Red Cross, so they can notify your relatives back home that you are well and safe...I already have your name and army serial number." "What is your rank...are you still a sergeant?" All this information came off my dog tags. Still writing, he now asked, "what is your bomb group" "Now, I can't tell you that" I answered. He said, "if you don't answer my questions you will go back to your prison cell...now, what was your mission?" "I overslept that day and didn't know the mission," I answered. He then asked, "what size bombs did you carry?" Again I answered, "I overslept that day and didn't have time to look in the bomb bay." He then smiled and said, "it doesn't matter, I have it all here." He opened a book and read me all the answers to all the questions he just asked. I said, "sir, I have asked for medical attention several times, do you think I could get something to put on my burns?" "Yes" he replied "I'll have a nurse come and take a look...you are now going to be put back in your cell and in a few days will be put in a discharge room with other non-commissioned officers until there are enough of you to transport to a Luftwaffe prison camp...Sergeant, for you the war is over, you will find the prison camp very comfortable, the Luftwaffe prison camps are the best." He got up and escorted me to the door saying, "goodbye Sergeant."

That afternoon, the cell door was unlocked and a nurse came in with a medical kit and put some salve on my burns, which by this time were beginning to heal nicely. Two days later, I was let out of my cell and taken to the front part of the building on the second floor. It was like the administrative part, for the floors were wood and the walls and woodwork were more decorative. The guard unlocked the door and I entered a room with a few Americans standing around.

The door locked behind me. "Greetings" said Charlie standing there grinning, "I just got here myself a few hours ago." The room was bare except for some empty bookshelves on the front wall. It had a couple of small windows, varnished floors and a hanging electric light bulb. The bookshelves were piled with loaves of bread in disarray. I asked Charlie, "how come they're giving us so much bread?" "A lot of guys aren't eating it, it gives them the GI shits" he replied.

Our days in solitary confinement sure made us talkative for we talked about everything, mostly about where we were from and what we did in civilian life. We figured the room was bugged and avoided military subjects. We were from all walks of life. There was Dick Thill from Chicago, who studied agriculture and sure knew his, beans...then there was David Walsh from Springfield, Mass. He was a nephew of Senator Walsh of Massachusetts. Dave knew a lot about medicine and fascinated us by explaining how surgeons practice tying knots by putting two fingers and a piece of thread in a matchbox...my fellow crew member, Charlie was from Oxford, North Carolina and from him we learned about tobacco... then, we had John Sperryak from Corning, New York, he was of Russian descent and quite outspoken. One of the standouts was Jack London from Boston whose first name was really Sam, but we called him Jack. He would chuckle

and say, "boys, we got it made. All we have to do is sweat this thing out and get home and collect all that back pay." "Will I have a story that's good for a few drinks. I'll go to the local bar and say 'bartender give me a drink, and start telling my story...there we were, flying at 23,000 feet over Ploesti...the flak was so thick you could walk on it... bartender another drink please...two engines went out and the plane caught fire and we were beating it out with everything we could lay our hands on...bartender another drink please." Everyone laughed.

During the solitary confinement, cigarettes had been withheld. Now we were given German cigarettes. The German cigarettes were so lousy that some of the fellows were able to quit smoking. Every day more men were added to our number. Most of us had been in the room for a week and sleeping on those wooden floors with no blankets was miserable. It would be nice to be somewhere where there were beds. I guess we were looking forward to going to a prison camp mostly for reasons of comfort.

Through the small windows, we could see Jewish women and their children out in the prison yard for sunshine and exercise. I could not understand how these harmless people could be a threat to anyone. Once we were allowed to go out into the prison yard. It was nice to be outdoors again.

Finally came the day for us to leave. We filed out of the room, down the stairs and into the sunshine. An open truck was parked beside the door and we piled onto the back of it. Our guards were three Luftwaffe pilots with machine pistols. They spoke no English. One drove and two got in back with us. The engine was started and we were off on another adventure.

Stalag-Luft IV

The gate was opened and we filed inside. A crowd of POWs were gathered near the gate and immediately we were besieged with questions about the war and where we were from. They called themselves, "Kriegies" that was coined from the German word Kriegsgefangen, meaning to be detained, because of war. The arrival of new Kriegies was quite an event giving the camp inmates accurate up-to-date information of the progress of the war.

The camp was opened on May 12, 1944, because a prison camp for Allied airmen in East Prussia was being evacuated as the fighting on the Russian front was getting closer and would soon overrun the camp. At the present time there were approximately 9,000 or so Allied Airmen being held here.

To relieve overcrowding, a C lager was being built across the roadway from this one. Until the C lager was finished, us new Kriegies in B lager were temporarily assigned to live in some small buildings that we called, "dog huts," placed near the regular barracks. The huts sat on the ground and contained no facilities. Each hut measured about eight by sixteen feet with just barely enough room to stand. There were no windows; the only light came from the open door. Ten men were assigned to live in each hut giving each man a little over one and one-half feet of sleeping space when lying on the floor. This made very close quarters and short tempers. Two army blankets were issued one American and one German. The two Blankets were all we had for sleeping. One blanket you laid on and the other you covered up with. We were given, a china bowl, a cup and some Luftwaffe silverware. With no washing facilities it was necessary to wash our dishes in cold water at the outside water pump.

Moved to "C" Lager

At the morning roll call, we were counted by a soldier with a green uniform of the Army whereas all of the others wore the blue of the Luftwaffe. This was a little puzzling. Perhaps it was because he was too old to fight and could speak English. Anyway, we called him "The Green Hornet." In charge of C lager was a tall officer with a long leather overcoat. His name was Captain Heinert. He presided at roll calls. During the roll call, it was announced that we should choose room leaders and for them to come to the cookhouse and get potatoes for us to peel.

The Kriegie camp organization consisted of a camp leader, lager leader, barracks leaders, room leaders and a POW called, the "Man of Confidence." Only, we had two, and both could speak fluent German, one was Frank Paules, who was also our camp leader and the other was Francis Troy. They were POWs that had sworn not to escape and were free to leave the camp to purchase things like toothpaste, saccharine, carrots, kohlrabis, etc. with money allowed us by the Germans according to the Geneva Convention for the treatment of prisoners of war. There were also some Kriegies that we called the Clique. They were in charge of the Red Cross parcels, library, recreation equipment, clothing and the cookhouse. They were the ones in a position to take advantage of their jobs. How they ever got their jobs, we never knew.

In our room was a fellow, Jones from Hagerstown, MD who seemed to take right over as soon as we moved in. He did get things done so we chose him as our room leader. Jones managed to get a pair of scissors and began to give haircuts for two cigarettes, our medium of exchange in place of money. Later, we got razors, shaving soap and sewing kits through the Red Cross.

Within our room, we decided to have two men each day handle detail duties such as peeling potatoes, getting chow, sweeping the room, covering the windows before dark and getting the coal and bread rations. This was done on a rotation basis meaning that each man got the duty every ten days. As we had no washing facilities in the barracks it was up to each man to clean his own dishes and silverware by using water from a water pail kept in the room or at the outdoor water pump.

The hot rations from the cookhouse consisted of hot water or tea before the morning roll call, a cup of soup for dinner and a cup of potatoes for the afternoon meal that came just before lockup. A detail man was at the cookhouse with a pail at each meal. Once back in the room, the food was dished out with a cup into each man's cup or bowl. In addition to the hot food, each man got 1/6 of a loaf of dark bread each day. The bread was heavy and moist inside. It was made with unbleached flour and we swore that it had a little sawdust in it.

The problem with dividing a loaf of bread six ways was that it came in such odd shapes that it was difficult to cut into equal pieces. This is where I became a bread-cutting specialist. I spent several minutes studying it like a surgeon before his first cut, then I put my knife to it. My group seemed to be satisfied, so I had the job permanently. Even so, its impossible to get them with the same volume and weight, so we drew cards with the high man getting first choice and so on. Well, that didn't work for as soon as the high man picked up his piece it didn't look as big anymore. We settled on another method called, "the bridge cut." This is where six pairs of cards are used, one card of each pair is placed with each piece of bread and the rest are shuffled. Everybody draws a card and matches it up with its mate under the bread. In this way no decisions are made its just pure luck. The food given to us by the Jerries averaged 770 calories a day and wasn't enough to subsist on. We were constantly hungry. American #10 Red Cross parcels began coming into the camp. Each man was supposed to get one each week, but there weren't enough parcels to go around, so they were given out only ¼ parcel per man.

More C Lager

Some unarmed German guards were constantly roaming around the lager and through the barracks. We called them, Goons, (for the uninformed, there were some zombie-like characters in the early comics called, Goons). Anytime a Goon entered the barracks; someone ahead had already shouted a warning. On this particular day, someone stuck his head in the door and said, "Goon in the block." About five minutes later, this old German guard walked into the room. He looked around the room, then pointed at John Spornyak and uttered, "American Indian," and walked out. John's face turned red...he uttered..."well, f-k, me, that dumb son of a bitch." Everyone in the room roared, it must be conceded, John did look like an Indian.

One day, the same Goon came into the room. He was quite elderly, as were most of the guards. He conversed with us in poor English. Pointing to each man he asked, "ve're you from?" He pointed at me and I replied, "Michigan." He said, "ve're" I replied, "Saginaw."

A smile came to his face and he spoke, "me live...Saginaw...me vork Malleable, on vest side." He paused, this sounded interesting and the Kriegies gathered around. He then asked, "you know Paul Velsel, he has hardware store? I answered, "sure, my uncle is a good friend of his." "Paul Velsel...my friend in Saginaw," he said. He didn't know my uncle. Jack London began asking questions like, "why did you leave the United States?" He answered, "living too fast in America...me like better, Germany." Jack looking at us, asked the obvious question as a joke, "are you going back to America after the war?" Not realizing he was being kidded, the old guard answered, "no me live Germany the rest my life." It was my opinion that the old guy left the United States because the great depression had set in and he lost his job.

The Green Hornet came into our room one day. His English was very good. He began pointing his finger at Kriegies asking for their last names. He pointed to one man who answered, "Love." "Love, he replied "with a name like that, you come over and make war against the Germans!" He got around to a Kriegie named Bachman. He said, "with a good German name like that, you come over and fight your own people!" Running out of names to comment about, he finally meandered out. At a later time, someone told me that he also lived in Saginaw.

There was one guard that everybody hated. He was the assistant to the head of guards and his last name was *Schmidt*. He was so disliked that the Kriegies called him, "Big Stoop." He was a big man, six-feet-six-inches tall and noted for his large hands that seemed out of proportion to those of a normal person. He was often seen yelling at Kriegies during the roll call. He had a fiery temper and with those big hands was known to cuff Kriegies on the head causing eardrum damage. Whenever we saw him roaming through the barracks, we stayed out of his way.

We had one fellow in our room by the name of Schrotzberger from Centerline, Michigan who was fluent in German, he never let on to the guards that he could speak their language. Occasionally, the Jerries would let us have a Berlin Newspaper and Schrotzberger would read it for us.

About once a month, we were supposed to be able to write a letter home through the International Red Cross, but sometimes it took months for the Red Cross form letters to be passed out. The form letter had large spaced lines to write on, which didn't allow for a very long letter. The following is from my postcard letter I sent home:

Sept. 5, 1944 Dear Mother & Father, I am now a POW. I'm all right and am in the best of health, getting lots of air, good food and plenty of exercise. We get Red Cross food every week. The Red Cross gives us clothing. You won't get many letters from me. Can you write to the chaplain of my squadron and check on my belongings. Love Alex

What a lot of bull! We knew that the letters are read by the German censors and if we wrote something bad about our treatment, the censors might simply throw the letter away. Therefore, we wrote good, glowing reports figuring the letter had a better chance of getting home. Any letter getting home is better than no letter! Letters from home were almost non-existent because of German transportation being disrupted by American bombing, at least this is what the Germans told us. Dave Walsh in our room was overjoyed at getting a letter from home only to read that his mother had died. In his grief, he went out to walk the circuit alone for several hours. To get a personal parcel from home was extremely rare. Usually only old Kriegies got them and when they did it was the talk of the lager. For a POW to get a parcel of several cartons of cigarettes would by Kriegie standards make the POW the equivalent of a rich man.

The poop from the group had it that some musical instruments had come into the camp donated by the International YMCA and a camp show was being organized. One day it was announced that the camp show was ready. It would take place in the recreation hall up in front of the lager. As all of the Kriegies

couldn't fit into it at the same time, there would be three performances each day. It was a fantastic show headed by a great old showman, T.J. Edwards of Boston. He flew combat in his forties and was now entertaining Kriegies in a POW camp. During the show the Green Hornet stood in back watching and listening to make sure the show had only entertainment and nothing offensive to the Germans.

The show had a couple of good singers who sang, Sweet Violets, Body and Soul, Sweet and Lovely, The Object of my Affection, East of the Sun and West of the Moon, Where or When, and others. A choral group sang a medley of college fight songs, one of which ended with, "fight...fight...fight." After the first show, the Green Hornet came up to the Choral Director, John Anderson and said, "you can't have a song where you sing the words, fight, fight, fight." John replied, "you'll have to talk to T.J. Edwards, he made up the program." T.J. was able to explain that, fight, fight, fight did not mean physical violence, but to spur participants on in a game between two colleges.

A comedian with a Brooklyn accent got up and told a string of jokes that had us literally rolling in the aisles. A couple went like this, "do you use college stationary for personal use," "no, I use toilet paper..." "Did you hear about the girl who tried to join the yacht club, but couldn't because she didn't have a yacht, so she joined the Country Club." He concluded with the announcement that the band would play the Kriegie version of Candlelight and Wine," called "Candlelight and Raisinjack."

The orchestra was really good and had two real pros, with Ace Hager playing the sax and Vic Housac playing the clarinet. They stood up in front and played a jam session of familiar tunes that had us clapping and cheering. Talk about a morale booster, for a short while we forgot that we were behind barbed wire. Our morale was high and we were in good spirits.

A few days later, we were surprised when the comedian from the show walked into our room, pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and read us the latest war news. He had lookouts posted at both entrances to the barracks, as he went room to room reading the news. Where he got the news, no one knew and no one asked, but the news was good. We were still winning the war and that's what really counted. From that time on, the news came along every few days. In fact with such regularity that we began to count on it.

“C” Lager Long lean and unclean

It was now beginning to get cold outside and we began staying indoors during the day. We were allowed twenty briquettes of coal for twenty-four hours and the stove had to be watched so it didn't burn too fast and leave us without heat. Jones our room leader was an expert at taking care of our stove. We were never allowed to peel potatoes in the barracks, it had to be done in the unheated, no facilities, washroom by the two men assigned to the house keeping duties. Because it was cold, now everyone chipped in and the potato peeling was done in minutes.

Our barracks got hot water from the cookhouse every ten days for bathing. It was so cold in the washroom that I kept putting off bathing. As it was getting colder every day, I figured I had better do it or soon I wouldn't be able to do it at all. I got a pail of hot water from the cookhouse and carried it over to the washroom. There was about an eighth of an inch of frost on the protruding nails. I found a piece of cardboard to stand on and stripped bare, washing with soap and a washcloth. I couldn't wait to get dry and get some clothes on. It was the coldest bath I ever took!

One morning during roll call, Dave Walsh said, "Al look behind you." Turning around, two rows behind me I see this tall, lanky, unshaven Kriegie with his overcoat on over his underwear with his long, skinny, long-john covered legs exposed. "That's the guy they call, "Long, Lean and Unclean." He's from a room up in the front part of the barracks," Dave said. With the roll call over, we headed back to the barracks to wait for the arrival of hot tea now being given out after roll call.

Being locked up in the barracks each night gave us little to do, but talk. Food was constantly on our mind and some of us began talking about various food dishes and the taking up of cooking for a hobby after we got home. We had fantastic pantries dreamed up stocking every type of food imaginable. We got a little

carried away with our descriptions of culinary concoctions and Tony Anthony from Florida couldn't stand it any more and told us to shut up. I guess Tony never liked me. He was of English descent and I once told him that he didn't look English. He got quite nasty, telling me that he'd like to run into me after the war.

Not having much to do and always being hungry, we were always having brews. Getting one can of instant coffee every four weeks required stretching. This was done by inserting the tip of a damp spoon in the powdered coffee and the brew made with the powder that stuck to it. With the addition of a little powdered milk and sugar or German saccharine made it vaguely taste and look like the real thing. At times for a little snack with the coffee, we toasted Jerry dark bread sliced so thin that you could see through it.

The night temperatures now dropped way below freezing and in the morning when I folded my paper mattress, there was frost on the underside.

That evening, who should come into the room, but Long, Lean, and Unclean. I don't know why he picked on me, but he wanted to swap his army pants for my flying coveralls. He said that he was planning an escape and needed my coveralls so he wouldn't be recognized as a soldier. I questioned his wisdom at this stage of the war and told him he was safer being with the rest of us. I also told him that if I were planning an escape, I would sew a suit made of white towels and make my break at night during a heavy snowstorm when visibility is poor and the dogs can't track you. He kept insisting that he wanted the coveralls and finally I was fed up and told him that I wanted nothing to do with his scheme and he left.

Bill Holman, from Utah who insisted that he wasn't a Mormon spoke up; "I have an idea for Unclean to escape. With all the farting going on around here, let's stuff him in the chimney and everybody put their ass to it and let a fart. Then, someone can light a match and we'll shoot him out like a rocket." I asked, "will farts really burn?"

Dave Walsh said, "they sure will." John Spornyak spoke up, "Alex, why don't you bend over and let one go and we'll find out." I answered, "no thanks, it'll burn the hair on my ass."

After several minutes of the guys trying to talk me into trying it, John shouted, "I'll try it." He bent over and stretched his shorts over his butt. "Get your damn match lit and lets find out," he yelled. The match was lit and held in position. He let go a fart and a blue flame shot out three inches. Everybody laughed this was really funny. Several other guys tried it, each time bringing on a laugh.

One morning, we were standing roll call and as usual, the Green Hornet was counting us. He counted our row and a step later; he stopped and backed up. He pointed to a man in the back of our row, then at the barracks. There stood, Long Lean and Unclean, as usual with nothing on but his overcoat, clutching a cup of coffee in front of him with both hands. A laugh went up among the Kriegies as he headed for the barracks to get dressed.

Christmas was a happy event, the International Red Cross provided each man with a special Christmas food parcel and we received it intact. This was like a Kriegie's dream and we munched and nibbled not knowing what to try next.

The games that came in the parcels were all different. Jack London got a roulette wheel, and using cigarettes, got a gambling concession going. It seems that everyone in the barracks was trying to get into our room to try their luck on Jack's wheel. Things got so busy for Jack that he had to take on some helpers. Finally, the whole operation was moved out into the hallway under the only bulb. Jack was heard yelling, "step right up gentlemen and try your luck." The thing was so overwhelming that everyone in our room was laughing. Lights out at ten o'clock ended the gambling. The next day, Jack and his helpers were counting and stacking cigarettes, still laughing. We never found out if anyone else in the barracks got the same game.

One evening, still in the holiday spirit, we began singing. After singing several old favorites, someone started singing The Star Spangled Banner and we all joined in. In our enthusiasm we got too loud and a shot rang out from the nearby guard tower, an indication that our patriotism was not appreciated. We took the hint and stopped singing, at least for this time.

The war news was excellent, the skies had cleared on the western front and Allied planes were bombing and strafing German tanks and trucks exposed on the roadways. On the Eastern Front, the Russians were driving west into Silesia with a spearhead heading north in our direction...the war would soon be over! New Years Eve and New Years Day were uneventful, the same as any other day. Somewhere near the middle of January, we got word that the delivery of Red Cross parcels was cut off because of transportation difficulties. The Russians were advancing and food was going to be scarce. Then, came the report that our retreat was cut off and it was just a matter of time and we would be liberated by the Russians. Our Man of Confidence told us to just sit back and take it easy and when the Russians came, to give the Jerries an even break.

Shortly after nine o'clock one evening, the back door of the barracks opened and in stepped the Green Hornet followed by the C lager commandant, Captain Heinert. Standing under the only hanging light, the Green Hornet spoke loudly, "will all of you step out into the hall, we have an Announcement to make." Men began coming out of the rooms, gathering around until the entire hallway was filled.

After several minutes, the Green Hornet spoke again, "We have just had orders to evacuate the camp...we know it is cold and we are sorry to do this, but we have no choice...the sick in the hospital will remain behind...and the rest of you will have all day tomorrow to prepare." He continued, "early the following morning, you will receive a hot breakfast...one Red Cross parcel will be given out and at seven-thirty we will leave the Stalag."

Continuing, "the first day, we will walk a long distance and we cannot provide you with food...you will have to eat your Red Cross food... later, you will walk twenty kilometers a day and have warm shelter, according to the Geneva Convention...also warm meals from a wagon will be served during the march."

It was goodbye to Stalag-Luft IV...some were glad, but most were not...I knew we would miss the place as soon as we got cold and tired. I stepped out the gate and into another phase of our captivity. What we didn't know was, that some of us would be walking for 86 days. The Date was February the sixth of 1945 and it was cold.

The Black March

This third day of walking was the toughest day so far. As tomorrow was to be our rest day, our German commandant thought he'd get more distance out of us today. He rode in a wagon. I did not envy him for we could stay warmer walking. The walking seemed endless. Most of the Jerry guards were old men and they were growing weary, some threw their guns away and some just deserted.

While walking, I recall seeing a Kriegie get out of line to ask an old guard if he could stop to urinate. The old frustrated guard did not understand and began hitting the Kriegie with his rifle butt. When we stopped to rest, some of the Americans took off for the woods and the guards were too tired to even care. It was what you'd call the survival of the fittest. Everywhere along the road were Americans and Jerry guards lying down, too tired to go any farther. I wanted so much to lie down alongside the road and rest and something inside wouldn't let me. Perhaps seeing the guards lying on the ground helped keep me going. Anyway, I plodded along, concentrating on just putting one foot ahead of the other and keeping my balance. After a long rest stop, we recovered a bit. Later, I heard that the Jerries had a wagon behind the column picking up those unable to walk any farther.

The trip from the barn hospital to Stalag 357 by railway boxcar.

One day we were informed that the train taking to us to a new prison camp had arrived and the next morning we would walk five kilometers to a train station. There would be thirty-eight men to a boxcar and we would have pails for water and toilet purposes. We got up exceptionally early and walked only three

kilometers...it seemed like five kilometers. The boxcars were on a siding and as we had already been assigned to cars before we left, we immediately went to our car. A roll call count was taken and instead of thirty-eight men assigned to a car there were fifty. European boxcars are smaller than American boxcars and there was only enough room to sit. The facilities consisted of straw on the floor and we never saw pails for water and toilet purposes as we were told.

The car doors were locked and we sat waiting. A locomotive finally came chugging up, hooked on and our ride began, first about five kilometers in one direction, then in the reverse direction...when the train finally got started, it kept moving.

Each boxcar had a small window on one side of the car near the end. When we were getting in the car, it seemed everyone was trying to get near the window. Some of the guys still had the diarrhea and as we had no pails we were in a dilemma, they sure couldn't defecate in the straw for there was barely enough room to sit. Someone gave up a Red Cross box and it was lined with straw, that and a tin can were our toilet facilities. All modesty was forgotten as Kriegies moved away to stay clear of a squatting Kriegie defecating in the straw-lined box. As the feces was mostly water, we had to be careful not to get splattered. The box was then passed man to man to the window where the straw was dumped out. The stench in the car was awful; having only a small window for ventilation it took a while for the odor to dissipate. With fifty men in the car, the guys that had managed to get near the window were kept busy dumping straw or urine. After a few hours, they were trying to switch places with someone, but nobody took them up on their offer.

Stalag 357

As this was a German Army prison camp, the Jerries were not as strict in this camp, as they were in the Luftwaffe camp. The British POWs were allowed to keep most of their gear when captured, they had just about everything except their guns.

As in most prison camps, cigarettes were the medium of exchange. These amazing British Kriegies had the whole economy of the camp based on the cigarette. It was interesting to walk about the camp and look at all the Kriegie stores, which were really tables set up outdoors. The tables displayed many items such as several accordions, books, photos, cups; ashtrays made from shell casings, dice, scarves and many hand knit articles. It was unbelievable the things they had. Other stores had food items that could be purchased for cigarettes, but few Kriegies these days had any. The food items were non-perishable canned goods that came in Red Cross parcels or in personal parcels from home. To set up a store, it was necessary to get a license and to get one the operator had to agree to keep food prices the same as the village store, locating in a building all by itself.

The village store was operated on the principal of the stock market, when food items were scarce and cigarettes were plentiful the prices went up and when food items were abundant or cigarettes scarce prices went down. Prices depended on the balance between the abundance of food and cigarettes. The prices were set at the village store and all the other stores had to comply. A file system was kept at the village store where one could bring in an item to the store when prices were high and turn it in for points to be put on one's account. Later when food prices came down one could buy an item with points held in one's account thus gaining points. When cigarettes were too scarce to be used as money, one could trade an item worth so many points for an item worth less points and the difference was the store's profits. There were store-advertising signs all over the camp.

The British were an ingenious bunch. With string, wire, wood and tin cans they made blowers for heating water and cooking food. The blower consists of a blower fan made of a tin can connected to a tin can firepot mounted on a board slab. By hand cranking a large wooden pulley, it spun the blower fan forcing air into the firepot. With this contraption, it is possible to get a lot of heat using very little fire material. The heat was so great that a Klim can of water could come to a boil in about four minutes.

The word got out that there were some American unclaimed personal parcels in the warehouse and a few men were sent to get the names off these parcels. Luckily, four men in our room got parcels from home. One guy got four cartons of cigarettes and by Kriegie standards, he was a millionaire. He had several buddies to watch over his stuff and he had it made. I happened to be at the village store when he and his buddies came in. They just about bought out the place. He was the envy of every Kriegie watching.

A fellow in another part of the camp also received four cartons of cigarettes. He didn't belong to a Combine and didn't make any new friends, preferring to watch over his things himself. One night, someone with a razor blade carefully slit the canvas tent where he lay sleeping and gingerly removed the cartons from under his head, where he had been using them as a pillow for safekeeping. This was the talk of the camp! If it had been me, I would have made some friends to help watch over my stuff, very fast. This no doubt was the work of one of the Limeys for they were really hard-up for cigarettes. I never heard of Americans stealing from each other.

There were still more unclaimed American parcels left. Because American POWs were scattered all over Germany and with the transportation system disrupted, they would never get to their addressees. It was decided to lay claim to them. First, we had to elect a Man of Confidence to represent us. Out of several candidates, a Gene Devens was elected. We immediately got a petition going to distribute the parcels among the Americans. The British Man of Confidence was against it; he wanted his people to share them with us. We were outnumbered by the British about twenty to one and dividing the parcels with them would leave hardly anything for the Americans.

The date was somewhere around the third week of March and the days were cool, sunny and pleasant and it looked like the most of the winter was over.

A rumor was going around that some cigarettes were coming into the camp and everyone was getting thirty-eight cigarettes. The next day I was sitting on my sack when a Limey sat down beside me and started a conversation. We talked about how we were captured, how long a POW and so on. Suddenly he said, "hey Yank, have you read *Gone With the Wind*." I replied, "no." He said, "I'll bring the bloody thing over tomorrow afternoon." The next afternoon he came, but brought no book. He had a couple of postage stamps and said he could get me a collection of about two hundred and seventy stamps from outside the camp. He said, he could get me chocolate, bread or food when I got my thirty-eight cigarettes. This confirmed my suspicions, this Limey was trying to con me...he would never see my thirty-eight cigarettes.

Finally, one morning they gave us the cigarettes. They were English cigarettes. I went for a walk around the camp to see how the food prices were affected. Along the way I met my con-friend and he immediately said, "I can get you some bread from the outside, but I must have your cigarettes to do the trading with." I didn't trust this bullshitter, so I said, "take me along and when you make the trade I'll give you the cigarettes." That took the wind out of his sails, he said, "I can't have anybody along this is secret stuff"...I replied, "that's too bloody bad," and kept on walking. He never came around anymore, which was just fine with me, as he was getting to be a pain in the ass.

There was a lot of stealing going on by the Limeys, something we never heard of back at Luft IV. Anyone caught stealing here was dealt with rather harshly by the Limeys themselves. On this particular day, one of our roommates came into the barracks all excited and said, "hey you guys, they caught a Limey stealing last night and early this morning they threw him in the shithouse...he has to stay there all day...everybody is going over and pissing on him." I asked, "isn't it too deep." He answered, "No, its only up to his knees...go over and piss on him." Some of the guys went over to watch, but I had no desire to see it.

Easter Sunday, was just an ordinary day, I do not recall any church service. We never received any Red Cross food parcels. The Jerry food ration at this time was 1/7 of a loaf of bread a day. 1/8 of a loaf on Sunday and a small piece of cheese or meat once a week. In addition, we got one-cup of swede soup at twelve noon and another at four-thirty in the afternoon. These were starvation rations. Some of the Limeys

would drink the liquid off the swede soup, then go outside and fry the rest with their blower into a sort of pancake. Anything for variety!

Right after the noon meal each day we got a news report from a Kriegie source and the news was good. The Yanks and Brits had crossed the Rhine River and were moving in our direction. The British in the camp said that we wouldn't be moved and would be liberated right here.

The Americans won out and got their unclaimed parcels. With the travel situation the way it was, they would never get to the person to whom they were intended. If we didn't get them they would probably fall into the hands of the British or the Jerries. The one that I shared with a few of the guys had some food to cook up and a large picture of a beautiful woman, probably someone's wife. I am sorry that I did not write down the address of the senders to thank them someday.

One day the Kreigie News Service told us that the American 9th Army was only fifteen miles away and was headed this way (we didn't know it at the time, but the news was received by means of a radio set hidden inside a mess kit). The next day the Jerries announced that we were evacuating the camp. The next morning as we were getting ready, a British Tommy came into the barracks and told us the Americans weren't far away and to stall for time.

Shortly later, a German sergeant came in and told us to get ready to leave. We began putting our coats on and he left. As soon as he was gone we took our overcoats off and sat down. About ten minutes later, the sergeant came in, looked at all of us sitting there and left. A few minutes' later, German soldiers with fixed bayonets came in and we stopped playing games and moved out. It was rumored that some men would get left in the camp to be liberated and a few Kriegies tried to sneak back into a barracks. One fellow was hit with a rifle butt.

We began to move out. I realized that I wasn't going to miss this place one bit. I hadn't made any friends and this was just another stopping off place. With spring just around the corner and the Allies on the move, this wouldn't last long. I was an old hand at these forced marches and was in excellent spirits. The date was April 6, 1945.

Our group was halted just outside the gates under a grove of trees. German trucks and military vehicles were scattered about under trees trying to stay out of sight of Allied fighter planes. After about forty-five minutes of waiting, three Limeys decided it was tea time. They picked up twigs and dry grass and fired up their blower. Who should come along, but that hated guard, Big Stoop, I hadn't seen him since Luft IV. As usual, he was hollering about something. When he saw the Limey's heating water on the blower, he went over and gave their heating apparatus a swift kick, sending it flying. With both hands, he held his machine pistol across his chest and bellowed for us to get in ranks. I thought, that's pretty stupid, when the Limeys could have simply dumped the fire material on the ground, stamped it out and be ready to go. We got in a column about four or five men wide and moved out down a dirt road through woods. All about were camouflaged gun positions and trucks dispersed under the trees.

We came in the open again and some B-17 bombers came flying over on the way to a target somewhere. Our column walked and walked. We got a five-minute rest break every hour or so which wasn't too bad. At least it wasn't cold. Another wooded area came up and we stopped for a short break. I sat down by a tree, leaned back against the tree and closed my eyes. All of the sudden, I heard Artie Shaw's, begin the Begine. I thought I was dreaming and opened my eyes. On the ground nearby was a phonograph that some Kriegies had brought from the camp. At the time I thought that was somewhat stupid carrying that heavy thing. (After the war, I found out that the phonograph had a secret radio built inside, tuned to the BBC in England).

The 2nd march

That morning we were stunned when the Jerry sergeant told us that President Roosevelt had died. He also said that Roosevelt was a great leader. I would have expected a touch of arrogance when he made the

announcement, but there was a touch of sadness in his voice. Some Germans probably wouldn't even have told us. We continued on. Several hours later we saw a familiar landmark that we passed yesterday. Upon seeing it, Ed remarked, "F—ked by the fickle finger of fate...they're walking us around in circles."

That afternoon we stopped at a Red Cross distribution barn and we each received part of a food parcel. Later, we stopped for the night at a small farm all by itself in the middle of several cultivated fields. Running through the farm was a narrow road, separated from our barn by a shallow ditch. I decided to make a small sandwich with some of the cheese we received in the food parcel. Figuring, it would taste better if the bread was toasted, I left Ed and Red in the barn and went outdoors to make a fire. The ditch running between the road and barn was dry and this is where I made my fire. I sliced the cheese into a couple of pieces and laid them aside. Then, slicing the bread into two paper-thin slices, I put one slice on my fork and began to toast it.

A formation of seven British Spitfires came flying from over the treetops of a nearby forest. We had seen them flying around shooting things up without any harm to us, but this time I was beginning to have a nervous feeling. Looking up at the planes, I noticed they were still out of range for strafing, except for one and he had his nose pointing right down at us. This was the signal to get the hell out of here! I dropped my fork and toast and headed straight for the barn, unfortunately there was a barbed wire fence in the way. As I got to the fence, I heard gunfire from the plane. I snaked my way through the fence tearing my clothes in several places and fell alongside a cement horse-watering trough. A second later, a body hurled past me and a Kriegie desperate for protection dropped into the water.

The first plane made his pass and swooped up, then the next one began firing, after the third I still didn't feel safe and decided to head for the brick farmhouse behind me. I ran through the open door, saw a cement cistern, got over on the protected side and sat down on the cement floor next to a Jerry guard. The other four planes made their passes and the formation was heard flying off. The guard and I sat there for a few minutes. He brought out a cigarette and struck a match. He was shaking so badly, I didn't think he was going to get the cigarette lit.

Going back outside, I saw a bullet hole in the barn about eight feet above the watering trough. In trying to reconstruct what had happened, unknown to me, there was a military vehicle coming down the road alongside my ditch. It had lookouts sitting on all the fenders watching for airplanes. The Spitfires missed the vehicle, but sure knocked down a lot of telephone wires. That was a little too close to suit me!

The following day our journey led us through a large forest. In the late afternoon, we stopped for a rest on a road running along the edge of the forest. All of the sudden some British planes came swooping down over us and strafed something a few kilometers away. It exploded with a roar and thick black smoke bellowed high in the air. After yesterday's close call, I was now becoming a bit apprehensive about planes flying around and shooting things up. I was no longer happy when they flew into view.

That evening they put us in a woods to sleep on the ground. Did we bitch because there was no water. A railroad track was nearby with a house alongside. We asked our interpreter to go over and to try to get us some water. All they offered us was three tubs of water and that wouldn't go far with one thousand men camped in the woods.

About a kilometer away was a French forced labor camp and with some persuasion the Jerries finally allowed us to walk over and get some water. The Frogs (Frenchmen) were railroad section hands and lived alongside the tracks behind them. They had lots of potatoes and were doing a land office business trading one hat full of potatoes for two cigarettes. The Frogs were taking advantage of us for cigarettes were very scarce these days. Their business was conducted through an open window with the bag of spuds on the floor. I got a hat full and gave two cigarettes. The Frenchmen turned their backs to discuss something and in that instant I reached down through the open window, picked up the bag of spuds and walked off. I chuckled all the way back to our woods. Laughing, I told Ed and Red, about how I did it. My joy turned to sorrow when I examined the bag to find all that was left was sand. It was poetic justice, I guess.

The 2nd March continued with spring weather.

We did get a short break and continued walking. Soon, we approached many trenches and earthworks and ahead was a truss bridge. On both sides of the bridge were foxholes with gun-crews manning 20-millimeter machine guns. Our column began crossing the bridge. The part of the column that I was in was just stepping onto the bridge when we heard aircraft behind us. It was the familiar sound of an airplane diving to strafe something. Turning my head to take a quick look, I saw a Spitfire diving towards us. The Jerries kept us walking. As the plane kept coming closer, I was getting panicky, self-control was difficult, as I wanted to duck behind a bridge girder. As the plane got closer we realized it was after a target across the river. The 20-millimeter ground guns guarding the bridge began firing; the plane passed over the bridge firing at something ahead and swooped up. Six more planes came down all firing at the same target. All the while explosions could be heard from across the river. The planes flew off unscathed. A column of smoke was rising and the crackle of flames could be heard from behind a ridge across the river.

The river was the, Elbe River. We got across the river and found out that some railway tank cars loaded with petrol had been shot-up and were burning. Our column turned right following the river and entered the town of, Lauenburg. We continued through the town, still following the river. Leaving Lauenburg behind, we approached another bridge and crossed it without incident.

Continuing

The next day we stayed put. The strafing from the Spitfires grew worse and it got so they would shoot up anything that moved. Several farms in the area were sheltering military vehicles and all the civilians were nervous. Two deaf mutes, a husband and wife, stopped at our farm carrying their suitcases and were at the point of hysteria, at not being able to hear the planes. It was just too much and they were moving somewhere else away from all the air activity. Once in a while a vehicle would pass by with personnel sitting on all four fenders continually watching for aircraft. A German tank came down the road. Just as it came abreast of our barn, a squadron of British planes flew into view. The tank stopped under a tree next to our barn with guns trained. Some of the crew stood behind the tank holding machine guns, waiting to be strafed. Most of us Kriegies seeing this scenario began to back away from the road, looking at the tank and saying, "get moving, get out of here!" No way was the tank going to move and give themselves away. A few minutes later, the planes were gone and the tank moved on.

Wars end

On the morning of May the 2nd of 1945, one of the guards came up and told us that the Allies were in the village of Zarrentin, three kilometers away. He also requested that we give them good treatment as accorded a prisoner of war. The Jerry guards stacked their rifles, leaving one man on guard duty and sat down to wait under a lean-to shed. The Kriegies gathered around in a group, looking over at the Germans, knowing how they must feel, losing the war and not knowing what the future holds. There were no smiles or laughter, just quiet talking. We didn't hate these people, we were just glad to see the war end. We waited and waited. Finally, after a couple of hours, a jeep drove into the village, driven by an American sergeant and accompanied by a British officer. The Jerry on guard duty threw down his rifle, raised up his arms and began walking up to the jeep, followed by the other guards with their arms up. After the months of hardship... we were free at last.



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