

## Limbourg POW Camp

November 14-20, 1944

After being on the road marching for the last five days, we are loaded into trucks for a several hour-long journey to Limbourg, a separation camp for thousands of American, British and French prisoners of war. The food situation had been growing increasingly worse and was not about to get any better. The camp was very crowded and word is that we would not be here too long. I did have the chance to write home. The International Red Cross had furnished a paper form, which we could use for this purpose. I took my time, carefully wording my letter. I explained that I was now a prisoner of war, was being treated fairly and hoped to be home before too long. I showed this letter to Demo Stathis, who said that he would like to copy parts of it for his letter to home. For some reason, this letter never did reach my parents. They did receive the only other letter I was allowed to write. This was several weeks later.

### Boxcars

November 21, 1944

Having spent a week at Limbourg, the separation camp, we boarded boxcars for travel to another POW camp. We were crammed in to a point that it was difficult to even move. I estimated that about 60 men were in my boxcar. It was difficult to sit up for fear of losing your space to lie back down again, which was the most "comfortable" way to relax while traveling. We lay side by side looking like sardines in a can. If one had to relieve himself, he was lucky to find his place again. I discovered this problem early on, and had to forcibly wedge myself back into my previous location.

Once a day, the doors to the boxcar were opened, and we were taken outside just long enough to receive our daily food ration of bread, obtain some water, and empty "the pot." In late November, the days were getting very cold and the nights were worse. With railroad facilities being damaged by constant allied bombings, we were moving very slowly, sometimes waiting for hours only to move a few miles. One evening our train was passing through Cologne when an air raid took place. A nearby explosion sent a piece of bomb shrapnel through the side of the boxcar. Fortunately, there were no injuries and the train was able to move out of the area.

Our journey continued and, at one point, through a hole in the wall, we could see a long column of German vehicles, including tanks, trucks, artillery and thousands of soldiers. Unknown to us at the time, they were undoubtedly heading into position prior to an attack during the Battle of the Bulge.

November 23, 1944 ... **Thanksgiving Day**

The past few days were much the same, still in transit on the boxcar, however on this day we stopped and were taken inside a building and seated at a table. We were

greeted by very friendly Red Cross people, who were mostly women, and given a nice meal. Until this moment, none of us realized it was Thanksgiving Day back home. The good old Red Cross hadn't forgotten and arranged to provide us with a good meal on this day. The Germans, agreeing to allow them to feed us the meal, most likely didn't realize that the day was a festive American Holiday. As I ate this meal, my thoughts turned toward home and how those Thanksgiving meals were before the war, with all the family gathered around the table. There would be seven of us, including my mother, father, my four brothers and myself. A huge 22 to 24 pound turkey would be in the center of the table with all the traditional fixings one could imagine surrounding the turkey. What a happy occasion that used to be. How I would love to see that repeated right now ... back in Seekonk. It was time to move on and re-board the train. We thanked the Red Cross and said our goodbyes. We needed this meal for a respite from our hunger.

## STALAG 12A - NEUBRANDENBURG

November 28, 1944

Our journey resumed. We were entering Northern Germany, where our pace picked up a bit. After one week in a boxcar we finally arrive at Stalag 12-A in Neubrandenburg, about 65 miles north of Berlin (see map on page 50). We were unloaded and issued green overcoats, given showers, my first one in over three months, and assigned to barracks.

This camp held American, British and French prisoners of war as well as thousands of Russians who were kept separate. (Hitler regarded them as subhuman.) This compound was completely walled with barbed wire atop. Guard positions were equipped with machine guns.

Sleeping conditions were, as usual, very cramped. There were a few tables provided; however, and sometimes we were able to make use of them. Hunger continued to get worse and sometimes one would say or do what normally would be considered very strange. Harry Ljungquist confided that if he were to survive and went home, regardless of where he went, he would always have a chocolate bar in his possession. An English P.O.W. held a full loaf of bread. He informed us that he had given his wedding ring to a guard who procured it for him. When asked what his wife would think if she ever heard about this, he replied, "I'll simply tell her that the Germans took it from me." I wonder if she ever found out.

An American P.O.W named Alan Goldman from Boston was sitting alone at a nearby table and was talking to himself. With a strange grin on his face, he was muttering, "Spaghetti, meatballs, steak, pork chops, corned beef, Coney Island hot dogs," etc. He continually shook his head as though in deep thought. I hesitatingly approached and asked him what he was talking about. "Food," he replied, "All the things I had taken for granted when I was home. I used to go to Joe and Nemos restaurant in Boston. They had the greatest Coney Island hot dogs in the world." I told him that I did not hear him mention pea soup and dumplings or biscuits, and that my mother made the best in the

world. We began discussing all foods and agreed that none of us really appreciated it fully. Why would it take a situation like this to make us realize how fortunate we once were. Some people in the world had always been hungry. Was it tougher on us because we once had everything, or did they simply just go through life this way? The memories of our hunger in these days would never go away, and it would get worse.

Goldman and I seemed to have a lot in common and developed a close friendship. He was of Jewish ancestry and therefore was not a strong believer in the Catholic or Protestant faiths. One Sunday morning, however, religious services were being held in camp and Goldman did offer to serve communion. He was in charge of handing out the communion wafers. He suggested that I get back in line afterwards, for seconds, which I did. Every morsel and every calorie counted. He also volunteered to serve breakfast rations one morning. He told me that after everyone had been served, and if there was any left over, he would signal me. I did not refuse. Goldman was laying the groundwork for survival and fortunately for me, I was included in these plans.

The cold and dark days of December were upon us. We seldom left the barracks. A Red Cross package had arrived. Each American was given one. It contained corned beef, Spam, chocolate, crackers and cheese, plus instant coffee (something new). A finer gift could not be asked for. This package really helped sustain us during the first weeks of December. We had little else.

On a couple of occasions, we found a German newspaper lying around. It described locations of battles in the area in which we were captured. The lines apparently had not changed much. I decided at that time that it might be wise to learn German as well as I could. It may come in handy later on.

### **On the Move Again ... Dannenwalde POW Camp**

December 16, 1944

It was during late afternoon, we were ordered out of the barracks with all our belongings. We were marched to a train station and loaded into a passenger train. Yes, a passenger train, as clean and neat as any I had ever ridden in the States. Our seats were comfortable and not crowded. We were several hundred miles from any battle zones, as we rode for perhaps an hour. We were taken to a camp at Dannenwalde, approximately 30 miles north of Berlin (see map on page 50). About 200 men were taken here on our train. I was with friends Donald Clark and Harry Ljungquist. Demo Stathis was not with us, nor was Alan Goldman. Our best and most comfortable travel arrangement so far was also our shortest, about an hour's ride.

The compound at Dannenwalde again was walled with gun emplacements atop and enclosed by barbed wire. The barracks were separated into a number of rooms, which were crowded, but warm enough. My room housed 16 people. Ljungquist and Clarke were among them. We quickly realized that the food situation here would not be

improving. Meals of what we termed, "grass soup," with a small potato were furnished us with one sixth of a loaf of bread were our daily rations. All food was handled and prepared in the compound kitchen.

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The weather was getting extremely cold. We were assigned to work details consisting mainly of tree cutting in the nearby forest. Guards would escort us to our various work areas. A few days after our arrival and en route to our work site, two guards had been chatting and seemed quite upbeat. When asked why, they responded that their armies had launched a gigantic attack into Belgium and had taken about 20,000 American prisoners. We were not quite sure just what to believe, but were pretty sure that this was a bunch of bull. The Germans never did mention this to us again although their claim at that time did turn out to be fairly accurate.

On around the 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> of December, we received another Red Cross package. With Christmas just around the corner, someone came up with the idea that if we could each donate something to the cook, he could prepare a real dinner, and the cook went along with this. (I must add that the cook was the only one in our group who seemed rugged and healthy and if I must say...well fed.) We would have our meal at noon on Christmas Day. It did wonders for our spirits if only for that day. We filled our stomachs for the first time in weeks, and it seemed great, and now guess what? Sometime in mid-afternoon, we were ordered to fall out and assemble in the courtyard.

The Camp Commandant was being paid a family visit. His 22-year-old daughter requested to review all 200 prisoners. While we stood at attention, she slowly passed in front of us, pausing to look us over, (with her father close by.) We also carefully looked her over. It was only the day before that we would rather have looked at a crust of bread, but now this young woman standing in front of us had all the appearances of a Ginger Rogers and our thoughts rapidly began to roam. But, the father, don't forget the father. He is standing right there as if he is almost trying to torment us with this pretty young thing. Conversation that night was quite upbeat, and if only temporary, things seemed a lot better.

Many of the guards seemed to be around 40 years of age and some older. Some had been wounded in combat. Others were strange in their own ways, but not all. Most spoke some English, and some even seemed friendly or wanted to be. Perhaps they could see the handwriting on the wall, so to speak, and we could talk to them, even bribe them with cigarettes. Cigarettes were furnished to us in our Red Cross packages. Those of us who did not smoke had the ability to obtain favors from guards who loved our cigarettes. For a pack of cigarettes given to a certain guard, we could obtain a loaf of bread in a downtown bakery. I obtained a loaf in this manner and some others did also.

Our barracks room contained 16 men, and to the few who were heavy smokers, the value of cigarettes was quite high. They believed that we must set a value on cigarettes before getting involved in any deals. It was decided that a loaf of bread would have a value of only six cigarettes. I could not quite understand the problems that some smokers must be having. They are hungry as hell, and yet they have to smoke. On

occasion this could lead to a few harsh words. However, things were to change and soon. Word of these dealings would soon get to the camp commandant, and he would put a stop to it. The guards involved in these deals would be reprimanded and a search would be made of all prisoners. Anyone carrying more than the allotted number of two or three cigarettes would have them confiscated from his person.

Each morning we were assembled in the courtyard and counted prior to being escorted off to our work detail. On one particular morning, we were searched for cigarettes. One particular guard, he was very tall and looked down at us wearing his glasses on the bridge of his nose, (we called him four eyes) quickly confronted me. He ordered me to empty my pockets, which I did. Finding no cigarettes on me, he brushed against me, muttering "schweinhund," and losing his arrogant smile as he moved away. He would get back at me later.

It was January and temperatures continued to plunge. Records later recorded it as having been the coldest Western European weather in 40 years. Being in a constant state of hunger made it worse. Perhaps the fact that we were forced to work helped take our minds off our problems. Everything considered, the prisoners got along with each other fairly well. When there were disagreements, it was generally when we were not working and confined in close quarters.

One morning while walking en route to our job in the forest, I spotted four small potatoes, about the size of golf balls, along the roadside. Another fellow saw them at the same instant, and we both lunged for them, acquiring two each. I wiped mine off and quickly ate them. It did not matter that they were uncooked.

Of the 200 men in our compound, one was chosen to represent us in any communications with the camp commandant. This man had a very good command of the German language. He did seem to have an unwarranted concern for his own safety, and he confided in us that he was Jewish and asked that we never mention this. No one ever did.

One morning in early January, the weather was painfully cold. So cold that our guards had built a fire within a shack while we were performing our wood cutting duties. Two at a time, our men were allowed inside for about five minutes to obtain some warmth. When another fellow, who was from Chicago, and I approached the shack believing that it was our turn to enter, we were stopped. "Four Eyes" blocked our paths, shouting "Keine schweinhunds," needless to say we did not enter.

"Keine schweinhunds" (no pigdogs), the other prisoner exclaimed, "that goddamed Hun, he's called me nothing but that for weeks. When I told him that "Four Eyes" also had never called me by any other name than schweinhund, he replied, "What the hell does he have against us. I'm going to come back here after the war and hunt down that bastard." "Do you think he will still be alive?" I asked. But right now, stomping our feet seemed to be the only answer in trying to keep warm.

There were some incidents, even humorous at times, which I shall always remember. Our cook, an American prisoner, was issued rations from which he prepared our evening meal (grass soup and potatoes). Bread was issued separately. The Red Cross had, for some reason, sent us two pair of boxing gloves. One of our guards claimed that he was a former boxer and had even sparred with Max Schmelling (former heavyweight champ). He repeatedly asked if there were anyone in our group who had the courage or ability to test him in the ring. There was one such man. Guess who? It was our cook. Why him? One guess. Somehow he seemed rugged and in very good health, and said that he also had some boxing skills and would welcome the opportunity to exhibit them.

In a roped off area near the kitchen with a guard as referee, the bout commenced. After a few seconds of feeling each other out, the German was sent crashing to the deck. He arose, and did his best but it was no contest. Our glee was cut short as we were quickly ordered back to our barracks.

A day or so later some of us took the opportunity to congratulate the cook on his boxing skills. Someone mistakenly asked him how he managed to retain his energy and boxing skills at these times. He curtly answered, "Why shouldn't I, and who the hell wants to know, what's your point?" The question went unanswered, and we departed, giving him a wide berth so to speak. No more boxing bouts.

Hunger was increasingly more acute. We had not had a Red Cross package for some weeks. If anyone had ever claimed that he had once been overweight due to a problem with genes, it was certainly not apparent now. There were no scales, but we all appeared pretty much in the same shape. Actually, it was amazing just how much work we could do. Being young, of course, had a lot to do with it. We worked in two-man teams with axes and saws. We would cut two meters of wood per day. We could then relax, unless we helped those who may be a little slower, which we always did.

Traditionally, Germany had always been very proud of its forests. Usually, once a week or so, a forester wearing his green jacket and fancy hat and curved pipe, would make an early morning appearance and spend much time carefully notching the trees he wanted to be cut and instructing the guards regarding others. He did not always get his wishes.

On at least one occasion, we paid more attention to the locations of the various notched trees, than did our guards. If we did not like the size or shape of the tree we were supposedly to cut, we would just notch another tree, one, which we felt we could cut faster and more easily. Just trying to have a little fun, and we usually got away with it.

We had no means of receiving any information as to the progress of the war. We simply assumed (and rightly so) that the outcome of the war was never in doubt. Whether we ourselves would survive was another matter. One never knew what acts of desperation or revenge that Hitler himself would try to enact, but we never lost faith in that we would survive.

The cold days of January dragged on, and it was at the point that our hunger had peaked when we were told that another delivery of Red Cross packages would arrive in a day or two. The arrival of these parcels was accepted by us as though a gift from the gods. The contents had to be rationed very closely, and for a few more days the thoughts of hunger would not warp our minds. If only the average well-fed American knew how well off they were, however, they would never know unless they went through the hunger we have.

It was so ordered that the contents of each package would be inspected. Some of them contained pepper, and some parcels did not. Pepper was to be confiscated. We were told that in case of an attempted escape, it could throw bloodhounds off our trail. Pepper was always placed near the top of the box, we would open the top, and if the guard saw none, he would quickly pass us through. Word was passed along, and many of us simply opened the bottom and kept our pepper. I was one of those who managed to hold on to my pepper in case of any future plans.

## **TWO, THREE, FOUR, FIVE**

February 3, 1945

As we were being assembled and counted prior to our daily trek to the forest, my thoughts went to the date, which to me seemed a little unusual. I mentioned this to Harry Ljungquist, my closest buddy. "2-3-4-5," I said. He asked me just what I meant, thinking it was some kind of code he was unaware of. I told him that it was today's date. A date I well remembered.

It began as a cool crisp day. It would heat up though as the day progressed. Work proceeded in the normal manner; that is, until around mid morning. In the distance, we became aware of a drone increasing in volume to the point that all work ceased and all eyes were on the sky. A massive number of American bombers were approaching, flying directly over us en route to bombing raids on Berlin and other targets. For a few minutes we just gazed at this awesome sight as all else, at least for the moment, seemed irrelevant.

Later, records of this particular bombing raid would show that up to 1200 B-17's and B-24's were involved in this raid. This massive display of our air power caused some of our guards to gaze up in silence. We did not care how they felt. We simply cheered them on while waving our arms in jubilation. "Go get them," we yelled. Not too bright an outburst on our part as I suddenly became aware of a very angry man quite close by. "Schnell arbeit, verdamte schweinhund." It was "Four Eyes" screaming at me and shoving me over a tree that had been lying behind me. With the axe still in my hand, and while lying on the ground, I glared up at him and renewed my grip. Immediately, two or three prisoners quickly ran to me and told me to cool it. After a second or two, and rethinking the situation I agreed this wouldn't have been a smart move on my part and thanked them for their interference. There was "Four Eyes" striding away, his rifle slung

over his shoulder, as I rose to my feet with an axe in my hand. Cooling it was good advice, but maybe I too would return after the war with my Chicago buddy and hunt down this "Four-Eyed" Hun s.o.b.

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Each evening we were supplied with bread. Each man's ration was to be 1/6 of a loaf. We were given two and one third loaves for the 16 of us. Each had to be cut in equal portions so each of the 16 men get an equal portion right down to the crumbs. The man to whom this chore had been assigned recently became the source of considerable scrutiny leading to complaints that he was being unfair... his own portion supposedly being slightly larger than others. After several such accusations of this, he offered a simple solution. "Just pick some other bastard to cut the bread." I was the one that was selected for this chore. The loaves tapered at each end and after careful scrutiny, they would be cut in the center and then twice again toward each end. Talk about advice, "Move the knife a tad here, no a little more there," even the critics could not agree. I finally said that I had studied the bread carefully and knew as well as anyone where it should be cut. One man persisted and I finally told him to just shut up. We actually had a few serious words before things calmed down. After a few days the bread-cutting chore was transferred to another person, whose efforts also seemed by some, to be unappreciated. Fellow P.O.W. Donald Clark still remembers these incidents in our barracks room. If we could all get together now, we would have so much to talk about. We were very hungry then. I am sure the boys in other rooms had problems of a similar nature. I am sure that during those days a loaf of bread would probably have looked better to us than Esther Williams, or the way the camp commandant's daughter looked on Christmas Day.

We could wash in cold water but never bathed, shaved or brushed our teeth. There was no way to change underwear or socks, and the only latrine was about 50 yards away. But we were young, and that was not a problem. One could receive a haircut for the price of two cigarettes. I think I only had one in all the time as a P.O.W.

It may have been about mid-February, when about three o'clock in the morning, we were jolted out of a sound sleep. A tremendous explosion nearby rocked the building. Exterior walls had been dislodged, pulled out two or three inches. There were absolutely no military targets of any value in the area, so we assumed that it was a bomb jettisoned by an Allied bomber unable to find its target. We would have to wait until morning to see what really happened. Sure enough, while walking the road to our work area, we passed the location of the explosion. Just off the roadside to our left stood the forester staring at a gaping hole where the bomb had struck, and also at the destroyed timber. It had been sheared from the blast and at an upward angle for a diameter of about 50 yards. The forester appeared as though in a daze. He did not speak so our guards kept us moving along. "So much for his immaculate forest," I thought.

It was only a few days later that some of us would be selected to do a different type of work. A flatbed truck containing hundreds of 50-kilogram bags of cement made an appearance not far away. It was our duty to unload these bags and carry them into a storage warehouse. We couldn't help wonder what this was going to be used for.



By this time some of our guards, when away from the compound, seemed to talk more freely and a few almost seemed friendly. Some even asked our thoughts about the outcome of the war and had already expressed some fear of the Russians. We soon discovered what was to be done with the cement that we had stored. It would be used to build roadblocks against a Russian attack. How would this stop the Russians, we thought?

A few days later, the great news was given us that another Red Cross package was on its way. Wow, the second in less than a month. Believe me, we rationed it very carefully, and again our nourishment improved for a few days. Corned beef, Spam, cheese, powdered coffee, cigarettes, D-bars (concentrated chocolate) and other precious edibles.

Toward the end of February, we would be put to work on our new field of endeavor. We would be building roadblocks just far enough apart that Russian tanks could not penetrate them. Now came the question: Was this against the rules of the Geneva Convention? Why should we be involved in this? We discussed this with our interpreter who would make arrangements to bring it to the attention of the Camp Commandant. The Commandant's reply was swift. "Do as instructed or go on half rations. Let me know your answer by tomorrow morning." We talked the situation over. My comment was, "Well, half of nothing is still nothing, but I don't think we really have a choice." We went along with the Commandant's orders. We would build the roadblocks. Would they amount to anything? Time would tell. Forms were set up. If the weather warmed a bit, we could get started with the cement.

We were also to perform another task. Six of us were chosen to be loaded onto a truck and given a ride through Templin and to an airport near the city of Eberswalde, about 15 miles from the Oder River. Here we set about loading parts from damaged German aircraft aboard our truck. We may have been there about an hour, and it confirmed our thinking that the Russians were not too far away. Artillery fire could be heard from the direction of the Oder River, and the Russians were just to the east. Back to camp we were driven, perhaps 30 miles to the west, where we unloaded the items we had salvaged.

Two pyramid-type enclosures, one on either side of the road, had been erected and now we were reinforcing them with additional timbers. The Russian tanks will never get through here, because the tanks are too wide, we were told. We were given instructions regarding the mixture of ingredients to be used. "You will use six parts sand, one part cement, and kleine vasser (little water)." Why little water?" someone asked. Because it is too cold, was the guard's answer. "Then why not keine vasser? (no water)" we asked? We were told to shut up, and just get to work. Okay, little water.

The guards apparently knew nothing about what we were supposed to be doing, and were just passing down orders. The weather had been getting above the freezing point, and we mentioned to the guards, why not use more water? My God, we thought, now we are trying to help the enemy. None of the guards paid any attention to our

suggestion, so we just said, "The hell with it," and went ahead as originally told. We even had some fun in doing the work. When given the opportunity to do so, the ratio of sand, cement and water in the mixture, could quickly be changed. At times, we would toss in 30 or 40 shovels full of sand or 10 shovels of cement and no water at all. We did not seem to consider the possibility of any punishment if things did not turn out properly. Hell, as far as the guards knew, we were only following directions, and did anyone think these roadblocks would really stop the Russians?

One day while performing this work, a truck carrying 30 or so German soldiers was passing through and came to a stop nearby. One soldier asked what we were working on, and we told him what we were doing and the reason for it. He told us in good English to do a good job. With a strange smile on his face and seeming to shake his head, he told us that they were heading to the Russian Front. That certainly was the last place any German soldier wished to go. Some of them actually waved goodbye to us, and we reciprocated. A strange world, indeed, I thought.

March 9, 1945

The forms to the concrete bunkers were to be removed. With some trepidation regarding what would unfold, we began removing the wooden frames along with their supporting timbers. It was soon apparent that there would be problems, real problems. Supposedly, by this time, the concrete in each bunker would have solidified and remain solidly in place. Not so. Sand and cement powder soon began pouring out between the openings, slowly at first, and then turning into a cascade of flowing sand. When we had finished removing all frames, what we basically had was a pile of dry sand on each side of the road. At least there was some solidification near the bottoms of each pile. Some water had been used there, but very little at the top. The guard was furious at what he saw, but again, we tried to explain what we had warned him of. He was probably concerned about his own skin, but warned us that we could be in trouble. Early on the next morning, we would have some concern for our own safety.

## **Dannenwalde Being Closed Down – We Are Moving Out**

March 10 thru 20, 1945

Very early in the morning on March 10<sup>th</sup>, we were instructed to assemble in the courtyard with all of our belongings. Guards were moving about us. The Camp Commandant assembled the guards giving them their orders. We were instructed to line up in two rows, alongside our best buddy. The camp was being closed down, and we would be marched to new locations. So much for the crumbling roadblocks, which we thought this was all about. The subject of roadblocks was never mentioned again.

My best friend was Harry Ljundquist, who was 38 years old, the oldest in our group. We seemed to have a lot in common, and I also felt that he, being quite old, may also need a hand at times if we were about to embark on an especially long trek. In fact, most men from our room managed to remain together as an intact group. What may lie

ahead was unknown, and we were soon on the move. Our group of 16 men moved out of *Donnenwalde*. Other groups from *Dannenwalde* were en route to other destinations.

During this 10-day period we were on the road daily, marching toward the northwest. We were taking a roundabout route over country roads, we slept in barns each night and the rations remained quite meager. The weather, however, was beginning to warm up. The fact that we, unlike the NCOs and officers, were forced to work during the cold winter days, probably kept us in a better condition for a trek of any distance. We were constantly on the alert for Allied aircraft that may mistake us for the enemy. We would occasionally see one or two, but they made no menacing moves toward us. Civilians seemed to pretty much ignore us. One particular day, as we were rounding a curve in the road, marching toward us was a group of perhaps 30 or so young German soldiers, singing one of their famous marching songs. They were heading east toward the Russian front and seemed oblivious as to what fate had in store for them. Most of them seemed to be only 16 or 17 years of age.

By observing road signs and trying to memorize them, I remember that we had been very close to the city of *Goldberg* and then rerouted to the south. Whether the guards had become lost or had a change in orders, I do not know, but we would soon arrive at a new destination, which would be our fourth camp.

## **Schlemmin POW Camp**

March 20, 1945

We were concluding a trek of ten days in which some in our group developed dysentery, brought on, no doubt, by the changes in diet and the water we consumed. I was one of those affected. We had no particular problems with the guards. On the evening of March 20<sup>th</sup>, we were brought into the village of *Schlemmin* near the town of *Lubz*, just east of *Parchim*.

*Schlemmin* is where my fourth camp (see page 50) was located. We were in a northern German farmland area and amidst forests. The Germans were running out of prison camps. Most of their prison camps had been over-run by the Allies. We were now actually located in the middle of a small town. Our wooden barracks, more like a house, contained two rooms. One room would be for the prisoners, again 16 men. The adjoining room housed the two guards. Gone were the barbed-wire walls and armed guards atop them that were so familiar to us before. This place was different. Next door, near the main road, was a home in which the *burgermeister*, his wife and 14-year-old daughter lived. It was extremely unusual to see teenage boys around anywhere, as they were being utilized to help the German army. Across the street, on the other side of the *burgermeister's* home, was another barracks in which 23 French prisoners of war were held. These men were captured at *Dunkirk* during the fall of France, nearly five years earlier. They must have seen real tough times, especially when the German Army was conquering much of Europe and North Africa. One can only imagine how the guards with old "Four Eyes" attitude and mentality must have treated the POW's back then.



Map shows locations of three of the German Prisoner of War camps where I was held prisoner.  
 Names and dates of captivity are shown below.

- Camp #1 (not shown on map) was in Limbourg. Held prisoner at that camp from Nov 14 to Nov 21, 1944.
- Camp #2 was at Nuebrandenburg from November 28<sup>th</sup> to December 16<sup>th</sup>.
- Camp #3 was at Dannenwalde from December 16, 1944 to March 10, 1945.
- Camp #4 was at Schlemmin from March 20 until liberated by the Russians on May 3, 1945.

The men in our room, whose names I can recall (some gave me their addresses) are Harry Ljundquist of Worcester, Massachusetts, Donald Clark of Silver Springs, Maryland, Donald Athey of Armstrong Mills, Ohio, Earl Widing of Worcester, Massachusetts, Frank Damasco of Brooklyn, New York, also, David Dicks, Gamboratta, Kelch, Modesti, Kessler, and Walker from Steubenville, Ohio. There were others whose

names I cannot recall. Most of the men had previously billeted together at *Donnenwalde* so, by now, we did know each other quite well and, for the most part, we got along.

One of our guards was named *Karl Bucher*, 19 years old and a wounded veteran of fighting on the Western Front some months earlier. The other guard was what we considered an ancient man. He was 62 years of age. Of course, we were young. For the most part, *Karl* seemed friendly and easy to talk to and also gullible, but at times he could show flashes of temper. We got to know him pretty well.

Our labor would continue to be much the same as before, cutting wood in the forest, less than a mile away. Again, two men in teams would cut two meters of wood per day. When finished, they could help others and that was it for the day. There was no barbed wire enclosure here, and we did have a washroom and toilet outdoors, directly adjoining our room. Still we had no change in underwear or socks. The *burgermeister* seems friendly enough, and would usually greet us with a "guten morgen," and sometimes even a handshake. At times we had the freedom to visit the French prisoners and vice versa. They had known the *burgermeister* for years and advised us that he had not always been this friendly. They also told us some interesting tales in this regard.

The *burgermeister* may have been in his mid forties, and his wife was somewhat younger. Some of the French prisoners told a tale of what befell them several years before. The *burgermeister's* home was directly across the street from their barracks. His wife was a very attractive woman who, at times, had no qualms about dressing or undressing in front of a window that faced the prisoners' barracks. If caught peering at her, the *burgermeister* or a guard quite often beat the guilty parties. When the war was going in their favor, the *burgermeister* could be a cruel man. Now, with the German "Empire" crumbling, he could see the handwriting on the wall, and was attempting to be *Mr. Nice Guy*. "He had better hope that the Americans or British get here before the Russians arrive," is the way one Frenchman put it.

*Karl Bucher* would escort us daily to our work detail in the forest. It did not take long for us to get to know him well. Although he had observed us cutting and felling trees, *Karl* felt that we were not giving enough warning to those around us when a tree was to fall. From now on, "You will shout 'holz' when a tree is to fall", he told us. We explained that it was safer to shout "timber," as that is the word Americans are used to. He stubbornly insisted that we should shout "holtz." Sure enough, he was standing leisurely nearby, when the tree I was cutting began to tumble. "Timber," I shouted. The tree snapped off at the base and bounced up striking *Karl* on the shoulder and knocking him to the ground, his rifle lying several feet away. He was not hurt and someone quickly picked up the rifle and handed it to him. He sat on the ground for a few seconds. He began to mutter, repeating "timber, timber." It was timber from then on. It was only a day or two later, while walking a narrow firebreak en route to the forest, a wild boar darted across our path. Someone mentioned to *Bucher* that they were delicious tasting, and we encouraged him to shoot one. Guess what? This opportunity arrived on the very next morning. On this same path, near the top of a hill perhaps a hundred yards away,

stood a boar. Bucher did not hesitate. He took aim and fired. The bullet missed the boar, and it also barely missed someone else.

Coming over the hill towards us was someone on a bicycle. Gesturing wildly as he approached, we quickly identified him as the forester. In his sharp green uniform and curved pipe, he quickly approached Bucher while unleashing a verbal tirade and gesturing "zing-zing," indicating how close the bullet had come to his head. Bucher initially stood at polite attention, but as the tirade worsened, he began mumbling under his breath. His talking became louder and clearer, and we could not believe what Karl was saying he continued talking in very vulgar English, and apparently the forester could not understand a word he was saying. Karl had asked that we help him improve his English, and apparently this is how we helped him. Our laughter made the forester realize what was really being said. Another short but stern lecture and the forester departed. Bucher turned to us and mentioned that he was going to be in big trouble. Some of us even shook his hand to encourage him. We also realized that someone who would shoot at an object up a road toward the crest of a hill had to be a little different.

April 1, 1945

April had arrived in the village of Schlemmin, and the days were getting warmer. More importantly, however, the food situation was beginning to improve. Our daily rations were procured at a nearby farmhouse, and when delivered, we were sometimes obliged to offer a hand in toting heavy sacks of potatoes. All of our cooking basically prepared by a woman in her late twenties whose soldier husband was at the Russian front. She also had a young child. The size of our rations were dictated to her by the German Officers. They consisted of bread, potatoes and soup, and we hoped that the hunger situation would soon be improving. At times we were sent in pairs to assist her. On one day in particular, Donald Clark and I spent an hour or more cutting potatoes and at the same time, reminiscing about old-time music. We agreed our pre-war radio favorites were Frank Munn, John Charles Thomas and Vivian DelaChiezza, who had a Friday-night radio program.

## Leaflets dropped

During the middle of April, leaflets as shown on the next page, were dropped by an American plane near Schlemmin. I bought one of the leaflets from a guard for two cigarettes. The purpose of the leaflet was to urge German Pilots to fly their planes behind the American lines and surrender at designated airstrips. The leaflet states this was to be done on April 29 and 30 only. Specific routes and airstrips were outlined for safe flying zones on these two days.

**DEUTSCHE FLIEGER**

Am 29. und 30. April 1945  
zwischen Sonnenauf- und Untergang

**KÖNNEN**  
deutsche Flugzeuge  
unter Beachtung folgender fünf Punkte

**UNGEFÄHRDET**  
auf dem OSCHERSLEBEN Flugplatz  
**LANDEN.**

1. Überfliegt die Front der amerikanischen Truppen bei Schönebeck längs der Elbe, südöstlich von Magdeburg.
2. Flughöhe 1700 Meter, Fahrgestell auslassen.
3. Gerader und horizontaler Kurs bis Oschersleben.
4. Zwischen Schönebeck und Oschersleben, von Ost nach West, wird während der angegebenen Zeit ein 15 km breiter Raum frei von FLAK gehalten.
5. Alle Handlungen, die als feindselig angesehen werden können, sind strengstens zu vermeiden.

DER AMERIKANISCHE BEFEHLSHABER

**BEFOLGT DIESE BESTIMMUNGEN GENAUESTENS  
UND EURE SICHERHEIT IST GARANTIRT.**

EPH 40

Thousands of leaflets, as shown above, were dropped urging German pilots to fly their airplanes behind American lines and surrender. Their security was guaranteed if they followed the instructions given.

Yesterday, April 30, many German airplanes were seen flying in the proper direction, toward the American lines.

As the final days of the war were nearing, I wrote notes of some of the more important daily happenings on the back of this leaflet that I kept.

My notes on the back of the leaflet read:

*The war seems to be just about over. At present the Americans are at Wittenberge 60 kilometers from Schlemmin. The Russians are 30 to 40 kilometers away near Waren, or, maybe even closer by now. Allied aircraft are almost always overhead.*

*Saturday evening, April 28th we saw a German transport plane shot down very close to our barracks by two British Spitfires. The roads are clogged with refugees fleeing from the Russians and heading toward the American lines."*

*May 1st, Rumors are the German Army has collapsed and this is ascertained by the fact that all day yesterday German troops "were passing by in disorderly retreat, most of them deserting their outfits.*

*May 2nd, this morning thousands of Heinies passed inevitably going to the American lines to surrender.*

*May 3rd, this morning at 10:00 o'clock Russian troops occupied Schlemmin. White flags were quickly hung on all buildings. Not a shot was fired. American Reconnaissance Troops of the 7th Armored Division passed through town. For the 23 French and 16 American soldiers being held prisoners by the Germans, this was undoubtedly the greatest day of our lives. We are free.*

Note: It was only recently (in 2001), I learned of a German Jet Base (Me-262 Jets) operating in Parchim, about 25 miles from Schlemmin and that on April 7, 1945 British bombers wreaked havoc on this base, dropping incendiary bombs on it. While a prisoner at Schlemmin, we had never heard any mention of this air base, but it is probably the reason for that leaflet drop in April of 1945. Also, it was probably the reason that transport plane was shot down on April 28<sup>th</sup>. They were told they could fly on April 29 and 30 only, and that was for surrendering.

#### April 10, 1945

About the second week of April, with the food situation slightly improving, we were getting bits of information about advancing Allied Armies: American, British and Russian. We continued to cut wood in the forest, five days a week, with Saturday and Sunday off.

#### April 13, 1945

It was early morning, and while beginning our day's work, I noticed the forester standing nearby. He had notched the trees that he wanted cut, and then approached me. "Roosevelt tod," is all he said. "Vas?" I asked him. He repeated, and soon we all knew what he meant. If he was telling the truth, Roosevelt was dead. He asked Karl Bucher in German if we knew who would take over as president. I and someone else soon told Karl that it would be Harry Truman, and that he would do a good job. For a minute or two we stood around in sadness, but soon resumed our work. Roosevelt died on April 12<sup>th</sup>. Word spread quickly.

A few days later, I was taken to a farm building where my chore would be baling hay in 50-kilogram weights. I took this opportunity to weigh myself, and the scale read 58 kilograms, about 125 pounds, whereas my normal weight had been about 165 pounds. We had all put on some weight recently, and I figured that I could have bottomed out at around 115 pounds a couple of months earlier. Even at 125 pounds, I did not go to sleep nights with just the thought of food on my mind. We were even beginning to feel almost normal again, but some serious news would soon be arriving.

It was on a Sunday afternoon, when several French prisoners came to our door with what they described as some disturbing news. The French had been the recipients of a small radio that they managed to keep concealed from the Germans. They also had hidden a map they brought with them, and through the news on the radio they managed to



keep the battle lines on the map current indicating the locations of Allied armies. The Russians were nearing Berlin and the Americans and British were only about 50 miles to the southwest and west of Schlemmin. The alarming news was that there were rumors that Adolf Hitler wanted to exterminate all prisoners of war. If Germany was going down, so were all their enemies. The French said that if they heard of any news regarding such killings, they felt we should plan an immediate breakout, and we agreed. How far we would get, no one knew, but there may be no alternative. At this point, we were rudely interrupted.

The door was thrown open and Karl Bucher entered, apparently suspicious of the extended stay of our visitors. Quickly spotting the map, which was laid out over a bed, he demanded to know, "What the hell is going on here, what is this map for, and where the hell did it come from?" As a cover-up someone answered, "It had been dropped by an allied plane." He picked up the map and said that he was taking it with him. Modesti said, "Karl, can we talk with you for a minute?" We encouraged him to look at the map with us, which he did, but he would not believe that the Allied Armies were getting this near, particularly the Russians. He left the map with us and stormed out the door shouting, "Alles Scheisen."

A few days later, we received news that the Russians were swarming into the outskirts of Berlin and were also attacking from the north ... in our direction. It was still uncertain as to which forces may get to us first. American or British, we hoped, but we would have to see. Karl Bucher began asking us our thoughts on this, also. Small German Army units were now seen passing through in an easterly direction, toward the Russian Front, and at the same time a trickle of civilians had begun heading in the opposite direction.

Throughout the days of April, our work detail remained the same. We were trying to convince Bucher that with the front lines closing in, he should soon make a decision. "Why not just march us to the west?" We warned him that if the Russians arrived here first, he could be in big trouble. In German he replied, "Ruski nix come to Schlemmin."

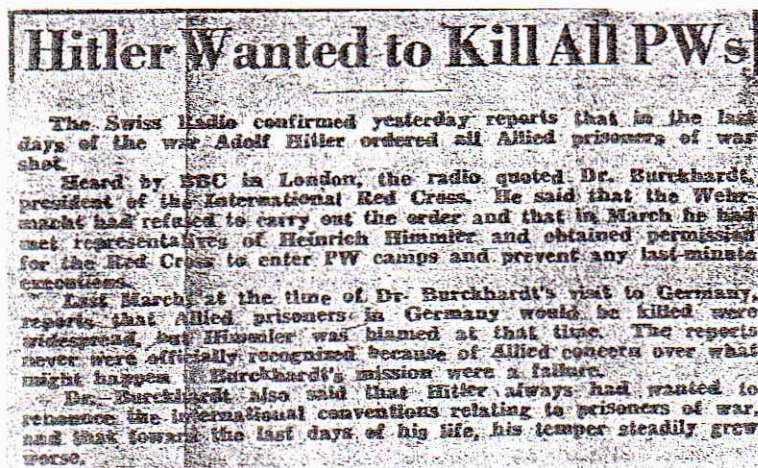
In late April the days were getting warmer, food rations were improving even more now, and in the evenings we, at times, strolled through the village, and even talked to the burgermeister, who, it seemed, was becoming friendlier. He even introduced us to his 14-year-old daughter, whom, he said, he was quite proud of. We did not let on that we had any information as to the progress of the war, and he never asked. The French prisoners avoided the burgermeister and seldom greeted us in his presence. They had their reasons. One Frenchman told us in no uncertain terms, that if the situation allowed, it would be the burgermeister's attractive young wife that he intended to settle a score with, the window entertainer of years gone by.

April 28, 1945

This evening while overlooking a spectacular sunset, a transport plane seemed to be attempting a landing in a field very close by. Could this be an attempted rescue of us? Some of us actually ran a few steps toward the plane, but quickly stopped and sought cover. Two British Spitfires, spurring machine gun fire, were close on the heels of the transport plane. (Remember on the leaflet, it said, "German planes were to be given safe flying zones on April 29 and 30 only." This may have been the Allies way of enforcing that order.) The German plane crashed to the ground, skidding some distance to where it hit a fence several hundred yards away. Some of the villagers were walking to the site and Bucher asked if any of us would like to go with him. We thought it may be a little unsafe and decided to remain where we were and return to the barracks. Two of the plane's occupants were injured in the crash. We did visit the site on the next day.

The road leading westward from Schlemmin toward Lubz and Parchim was now becoming clogged with fleeing civilians, and not only civilians, but German soldiers were joining them. It was about April 30<sup>th</sup> and in the early evening, hundreds, if not thousands, carrying whatever belongings they had, were passing through. Out of a clear sky from the east an American fighter plane zoomed in sweeping to about 50 feet above them. The plane followed the column for some distance before departing. No shots were fired, and we were very grateful for that. We mentioned this to Bucher and told him that he would be smart to join the crowd and head toward the American lines. His reply was that the S.S. Troops would weed out all army deserters and shoot them. We asked him if he thought that his chances would be any better if the Russians got here first. He replied again that the Russians would not come to Schlemmin. The French informed us to the contrary. The Russians were getting close, and the Americans and British were still about 40 miles away.

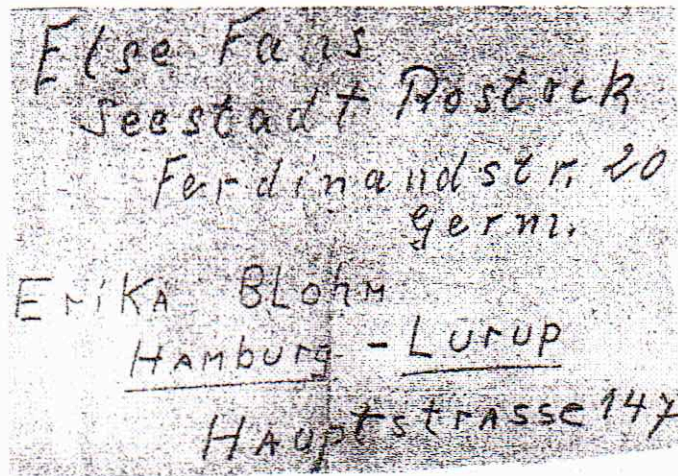
We learned days later that Adolf Hitler committed suicide on April 30, 1945 along with his wife of a few hours, Eva Braun, and several of Hitler's top aides.



The above is a clipping from "The Stars & Stripes" newspaper.

May 1 and 2, 1944

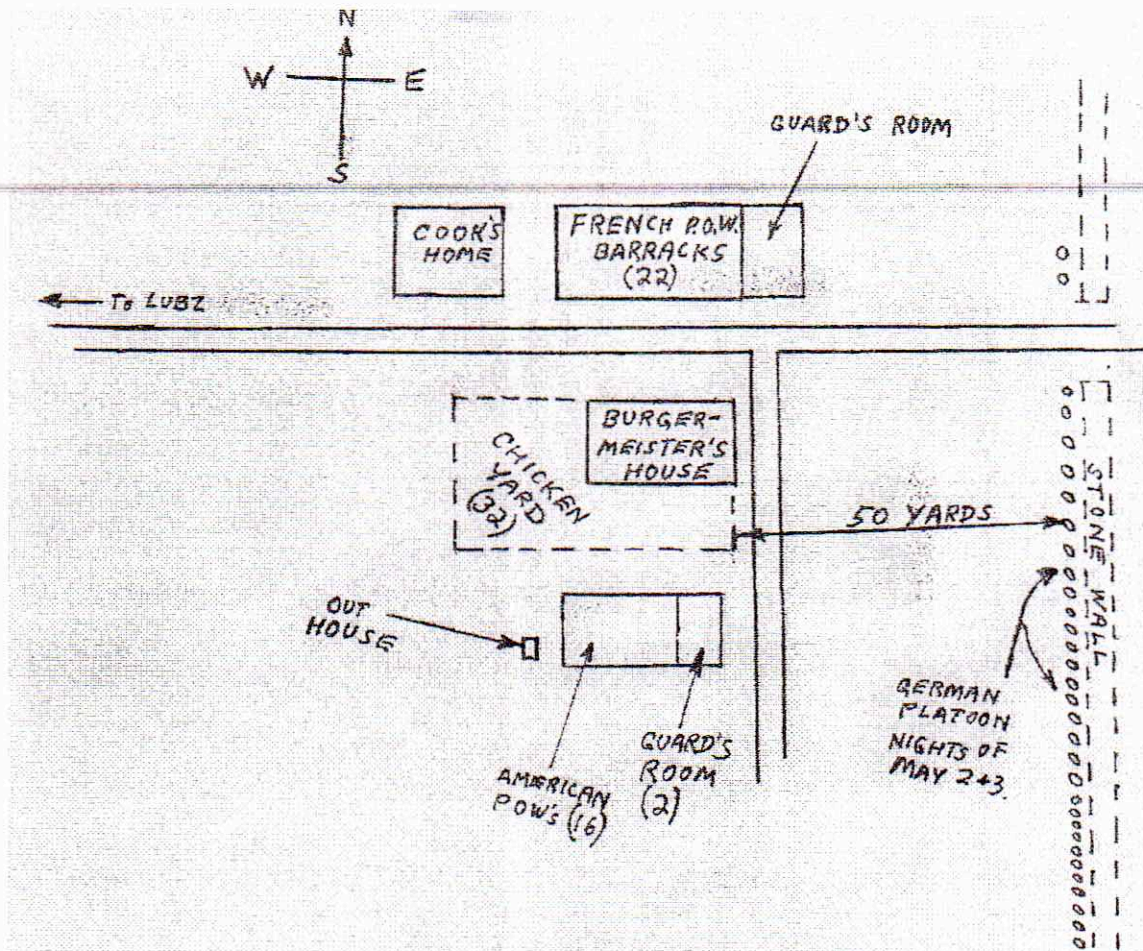
On the first day of May, Karl Bucher had some company. They were two young women who, tired of constantly fleeing, were invited to share his quarters. Their names were Else Fahs of Seestad, Rostock and Erika Blohm of Hamburg – Lurup, one of whom had a two-year-old child. Erika had been bombed out of her Hamburg home and went to live with her cousin. After leaving Rostock, they headed generally south and here they were in Schlemmin. Our days of working had come to an end. The women seemed eager to talk to us. They described their harrowing flight and just needed a couple of days rest before continuing on. They were each 22 years old and attractive women, and I felt sorry for them. They were also human beings and despite what Karl Bucher thought, we told the women that the Russians were not far away. We urged them not to stay long. They gave me their names and addresses, which I still have.



Else Fahs  
Seestad Rostock  
Ferdinandstr. 20  
Germ.  
ERIKA BLOHM  
HAMBURG - LURUP  
HAUPTSTRASSE 147

The exodus to the west was increasing by the hour. People on bikes, walking, or pushing baby carriages were clogging the road, and now there were hundreds of German soldiers amongst them. Some had no doubt shed their uniforms. There was no end to the column, and they were of all ages. Bucher would not move. We stayed.

By early afternoon, artillery fire could be heard in the distance. The Russians had reached Karow and Plau, about 15 miles to the east. A German infantry platoon had been setting up a defense line behind a wall about 50 yards to the east of our barracks. If the Russians attacked and the Germans resisted, we knew that we had to get out quickly and were making plans to do that. There was a large ditch about a mile to the west, and that is where we might have to seek cover.



The above sketch shows the layout of the area in the village of Schlemmin where the Germans were holding the Americans and French prisoners. Russian troops were advancing from the east.

The Russians moved closer and their artillery fired a number of shells over the village during the night. We did not sleep too well during these nights and were up early every morning not knowing what the new day would bring.

Day and night now we saw endless lines of people, some who were barely old enough to walk while others seemingly almost too old to walk. I could not feel empathy for any of them although Hitler had brought retribution upon his own people. I have often mentioned Karl Bucher, our young guard, and also the burgermeister along with his wife and daughter. Constantly we wondered what their fate would be. However, what lied in store for our group of 16 POW's overshadowed all else. We surely expected that tomorrow would be our day and that we would be liberated. We also knew that a German platoon had entrenched not far from us. We were just behind them. Russian artillery had been firing to locations in the rear, and we were ready to move out quickly at any time.

## LIBERATED

May 3, 1945

As daylight finally dawned an eerie silence prevailed. We could see no sign of the German unit that had entrenched nearby the preceding evening. They had apparently withdrawn, but they did leave behind two riflemen who stood guard near a stonewall that ran along the roadside and was facing in an easterly direction. We spoke with Karl Bucher again and told him the Russians would be here today in an attempt to convince him to leave. We tried to convince the two young women that it was time for them to move out also. But, none of them wanted to believe us and thought they would stay another day.

In chatting with Bucher we asked, if during our stay did he always keep his rifle loaded? He replied, "Yes, but why do you want to know?" "Just curious," someone replied. He even showed us a clip of ammo and how he loaded it. We were thinking, in order to protect ourselves, we may have to grab Bucher's rifle and take out the two riflemen standing by the roadway. This could be a little touchy in attempting to do, but it may be the only way to save ourselves, especially if those two Germans left behind began shooting at the soon to be oncoming Russians. We knew the Russians would certainly respond and maybe even with artillery fire putting us in harms way

Events soon started happening very fast. While standing just outside the door to our room, observing the two German riflemen who were still in position, someone spotted four men on bicycles approaching from the east. The German soldiers saw them also and tossed down their rifles and threw up their hands in surrender. "The Russians are here," someone yelled. Word spread quickly; our barracks emptied. We kept our distance while observing the Russian patrol sending two of its members to the rear with the prisoners. No shots were fired. When the remaining Russians were satisfied that there seemed to be no resistance, we were able to approach them, letting them know who we were, and they greeted us warmly. Within minutes, all Americans and French had approached the Russians and decided to remain in close contact with them until the main body of Russian troops arrived. We were not celebrating yet. We were told that there would be some questioning, and the Russians would appreciate our assistance. It would turn out to be a very eventful day.

We did not have to wait long before Russian troops began swarming into Schlemmin on foot, in trucks or vehicles of any type, on bicycles, and then tanks. Thousands of troops were pouring through. At times they seemed to be nothing more than a disorganized mob. Many had been wounded, and some were drunk. Mounted cavalry troops were sweeping the adjoining fields. Needless to say, we did not stray too far. Some Russian units were pushing on through and beginning to round up prisoners. Russian officers were questioning them, and also some of the villagers. We were being involved in aiding in interpretation. Five languages were being spoken. They included Russian, Polish, German, French and English.

A Russian officer of some rank appeared, and in perfect English told us that he could handle everything as he could speak all the five languages, and apparently he could.

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Most Russians seemed friendly enough, and even offered us a sample of some liquor. Believe me, a sample was enough. It was potent. I offered one Russian some prunes that I had obtained from a Red Cross parcel. He probably took at least twenty, and he left me only one. I did not complain.

Now, where was Karl Bucher during all of this, and also the other 62-year-old guard? Where were the two young women and the young child? The guards were gone. The two women would not come out of their room. They feared for their safety. I suggested that they leave the room, greet the Russians and get moving to the west. They did come out and meet the Russians and things seemed okay, but they again returned to their room. Apparently, Bucher and the older guard had attempted to slip away at the last minute. Russian units, which had earlier pushed on toward the west, were now returning with a number of prisoners. The prisoners were being forced to run while the Russians were prodding them along from horseback. One of the prisoners caught our ear as he yelled out to us, "Tell them I am a good guy." It was Karl Bucher, the old man was alongside trying to run, and none of us uttered a word. They soon disappeared up the road and over a hill to the east. Those who faltered were being whipped. How far did they get? Who knows?

As I mentioned earlier, many of us had sipped a bit of liquor that the Russians offered to us. We returned to the barracks and noticed one man, who may have had too much, had taken time to bathe. I asked him, "Why so clean?" He replied, "I am going to rape one of the women in the other room before the Russians do," I asked him if he was serious, and he said, "Yes." While everyone else was strangely quiet, I told him, "You are not going anywhere." I blocked the door to their room as I lectured, "You are an American soldier, and you are not going to do this." He backed down, and I actually felt quite proud of what I did. Others later told me that they would have supported me if need be.

I later checked the room where the women were staying and found they were still there, but getting ready to depart. I again urged them to move quickly. Else and Erika set out on foot to the west. They carried along a two-year-old baby. I have often wondered about their fate and whether I should have inquired about this. Why? Because they were human beings caught up in a war in which they had no control. There were certainly hundred of thousands of people in similar situations. I felt that I did the right thing in protecting them at the time and have felt good about that.

The French prisoners also decided to remain for the day. The burgermeister had been raising chickens in his backyard. Our plans for the day included a little feast. We procured 32 chickens, all that he had, and prepared a sumptuous repast, commencing in early afternoon and in the burgermeister's own yard. What a cookout this made. The French and American ex-prisoners of war did a pretty good job of eating them, and what

was left of the chickens, was later discarded in an outhouse. We even had a few Russians drop by for a bite to eat, but not too many.

The burgermeister's whereabouts were unknown; however, one of the Frenchmen did boast of a certain conquest. He had spent some time with the burgermeister's wife. The same one who freely dressed or undressed in a window facing the French barracks, which later resulted in beatings of anyone who watched her. The boasting Frenchman said his morning went quite well.

We were well fed that day to say the least, although food had not been a major problem lately. We were no longer prisoners of war, and we knew that we should soon be back under American control, but we still had to be careful. By late day, the Russians seemed to be rummaging through every building in site. We decided to play it safe and stay in our own barracks.

In late evening came a loud banging on our door. Someone opened it to find the burgermeister's 14-year-old daughter outside. "My father is gone, my mother has been raped. Can I find a place here for the night?" "Every bunk here is taken," someone told her." "I will sleep with anyone, and if the Russians ask, you can tell them I am your girlfriend," she replied. While understanding her plight, most of us felt it too risky. One of the men, however, did speak up and said, "Why not?" She could share his bed, and there would not be any fooling around. I believed him. I slept pretty well for a while, but things were beginning to get noisy outside. On several occasions, there was knocking on the door and Russian voices were heard, but they made no attempt to enter. Did they know we had company? At any rate, someone in our group decided that enough was enough. He wanted the burgermeister's daughter out. Why should we protect her? Some others agreed, and when someone looked outdoors and saw no sign of Russians, she was ordered out and took refuge in the outhouse, where she spent the remainder of the night. I never saw her again.

#### May 4th, 1945

Other than today being my 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday, it was our first full day of being free in a long, long time. What a great birthday present, I thought. We are free. We are free at last. If only the folks at home could know of this great birthday gift given to me on this day.

#### May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945

During the morning the road to the west was clogged not only with Russian troops and vehicles, but also released prisoners of war of different nationalities. Included were Jewish prisoners still in their prison garb. Until now, we had never even heard of their hideous experiences or even about the concentration camps they were in. In late morning, we decided to leave Schlemmin and headed west walking toward Lubz. Few civilians were seen. We remained close together as a group and occasionally passed German prisoners headed in the opposite direction. We arrived at Lubz late in the day.

I procured food somewhere and actually slept in a bedroom of a home that night. I did leave my shoes on overnight.

May 6, 1945

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Before departing in the morning, I noticed a filing cabinet containing various documents, and as a joke quickly shuffled them. As I turned to leave, who should be entering; a Russian soldier who seemed a bit startled until I shouted "Amerikanski." He smiled, we shook hands and I departed.

Our group gathered together and we began to move again heading toward the direction of Parchim. We heard a few shots fired, perhaps a mile to our front, so we did not want to get too far forward. Someone mentioned, "Hell, we can always run if we have to, and no one is going to call us a coward now." It may have been about midday when we saw a most interesting sight. In the fields, on either side of the road, there were thousands of German prisoners\* all sitting, with rifles, pistols and weapons of all types, either stacked or just lying on the ground. We left them alone. I noticed, sometime later, an American soldier toting a bag containing all the pistols he could carry.

As evening came we stopped for the night and again slept inside a building and procured our own food for the evening meal.

Early in the morning, we were on the road walking again. As we neared Parchim we were informed there could be good news for us. The Russians had slowed their advance and told us why. They were approaching advancing American units. The Russians asked us to come forward with them and join them in greeting the approaching American troops.

\*One of these men was a German soldier whose name was Fred Vogelsang. He managed to slip away from the Russians and afterward surrendered to the Americans. In 1995, I met him at the Sun Tan Motel, which he owned and managed, in Daytona Shores, Florida. We spoke at length about the war and especially about our happenings on May 5, 1945 in Parchim, Germany.



By late morning there was quite a celebration going on and no one could celebrate like the Russians. Soon it was drinking, dancing, music and party time. While shaking hands all around, I could not help but notice how clean and rugged our American soldiers appeared. My God, we looked so much thinner, dirty, unshaven, lice-ridden. Having lived like this for months, we thought our appearance was quite normal. I wonder what these American soldiers thought of us as everyone mingled around celebrating.

They were from the 78<sup>th</sup> Division. While talking to one of them, he asked where I was captured. I told him, "at a town called Schmidt, in the Hurtgen Forest." He replied, "My God, we only recaptured that town on February 8<sup>th</sup> and that was after being thrown out two days earlier." I told him that we had captured the town on November 3<sup>rd</sup> and were driven out the next morning. Schmidt had not been recaptured in the three months since we were there.

A day or so later we were officially reclassified as released prisoners of war and back in the U.S. Army.

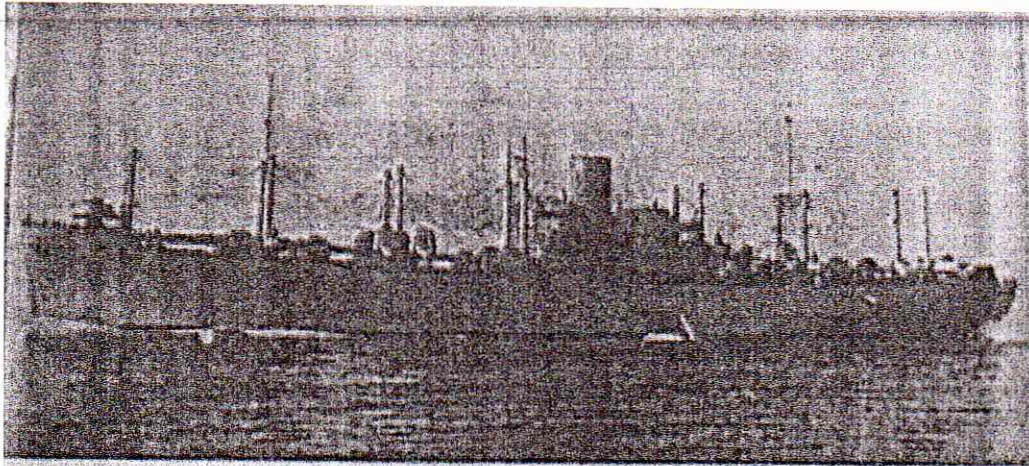
We were transported back to a rear echelon facility for showers, a change of clothing, hot meals and some well-deserved relaxation. Medical check ups were also on the agenda.

## **GERMANY SURRENDERS**

Germany surrendered at 2:41 am on Monday, May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945. Celebrations were going on everywhere amongst all Allied Forces and in all the Allied countries. However, we were still at war with Japan.

Soon after all the formalities of signing the surrender papers, preparations were started for certain troops to become part the Occupational Forces in Europe, while other troops were being prepared to be shipped to the Pacific. Some of us would be shipped home and allowed furloughs and rehabilitation before being shipped to the Pacific Theater of Operation.

## GOING HOME



*Photo courtesy Ingalls Shipbuilding Corp.*

### SEA ROBIN

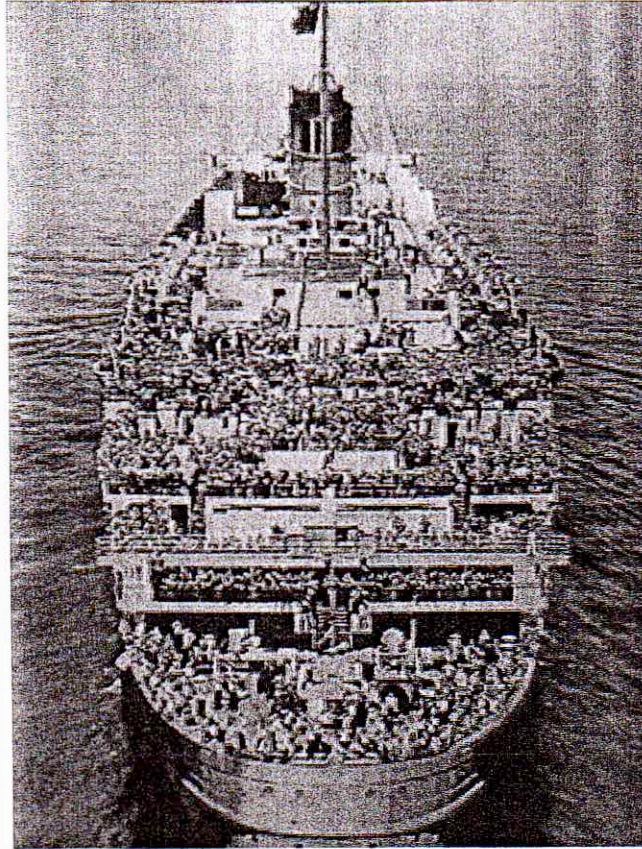
<i>Length, overall</i> ... 492' 0"	<i>Gross tons</i> ..... 7,886	<i>Propulsion</i> ..... Turbine
<i>Beam</i> ..... 69' 6"	<i>Speed (knots)</i> ..... 16½	<i>Passengers</i> ..... 2,043
<i>Draft</i> ..... 28' 6"	<i>Radius (miles)</i> ... 25,000	<i>Cargo (cu. ft.)</i> ... 142,170

*Built in 1944 by Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation, Pascagoula, Mississippi  
Operated during World War II by United States Lines Co.*

We left from the port at Le Havre, France on June 1, 1945 for our journey home on the Sea Robin. The fear of enemy submarines were now gone. Our thoughts turned toward seeing family and friends again back home.

#### A Note of Special Interest About the Sea Robin

After the war ended the Sea Robin was converted to a steamer, and renamed, "the Jacob Luckenbach". On the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1953, on a charter trip for the Pacific Far East Lines, it was outward bound from San Francisco to Yokohama, Japan, fully loaded with government cargo and mail when it was in a collision. In early morning dense fog, about 11 miles from the Golden Gate Bridge, an inbound freighter, named the Hawaiian Pilot, struck the Jacob Luckenbach (formerly Sea Robin) sinking her in less than an hour. The Hawaiian Pilot rescued the Sea Robin's entire crew and passengers. Later, when the wreck was located in 28 fathoms of water, salvage was not considered to be practicable and there she lays today.



A typical American troopship carrying troops home after Germany surrendered. The stagnant air and cramped quarters below decks would bring many of the men up on deck for fresh air and more openness during the daytime.

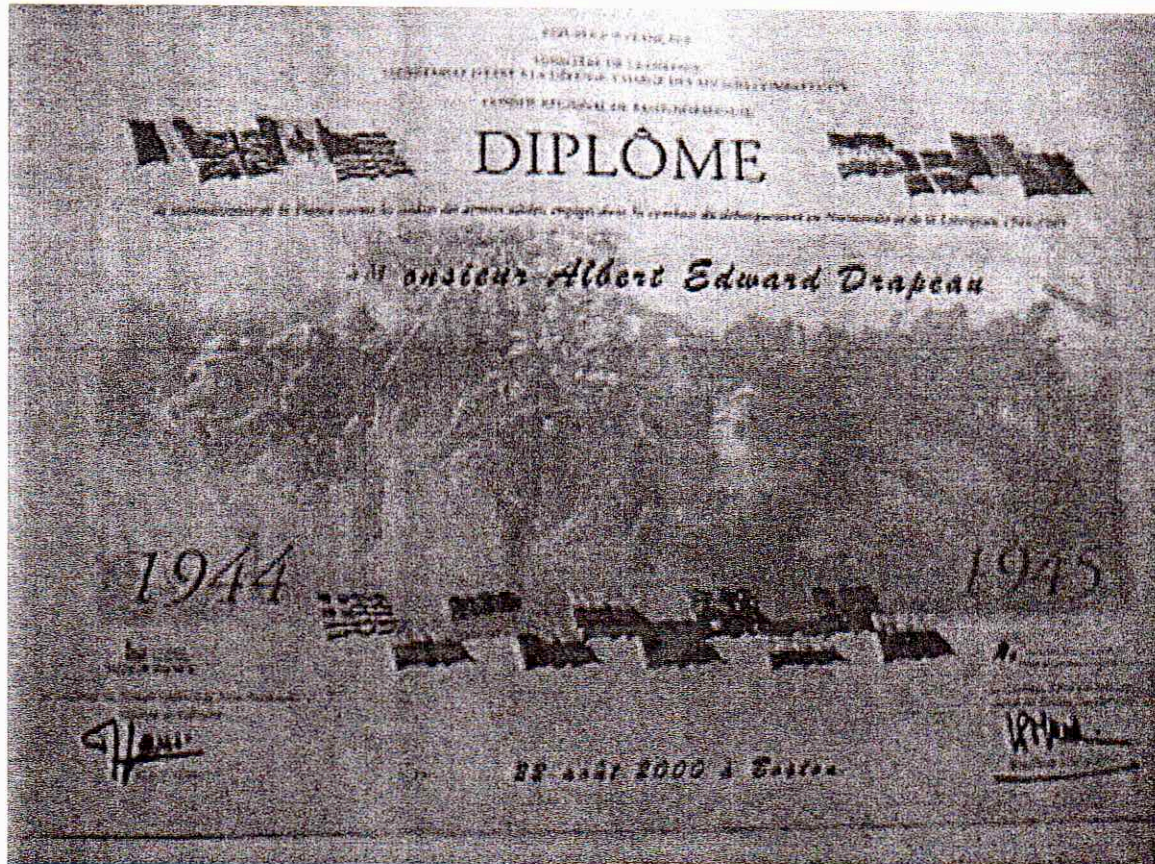
## Back Home in the Good Old U. S. of A.

We arrived in the New York Harbor on June 11, and were immediately transported to Camp Shanks, New Jersey. The next day I was shipped to Fort Devens, MA where I was given a two-month furlough from June 14<sup>th</sup> to August 17<sup>th</sup>. During which time I had an opportunity to go to Salisbury Beach, Massachusetts for several days with my family, aunts, uncles and cousins. It was like paradise.

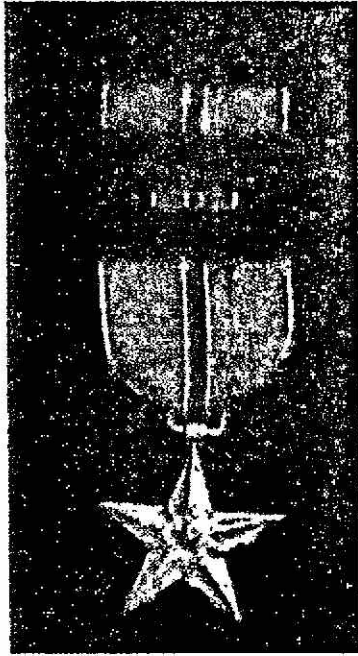
On August the 17<sup>th</sup> I was shipped to Lake Placid, New York for 10 days, another paradise. On August 27<sup>th</sup> I was shipped to Fort Ord, California, arriving there on September 3<sup>rd</sup> and was there until Dec 1<sup>st</sup> where I was honorably discharged from the U.S. Army with the rank of Sergeant.

The End

# Medals and Honors Received



Received From the French Government August 22, 2000 for Help in Liberating France 1944-1945



The Bronze Star Medal



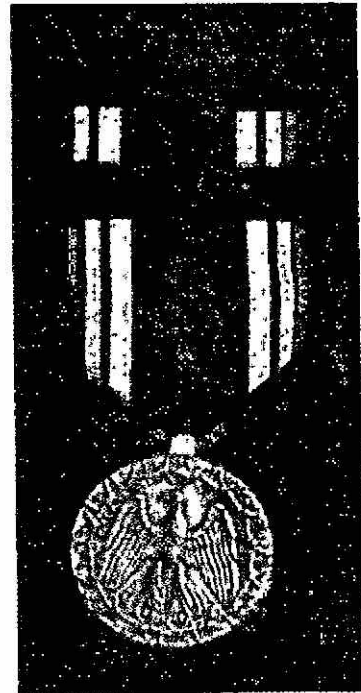
WWII Victory Medal



Honorable Service Medal  
(Good Conduct Medal)



American Campaign Medal



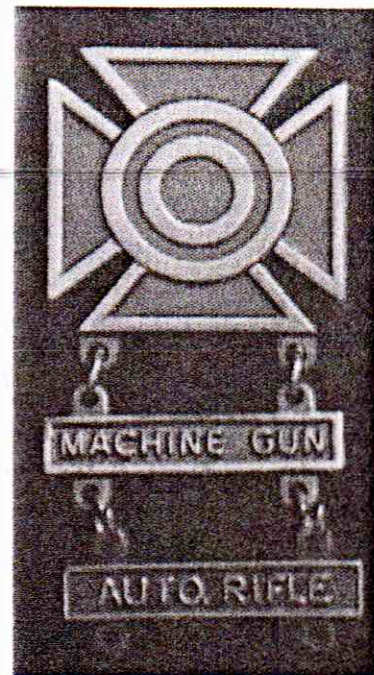
POW Medal



European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal

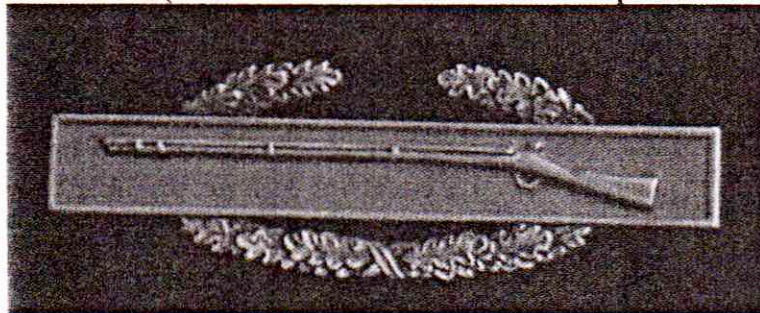


Expert M-1 Rifleman Medal



Sharpshooter Machine Gun and Browning Automatic Rifle Medal

(Note: Some medals are shown with respective ribbons above.)



Combat Infantryman's Badge



Discharge Lapel Pin



Jubilee of Liberty Medal  
Presented by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
In Honor of All Who Participated in the Normandy Invasion

## About the 28<sup>th</sup> Division

The 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division is the oldest division in the armed forces of the United States, being officially established by a General Order dated March 12, 1879 as a Pennsylvania National Guard outfit. The red keystone is the official shoulder patch of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. In an excerpt taken from the 28<sup>th</sup> Division's Internet web site, it states, "The Germans called it the "Bloody Bucket" because of the blood-red keystone insignia and vicious fighting tactics during the Normandy Campaign."

During World War II it received five campaign streamers – Normandy, Northern France, Ardennes-Alsace, Rhineland and Central Europe, in addition to the Croix de Guerre. The division was deactivated on December 13, 1945. In 1950 to 1954 the Division served in Korea.

### Epilogue:

Many accounts have been published on the Battle of the Hurtgen Forest. Charles Whiting and Charles Macdonald covered the battle in some detail. There were numerous other publishers. Undoubtedly, the most thorough studies of this battle were encompassed in the book, "Special Studies – Three Battles – Altuzzo, Arnaville, and Schmidt", written by the Center of Military History, U.S. Army.

Each of these books mentions the flight of some 200 men of K Company and L Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 112<sup>th</sup> Inf. Reg. into the wooded area southwest of Schmidt on the morning of November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The Whiting and Macdonald coverage understandably lacked the detail included in that of "Special Studies". The latter, however, with the exception of two men who escaped on November 7<sup>th</sup> and reached the American lines on November 9<sup>th</sup>, never did mention any interviewing of survivors of our entrapped group.

In summary, regarding those fatefully dark days of early November 1944, it was on November 3<sup>rd</sup> that the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment made the furthest advance of any unit on the Allied frontline, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in the most forward position. On the morning of November 4<sup>th</sup> while being attacked from three directions the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was forced to pull out of Schmidt. Confusion reigned over the battlefield. The bulk of the Battalion, with or without orders, withdrew to Kommerscheidt or beyond. The remnants of K and L Companies, the last to leave Schmidt, fled into the woods to the Southwest where we fought on until late on November 8<sup>th</sup> when the survivors were forced to surrender. I later discovered that strong German attacks had driven the 28<sup>th</sup> Division to positions farther to our rear further lessening any chance for rescue. Late in the day on November 8<sup>th</sup> while under a severe shelling attack and enemy penetration of foot soldiers, any hope of relief arriving was now gone. We yielded to a surrender ultimatum given by the Germans. Of the approximately 200 men that were left from Companies K and L, I counted 100 men standing plus 25 beside us on the ground. German accounts claimed to

have captured 133 men on this day. It seems an accurate number, as there were some wounded still in the woods. The tired and battered men had not eaten in five days. Without our elaborate entrenchment, we could have all been casualties. (See map on page 26)

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After our being driven out of Schmidt on November 4th of 1944, the town of Schmidt was not recaptured until February 8, 1945 (some 3 months later). Frozen American and German bodies that had been lying in the woods all winter were discovered in the spring thaw, and there were dozens of them.

The 28<sup>th</sup> Division suffered over 6000 casualties in two weeks. Very few infantrymen remained unscathed. When The Battle of The Bulge began five weeks later, the Division was in the process of being staffed with thousands of replacements while holding a long section of the front in what was supposedly a quiet sector on the Belgian-German border. The division bore the brunt of an attack by nine German Divisions on December 16<sup>th</sup>. Within two or three days the division was shattered, breaking up into many small units that continued the battle.

As fate would have it, if I had not been captured a few weeks previously, my experiences at Schmidt would have probably been repeated ... or worse.

For the infantryman who entered combat in Normandy in the summer of 1944, his chances of driving across Normandy, Northern France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and into Germany without becoming a casualty of one type or other were nil. While the infantry units made up only 25% of an Infantry Division's total manpower, it suffered 80% of the casualties. Front line units in many divisions had turnover rates of over 500%.

While in combat, some men cracked under pressure and some became deserters. The unfair part was that if a ranking officer cracked, he was quite often simply relieved from his command and transferred to rear echelon duty. Not so with an enlisted man. He was quite often deemed a coward. One soldier in particular, a Pvt. Eddie Slovik of the 109<sup>th</sup> Regiment in the 28<sup>th</sup> Division deserted the front lines and under no condition would he return. Even the threat of execution would not change his mind. Eisenhower, himself, made the final decision and as a warning to others Eddie Slovik was executed by a firing squad.

Frontline soldiers were not treated fairly. I may have seen one change of clothing, including underwear, in three months. Some historians stated that we were allowed two beers per day in our rations, plus frequent hot meals. I never saw a beer ration, and I may have had two or three hot meals during the entire time on the frontlines. We may have killed a cow or two to supplement our food rations, but this was done on our own. The chain of rear echelon supply and transport did a good job at siphoning off many goods destined for the front lines. In some cases, black marketeering was quite profitable for a few.

Most historians have concluded that the Battle of the Hurtgen Forest was not a wise involvement. Our tremendous advantage in air superiority was nullified. Usually



our airmen flying over the Hurtgen Forest could not find their targets and sometimes attacked friendly partially hidden ground forces. Our route of attack via a narrow trail, denied us tank support plus supplies could not be brought up. By controlling three main roads leading into the area, the Germans had no such problem and were indeed baffled by our efforts.

What should have been our main objective were the Roer River Dams and not the Hurtgen Forest. The dams were not even considered in the original plans of attack. Later, allied drives to the north were greatly hampered when the enemy subsequently flooded the area by destroying these dams.

In the final analysis of my combat days, the enemy, with fewer men and really no air force, nearly held its own while inflicting 30,000 casualties on our 1<sup>st</sup> Army troops.

As a prisoner of war, I was held captive during the final six months of the European War. I suspect that in some cases conditions of brutality may have eased. Most of our guards, though not all, could probably see the handwriting on the wall, so to speak. However, we became increasingly aware of the threat of a final "payback" by Hitler. His SS units were extremely dangerous and would perform any duties asked by Hitler. As it turned out, only about 1% of American prisoners actually died in captivity. One man that I knew died when an Allied plane strafed a boxcar he was riding in. His name was Pvt. Davis, the same 19 year old who was standing beside me and had his face slapped by a German officer shortly after being captured.

Hunger, especially during the first four months of captivity, was unbelievable, and I am sure that we were all affected to the point that it warped our minds. I can never forget the pangs of hunger and continually thought of how fortunate people in America were. I have sometimes thought all Americans, health permitting, should voluntarily fast for 24 hours. This would begin to give one only an inkling of our experience of the five days without food prior to capture, and the months of hunger that followed our capture.

I have often been asked as to whether or not I was terrified upon being captured. Perhaps the first twenty minutes or so was quite tough to handle. We were assembled in front of the German troops and slapped around a bit. The enemy was discovering his own dead and wounded and began questioning their own men, who we had held captive, as to the treatment they received from us. This was certainly a continuation of the terror we had been experiencing for five days in which we were attacked and shelled before surrendering. A number of artillery shells began landing very close. Our captors decided to move us (and themselves) from the area. Being captured would be a continuation of the many indescribable ordeals.

I honestly had the feeling that if one could come this far and stay alive, my chances of remaining alive were pretty good, and fortunately, I was right.

I have a great respect and understanding of all men who endured my tribulations, and especially to those who were prisoners for many years such as those captured by the Japanese. I would not repeat these experiences for any amount of money, and having gone through them, I received an education that only an ex-POW could understand.

In 1992, I returned to Europe, mainly to revisit the battle areas of my youth. I visited the Normandy Beaches, the American Cemetery near Omaha Beach, plus the British and German Cemeteries in Normandy, across France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and into Germany at Remich on the Moselle River (the town that on September 22, 1944, I spotted 50 Germans across the opposite bank) and where I took a prisoner. I felt sad just looking at the children, the young, and the old. Why? Because, the ones we once hated so much and fought against, now, seemed so much like the rest of us. What a different world then or, what a different world now. On this trip my wife, Eleanor, son Larry and his wife Linda accompanied me.

We visited the Hurtgen Forest area of Vossenack, Kommerscheidt and Schmidt. In Schmidt, now a beautiful fall tourist area, there are two modern motels. We stayed in one. We located the approximate positions of L Company on the night of November 3-4, 1944. Oh, so different now with housing developments. Then we strolled toward the woods downhill to the southwest, which had once been my home for five days. An elderly German couple greeted us. We briefly spoke, and I pointed toward myself and then toward the woods, and in German, exclaimed, "1944." They nodded as though they understood. The terrain had remained the same as it was in 1944. The woods seemed to have a different hue, and the forest floor itself had been smoothed completely, free of shell holes.

For a few minutes I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts and of days gone by. All was so quiet and peaceful now. Back in 1944 we had lived in holes up to six feet deep with a step along one side so we could get in and out. I could not help but wonder if this spot was the final resting place of a number of our soldiers, and whether their loved ones back home had ever heard their final story.

I repeated this journey again in 1993. This time with three combat veterans and my youngest brother, who was too young to serve in WWII. I again revisited the same areas and had the chance to get to know a few of the people.

I am planning another visit, perhaps next year (2002). Recently I have had the good fortune to be able to locate and contact two of my army buddies who were captured with me. They are Donald Clark and Demo Stathis, the platoon medic. Neither has ever returned, but both stated they would love to revisit that area. There would sure be plenty of reminiscing. Also, more recently I have had the pleasure of being able to contact some other former army buddies, namely Harry Ljungquist and even more recently Alan Goldman. I hope there will still be more I can find. I plan to keep looking.

#### Credits and Pictorial Acknowledgements:

"World War II" by Military Press, "Life Goes to War" a Time-Life Television Book, the U.S. Coast Guard, "the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Book," by Former General Norm Cota, "A Dark and Bloody Ground" by Edward C. Miller, the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division website, "Troopships of World War II" by Roland W. Charles, "the U.S. Merchant Marine in War" website, L.A. Sawyer's and W.H. Mitchell's "World Ship Society," Ingalls Shipbuilding Co., U.S. Army Military Records, and The Stars and Stripes (the Army newspaper)

**Albert Edward Drapeau** was born in 1923 in Seekonk, Massachusetts. He grew up on County Street near the old Anne C. Greene School, where he attended grades 1 thru 6. He attended the former Seekonk Junior High School located on Pleasant Street, for grades 7 and 8. As the school system at that time in Seekonk only had classrooms for grades 1 through 8, the town made arrangements with nearby communities for its students to continue their education in grades 9 thru 12. For the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Al went to Nathan Bishop Junior High School in Providence; and for grades 10, 11 and 12, he went to East Providence High School. Al graduated from East Providence HS in 1941 and became employed at the Davol Rubber Company in Providence until he was drafted into the United States Army in March of 1943. Upon his discharge from the army he, with many of his Seekonk WWII veteran buddies, took a much-needed period of rest and recuperation before returning back into the work force. He then became employed at Grinnell Corporation's textile humidification division, "American Moistening Company." On May 20, 1961 he married Eleanor Mowry Hogan Drapeau. They raised their family of six children in their home on Clarke Street, where he and his wife still live.

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