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Notes about Stalag Luft 1

HOW CAPTURED

January, 1944. I was a navigator in the 303rd Bomb Group, flying out of Molesworth, not far from Northampton. My group had heavy losses during the previous couple of weeks, losing about half the planes we put up in trying to bomb the ball-bearing works at Regensburg. So we were on stand-down. No mission scheduled. But General Doolittle had just been named chief of the 8th Air Force. And Allied intelligence was concerned about the building of what looked like long concrete slides along the French coast. The British and French didn't know yet, but those were to be the launching sites for the first of the V bombs.

So it was almost noon on January 14 when we got word that we were to fly a medium-level mission against the concrete launching pads being constructed. I was at the officer's club and didn't even have time to change, just slipped my old flying overalls over my dress uniform. The weather was beautiful, bright but rather cold, and we were all rather excited. Just a quick flight across the Channel, 10-15 minutes over the French coast near Dunkirk and back home.

But flying at 10,000 feet our four-engined Flying Fortresses (which seemed so big then) were sitting ducks for all the anti-aircraft guns which the Germans had massed on the coast. Two of the ships in our flight of three were hit almost immediately. My plane would zoom up into a stall, then whip down in a sickening plunge before the engines would try to take us up again. The shells were bursting all around us, shrapnel tearing through the ship with a sound like pebbles hitting a tin roof. One engine was on fire and all controls were shot out. So the pilot pushed the alarm bell as the signal to bail out. It was the navigator's job to open the escape hatch just in front of the bomb bay. I kicked it open and rolled out, waited a few counts and pulled the ripcord.

I was not prepared for the jerk that came with the opening of my chute. In the haste of the mission preparation, I had stuffed my overall pockets with extra packs of cigarettes, the usual escape materials (given to us each mis-

sion to aid in the event we were shot down—maps, German and French money, high energy chocolate bars, etc.) The jerk emptied everything out of my pockets and for an instant I was the center of a cloud of goodies, which then vanished.

Floating down in my parachute was almost like watching the beautiful screen at the Air and Space Museum in Washington. I could see for miles back across the sunlit channel to the white cliffs of Dover. Other planes were falling around me, but they seemed part of another world. I hit the ground in the middle of a plowed field, just about the same time that our plane landed half a mile away and blew up. Several hundred yards away a German artillery crew blasted away at other planes coming over. An old Frenchman plowing behind a gaunt old white horse went by me not 50 feet away. Naturally he was afraid with so many Germans nearby to show any sympathy. Our orders were, first: bury your parachute. Second: look for a place to hide until dark. I began scratching in the newly-plowed damp ground. You can imagine trying to dig a hole with your hands big enough for a chute that keeps billowing and stirring in the wind. I finally gave up, started to run toward some trees about a mile away. A long string of German soldiers came over a little rise in the ground and shouted at me. I felt that my stained oil-covered flight overalls must make me look like a French farmer, so I turned and ran toward the plower. But the Germans were not as stupid as our intelligence officers promised. They began shooting. I surrendered.

HOW TREATED?

How one was treated depended to a great extent upon how and where you were captured. I had friends captured near cities they had just been bombing. Civilians often beat and sometimes killed the allied airmen. Fortunately I was captured by Luftwaffe (German air force) men. I was shoved around a little but not hurt. After slight interrogation, I was put into an underground bombproof bunker—locked up in a windowless room with about nine other men dressed much as I was dressed.

We had been warned by our intelligence officers that the Jerries would sometimes put captured airmen in with fake prisoners to encourage them to talk. I thought the other nine were Germans—though they spoke colloquial American. They thought I was German, and they were a team. A German guard threw in five blankets—one to each two men—to cushion the hard

cold cement floor. The other men wouldn't share with me. Much the same with a bowl of weak soup that was passed to us several hours later.

Gradually as the hours passed we cautiously exchanged a few words. But at first I was unlucky. I have never been a sports fan. The others in my prison dungeon asked me questions about baseball and other sports. I could not answer. That at first convinced them I was a German. But after a day or two we exchanged enough information (cautiously) about the United States to convince us we were all Americans. (The mystery of how I came to be with the wrong crew was not solved until we began to compare notes in Stalag Luft One. I learned that the navigator of the crew I was put with into dungeon was killed. His parachute did not open. I drifted some distance away from the others of my crew and the Germans thought I belonged to that (to me) strange crew. Of course my own crew earlier thought I had been killed, since Germans told them that one man had died when his parachute did not open. Such is the confusion of war.)

After some 4-5 days in the dungeon we were assembled with other captured crews (including my own) and hauled to Paris—in a school bus and an open truck. I made the mistake of trying to insist that one of my crewmen (who had hurt his leg) be loaded first onto the more comfortable school bus. In anger the Germans made me ride on the back of the open truck, and every 30 minutes or so one other American and I had to take buckets of little wooden blocks on which we were riding in the open truck, and fill the combustion boilers which ran both bus and truck. So it was a cold trip to Paris.

We were paraded through parts of Paris—two Jerries toting Schmeissers (sub-machine guns) to each man—to the north station. From there we went by train to Frankfurt to the main interrogation center. There we were separated, thrown into separate confinement cells and questioned. Each cell had only one small window, and for punishment and an inducement to talk every other day this little window was left shuttered, so that one spent 24 hours in almost complete darkness. Then the shutter would open and in would come a German intelligence officer. By the end of two weeks they realized that as a second lieutenant I didn't know anything anyway, so I—along with many other prisoners, was herded into a little boxcar (one of the old French WWI cars for “40 men or 8 horses” and we were attached for eight days to any train which happened to be going north.

This was an extremely rough time. We had little to eat. Only occasionally were we given water and a few times a tin of soup. There was only a hole in the floor for a toilet and not enough room for everyone to sit or lie down at the same time. But this was a period of intense patriotism. I remember that one night the train which had pulled us all day stopped on the outskirts of Berlin. In the middle of the night the British came over on one of their saturation raids. Although we had only a few small, heavily barred windows, we watched as the tons of bombs fell on the city and huge fires raged. Our car rocked and swayed at times from the bomb blasts but no one was hurt. At one end of our car a German guard with his submachine gun sat in a little wire cage. He became very angry at our cheers and threatened us with his gun. Someone started singing the Star Spangled Banner and everyone joined in. I have never heard our national anthem sung with more fervor than that night in the midst of a fire and bombing raid in Berlin.

Eventually we arrived at our camp—Stalag Luft One at Barth on the Baltic coast of Germany. (The camp was out on a peninsula of sand which stuck out into the Baltic. The German camp was located at the neck of the peninsula where it joined the mainland, and then beyond it was the little town of Barth.) The camp looked like camps do on television. It was fashioned in sections—with about 10-12 long simple wooden barracks, surrounded by high barbed wire fences, doubled, with accordion rolls of wire in the middle. Inside each fence—about 15 feet or so from the fence was a warning wire—about 12 inches above the ground. Anyone going past the warning wire could be shot from the guard towers which lined the fence. In the middle of the camp was a playing field, almost as big as a football field. This field was surrounded on three sides by sections of barracks, each with their own fences. But early each morning and late each afternoon we lined up on their field to be counted, and then during most of the remainder of the time we could walk, play, exercise on this field.

The camp grew unbelievably. When I arrived there in perhaps early February 1944, we had about 500 men. By the end of the war we had over 10,000 “kriegies” (short, if I remember how to spell, for kriegesfangener—for prisoner of war). Most of us were American and British, but we had Free French, some Poles, South Africans, and a sprinkling of many other nationalities. In general we were not treated badly once we got into the camp. Our own

officers more or less ran affairs within the camp. They divided up the rations which the Germans gave us, usually about half-a-loaf of dark bread per day plus a ration of thin soup and occasionally a ration of potatoes or cooked barley or—so often I still don't like them to this day—a type of rutabaga (isn't that like a huge turnip?).

As long as things were going fairly smoothly, the senior German officer gave a command for us to fall out for morning roll call, as an example. No one would move until our own senior officer in the barracks gave the command. But on some occasions—an attempted escape, a trick played on the German guards, whatever—then the Germans would plunge in among us with rifles and clubs and their terribly fierce dogs.

Generally most of the German officers tried to abide by the Geneva Convention covering war prisoners—except that they could not furnish food, clothing, and housing that we needed. We existed largely due to packages of food from the Red Cross—which in good times came in once a week. Each package contained a tin of meat, a package of cheese, powdered coffee or tea, a packet of sugar, perhaps a few other items. With this and the meager German rations we lived—though we dieted.

And toward the end of the war as German transportation broke down even these parcels played out. The last few weeks of the war were pretty bad. There were many days we lived on the rutabagas—which we cooked into a sort of watery stew with whatever else we could scrounge. There were a number of days when the only water we had came from puddles on the muddy ground—and we were thankful that it rained almost every day in northern Germany.

HOW RELEASED

In one sense, we weren't. We were in the small pocket of northern Germany between Restock and Stettin—now in Poland. This was one of the last areas left in German hands. Finally one night perhaps late in April most of the German guards fled, since they knew the Russians were coming to occupy the area. I was in the barracks which had been chosen to take over the camp. We tore up beds and chairs and made crude weapons and at midnight broke through the gate of our compound. Actually most of the few remaining guards surrendered and then for several days we sat—the Germans locked

in the old guardhouse where they put us for offenses—while we manned the watchtowers. The Russians finally arrived—mostly guerrilla troops, unbelievably rough, and the shooting and raping for several days was pretty bad around us. However, except for taking our watches if they saw an American wearing one, they were friendly to us. They lived off the land. They expected us to do the same. When they heard we had been short of food they went out to nearby farms and drove in the cattle. When we left our barbed wire camp there must have been 200 cows wandering around inside, since no American had the drive to actually butcher a cow.

We lived in the middle of the Russians for a week or more. Actually they planned to take us out by way of Russia, but finally the American air force flew bombers into a nearby field and we were flown back to France.

So I was a POW from—as I recall—January 14, 1944, until about the middle of May 1945. (We didn't even know really when the armistice was signed.)

HOW PASSED TIMES

When I got to the camp we had a small prison library—perhaps two to three hundred books, brought in by the Swiss Red Cross. During the war the Swiss occasionally added to this collection. Then each prisoner was allowed to get—as I recall—one book parcel of 3 books—about once every three months. Many of our families sent books, which we read and donated to the Library. By the end of the war we had a Library or perhaps eight to ten thousand books. And about a week after the fighting stopped (but while we were still there, and while the Russians were looting the countryside, all activity was paralyzed), a convoy of trucks from the Swiss Red Cross drove up to our camp, loaded up every book and took off again for Switzerland. I have always kept the picture of the patient Swiss hoarding all those books in some Swiss cave waiting for WWII to start so that they could again set up libraries for prisoners of war. So we did a lot of reading. (I worked at times in the Library. As officers we could not be made to work by the Germans, except that we could volunteer for jobs for own people.)

We played cards with cards which became so thin and greasy that they clung together like magnets. For about 3–4 months the men in my room (we had a room built to house in double-tiered bunks about ten men, though by the end of the war we had 22 in this room, in which we did all our cook-

ing, washing, sleeping, entertainment, etc.) played chess from morning until night—and into the night. (We scraped the wax off cheese and other paper wrapping from Red Cross boxes and made candles. A few persons managed to swipe electric light globes and after the barracks had been shuttered tightly for the night and all lights turned out, would hang these bulbs on the exposed wires which ran along the ceiling—having scraped a little insulation away—and carefully shielding the light so that nothing could be seen outside).

Hiding contraband took up a lot of time. We made a little secret trapdoor into the attic from our room. We maintained American (or other Allied) guards in our barracks 24 hours a day to guard against sudden searches. When our guard at the door hollered “goons up” everyone jumped to his hiding work. Our light bulb would be quickly disconnected, slipped through the small trapdoor into a little hiding place in the attic (actually just a small crawl space). Fortunately the Germans were almost always methodical. First they would break into the barracks in the middle of the night, search the downstairs thoroughly, then leave the rooms and assemble in the hallway, then send a couple of men up to look over the attic. While they were assembling we reached down our bulb and put it in a hiding place in back of our coal stove that we had built.

Much time was taken up with guard duty. We followed each guard who came into the camp area. Each barracks was guarded—though often secretly. We spent a lot of time on escape attempts, since even the simplest tunnel might demand the constant work of hundreds of men. We had over a hundred tunnel attempts. None succeeded. We had a few men get out of the camp—but none could get through the German camp and town connecting us to the mainland. One did but was caught soon after.

We had classes. I taught history for several months—largely as a distraction for a tunnel going on from the next room. We walked endlessly around and around the playing field. We had some camp shows, exercise classes, debate groups. (One of the big evening debates we had concerned what to do with Hitler and his group after the war. Interestingly, we decided that under international law there was nothing which could be done. This was not that we did not want to do something to them, but felt that legally there was no way to do so.)

We tormented the Germans, and they tormented us. Their intelligence men (ferrets) snooped continuously. Most of them spoke excellent English and many had lived in the United States. Some of the happenings were frantic. One day a fighter pilot—one of our top aces—saw a German guard leaning up against the thin wooden wall (outside) of a barracks. The pilot got a baseball bat, went inside to the spot opposite where the guard was leaning and hit the wall as hard as he could. Even with a helmet on, he was knocked, stunned, to the ground. By time he could recover and charge inside the barrack the barrack was empty.

We made all sorts of illegal instruments—and many legal. From tin cans we fashioned cooking utensils, pie plates, cups, candle holders, ash trays, etc. From kitchen knives or smuggled bits of steel we made saws and did some woodworking (using parts of the barracks for wood).

One day a German work crew inside the compound was replacing a light pole (not a very large pole such as we have). Come lunchtime they left the pole outside a barracks and trooped off for their lunch. Immediately dozens of kriegies descended on the pole, sneaked it into one of the barracks' hallways, and set to work upon it with their little saws and knives. By the time the Germans returned half an hour later no trace of the pole was left—it had all been burned in our cook stoves. The Germans could not believe it, so we were all hauled out to the playing field and kept there for hours under their machine guns while goons searched the barracks. Finally they had to give up.

But they caught us at times too. At one time they distributed scrapbooks which they had obtained from the Red Cross. Then at a search they read all the scrapbooks. Sure enough, one American officer had written a story describing how we kept one of our secret radios hidden.

We traded. Many of the German guards could be bribed with cigarettes or candy to bring in toothpaste, combs, razor blades or even contraband—such as parts for our secret radios (we had several). For several months I helped to operate the American canteen. We set up a canteen at which prisoners could buy or swap items. A British boy who got an American Red Cross parcel might wish to sell the powdered American coffee he didn't want.

Cigarettes were the universal trading medium. (We Americans were fairly wealthy, since we received occasional cartons of cigarettes from home.) So we had signs giving values of everything—one packet of cheese might be worth 11 cigarettes. So we maintained a regular store which took in and paid out thousands of cigarettes a month. On each sale we took a small profit. This profit was used mostly to buy things from certain German guards or to help finance escape attempts.

We cooked. Even with the few foods we had, we experimented with different recipes. We gardened during the short summer. Much of a small playing field was turned into garden plots—though actually little was grown—though we did have one other small field where British enlisted men grew very nice cabbages for our common soup.

We talked. We speculated endlessly about the end of the war and what we would do after the war. We sketched. The friend on the bunk next to me got a packet of crayons somewhere, and he filled up all the wall space around his bed with gaudily painted pictures—not of women, but of plates of fried eggs and bacon, roasts, steaming turkeys, smoking sausages, and everything else good that he was dreaming of. (When you really get hungry, sex takes a pretty slow second to dreams of ham and eggs.)

CHRISTMAS AT STALAG LUFT 1, DECEMBER 1944

With the fourteen officers in our room in the barracks, we decided to have a Christmas party to keep up our spirits. The Germans provided only about 1,000 calories per man per day, which consisted of potatoes and weak soup. We supplemented their food with Red Cross parcels, which we were supposed to receive weekly, but actually received about 2 a month, fewer in winter when transportation was unreliable. Each parcel usually contained essentials such as KLIM (powdered milk), oleo, cheese, hardtack, sugar, raisins, powdered coffee, 1 chocolate bar, and sometimes soap and Pycope tooth powder.

With our food parcels, we could scrounge up some Christmas snacks, but two of my friends, Frank Miller, New Mexico, and Bob McGee, Massachusetts, and I decided to lift our spirits with a decorated Christmas tree. We also wanted lighted candles on the tree. That didn't come in a Red Cross box. To make our tree, we swiped bits of barbed wire from interior fences in the

camp (touching the outer wire of the camp could bring a rifle shot from a guard tower). We also saved bits of tin cans to make ornaments. But how could we light the tree?

We remembered that each precious Red Cross parcel contained a small bit of cheese wrapped in wax paper. Experiments showed that if heated over our little coal fire we could obtain about 1/8 teaspoon of wax. We began scrounging wax paper from everyone in the barracks. We wanted 20-30 candles on the tree, and we figured it would take about 400 pieces of wax paper. To shape the candles, we used the little cardboard containers from the Pycope toothpaste and put a string inside them for the wick. After weeks of work, we had stars made out tin cans, a barbed wire tree, and about 30 candles that would burn 30 minutes for our Christmas celebration, a little bit of light in the winter darkness near the Arctic circle.

THOUGHTS ABOUT THE WHOLE SITUATION

All things considered, we were lucky. The Germans were not like the Japs. Some of their officers were as honorable as circumstances permitted. We were fortunate that we could keep our own discipline, and that we presented a united front to the Germans. I remember several moving scenes where a senior officer would stand before all of us assembled in ranks and refuse to have us obey an order (as when we would refuse to stand still for a count in order to try to disguise an escape attempt). But, then, we knew the senior officer would be sent to solitary and then to another camp—not shot. (We did have several shooting incidents, but these were not premeditated.)

We were not existing in the sort of terrorist-hostage situation such as we have today. I doubt if any American in the camp ever really felt abandoned. We all knew that we would win eventually, and we cheered ourselves a little with the idea of tying down so many guards, doing something which would keep the guards excited, etc.

Undoubtedly there were many lessons to be learned. Some of us didn't learn them. One young man in my room ended up in a psychopathic ward. Two others that I have heard from since cracked up in civilian life—but they may have done this anyway.