

A PRISONER IN WORLD WAR II

Russell D. Rasmussen

Formerly Staff Sergeant, Leader of Third Squad, First Platoon, A Company, 17th Armored Infantry Battalion

The conversations of fifty-two years ago included here unavoidably contain some fictional elements. Yet I have written as truthfully as I knew how.

Also, I have outlined –but only in a general way—the fighting that preceded my capture in “bloody Herrlisheim.”

Earlier, in a large Texas maneuver, armored infantry Capt Carl J. Helton had sent me on a night reconnaissance patrol to locate enemy machine guns. That had signaled something big afoot. Later in France, near Weyersheim in Alsace, on January 15, 1945, the Captain again had sent me on night patrol. “Find the best place,” he said, “for tanks to cross the Zorn River.”

Upon arrival of full daylight on January 16, thirty to forty tanks from the 43rd Tank Battalion, informed by my patrol, and enabled by an engineers’ unfolding bridge, crossed the Zorn River. Zebra-striped with white paint, these thirty-two-ton tanks attacked down the snow-covered, 150-yard-wide field, both machine guns of each vehicle firing continuously. They traveled toward Herrlisheim, a village in Alsace. From a map, I estimate Herrlisheim to sit three miles west of the Rhine River, fourteen miles north of Strasbourg, and twenty miles south of the point in Alsace’s northeastern fords.

Companies A and B of the 17th Armored Infantry Battalion (AIB) left their half-tracks and drivers behind in Weyersheim. The infantry followed the tanks on foot. As usual, Captain Helton was right up at the front of A Company. By ordering Company C of the 17th AIB to go elsewhere, higher officers had deprived the Commanding Officer (CO), Maj James Logan, the use of at least one-third of his battalion.

Engagement became heaviest where the Herrlisheim-Gamsheim railroad grade cut straight across our front. Our Sherman (M4) tanks kept firing their cannons over the grade. Between shots, to evade enemy anti-tank fire, the tanks zig-zagged fifteen yards, both backward and forward between shots. Each time, upon arriving at the grade, they had only a few seconds to spot one of the well dug-in, superbly camouflaged antitank guns, then traverse, aim and fire.

Because we infantry had to closely support the armor, all cannon and machine gun fire that missed the tanks came at us where we lay on the frozen, open ground. Mortars and a multi-barrelled, rapid-fire anti-aircraft gun shot specifically at us.

We thought the 66th AIB had cleared Stainwald Wood, on our right flank. In fact, the 66th AIB had been unable to. Now the SS panzer infantry in the Wood could turn its force against our right flank

out in the open field. The heavy struggle lasted until dark. Because the SS had poured such heavy fire on both our front and our flank, our tanks and infantry withdrew half way back down the field to get us out of the light of burning tanks, to reduce casualties, and to evacuate our wounded.

After midnight, tanks and infantry moved again toward the railroad, but to a low hill along the left side of the field. On the safest side of that hill, we infantry lay dispersed on the snow in a driving wind, trying to sleep.

Before dawn, January 17, we infantry led a wide left hook attack toward Herrlisheim—in low ground. This took us across the railroad, and kept us below a direct line of German fire from the former battle area.

After we had fought our way up and into town against heavy resistance by Germans and a tank in the new area, our remaining tanks joined us. Several tanks carried crates of hand grenades banded to their back decks.

Before we could free the crates, enemy tanks lumbered out in between the railroad grade and Herrlisheim to cut us off. The commander of the American tank nearest to me knew that unless we broke the Mark V tank challenge, we could receive no fuel for our tanks, no help from an artillery observer, no medical care for the wounded, no replacement of our casualties, no ammunition and no food.

In his need to shoot first, the tank commander didn't wait for us to free the grenades. Snuggled close to a house, and still unseen by the enemy, this tank fired first. As the commander had intended, the shell ricocheted off the frozen ground near the Mark V and hit the weakest side armor at the ideal angle. The second shot did the same. But two golf balls would have penetrated as deeply.

The German gunner now had his slower, manually traversed, cannon nearly lined up on the Sherman. The American commander called over his tank intercom, "Crew, abandon tank." The five crewmen began popping out of the three hatches like corks out of champagne bottles. By the time the last crewman's feet had touched the ground, the German shell had rammed a hole through the heaviest—that is, three inch—front armor. Within seconds, the gasoline required for the radial aircraft engine had ignited. Before we could cut the boxes of grenades loose, the fire drove us away and destroyed those weapons. This loss boded ill, especially for street fighting at night.

While in a skirmish line in town, we stopped in the protection of houses and rubble, at the edge of a large open space. Off somewhat to my right, an SS tank officer in black and an enlisted man in camouflage uniform, walked into the open as if they didn't see us. From time to time, while the officer cradled a weapon across his left arm, he used binoculars in his right hand to scan the area.

Are they reconnoitering? Or trying to surrender? Fat chance of that; the SS are fanatics, probably never surrender. Anyway, who would they want to surrender to an outfit their own side had already cut off from help? If their superiors caught them later, and discovered their surrender, no doubt the higher officers would have them shot. Neither man has a hand up, nor is showing a white cloth.

I tried calling out a few words, but I didn't know German. Abruptly, the officer began to raise his weapon—I thought as if to fire. I fired first. Both men ran. I knew I had hit the officer near the heart. I shot at the other man. So far, I had felt nothing troubling about my decision to shoot.

But the enlisted man fell out in the open, where he writhed in agony. Because of where I had hit him, I knew he couldn't live. I could see no chance of people from either side getting that far out in the open to help him. We had no medic. And the Germans had withdrawn enough they didn't see him. Hoping to abruptly end the man's misery, I fired another shot. Because of the angle I only added to his misery. I fired yet again. By this time, strong distress tore at me.

Lt Drum then arrived. "They were," he said, "trying to surrender."

"Oh God, Lieutenant, I hope you're wrong; I didn't read it that way."

I knew Lt Drum might be correct. Yet it had made no sense to me that they gave no sign of surrender, only of reconnaissance. I never really saw how Drum might have been correct until my first 12th Armored Division Association reunion in 1988. Since then, I've had some bad nights thinking the two men might have been trying to surrender after all.

But back to our movement: we took the open ground. On the point of a manure pile in a yard, we found the tank officer spread-eagled, on his back. Looking him over, I observed that he didn't look like part of a super-race. Yet the image of his ashen-dark face of death haunted me.

I vowed that, where possible for the rest of the war, I'd shoot to disable and disarm, not to kill. I had wished then and ever since that I had only shot these men in the legs. I'd do what it required to win the war. But I planned no mercy shots, unless a man was completely, hopelessly on fire. At Herrlisheim, I learned to beware of even good intentions, unless I had rather sure means of carrying them out.

We fought on to within the last block of town. There a German tank in the street, supported by nearby abundant infantry, held us up. At dusk, Maj Logan, our Battalion CO, ordered his two infantry companies (his two-thirds team, or less) to pull back for the night to more defensible positions. We occupied a line of houses along one street, across the width of the village.

About 0300 hours, on January 18, the SS attacked our line. With tanks and swarms of infantry, they broke through the line not far from the battalion command post (CP). Surrounding the defenders, the SS rolled up the line, house by house.

When the SS came after our house, I called in the dark to men in the other rooms and hall: "A Kraut with machine gun and grenades is coming up along the wall. I can't get at him, not until the last second. Stay out of the doorways."

I ordered Rulo (not his real name; more on that later), the only other man in the room, to move to the other side of the window from me, against the outer wall, and back in the corner.

Our window faced a sunken orchard. Almost, if not all, other windows and door openings faced the street. The SS had set up a machine gun across the street to prevent our escape. That gun kept firing into the street-side openings, and sometimes through them, into the hall.

German machine guns, depending upon their model, fired at least 750-1,000 rounds per minute, in contrast to the American machine gun rate of 450 rounds per minute.

Because our mortar and machine gun squads each had defended a different house, we had no machine gun with us—only semi-automatic rifles and one semi-automatic carbine.

Each burst from a German machine gun, because of its high rate of fire, sounds like a burp, or like an instantaneous rip of a giant sheet of coarse sandpaper. The SS machine gun continued to rip its deluge of bullets into the hall. For that reason, I had decided before the German grenade bearer arrived at our window not to seek temporary refuge in the hall.

There is no mattress nor furniture here to get behind. Should I peel my harness, spread my field jacket like a net to bounce the grenade back on the sender? Too late, he's here. At the last second, I fired two shots out the extreme lower right corner of the window opening, into the deep darkness.

They missed. Damn.

"Grenade on the floor," I called, as the SS soldier sprayed the room with his submachine gun.

Should I try to take his gun? Too risky.

Should I jam my right foot against the side of the gun, while raising my rifle vertically in the window to shoot down on him? No, the grenade on the floor might hit my exposed male members.

While twisting my head and torso away, I folded my arms and hands around my neck and face.

The explosion drove twisted, pointed fragments, sharp as knives, into me in three places: across my right hip, into the inner side of my left thigh, and into the outer side of my right leg above the ankle.

A muffled conversation buzzed outside the door of the room. I had assumed the voices belonged to Lt Drum and Platoon Sergeant Albert Funk. But either I had forgotten, or didn't know, that Lt Drum had sent Sgt Funk with some men to another house across the street and farther out of town. Simply to inform TSgt Funk in the dark, I spoke—surprisingly—in a matter-of-fact voice: "Al, I'm hit—in the legs. Rulo is down. Sounds like he's hit bad—through the lungs."

More consulting buzzed in the hall.

Although I didn't know it until later, the machine gun across the street had killed a man to Lt Drum's left.

Then Lt Drum's calm words sounded in the dark, "We are going to surrender."

Oh NO! I've just begun to get the hang of things. I'm just starting to know what to expect of people and weapons on both sides.

Could I hide under the house until the German's leave? Woops, I'm bleeding too fast.

After trying to take a step, I knew that I needed help soon, and that any attempt to walk would cause the fragments to slice me more.

My disappointment with Lt Drum's decision soon changed. I believed that with their two or more machine guns, grenades, and a tank, if they wanted to use it, the SS could kill all of us.

I did resent Division having put our officers in such an absurd position that the only sensible option open to them had been surrender. Withdrawal in the night to join the rest of the Division might have saved many of these men to fight another day. Besides, Division had sent us as it did, based on the faulty intelligence that we faced only three hundred poorly trained, mixed and inferior troops. By noon on that first day, the Division should have known we were fighting highly experienced, well equipped, and far more numerous Germans. Following my flash of resentment came the thought, At least, I'll no longer need to kill people.

Hearing men in the front room organizing to surrender, I spoke in the dark, "Can someone help me? I can stand, but I can't walk." Assistant Squad Leader Sgt "Joe" Boccolero and Pfc Glenn Powell helped me; I put an arm around the neck of each. As they walked slowly, I swung both legs forward together, one swing at a time, until the two men lowered me to the ground outside. There, everyone could see my profuse bleeding.

The SS officer ordered us prisoners to march. His men pointed rifles and machine guns at us. Man, I thought, are these SS wound up; they must be loaded with Schnapps.

In response to the SS order to march, Lt Drum said, "No. Stop that man's bleeding; then we'll go."

Hitler's SS had massacred prisoners at Malmedy, and Drum is saying, "No." He must be out of his mind!

Again the SS officer ordered us to march. His men snapped off the safeties of their weapons, and shoved gun barrels into the men's backs and ribs. Again, Lt Drum said, "No. Stop that man's bleeding, then, we'll go."

Oooh—they're going to shoot us now.

Tense silence prevailed.

The SS officer then sent a medic to attend to my bleeding. He slit off my trouser and underwear legs full length. Since I liked my sno-pacs so much, I nearly flinched when the medic also split the top of my fight foot, the full eighteen inches. Somehow, he stopped the bleeding.

Because of Sgt Boccolero and Pfc Powell, I had been able to get out of the house. I owe them much.

And to Lt Marvin Drum, I owe the saving of my life. Had he not taken the stand he did, when he did, I would have bled to death.

Earlier in the battle for Herrlisheim, Lt Drum had shown so much courage at times that we feared we would lose an excellent officer.

Our captors took Drum and me beyond a sunken orchard to a house basement. While a medic checked me further, the SS officer asked Drum for each man's name, rank and Army serial number, and if there were other wounded. I mentioned "Rulo." We could only hope the Germans did right by him. "Rulo's" type of wounds and distance from surgical help meant he would die soon.

Note: After that night, I've never remembered Rulo's real name, perhaps because, having joined us late, he was with us such a short time; and because of my distress at his needlessly getting killed. After fighting long in N. Africa and Italy, he came to us war-weary, making only a feeble effort even to survive. On that last night, despite my order, he apparently had stayed in the center of the room—where the grenade and machine gun could be expected to strike.

When my guard saw me shaking my head, trying to clear my vision, he offered me a shot of peppermint schnapps from his canteen. I thanked him. Then he said, "May I have your watch?" Well, Russ, you let yourself open for that one. But I yielded the watch.

Someone, perhaps Sgt "Joe" Boccolero and some guards, brought from a garden a trailer with half-inflated tires and a bed only nine inches above the ground. After having me placed on the trailer on my side, the guards had the POW enlisted men pull and mostly push the trailer. Men could only push from a near horizontal (push-up) position. Lt Drum gathered garden sticks so the men could push with them from a near-standing position. But fearing the sticks might be used as weapons, the SS officer ordered Drum to have the sticks dropped. Our men had to push me three miles to the Rhine River from the horizontal position. Lt Drum spelled off some men who could go no more.

As I rode, the thunder and light flashes of an artillery duel reminded us we were not out of danger yet. While the sky remained still dark, we rode across the Rhine on a barge.

Sgt Boccalero put me off at the Siegfried Line pillbox, utilized as a medical station. After we had wished each other good luck, he departed. After some wait, a Pfc with a broken leg (femur) and I rode away in a small truck. The Pfc's leg had never been immobilized. Riding over deep, rough, frozen vehicle tracks sent us several times airborne. Until our arrival at hard-top roads, the grinding of bone ends continued with every vibration of the truck. After those airborne drops, my bleeding had also resumed.

As we rode through several towns, I reflected on my lot so far: drafted, but given the best leaders in the Battalion, Captain, Lieutenant, and Platoon Sergeant; captured by the SS, but not shot;

wounded but only in the flesh of my legs; bleeding profusely, but saved; unable to walk, but not abandoned; carried on a hard cart, but with half-inflated tires. How fortunate could I get?

We came to a community, to a one-story high-windowed, brick building. The truck stopped at a curb. Four women of mixed ages had come to watch. When they saw my blood running down the tailgate, and the wild movements of the Pfc's leg, deep concern lined their faces. The guards, determined to prevent fraternization with the enemy, ordered the women to get-the-hell-out of there. Reluctantly, they withdrew up a hill and turned to watch.

Before the freeze, vehicles had churned deep ruts in the mud over most of the intervening thirty yards between the curb and steps of the side door. While hopping on one foot, over the ruts, I fell several times.

Inside, a Roman Catholic nun told me not to lean against the wall. To protect the floor's finish, she found something with which to mop up my expanding pool of blood.

After I had been in the building ten minutes, the Pfc, with his leg swinging and his face contorted, struggled through the doorway.

Two long rows of single beds with white sheets ran the length of the room. At the far end, an SS soldier in a camouflage suit sat on a bed. He may have been a recent patient. In the opposite direction, thirty feet from us, an old-style coal or wood burning stove heated this end of the long room.

The nun, wearing the distinctive hat of her order, pulled up a chair, sat down, and said in English, "Why did you attack us? Germany had done nothing to you." It sounded like a question designed to get me talking carelessly. I remained silent.

A German officer (major?) and a sergeant entered. As the officer warmed his hands and backside by the stove, he looked me over for a few minutes. "Well, 12th Armored Division," he said. "You recently arrived at the front, didn't you?" I ignored him. "Sergeant, would you mind," he asked, "if I took your shoulder patch?" "You may take the patch." (He could have taken it anyway.)

As the German sergeant opened his pocket knife while approaching me, the officer said, "He is not going to cut your throat. He is only going to cut loose your patch."

After looking at that triangular emblem a bit, the officer said, "Why didn't the United States take South America and leave Europe to us? That way, both nations would have had it good."

I said nothing.

After a messenger came in, the officer and the sergeant hurried out.

While the officer had talked to me, the SS soldier at the other end of the room had kept moving toward me, a bed or so at a time. When I had looked his way, he had remained still. As soon as I looked away again, the SS soldier moved closer. I wondered if he held something in the hand he kept behind

his back. Also becoming suspicious, the nun put her chair directly between the two of us, and sat there, alert.

The Pfc with the broken femur, who had gone into Surgery some time ago, never reappeared.

Before anything had developed with the SS soldier, the surgeon waved me in. He motioned that I should strip entirely, and lay on the narrowest operating table I had ever seen, all bare metal in a room no warmer than 45° F. With blackout curtains over all windows and even walls, I couldn't tell if a window had been broken, or kept open, or if the temperature suited medical purposes. After seeing how red the hands of the doctor and the nurse were, I wondered how they could operate.

The bare steel table felt like a reversed branding iron. Yet the gestures and conversation between surgeon and nurse concerned me more: I have hip and leg wounds, but the nurse keeps pointing to my navel and groin. What are they talking about? The Pfc has never returned from surgery; he is not in here; and this is the last room on this end of the building. Could these two be planning some Nazi experiment? I have to get off this table. But to do what? I'm naked, wounded, and miles inside the German border in January! Without the slightest smile, but by tone and gestures, they tried to reassure me. When I lay back again, they injected anesthetic.

I came to in an oval basement, where beds paralleled the line of the wall. With a start I recalled, What about my organs? Cautiously reaching under the covers, I found all intact. Whew!

In the light of the one twenty-five-watt bulb, I noted the absence of windows. Well, so much for my chances of escape. Then, the absurdity hit me of any attempt to escape at this stage, inside of enemy borders, wounded and naked in mid-winter.

No nurse appeared. Another nun, well along in years, fed me a teaspoon of mashed potato. "Do you know anyone else," she asked, "who might need some of this?"

"No, Schwester," I said, "I just came to. I don't know the situation of anyone here." She left.

The faces of all the men remained hidden from me. But one of the men kept gurgling in his body fluids. Although I wanted to get help for him, I found no one around. Wondering if I might go to him, I first tested my ability to move in my top bunk. Even a slight turn warned me that getting down from the bunk would be a major operation in itself. Also, I thought even if I could get to him, what could I do? After a labored half-hour, the man's gurgling slowed, dropped in volume, sputtered a few times, then ominously ceased. For me, sadness, guilt, and fatigue filled the silence. Trying to pray, I instead fell asleep.

Next day, a farmer and a uniformed Hitler Youth carried us to a wagon, and from it to a train of 80-100 boxcars, some of which bore on their tops a red cross on a field of white. Two hinged arms held each stretcher to the boxcar walls.

A German-speaking American POW medic spoke to the Hitler Youth for me. A 1,000 plane armada of American bombers and P-47 fighter escorts flew over at high altitude. The train stopped in a

cut, and the medic opened the boxcar door to watch. I wanted to know if the Hitler Youth, who also saw the armada, still believed Germany would win the war. “Oh yes,” he said, “the Fuhrer said so.”

A few miles north of Stuttgart, at Ledwigsburg, Germany, trucks moved us from train to Stalag V A. The gate of a barbed-wire enclosure opened, and the truck passed through. As the gate closed behind us, a touch of nausea chilled my gut. What bothered me most was not my imprisonment, but that my wounds were limiting my chances for escape.

My morale dropped further with the discovery that the one-hundred POWs from India were speaking no English. Also, I hadn't eaten for two days, and now had missed another meal. But a fifteen-year-old Arab boy, captured four years before in North Africa, urged me to eat his candied bananas, peelings and all. The Indian Red Cross had apparently provided them. I would soon discover that hunger shadowed the prisoners here. How much more it must have gnawed at a growing teenager! Without good reason, he never would have given up his food. He liked the bananas, and was not allergic to them. Also, I had made it clear before accepting his offer that I had nothing to give in return. Nor could he expect having me as friend; by supper, the Germans would move me to the American section. I'm convinced the boy had given out of principle. Ten years later, in theological seminary, I heard of the very ancient custom of desert hospitality. That rule said that if a man—even your enemy—touched your tent, and asked for help, you were obligated to be his protector and host for three days. After that, the guest must go on his way again. I'll always remember how the Arab boy had boosted my morale, and wonder if he had been applying desert hospitality to me.

That day, the Germans moved me in with the Americans on the top floor, in the smallest room, with three other men. This good fortune enabled me to miss the crowding and noise out in the huge room jammed with double-deck bunks. More importantly, I avoided being near the many arm and leg casts that provided lice an ideal hideout.

The beds in the small room, however, presented problems. They were deep boxes, about 5 ½ feet long, with narrow-edged sideboards. My 6'2 ½" frame hardly fit in. By extending higher than the mattress, the sides of the box frequently cut into my arms and legs, day and night. The mattress consisted of a burlap sack filled with thirty-inch strips of narrow wood shavings, which easily clumped together. Laying on them seemed comparable to reclining on sticks glued to a floor. In order to re-arrange the wood strips, previous occupants had torn the burlap in many places.

Confined to bed for weeks, I never saw out a window. Others described the weather, the severity of the temperatures and winds. The normal household heat inside meant much to me, and more yet when told that the men in the artillery horse barn had no heat.

A British paratroop major/medical doctor, who had been captured at Arnheim, Holland, dropped in to look at our wounds. The conversation went something like the following:

“We have next to nothing here to work with, only one gallon of Dakin's solution for eight-hundred (?) men for week (month?). Bandages are small and scarce. But cheer up, lads. The war won't last beyond the summer. And we are going to win.”

I enjoyed meeting one of our Allies. But the Major warned us: “You will have to help yourselves, and help each other every way you can. I am one of only two doctors here. The other is a Pole, who was a lieutenant in the Warsaw uprising. He will work with the non-English speaking nationalities, because he speaks little English. I will work with the English speaking men. He and I can call on each other for help. But we have no operating room. Actually, there is not much we can’t do separately.”

“Sir,” an American asked, “what did you mean, that we should help ourselves; how do we do that?”

“You can avoid self-pity. Those who indulge in it don’t last.”

Another American said, “Sir, I don’t see how we can be optimistic. Here we are sleeping on wood shavings and burlap sacks. Those damned German POWs in the States are sleeping on white sheets and eating ice cream. I know, I’ve seen them”

After hesitation and a slight grin, the paratrooper replied, “Well...now you see the temptation I spoke about.”

“But sir,” said another, “on this sawdust filled bread, how can anyone heal?”

“Healing will go slow,” the Major said, “but the war will soon end. Then you will have good food and heal fast. I can’t emphasize too much, that the best medicine, and almost the only medicine we can offer you, is a positive outlook. It will be up to each of you to use it.”

Just as the hospital offered little medicine, so it also offered little food: two meals per day, one of bread, the other of soup. The bread came in unwrapped, round, one kilo (2.2046 lbs) loaves. Each man received a wedge-shaped one-third of a loaf (.74 lb).

I had heard that sawdust made up 25% of each loaf. I don’t know the accuracy of that percentage. I do know we frequently saw in the dark bread tiny lumps of light-colored fibers, as small as those from a man’s electric shaver. This same bread went to prisoners, soldiers and civilians alike. For two weeks, the bread disgusted us. From then on, we craved more.

The other meal of the day, soup, consisted mostly of hot water. This meal filled a quart and one half bowl or less. The soup contained no meat, no visible potato. Sometimes it contained only a few strings of cabbage. Usually, most of the substance came from that poor grain—barley.

On three occasions, a man travelled the ward, handing a half-inch thick slice of bloodwurst to each patient. Although I tried to down it, both the idea and the slimy texture bothered me.

Weekly, the main event remained the arrival of one ten-pound Red Cross package for every two men. That gave types of food we otherwise lacked. Equally important, the boxes fanned the spark of hope; someone had remembered us.

Air-raid sirens started our almost nightly rushes to the basement shelter. The compressive roar from armadas of big British bombers soon followed. But the bombers usually went on to Stuttgart, or beyond.

These air-raids meant different things to different men. Before his capture, the Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR) gunner in my room had received two wounds while attacking a line of woods. A German bullet had grooved the side of his head, where the arm of a pair of glasses usually runs. The depth of the groove seemed to equal the width of a bullet. But the other bullet had ripped from the side and rear across both buns of BAR gunner. He felt certain that his rebellious ammunition bearer, who wouldn't do his share of fox-hole digging, nor keep up, nor come up when the firing started, had shot him.

In Ludwigsburg, BAR gunner had to carry my stretcher three or four floors to the basement air-raid shelter, and back, nightly, until I could walk. With my dead weight on his stretcher, each air-raid meant re-opening of his wound—a pain in the butt for him. But for me, each air-raid meant the pain of knowing that my dead weight tortured him.

Another discomfort came with the air-raids. The Americans, having the exclusive rights to the Norden Bomb Sight, made daylight, precision drops on specific, seen targets. In contrast, the British made drops at night, on areas. Probably, they couldn't see even the area! No wonder we POWs felt uneasy.

Especially during air raids, time slowed to a frustrating crawl. Talk remained our major distraction. Even for that, you needed a same—language partner. If talk became boring, you could count the number of lice visible at one time crawling in and out of the knit of one unfortunate man's sweater. Four set the record.

Several of us preferred a more inspiring time killer, visiting the only man there from Holland. The number and severity of his injuries from a bombing forced the Germans to keep him in the air-raid basement. Both legs and one arm remained in traction. He also had numerous abdominal wounds. We couldn't understand his language, nor he ours. Although his sounds and gestures went a long way in telling his story, I never discovered whether he was a soldier or a civilian. Remaining unflinchingly positive, he assured us he would walk by the war's end. If he didn't make it, I would be surprised. Although the most severely injured of any of us, he inspired hope, laughter, and—I believe—healing. Some said the Germans held him in high regard.

In late February, my hip wound had had closed. My left thigh wound had reduced to the size of a quarter. The right leg wound had progressed yet it worried me. Its location on the outside edge of the leg and inside my sno-pac (boot) made it difficult to protect from bumps and to keep clean.

By this time, I could walk to the latrine and air-raid shelter. The first trip to the latrine enabled me to look out the window. Outside of the stacked concertinas of barbed wire, a short guard walked his post in a blizzard. The bottom edge of his overcoat hung in strips three inches wide and nine inches long

where it dragged the earth. Apparently, the guards of whatever height work this same large overcoat over their own while walking guard in bitter weather.

Seeing this weather, having open wounds, and having no idea where my clothes were locked up, I had given up all idea of escape soon.

Only cold water ran into this latrine. Yet soldiers from India came in two's to strip, squat, and pour water over each other's heads and torsos with large metal pitchers. Because we had no soap, I couldn't tell whether hygiene or religion motivated this. It puzzled me that the Germans allowed so much water to be used in this way. Perhaps they didn't know about it. Their attitude seemed to be – no fraternization. Control the prisoners, but stay away from them.

Occasional delousing showers were given to ten Americans at a time by three showerheads in the basement. After five minutes and a one-minute warning, the guards shut off the warm water. A green blob of black-speckled soap did minimal good. Years later, I came to suspect the soap had been made from the ashes of holocaust victims. Yet at the time of my shower, I knew nothing of that.

An American, under guard, came one day to tell me he had been chosen as Red Cross representative, and that some members of my Squad were in the barn. That gave me my first knowledge of where they were. Knowing that I never smoked, they asked whether I would give them my package of Red Cross cigarettes. I sent Lucky Strike packages once or twice.

On March 6, the Germans indirectly passed word that, after two or three days in the barn, they would send me on a long train ride. In preparation for the trip, the German caretaker, whom I never saw, handed my clothes to an appointed American to deliver to me. They said the lower part of my two-piece underwear could not be found. The olive-drab wool trousers, both legs still split, were stiff like boards. Dried blood covered every part except a three-by-six-inch strip parallel to my belt on the left side. These trousers had been SOAKED in blood. A lot of the blood spilled in "bloody Herrlisheim" had been mine.

I used my cigarettes to prepare my trousers for the train ride. The German caretaker washed out the dried blood, sent a single thread about six feet long, and loaned me a needle. But the distance to be closed included the split from bottom to crotch on the left leg, and from bottom to belt on the right leg. Laying the thread alongside both splits made clear that sewing the usual way would fail. Instead I doubled the thread, then tacked a new spot every five inches. Although that left unwanted openings all along, this seemed less likely to break open altogether during a long ride in a jammed boxcar.

Going to the air-raid shelter and latrine under my own power, and wearing clothes again, had boosted my morale. Despite these gains, I dreaded the coming move to the unheated barn. To understand this better, we go back in time to December 9-10, 1944....

At that time, Companies A and B of the 17th AIB had entered their first combat. In Bining, France, they had attacked a reinforced-concrete, block-long, three or four story barrack. As we had

approached the barrack, a machine gun close in front of us began firing. We dropped prone, and tried to locate the hidden gun. It puzzled us as to why the gun kept hitting twigs twenty feet above the ground, on a tree thirty feet behind us.

When I had hit the ground, my overcoat had soaked up a huge amount of melting snow. We also wore four-buckle overshoes. When I tried to raise up from the prone to a push-up position to search for the gun, I could hardly move. I contemplated possible close-quarter fighting inside the barrack. After brief but earnest thought about long-range consequences, and with the machine gun still firing in bursts, I rolled onto my back, removed harness, rifle belt, pack and entrenching shovel, to shed the water-laden overcoat. I felt ready then to locate the gun and fight.

One of our supporting tanks came up to my right rear, where a land mine blew off a track. But from the height of the tank turret, the commander saw a camouflaged German shelter-half nailed flat over the machine gun pit. The tankers fired a shell with a delayed fuse in front of the pit. The shell ricocheted and burst in the air over the pit, beheading the gunner and killing his ammunition bearer. Then we infantry took the barrack.

We came back that night. A Frenchman had hung my soaked overcoat on a huge nail on the outside of his door. I took the coat to the half-track and left it.

After fighting in the Maginot (French) Line area, being hospitalized with immersion foot for ten days, coming back through a replacement depot, and returning to A Company, I found them in reserve, back in the same barrack!

Just before we moved out again, our supply soldiers had issued some wonderful, pile-lined field-jacket liners, and mountain sleeping bags. I always supplied my men before myself. Half of the Squad had received sleeping bags; the other half received the prized pile liners. I received neither because the supply had run out. A lot of rear echelon men, supply soldiers, etc, had taken the liners, although they could have done well in overcoats, because they neither had to fight nor crawl on the earth with their knees free. The fighting soldiers often had to do without.

I held to my risky decision to do without an overcoat. I went on to the end of the war, including POW time, wearing only wool underwear, an Army sweater, a Red Cross sleeveless sweater, a field jacket, a hood, a scarf, and a raincoat as a windbreaker. In combat, I kept a shelter-half to cover a fox-hole, when appropriate. After leaving the prison hospital, I had less defense against the cold than other POWs.

Let us now move forward in time to where we had been looking at my dread of leaving the POW hospital.

I dreaded the cold to come, first in the stables, then in the train. There would be little food, no underwear for my seat and long legs, no heat in the stables or train, too little thread to close trouser legs tight, no overcoat, and no way to repair my split sno-pac.

Also, I dreaded what might happen to my remaining two open wounds. On the train in a jammed boxcar, my right leg would surely get kicked. I also knew it would be nearly impossible to keep that wound free from infection. There would be neither clean water nor soap with which to clean wounds or socks. At the very least, the wool socks would irritate the raw flesh.

On the day before I went to the stables, the British doctor helped by cleaning my wounds with Dakin's solution and covering each with a skimpy bandage.

On that evening before going to the barn, I looked back. Then I realized that in those past fifty-one days in the depths of winter, as a prisoner without an overcoat, I might have perished—had I never been wounded! Hospital food, and especially heat, far exceeded what my non-wounded comrades had received in the barn. For me—strangely—the worse had become the best. Again, how fortunate could I get?

On March 10th, an armed soldier escorted me to the barn. I don't recall having seen any blanket there. Only one frame for a double-decked bunk sat in the area. All wire for the top frame had vanished. The wire on the bottom frame was twenty-five inches above the floor at the bed ends, but only five inches from the floor in the middle. The square spaces between the criss-cross wires were ten inches apart. No mattress could be seen. To this remnant of a bed, the frigid concrete floor offered no satisfactory alternative.

A succession of men tried the sagging bed wire. Within fifteen minutes each man had stood up and moved around. Usually, we tried to sleep sitting down, knees drawn up to reduce the amount of body area touching the floor. Sitting required you to lean on the frigid outer wall, or against one of the inner posts. A blizzard labored to gain entrance. Who slept? Not I.

I don't remember food or drink having been given in the mornings. At noon, the guards gave soup, far more water than cabbage. In the evening, they gave us about one—seventh of a loaf of bread. We received no Red Cross food.

At the barn, the latrine, a covered bridge over a wide, concrete-lined, dry canal, gave overhead cover. But, entirely open from the underside, except for a walking plank and a sitting plank, it felt like an arctic wind tunnel robbing us of vital body heat. Rains would have washed the waste downhill into a pasture, for fertilizer. This rig saved the Germans crucial manpower. Yet the pre-electric rural privy of my Nebraska childhood had at least offered an all-around windbreak in contrast to this bridge ten feet up in the air, and open underneath. The Nebraska privy also had had a Sears catalog for toilet paper.

After my third day in the barn, the Germans marched us, twenty-five abreast, a few miles to the rail yards. On the way, we passed a work battalion of slave Polish women, repairing an intersecting side street with shovels and picks. We gave encouraging signs and calls.

Guards herded us into "40 and 8's" – the small European-type boxcar, rated to haul forty men or eight horses. Surely sixty men occupied our boxcar. No Red Cross nor POW insignia appeared on the train. Would Allied airplanes bomb or strafe us?

With foot room allowing us too little movement to keep our balance, no one could stand for long. Because of my long, wounded legs, getting seated became a slow, painful contest for space. The wound in my boot usually took a hit or two. Once seated, our legs began aching going to sleep.

A slit in the boxcar wall allowed me to see giant snowflakes falling. That soon turned into a blizzard.

Food for the trip consisted of dark bread and a two-inch wedge of goat cheese. I don't remember receiving any more food during the thirty-six to forty-eight hour journey. The guards once gave us a drink of boiled water.

The latrine for the trip, a two-gallon can, danced in the coldest, draftiest spot near the boxcar door. One man, with severe diarrhea, tried to get away from the door, especially because he had wet all of his clothing from the waist down. But not even his best friend wanted that wet, smelly mess huddled with them for warmth. Everyone kept pushing him back into the draft of sub-zero air near the door. I marvel that he survived.

At the Munich rail yards, the guard let us out, one at a time, to relieve ourselves. Air raid sirens wailed. Guards rushed us into the boxcar, and wired the doors, and ran to the edge of the yards. The engineer detached the engine and sped away. Now we heard the planes overhead. In spite of cloud cover, our hearts raced. The bombers went on. When will this hungry, frigid, cramped, thirsty, noisy, dirty, painful, dangerous, getting-farther-from-home ride ever end?

Finally, the trip ended, sixty two kilometers south of Salzburg, Austria. As we passed eight kilometers beyond Bischofshoven, we arrived at Markt-Pongau. A sharp vertical cut through a thirty-foot snowdrift channeled our exit from train to road.

Guards with submachine guns and German Shepherd attack dogs marched us a cold mile and one-half to STALAG 317C. In this narrow mountain valley, the prison set between a large stream and a railroad track.

In the American compound, the guards put us into an unheated shed, with frigid concrete-block walls, a frigid concrete slab floor, and one window cracked. The shed had no ceiling to hold our body heat down, but only the frost-covered underside of a high, inverted V roof.

The sleeping rigs had five board shelves per unit, each unit holding eighty men. Guards regularly took away any paper or cardboard that we used to soften the crude shelves and keep cold air from coming up under us through the cracks.

The guards gave us a half-blanket each, made of discard wool, sometimes interwoven with pieces of straw. That piece of blanket touched the shelf with only two inches extra on each side. Only later were we given a second half-blanket.

I couldn't huddle with others to save heat. With my hip barely healed, and both leg wounds open, my frequent changes of position bothered others. Nor did I like having my wounds bumped frequently.

Not sharing blankets bothered me less than the lack of my long, heavy overcoat. At least one doctor says immune systems are most active when we sleep. If true, an overcoat would have boosted my immunity to disease by increasing my sleep. In this coldest winter in Europe for many, many years, I suffered in almost every waking hour. But I refused to waste energy on self-pity.

While locked in every night, we needed the indoor latrine. A below-ground-level, open-topped, concrete tank filled often. Toward the last, when 800 Americans used that facility, the odor coming out to my bunk nearly delayed the onset of sleep.

At Markt-Pongau, instead of breakfast, we received a bowl of (burned barley water?). After two weeks, few men drank it. Yet every day, two different men had to carry a large, heavy wooden tub of the liquid two blocks from the kitchen. Because we were forbidden to ever throw any out, we had to carry back almost as much as we had brought. The noon meal, a bowl of soup, contained only a cup of solid content. The evening meal, one seventh of a kilo loaf of dark bread, always received the biggest welcome. "If we could only get more of it," we said.

On those weeks when our guards gave out ten—pound Red Cross packages, we had to share that parcel between seven men. The one can of sardines, say, split seven ways, didn't go far. Yet as a morale booster, it lasted for days. Each package speeded up our sloth-paced existence.

Sometimes we received British packages with a large packet of tea leaves. Because Americans cared less for tea, some tea usually stayed around. The favorite pastime of many men involved the time-consuming collection of what tiny slivers you could find as fuel for a fire. All were about one-fourth the size of a matchstick, and becoming more scarce every day. A tin can from a Red Cross package held the water to be boiled. The process allowed three to four men to stand around warming their hands to a small degree. Then they talked as they sipped tea. As much as almost anything else, that distracted us from the interminable waiting. The first time I ever saw sweetened, condensed (not evaporated) milk, it had come in a Red Cross parcel. Nothing in my life had tasted so good as that liquid candy. Canadian Red Cross packages offered a huge biscuit and Canadian bacon. What a disappointment to discover the bacon contained no lean, but only fat!

A convoy from Switzerland of fifty Army-type trucks, painted all white, including tarpaulins, and marked each with a huge red cross, stirred excitement by parking just outside the prison fence. News that most packages in the trucks would not stay in Austria, but go to Germany, let some of the pressure out of our enthusiasm. But the Red Cross representative came in to inspect us! Uneasy officials stayed very close to him, we thought, to divert attention, to shorten and trivialize his work. The man stubbornly held out for direct contact, up close. When officials objected, he pointed out that their nation had agreed to those terms, and that he would publicize to the world if they failed to honor the agreement. The Red Cross representative did a great job hearing, not only our brief statements, but observing our body language. The officials glared at each POW speaking, in effect saying, "Remember,

we'll be here when the Red Cross is gone." The convoy and the gutsy inspector had cheered our dragging, gloomy days. The Red Cross had also provided good paperback books. Eye pain kept me from reading them.

Delousing showers at Markt-Pongau came only every four to six weeks.

On a snowy day, two Russians sobbed as they towed from the kitchen a sled laden with the body of their dead comrade—a bloody mess. The guard took them to pre-dug holes at the foot of the mountain. After covering the body with rocks, the Russians returned under guard. Having once been in the kitchen, I remembered that the German sergeant had worn a side-arm, and that the Russians had continuously pushed their luck. Hitler had told his people that the Slavs were less than human. In light of that, I wondered if this shooting meant someone had authorized the German sergeant in advance to shoot and bury any troublesome Russians.

On another occasion, a German (major?) had entered our compound and walked around looking closely at individual men. When he walked over to me, I came to attention. That suited him; he moved on. Then he called out in English, "How many of you are Jews?"

Oh no. Here goes that idiocy again.

Tense, deep silence lasted fifteen seconds, until someone in the back who couldn't be seen, answered, "We all are."

The rest of us took it up. "We all are, we all are."

The major departed.

Life seemed to have become a chain of problems. Bob from Iowa and I talked about his alligator-like skin. The Stalag staff had given him a tiny vial of lemon-based vitamin C pills, which he was not to advertise because they had little of it. Bob saw me often enough that he could notice any changes in me. One day, after looking at me, he said, "Man! We've got to get you out of here. You have a highly infectious disease." Running to the gate, and waving his arms, he called the guard. Within fifteen minutes the powers had me and my soup bowl and spoon on the way to a wooden isolation barrack.

There's a real bed here, with mattress and sheets. Am I dreaming? Now, he's giving me two entire Red Cross packages—for just one week! Let's see why they look different from the regular packages. My gosh, it's mostly meats. Am I hallucinating?

Taking the meat for real, I gorged myself. Although a voice said stop, control eluded me. Somewhere along, the light dawned: If I don't stop this, I'll die. The struggle went on the whole first week. Then recovery began. Although hunger never vanished, it increasingly eased.

A medic stopped by, morning and late afternoon. Otherwise he left me all alone. I slept every night. Russ, if this is hepatitis, you should have come down sooner. Think what you've been missing.

By the end of the third week of isolation, my left thigh wound had closed. The medic even treated the other leg wound and put a bandage on it! I could scarcely believe it.

When they sent me back to the compound, a meal of soup greeted me. The soup consisted only of hot water with a small handful of lawn mowings thrown in. The POWs' disgust had never been so great as then. But a guard told us not to throw the soup out, that we needed the vitamin.

But being back had one good side: the secret news system, which I had missed during isolation, told us where Patton's forces were. Almost no one knew who had received the news, yet every nine to fourteen days, it entered the compound and spread by word of mouth. Some men thought the British chaplain had carried the news. Other men said a tiny radio that could be dismantled into seven parts brought the word. They also said some of the parts had been hidden at times in the muck of the latrine. Despite searches with dogs, the guards never found a radio.

Like the guards, I also failed to find something. Spring sunshine in the mountain valley increasingly sweltered my feet in the sno-pacs. Of course, the guards allowed no one to go barefoot. Although I somehow had found a pair of wooden shoes, they turned out size twelve, instead of thirteens. Painfully, I had to make do with the sno-pacs. Good glory, will the war ever end?

Watching the Polish compound provided some diversion. The Americans, in their uneven mix of sno-pacs, overcoats, field jackets, flight jackets, monster sheepskin lined high altitude bomber-crew overshoes, and tankers clothes reminded me of a tag-ends sale in a second-hand store. The Polish, in contrast, all wore the same uniform elements: a) the Polish cap, with stiff visor and several points in the crown aimed out horizontally; b) the American WWI Army uniform (minus US insignia) of a high-collared jacket, breeches and woolen wrap leggings, and c) the part that fascinated me most—Dutch-type wooden shoes. When a Pole called his men to attention, the command sounded like a gigantic sneeze. The heels of four-hundred pairs of wooden shoes probably outdid anything the heel-clicking Germans had ever done. At that resounding whack of four-hundred pairs of wooden heels, I couldn't restrain a smile, then a laugh. I liked it. Oh yes, the Red Cross again appears: it had obtained the American uniforms for the Polish.

The situation of the Russians provoked no laughing. Nine thousand of what I had estimated as twenty thousand Russians had come down with typhoid fever.

The Americans also worried. Groups of SS men came frequently to look us over. The behavior of the SS gave the impression they planned to take control of our compound on the last day, shut us in, burn the building and machine gun any who tried to escape. Many Americans discussed options, and searched, and searched for anything that might be utilized as a weapon. Fortunately, the SS never attacked.

On May 6th or 7th, I had stayed awake most of the night. Next morning, I awoke late. Where is everyone? Had the Americans come and taken the others while missing me? Rushing to look outside, I saw a huge gap through the barbed wire. During the night, all guards and staff of Stalag 317C had disappeared. The POWs had widely scattered.

In a farmer's newly planted potato patch, I used my hands to dig like a dog. I ate the whole, small potatoes as they were. The war is over. Oh freedom; what a relief! Thanks be to God, and to all who had helped me, military and civilian, from both sides.

.....

After five or six weeks, I arrived at a pier in Hampton Roads, Virginia, where a band and vocalist greeted us with "Don't Fence Me In." Treatment, surgery and recuperation took most of the summer at Fort Leavenworth Station Hospital. After my furlough home to rural Hayard, Nebraska, the Army ordered me to report to the Re-classification Center in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Business occupied the mornings for three days. In the other hours, the Army treated us to the grandest smorgasbord in a grand hotel, free tours, free dances, free hotel rooms.

After promoting me to Technical Sergeant (now called "Sgt 1st Class"), the Army sent me to Ft Leonard Wood, Missouri. On November 23, 1945, they honorably discharged me after three years, one month and twenty-one days in the service.

(The end)