

To Capt  
Burr Wilbur Shupe  
a fellow  
of the  
Mar '93

# Escape to Russia

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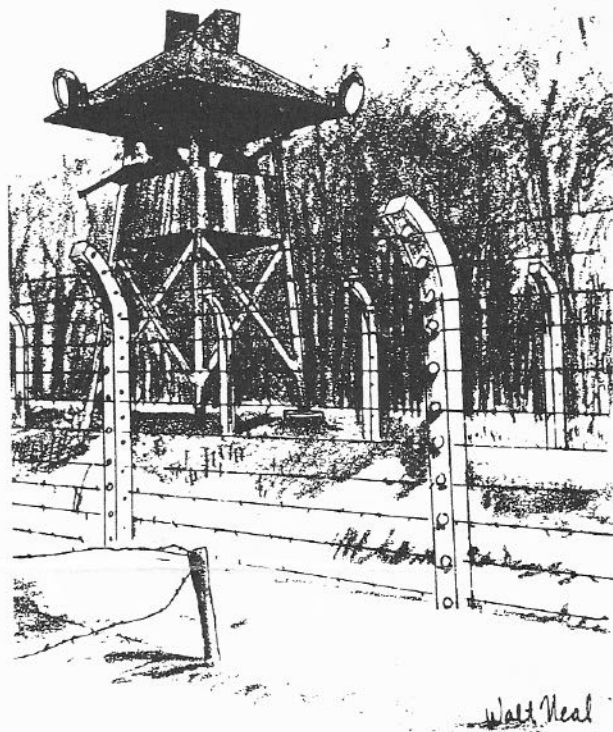
This story begins on Oct. 13, 1943, near the small town of Caserta, Italy, which is northwest of Naples. As a soldier of Co. G, 30th Infantry Regiment, Third Infantry Division, I was engaged in combat with the German Army. On this night, our force of about 25 to 30 men was to cross the Voltorno River and take a hill approximately 1200 to 1500 yards from the river. After taking the hill we were to defend it until reinforcements arrived. We were successful in crossing the river and secured the position shortly before dawn. We defended the hill with heavy fighting until sometime after noon when we heard tanks moving up, which we thought were our reinforcements. They turned out to be German tanks which surrounded us. We had suffered heavy casualties — seven men were left, and we were out of ammunition, with no anti-tank weapons. We were forced to surrender. As we later learned ours was a diversionary action to make the Germans believe it was part of the main crossing of the Voltorno.

We were taken behind the lines to a German command post where we were treated for our wounds and interrogated. Later, as we started to move back from the front lines, we were strafed many times by American planes, some casualties resulting, both American and German.

As we moved further behind the lines, we were joined by more prisoners who had been captured at various places. We were then loaded on boxcars for the journey north. The boxcars were very small and too many men were crowded into each one. We had to sleep on the floor without blankets, straw or anything, and it was getting cold, especially in the mountains. Most of us had only shirt and pants, no jackets or overcoats. After the wide openness of North Africa and Sicily, being packed into the boxcars like beans in a can was insulting as well as miserable. The only sanitary facility was a bucket in the middle of the car which, to say the least, was inadequate as nearly everyone had dysentery to some degree. After a very short time with everyone using the bucket, the stench became so awful that, even though we had been in some bad places before, we didn't think we could survive this one. But survive we did, and traveled on north to somewhere near Munich. To while away the miles, I became preoccupied with removing the barbed wire from one of the windows, hoping for an escape. I finally realized that while in enemy territory and with no partner to accompany me, it was not the time nor the place.

After we were unloaded, we were paraded through the street of some town so the people could see that the Germans were winning the war. We didn't look like much at that time as we were battle-dirty and ragged, but still had the American spirit. Unfortunately, some of the townspeople tried spitting on the soldiers and some of the angered GIs took a swing at them, which cost them dearly with a rifle butt to the head. This happened several times.

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Walt Neal

From this town we were moved into Stalag VII-A, which was probably the worst hellhole on earth, or so we thought at that time. The compound we were in had American, English, South African, Indian, and French soldiers and possibly others. Next to our compound, separated by barbed wire, was the Russian compound, which from all appearances was worse than ours, if that was possible. One day, some type of disturbance took place in the Russian compound and the German guards seemed to have trouble stopping it, so late in the day they turned several very large and mean-looking German police dogs into the Russian barracks. The next morning, dog hides were seen stretched on the fence. Evidently the Russians had one good meal. Every morning, we each tried for first place in lice counting, great diversion. After about two months in this hole, I was sent to Stalag II-B at Hammerstein in Poland. This was at Christmas time, 1943.

In early January 1944, I was sent on an arbeit (work) detail with several other enlisted men to Oflag 64, an officers' camp at Szubin, (Aultburgund) Poland. Here most of our work took us outside the camp digging potatoes, picking up supplies, or whatever else the Germans wanted us to do, including yard work and gardening for the German commandant and officers' quarters. One of the grounds-keeping jobs performed inside the camp by the enlisted men was to keep the space between the trip-wire and barbed wire fences completely clean by hand-spading and raking it smooth so that any footprints of escapees would be readily observed by the guards in their towers high above the compound. This was an area approximately ten feet across which surrounded the entire camp.

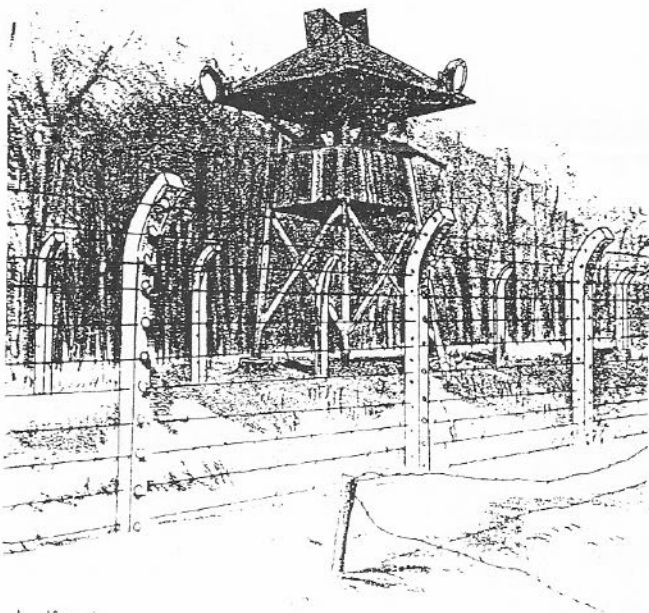
One day we were working in the commandant's garden while being guarded by a Pole who had joined the German Army. He was limited in his physical ability as he had only one eye. For some reason he loved to be nasty to us while we

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worked, always screaming and hollering. This particular day he didn't think we were working fast enough or doing it right, so we told him to do it himself. As it happened, I was kneeling down on the ground as he came charging over to show me what to do and, as he bent over, his Luger pistol fell from its holster into my hand. Needless to say, the whole world stopped right there as neither of us knew what to do next. I thought about taking the gun and making an escape, but the odds were so against that, I regretfully decided not to try. Deliberately, I pushed the gun aside and let him pick it up. After that he treated us a little better, which helped under the circumstances. We had a variety of guards at Oflag 64. Some were very good to us while we worked, helping us scrounge additional bread, vegetables, etc., but some were just plain mean and tried to do everything they could to cause us trouble.

Another interesting event occurred at Oflag 64 in June 1944. The officers had planned a big celebration for their first anniversary there, which may seem like a strange thing to celebrate, but it helped to break the monotony. What baffled the Nazis was that this party coincided with the Allies' D-Day, June 6, 1944, which no one at the camp knew about ahead of time. The Nazis concluded that we had advance knowledge of the exact time of D-Day and they were very upset. The Gestapo was sent in to search and find out how we had this advance information, but for all their searching they found nothing. However, there were many secrets in the camp that remained the sole property of the POWs, which the Germans suspected but never uncovered.

Everything remained about the same in the camp until the first part of November when the German guards started getting very nervous. On several occasions the cold north wind would blow through the power lines while we were out



working, and we told the guards that it was the "Russkies" coming. This only made matters worse, but we had to enjoy our share of harassing, also. At this time the Russians were moving ahead and the Germans were beginning to be afraid.

On January 21, 1945, the order came to evacuate Oflag 64. At this time there were about 1500 officers and 135 enlisted men at the camp, although not all were capable of marching. Some were left behind, some hid out in a tunnel which the officers had been secretly digging. We fell out in the designated areas for further orders and finally, after some confusion, struggled our way on out of camp. The first night we stopped at a small town and managed to get a little sleep in the cold by snuggling up to some cows in a barn. I think the cows liked it too, it was so frigid.

Early the next day we were up and getting ready to move out when word came that the German guards had left because they thought the Russians were advancing on them. Captain Walters started to organize the enlisted men into a company in an effort to determine what the next move should be. Just as he was getting things together, word was received that the German guards were returning. At this time everything changed again for the worse.

Now I had a buddy by the name of Eddie Weirzgacz from Chicago. We both decided we'd had enough of this march in such bad weather since by now we'd had considerable experience with this cold climate and barren countryside. At the time we didn't know how far the march was to be, but expected it would be a long one if they marched all the way to Germany. We felt that it was going to be a rough time with such a large group of POWs, and feeding and housing would be almost impossible. We decided we could make it better on our own, travelling in a different direction. Our decision to escape was a good one, as it turned out, for the march was several hundred gruelling miles with some of the men perishing along the way, and much suffering among all. Nevertheless, we knew the decision we made not to continue the march was also very critical, as the Germans were known to be relentless in their pursuit of escapees. They would set building afire or machine gun them if they thought someone might be hiding inside. Even with all of the negatives, our desire for freedom was strong enough to overcome the dangers, so we made our plan for escape.

The farm where we stopped had several barn-type out-buildings which Eddie and I had looked at while the guards were gone. One building was used for storing hay, typical of the barns in Poland. They constructed a concrete box inside the barn about 10 to 15 feet high with the outside of the concrete walls approximately a foot from the outer wooden wall of the barn. The reason for this was to prevent rats from ruining whatever was stored inside. When we made our break, we ran to this building, climbed on top of the concrete box and slid down between the concrete wall and the outer wooden wall. Fortunately, being well undernourished by this time, there was just enough room for us to slide down between these walls with our hands pinned at our sides. We were on the side of the barn that faced the area where we had been assembled a short time before.



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Just after getting settled in our hiding place, the German guards came back and began getting the POWs ready for marching again. They began to search for any men who weren't present when they had everyone assembled the first time. Some of the guards knew Eddie and I were missing because we had been guarded by them on our work details. The guards were using dogs to try to sniff any POWs out of hiding. We could look through the cracks between the boards and see what was taking place. Several times the guards brought the dogs over to the barns to see if they could find anyone. Our hearts were pounding so hard that we were sure they would discover us. Probably the reason they didn't was that the weather was extremely cold and it had begun to snow. The guards were in a hurry to get the men marching quickly, for the Russians were moving rapidly towards this area.

After what seemed like an eternity the Germans finally moved the officers and men out of the area onto the road away from the farmyard. At that moment, we didn't realize that we might never see our Oflag 64 comrades again. Their choice to go on with this march was as critical as ours was to escape it. We couldn't see anything after they cleared our immediate line of vision, so we stayed put for what we felt were hours. After so long the cold really got to us and we needed a latrine. Due to our tight quarters, our hands were fastened to our sides. We knew if we let go, we'd become a solid block of ice, and that we didn't need. Finally, the pain got so bad I told Eddie that I was going to get out of there, and if the Germans were still around they could shoot me if they wanted to. We cautiously wiggled and squirmed our way out — ah, blessed relief! — and no Germans. Then we went on to check out the situation over at the farmhouse where there were some refugees and other GIs. As Eddie could speak Polish, he found out from the refugees that the Germans had marched the POWs out. One of the POWs left behind there had a real bad case of frostbite on his feet and was in great pain. We did what we could for him, wrapping his feet in rags and scrounging some wood to make a small fire to try and warm him. We never learned whether he survived or not.

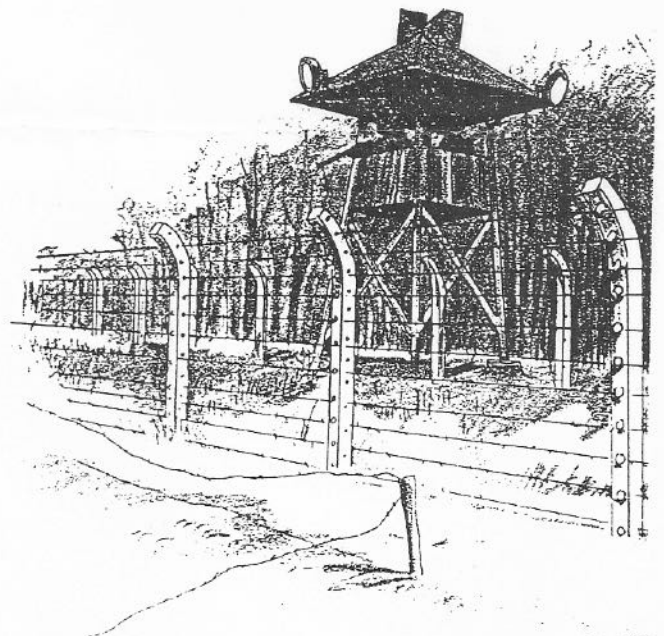
Here I would like to tell how I met Eddie. On the first night in the boxcar from the front there were prisoners from several outfits. Eddie was one from the 45th, along with several other soldiers that had been captured about the same time we had. On the trip north we were very crowded and everyone was grumbling about not having enough room to stretch out. Near where I was crouched, this guy kept picking on another short, slight-built soldier, whom I had met earlier. After awhile I got fed up with this bickering and told him to try me if he wanted to pick on someone his own size. Of course, at the time, I didn't know how big he was because it was pitch-dark in the boxcar. The next morning, when it got light enough to see, this guy wanted to take a look at the so-and-so who challenged him during the night. As it turned out Eddie was about 6'1" and weighed about 185 pounds; I was 5'8" and weighed 135 pounds. Eddie took one look at me and started to laugh, and then we all had a good laugh. From that day on we were the best of friends through Stalag VII-A,

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Stalag II-B, and for the year we were at Oflag 64 where we worked outside together. That is how we were able to make our escape, as we knew each other and, most importantly, knew we could trust one another in difficult situations, which we definitely knew were ahead of us.

For several days we remained hidden in the farmhouse outside Szubin, and then one day we contacted a Russian captain who was out on patrol. He advised us to head for the Russian lines the next morning, which were about a mile or so away. The next morning we gathered up what gear we had and started out for the area the captain told us to go. We were walking down a road with a small ditch and hill on one side, so we decided to get up on the hill to see better. As soon as we did, the Russians opened up with everything they had. We scrambled for shelter and made our way back to the farmhouse. Fortunately, neither of us were hurt.

After several more days, we contacted another Russian patrol and told them what had happened. They told us to try again, and this time we were successful in getting through the lines into a town where the Russian Army was set up in a building that had been a Nazi headquarters. We stayed with this outfit for a few days, drinking vodka and eating with the soldiers. Then one night a Russian captain got with us and started drinking vodka heavily. It wasn't long until he was very drunk and he took us with him out in the streets to shoot up the insulators on the electric poles with a submachine gun. After awhile he tired of this fun, so he commandeered a large tank and we headed out toward what he thought was Berlin. We were going to take it all by ourselves. As we were unarmed, we did what he told us to do. He ordered us to get on the tank and away we went, not realizing at the time that the driver was about as drunk as the captain. He was a wild driver, running over everything that was in his way. When he finally ran off the road into a snowbank, Eddie and I had had



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enough. We jumped off and headed out on foot down the road the direction we had come, deciding it was time for us to get away from this outfit.

We started hiking back towards Oflag 64 at Szubin, and managed after some time to catch a ride on a Russian truck. When we arrived back at camp all of the American POWs that had been left behind when the Germans started the march had been moved out by the Russian Army, and now the Russians occupied the camp. We stayed in the main headquarters building where we remained for several days. During our stay at Oflag 64, we observed the Russians using almost anything for target practice. Late afternoon was the worst time, when they were drunk enough to start shooting at random, hitting insulators, signs, poles or whatever. It didn't take us long to realize this was not the way to freedom, so we headed for Warsaw.

We were carrying very little food with us, having eaten nearly everything we had originally left camp with. Luckily, my Dad had sent money to one of the tobacco companies in the States to have cigarettes sent directly to me. For many months I had not received any, and as fate does at certain times, I received about 15 cartons of Lucky Strikes all at once just before we were to start the march back to Germany. Since Eddie could speak Polish and I had the cigarettes, trading for food and other necessities was pretty easy. Although there was not much of anything to eat anywhere, we managed to get enough to keep going.

We hiked and hitched our way towards Warsaw for several days and finally got a ride in a 6x6 driven by a Russian soldier. The roads were very icy and snow covered as we pulled into Warsaw, or what was left of it. The Germans had completely leveled the city. All of the bridges were out across the Vistula River, and it was full of floating ice. The Russian engineers had set a floating bridge across and, as we neared the river, we noticed that the driver was getting wilder with his driving. Finally I looked out the back and to the front and saw that the driver was headed straight for the river where there was no bridge. I yelled for Eddie to jump and we both bailed out while the truck kept right on going into the water. I don't know what happened to the driver as we got away as fast as possible. The only thing we could figure was that the driver was drunk.

We crossed to the city on the other side of the river and found a family we could stay with for a few days. By taking our cigarettes to the open air market, we were able to bargain for enough food to have fairly decent meals, thanks to our host. This system also worked to get some coal, so we had a warm place to stay at last. The Polish people here treated us real well.

After several days we decided we had better move on — just where we weren't sure, but thought the best way was towards Moscow. While in the service in the States, I had met a Jewish soldier who was one of the finest people I had ever had the pleasure of meeting; he even made me an honored guest at his wedding. The reason for telling about this soldier is that I remembered him saying he was born in Minsk,

Russia. At that time, I really didn't have any idea of where it was. With the help of the people we were staying with and some old maps, we located it and Minsk became our goal, as it was on the way to Moscow. Again hitching and hiking, we made our way to Minsk, all the time trading the cigarettes for food and other useful items. The Russian people one-on-one were very friendly and helpful. With Eddie's Polish and my Kriegie German, we managed to get along pretty well.

We were now beginning to run into more and more POWs who had escaped from camps and marches. After leaving Minsk, we joined up with a group of officers who were trying to get word to the American Embassy in Moscow to let them know there were a lot of Americans running loose in Russia. I later found out that one of the officers from Oflag 64, Dick Rossbach, who had also escaped, was the one who made his way to the embassy in Moscow where the American government made arrangements with the Russians to move the POWs to Odessa by rail. The boxcars that they supplied somewhere on the outskirts of Moscow were nearly the same as those we started with when the Germans first captured us.

The train rattled on down to Odessa where we were billeted in an old warehouse without heat and very few sanitary facilities, but we were one step closer to freedom. One day we were rounded up and taken to a large building where we were told to strip for an examination. The only thing covering us was goose-pimples. As it turned out, all of the doctors were women, but after what most of us had seen, this didn't matter to us.

For several days we waited and finally an English ship came in and we were loaded aboard. It was not much, but at least we were headed in the right direction. We sailed to Constantinople and on through the Dardanelles to Port Said, Egypt, where we were finally under American control. For me, this was 535 days from date of capture. We were issued all new uniforms, examined, interrogated, deloused, poked and prodded while in Port Said, then finally sent by ship to Naples, Italy, for further processing. On April 9, 1945, we arrived back in the good ole United States at Camp Miles Standish, Boston, MA. We went on leave, and then R&R at Hot Springs, AR. At about this time the point system was put in force and since I had enough points for discharge, on July 3, 1945, I became a civilian.

In October 1987 we attended a reunion of Oflag 64 in Washington, DC. Without doubt this reunion will remain in my heart forever. It was extremely heartwarming to visit with some of the men I hadn't seen in over 40 years. I feel that the officers, enlisted men, and their families are the finest group of people I have ever had the privilege and pleasure of being associated with. I realized then that without the understanding, love and devotion of the wives of the ex-POWs, our lives would not have been as full and rewarding. We owe them a tremendous vote of thanks. The camaraderie and caring among this group is something that can only be felt by people who have survived such a traumatic and trying experience. Even though our adventures were similar, each and every man lived it in his own unique way, and this story reveals some of the things I remember.