CPT Harris Otto Machus

1908 – 2001

Published source for this biography is *Turmoil to Triumph The Odyssey of Captain Harris O. Machus Through Six War Devasted Countries in Search of Survival* by Angus Duncan McKellar. Page numbers are noted in the text and specific quoted passages placed in *italics.*

EARLY YEARS

Harris Otto Machus was born in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, on 10 July 1908. Early schooling took place in Lansing, Michigan. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a minor in Economics from Michigan State University and was active in the ROTC. Harris Machus and Elaine Skimin Machus were married in June 1935.

MILITARY SERVICE

Lt. Machus (known as Mac) joined the recently activated First Armored Division in the Fall of 1940. Comments made in the book FORWARD by Lt. General James D. Alger, United States Army, Retired, offer a military portrait of his potential:

> *Through endless hours, days, weeks, and months of training, we participated in the 'Forging of the Thunderbolt'. And the fact that Mac remained with the Division through many and drastic levies on the First Armored for cadres to activate and train newly formed divisions attests to the outstanding qualities he demonstrated as an armored leader.*

COMBAT AND CAPTURE

Lieutenant Colonel J.D. Alger, commander of the 2d Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment, 1st Armored Division, would require these qualities when Captain Harris O. Machus commanded 2d Tank Battalion E Company during the attempt to rescue 2500 trapped and encircled American infantry on February 14-15.

> *Our mission is to retake Sidi bou Zid and drive the enemy from the area to relieve the 168th Infantry troops under Colonel Waters on Lessouda Mountain. Other units of the 168th Infantry under Colonel Drake are on Garet Hadid and Djebel Ksaira. They are surrounded by the enemy and cut off by German forces. Enemy*

strength is uncertain. Other than these cut off units, Combat Command A has lost everything. (pp.9-13)

These next remarks portray his uneasiness.

Machus felt a sense of unreality. This beautiful sunny day was a day for living and laughing, certainly not a day for dying. For a fleeting moment he thought of the letter he had written to his wife that morning by the light of his flashlight when he returned from the briefing: his attempts at reassurance and bits about the little bakery that Elaine was struggling to keep open back in Birmingham, Michigan, and what *they would do when this damned war was over. Still, he reasoned, months of grueling training had gone into molding this tank battalion into a powerful fighting force. Yet, the failure of the high command to provide in-depth reconnaissance east and Colonel Hains' less than enthusiastic remark* (*"I do not know what good this attack will accomplish, but I hope we get four to one in our favor!"*) *triggered a twinge of doubt.* (p.20)

The battle was drawing rapidly to a close. The tank was now a sitting target. The end came with stunning swiftness. A shell pierced the tank's thick armor and exploded. A jagged casting flew loose and severed the assistant gunner's head from his body. A piece of flying metal gashed Machus's neck and shoulder and knocked him unconscious. Blood coursed from the wounds as he lay on the floor. Still another shell penetrated the rear plate and through the gasoline tank. (pp.31-33)

His crew, believing their captain dead and unable to see his out-of-sight body, scrambled out of the burning tank. In a daze, Machus came to, managed to drag himself out through the hatch to the ground and blacked out again. Regaining consciousness, he reached his crew and was told the battle was over—no place to hide.

Moments later the Germans arrived and loaded him onto a truck with other wounded soldiers while making its way across the desert to a German first aid station around 2030. Machus remembers that he was treated by a German doctor who cleaned and dressed his wounds and gave him a sedative injection for sleep. Awakened the next morning by a German medic, he heard the dreaded sentence, "*Fur dich ist der Krieg vorbei. For you the war is over".* A cup of ersatz coffee and bread with jam were offered and accepted.

Finding himself in a large tent, he recognized an unhurt American staff aide and they exchanged news. Told about the injury and capture of Colonel Alger and the death of Major Emery, a close friend, silenced Machus as he reflected on the last time he had seen Emery. Moments later, he and others were moved onto a personnel carrier enroute to an Italian field hospital. There another German doctor redressed his head wounds and placed his left arm in a sling to support the broken collar bone.

Moved next by truck to a large city hospital at Sfax, Tunisia, Machus recalled the very competent treatment administrated by German doctors; his pain, still severe, was managed by sedations. Recovery was slow, but he began to gain strength and attempted short walks. Two days later and ambulatory, he was again moved to a tent city outside of Sfax where a young Italian doctor attended to his wounds in a first aid tent. Overcrowded camp conditions and severe hygiene issues (including food sources) were alarming, the only positive point being that the camp was '*loosely guarded*' because few prisoners were able to rise from their beds, much less escape. With this knowledge in mind, Machus decided to slip away toward American lines (as boundaries were still fluid), but he became extremely ill and was moved to a Red Cross ship in the harbor where he improved rapidly.

Two days later, all dreams of escape vanished as the ship moved to Bari, Italy, on the Adriatic Sea. Dockside, American and British wounded were separated from the Germans, then trucked to the outskirts of the city '*to a make-shift POW hospital in a large converted schoolhouse staffed with British doctors, taken when Rommel had captured Tobruk.'* Machus's health returned as he struck up conversations with other POWs and increased his endurance by expanded distance walks each day. His physical conditioning did not, however, isolate him emotionally from the sufferings and death of others around him and he vowed that '*nothing short of escape would give him any semblance of peace.'* (pp.43-52)

A MESSAGE RECEIVED

> *25 March 1943. More than a month after the Sidi bou Zid battle, 5000 miles away from Battle Creek, Michigan, the Red Cross office volunteers logged a War Department telegram: 'We regret to inform you…Captain Harris O. Machus…missing in action.' Coincidentally, the volunteers knew Elaine and Harris Machus when they lived in Battle Creek. Reluctant to contact Elaine, they called Billy Knapp, then in Standard Brands' Detroit office, and formerly a co-worker with Harris in Battle Creek.*
>
> *When Billy arrived at the Machus's Birmingham home with the message, he walked into a birthday party for the Machus's three-year-old son, Robert. Elaine had come to Birmingham to help Harris's mother with the little Maple Avenue bake shop after the senior Machus died a month before Pearl Harbor.*
>
> *"It is bad news, and good news", Elaine told the worried Knapp. "I know from the Round Robin letters which the military sends out to the wives of overseas officers that a high percentage of those reported missing in action turn out to be alive."* (pp.52, 53)
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> [*A week after Elaine received the 'Missing in Action' message, she received a phone call from Royal Oaks artist, Jean Harding Brown, confirming that Harris was alive. "My husband is an American*

Field Service officer in Africa. He received a call from fellow officer that he had met Harris Machus from Birmingham, Michigan, in a POW camp in Southern Italy, near Bari. That he is well and okay. He said that the Italians never reported Machus's name to the Red Cross."] (p.60)

Half way across the world, Captain Machus's wounds had healed well enough for him to be moved to a transient camp outside of Bari near the airport. American B-24s were often heard overhead as they made holes in the runway, which were filled the next day and bombed the next.

Here is where Machus experienced his first bartering experience. A British officer was intrigued by the heavy combat overalls which Machus had worn into battle over his combat jacket. He traded the coveralls for a pair of British army tropical issue walking shorts, toilet articles and a razor. Keeping his hopes of escape alive, the shorts served as Mac's incentive to lengthen his walks until his legs could support a bid for freedom. (p.54)

CAMP CHIETI AND BEYOND

These incentives were placed on hold when an Italian guard appeared one morning with a list of prisoners and Machus's name was called. Loaded onto a stake body truck with a small truck leading the way, they entered the outskirts of Chieti, Italy, and viewed in the distance a ten-foot-tall cement block wall, gray and forbidding with sentries observing all activities below. As the convoy pulled up in front of the camp's headquarters building just outside the front gates, the men noted a sign that read 21.

Assigned to a fairly new one-story barracks, the group noted the wooden double-deck bunks which accommodated about 200 men; four other similar buildings were located within the five-acre camp. POW numbers included about 900 British and 150 American officers. Machus was surprised to learn that a famous Associated Press Correspondent named Larry Allen was a member of their barracks; he was being held against Geneva Convention rules which made the Germans nervous because of his status as a non-combatant. While Mac was reading the front hall board, Allen stopped by, introduced himself and added: *"I listen to the Italian broadcast at 11 a.m. and the BBC at 3 p.m. They do not tell me what I cannot write so I give them hell, especially about holding me."* (p.56)

The camp appeared to be efficiently run with a British officer in command. Machus noted a functioning baseball league, the formation of a drama group and a garden project. The POWs were in charge of their own kitchens, supplemented by British Red Cross food packages and those from British families. Asking about working in the garden plot, he was handed a box full of dirt, then later, noted the disbursement of dirt boxes carried by other POWs—too much dirt, so he queried a fellow gardener: '*Tunnel?'* This received a nod. Every activity was executed to cover the existence of two tunnels and since no one knew Machus, they were careful about sharing information until

he was vetted. Later inquiry by Machus about being a tunnel digger was met with the comment that he would have to live in one of buildings where the tunneling began.

Water became a scarce commodity, so Machus, a quick learner, observed the Brits drinking theirs with tea—an activity more important to them than using water for other purposes. Problem solved. Humor, another necessary human need, lightened many situations and was often supplied by Larry Allen as he continued posting his withering jabs concerning the poor qualities of the Italian troops. These enraged the guards who tore up the posting, which was followed the next day by another posting, which was also shredded, all episodes causing this comical ritual to renew itself—to the delight of the POWs! (pp.54-60)

> *Food was barely adequate, mostly of dried varieties. But once or twice a week spirits were raised when the cry 'Tony's here' echoed across the compound. From the barrack windows, POWs could see a white-haired farmer leading a gentle donkey, hitched to a two-wheeled cart piled high with fresh vegetables. A crowd gathered quickly on the rare occasions when scarce pears and oranges were also included in the high-sided cart, brilliantly painted in floral designs. One day, however, the farmer came into the camp, his bent form shaking. 'Perche, perche, why, why me?'*

Regrettably, a bomb from an American plane which was targeted to knock out a bridge on the Adriatic side, mistakenly hit the farmer's home instead, killing his daughter and son-in-law. Tony's demeanor changed completely, even as the POWs tried to comfort him. His world would never be the same again. (pp.61-63)

A month later, Elaine's letter arrived with good news that they were doing well thus renewing Machus' hopes of escape. Adjusting to camp routine, he managed a baseball team of all British players and spent idle time at the camp Red Cross library located in the headquarters building. Standing and reading on the shady side one day, he was approached by Lt. Stirling stating, "*we need another man for the alert system. We never know when the guards are coming to search the cabins, although they do not come very often. But when a platoon comes through the gate, we know the only reason they are coming in is to search. It would be catastrophic if someone were caught carrying a carton of dirt out of the barracks. This would mean immediate muster, and platoon of troops would be called in to ransack the barracks."* (pp.63)

The alert "keys" lay in the turning of book pages or shifting of reading materials. These warnings gained diggers the needed minutes to erase any evidence of tunnel existence. Fortunately, they remained undetected and work continued at a rapid pace.

Allen continued monitoring of the official radio newscasts—resulting in a cheer from the POWs when news reached them about "*the Sicily invasion on*

10 July, the follow-up landings of heavy reinforcements commanded by General Montgomery and accounts of General Patton taking Palermo on 22 July." (p.64)

Other good news reached them: 25 July 1943 King Emanuel has dismissed Mussolini. *'Should not be long now!'* was frequently heard. Camp activities reflected these positive signs, but time wasted on surrender terms between the Allies and Italy enabled German reinforcements to be placed throughout parts of Italy. Finally, on 8 September 1943, Italy declared Armistice and Allied landings occurred on 9 September at Salerno but with heavy loses. The once jubilant feeling shared among the POWs at Chieti now turned to frustration and disbelief as German uniformed guards replaced those of the Italians who had fled on 19 September.

German military elitist parachutists were now their prison guards. Americans who were familiar with the rigor imposed by their new keepers prepared for the new regime. Tunnel diggers remained within its walls the first day, camouflaging the exits.

> *All of a sudden, the thought swept deep within Machus, and every man standing in line in the prison yard, that this was going to be a hell-of-a-long war for them. Under the lax, indifferent Italians the prisoners had succumbed into thinking they would be going home any day. Now the only certainty was they would be moved out ahead of the Allied advances.* (p.67)

Two days later, the POWs of Camp Chieti were told to prepare to move out in the morning. Since Machus had few articles to pack, he concentrated on the two letters from home handed to him by the Red Cross Representative.

Marched through the gate at seven AM, the prisoners mounted twenty old Italian lorries, which slowly made their way inland from the Adriatic Sea. Thoughts of escape ran through his mind, but attempting it during daylight hours in open country surroundings was courting suicide. Several others jumped from the trucks, but were met with warning shots from the paratroopers who simply waved them back to their lorries. "*The next time",* shouted the German officer, *"the guards will shoot to kill."* (pp.68,69)

Dusk found the lorries entering Sulmona, an old-style fortress of adobe buildings with high crumbling walls which encircled the compound with barbed wire.

> *Lt. Colonel Gooler surveyed the compound. "Machus," he said glumly, "It is going to be a hell of a lot worse before it gets better."*
>
> *He was one hundred percent right.* (pp.69)"
>
> *The first afternoon at Sulmona, Machus walked around the camp with three companions—unobtrusively searching for a weak spot that might offer the slightest possibility of a way out. The guards did not seem very dedicated. Their specialty training as parachutists was no longer needed, but their 'don't give a damn'*

> *attitude gave the prisoners a false impression. They were still German soldiers, following orders.* (p.71)

These premonitions soon became a reality.

Machus and Joe Adamo were surveying the area for an escape route, versus enduring whatever the Germans had planned. Agreeing to try, they joined others after dark and watched as several slipped under the wires, waiting their turn when machine pistol bullets hit two of the terrified escapees. The rest '*melted into the darkness and made their way back inside the decaying bastille.'* To discourage others, patrols were doubled and weak points were reenforced. Other issues including food shortages and primitive sleeping pads on musky floors combined to make their lives miserable and their situations desperate.

More changes were to come: on the eleventh day of their arrival at Sulmona, 2 October 1943, the prisoners were assembled and told by the camp Kommandant that they would depart at 1600 with the threat that anyone who tried to escape would be shot. Marched down the railroad tracks in the rain, prisoners were handed a small loaf of bread and packed in '40 and 8' cars (vehicles designed by the French for 40 men and 8 horses—used in WW I).

> *Machus found himself packed into a car with seventy other prisoners, and for a fleeting moment he recalled the cattle cars at the Chicago stock yards he once toured when he was a regional manager for one of America's leading wholesale food companies.* (p.74)

ESCAPE AND EVASION

Two small windows were positioned in each car for air and light, convenient for horses but too high for men. Nevertheless, Machus started pulling on the round window bars which were attached to rotten wood. As he worked frantically, the last two came loose and a hole appeared large enough for him to climb through. When asked if anyone wanted to join him, most declined and moved away from the rain which poured through the window. A tall Texan, Jim Johnson, however volunteered to 'partner up.'

> *At the next train station, the two stood ready, clutching the Red Cross cardboard boxes, each containing razor, towel, hoarded Red Cross chocolate bars, and the piece of bread. As the train pulled slowly from the station, a burst of machine pistol fire came from the direction of the rear car. The guards had stopped any attempted escape.*
>
> *Machus passed the small box to Jim. 'Suppose I go first. Drop this out with yours after I jump. I will head north, and you come south to meet me.' Companions hoisted him to their shoulders and shoved him through the opening feet first.*

Below, he viewed only emptiness, so when the next possible opportunity appeared, he grabbed the window sill, pushed out with his feet, and landed hard on his shoulders, but was clear of the track and concealed in underbrush. (pp.75-79)

Testing his body for injuries, Machus found raw abrasions, but nothing serious. After climbing the bank, he walked away from the disappearing train, looked for the missing cardboard boxes, and then heard a muffled—"Mac?" Jim had made it too! After one near-miss contact with a German patrol guard, they walked all night and had stopped to rest when they heard a voice: "Buon giorno". The young man recognized American uniforms, pointed to himself, saying, 'Angelo' and explained that he had left the Italian army, returned to his home and had saved his sheep by keeping them away from the Germans during the day. Their precious Red Cross boxes lost, Machus and Johnson gladly shared the Shepard's offer of hearth-style bread as they sat with him and made conversation mostly through gestures and smiles.

Another rain shower caused Machus to point downward toward the valley, but Angelo shook his head, pointed upward instead, and motioned for them to follow him to a cave, fairly shallow but doable. Angelo had noted a large dead tree on the trail, which they used to make a warming and much appreciated fire. Angelo, gesturing that he would return in the morning, then moved down the trail. Sharing thoughts of freedom, Johnson and Machus endured the long night hours and were standing at the cave entrance early the next morning when they saw three people: Angelo, a woman who set a kettle of soup on the fire, and another man, known as a woodcutter, who served as interpreter.

Later, they would meet the wealthiest Padrone in the area, Carlo Brescianni, who owned the entire mountainside (which included the forests and the hired woodcutters) and was a central figure in ensuring their safety. Carlo had lived and worked in the U.S. and favored the Americans over the Germans.

> *After weeks of inactivity, Machus and Johnson were discouraged from leaving, but by November, they were determined to continue on; encouraged instead by Angelo to go to the village, there was little to do but accept the invitation. Yet the Americans hesitated, not liking the idea of going into a small town where the fascists and allied sympathizers were divided in their allegiance, and into an area saturated with German troops. But, Machus reflected, they needed help. 'I guess we do not have an alternative,' he admitted.* (p.87)

Throughout the weeks that followed, both men appreciated the generosity of the Italian families who hosted and fed them, but also felt that intrigue was part of a possible game on the parts of their hosts. Constantly encouraged by the villagers to stay, Machus and Johnson then heard a BBC newscast that the Allies were not next door as they had been told—forces were stalled.

As Germans continued to pour through the village (and the room next to theirs on one occasion), they met Emilio Menotta who offered to be their guide through the mountains. Invited later to his small home, Menotta pointed toward two other men seated at a table.

> *"Friends of yours. English." Machus smiled when he recognized the men from the Chieti POW camp. The two British officers smiled and shook hands. "We got to Bonaretti's after you left and he sent us here. I guess we all jumped off the train the same night. Been on the run ever since."* (pp.89-97)

Leaving early the next morning and carrying a small pack with food provided by Emile's wife, they followed his lead for five days through tortuous snow drifts and high winds, sleeping in the snow when no shelter was available. Sighting a valley and descending it, Emilio pointed to their new direction as he turned and began his homeward trek. Continuing on, the two Americans and the two Brits shouldered their way through rugged landscapes, finally descending to a valley road where they noted strangers ahead. By pure chance when seeing the tall stranger up close, Machus replied,

> '*Quite a ways from England, aren't you?' The man's reply: "I am Captain Ralph Noyes, and this is Sergeant Fred Gerber, of South Africa—and our own Corporal Dudley DeJean. Just met them today. We have all been trying to get across those bloody mountains". Pointing south he added, "Gave it up, you know. Just too much snow."* (pp.98-100)

Later, the new group revealed more about themselves. Captain Ralph Noyes related his circumstances first:

> *"My bad break came when Rommel was riding high in Africa. I commanded a post well forward on the third day of El Alamein. Walking back from a nightly briefing session, I was deep in thought abut the orders for my battery outpost which were to be implemented the following morning. In the darkness, I missed my post and walked into a German patrol. We were mutually startled. A guttural voice yelled out to halt, and I was hustled back to German lines."*

Possessing a gift for languages, Noyes escaped from a camp at Modena and used his Italian to avoid being recaptured for some months.

> *'How about you, Sergeant?' Machus asked.*
>
> *Gerber replied, "I was in artillery and we needed information. I dressed in Arab's clothes and worked my way around and well ahead of our lines up to the top of a hill overlooking the desert. I saw a half dozen Arabs standing around but not did not pay much attention to them. But when I pulled out my field glasses one of the 'Arabs' drew a machine pistol. The Germans had had the same idea."*

"DeJean?" Jim queried.

"A track shot disabled our tank and we were easy pickings. I had jumped off a train a couple of months ago."

Later, while Gerber was gathering firewood, Noyes stated that Gerber *"was a government ranger on a big game preserve in South Africa before the war, so outdoor living comes natural to him."* (pp.103,104)

This incredible survival story of these seven men included enduring winter weather among woodcutters and building roughly-constructed cabins for warmth and safety. All of this occurred while being surrounded by a permanent German garrison—an R&R center for front-line soldiers. Many small towns in the area were used by the Germans for this purpose. (pp.101-107)

Relocating later to a well-constructed cabin built by escaped British Empire soldiers from India, the men were contemplating their unknown destinies when a special holiday celebration appeared out of nowhere.

Midmorning of Christmas day Machus stumbled down the hillside to the small brook to refill the water pail. When he paused to rest halfway back up the hill, he heard the shouts of the woodcutters and the sounds of the mule train. Machus watched incredulously as the Italians drove up to the little cabin, unloaded packages and pots, and crowded into the hut. 'Buon Natale! Felice Natale!' They spread out loaves of bread, pasta, mutton, even cake, and four bottles of vino, all collected at the midnight Christmas mass from parishioners who had little food to spare. The Italians loaded the mules' 'saddle' arrangements with firewood-poles two to four inches in diameter and about seven-foot lengths, and left in the early afternoon. The woodcutters returned twice during the holiday week, and left more bread on each visit. (pp.108,109)

Fortune did not always accompany them as the Indian soldiers returned to their cabin as they, too, had been unable to conquer the mountains. Nodding their goodbyes, the 'visitors' gathered their things, left some bread for the Indians and returned to previous lodgings, only to learn that the storm had demolished both cabins; only a shelter on the mule trail was left standing and the worse snow storm seen in twenty years was upon them.

In early January 1944, their supplies greatly diminished, Machus and Noyes decided to try their luck in the town of Trasacco. Fortunately, the blizzard which limited movement on any level, also affected the Germans' activities as well. Entering the town, they went unnoticed by the garrison soldiers as their attentions were occupied with clearing areas and returning to their warm rooms. Hiding in clear sight had been their savior.

Entering the home of Carlo Brescianni, they were supplied with a place to sleep and food for the return trip to the mountains. During a second trip to the town, they learned that word was spreading about Allied officers visiting

the area. This increased their fears of discovery, so the duo returned to the cabin, the time frame late February 1944.

This epic narrative included the visitation on 8 March 1944 of two British commando lieutenants (on secret search-and-destroy missions) who heard about their group and stopped in for a brief stay before they packed off, and a downed but uninjured British spitfire pilot who walked up to the hut, relayed his short story, gathered his parachute along with his survival rations and headed for the coast south of Anzio. Discussing how their increased popularity was making their capture imminent, they again gathered their belongings and hiked over the mountain to a new cabin. (pp.110-128)

RECAPTURE AND RELOCATIONS

On 17 March 1944, a platoon of German Alpine troops sent Machus racing over the ridge to the sound of gunfire, only to be found by another platoon. Leader of the first patrol walked up and motioned for Machus to follow him. *"Kamerad kaput" he said.*

Jim Johnson, his escape buddy and trusted comrade, had died quickly. Questioned about others, Machus replied that they were alone. Informed that the group could be shot as spies for wearing civilian clothes, Machus replied: *'We were more interested in just keeping warm. Those tropical uniforms we had in Africa were not much good to us here.'*

The German officer nodded in agreement. After other group members were found and rendezvous with the remainder of a full company occurred, they marched twelve miles to the R&R center at Chivita. Captain Noyes was interrogated first then announced that the commandant was taking them to dinner at the German-officers' mess to eat the best meal they had eaten in a month, but it came at a price.

> *Noyes again recited their experiences since Africa, but the German's expression showed skepticism. "He thinks there are many more British and Americans in the hills. Seems a decent chap, but I do not think the questioning is over." (pp.129-133)*

Taken by truck that evening to nearby Sora, Machus and Noyes saw artillery flashes as they entered the stone walled building, which served as a collection point jail for front-line prisoners.

> *'Damn, so close!' Machus exhaled bitterly. 'We stayed too long in one place. If we had only decided to leave sooner!'* (p.134)

Interrogated the next day at noon, both repeated their previous statements. Still convinced that the American and the Brit were telling half-truths, the prisoners were recalled the next afternoon to the intelligence officer's room. After a much-appreciated bath and another dinner, the German officer used another tactic.

> *"I know Germany cannot possibly win this war, but there will possibly be a negotiated peace soon. So why not do your friends back in those mountains a favor, and help us bring them out of that miserable life?"* (pp.136)

Receiving the same answers, he sent them back to jail.

The next morning, Noyes and Machus joined other prisoners from their compound along with additional Allied POWs as the truck convoy expanded. By sunrise the next day they were thirty miles from Rome.

> *At 1000 hours they wheeled into the old national guard headquarters at Farasabina, now used as a collection point to handle the heavy flow of prisoners. About 3000 Allied prisoners were here, most captured in the heavy fighting near Cassino. For easier control, the Germans had divided the camp into smaller fenced compounds, about fifty yards square.*
>
> *A bustling rail center could be seen a mile from the camp. As Noyes and Machus watched, a flight of four flying fortresses came over at noon. The prisoners cheered wildly when the 500-pound bombs exploded in the rail yards and blasted dirt and debris skyward. A feeling of exhilaration swept through Machus as he watched the first retaliatory strike against the enemy he had seen since the raids on the little airfield rear Bari almost a year ago. Air raids continued almost daily—the Americans flying forts at noon, and the Lancasters at midnight.* (pp.139,140)

Tragically, one such attack contained a dark side: as the prisoners watched in horror, navigation errors caused bombs to rain down on their POW compound instead of on the rail yard. Several barracks disintegrated, the ground shook with tremors, and men everywhere dropped to the ground, hoping to avoid the carnage. Friends and enemies alike endured the same fate—war at its worst. (p.141)

Air raids continued through April 1944 without incident.

On 1 May 1944 Machus and Noyes boarded a bus with others and by the following morning, they were near Florence, at Latrina. Quartered with 3000 American enlisted men and 200 officers, all endured poor-quality soup and ten empty days and nights. Their next stop, via truck convoy, was Mantova. It was better organized with the distribution of new clothing from the British Red Cross.

May 18 under heavy guard, the prisoners were marched to a line of box cars, given a three-day supply of bread and locked in. Passing through the Brenner Pass and Austria, they entered Germany, through Munich, finally arriving at Moosburg.

MOOSBURG

The facility at Moosburg was the largest prisoner of war camp Machus had seen. American and British prisoners from Italy were collected and redistributed at the former army training base. A large detachment of guards met the tired, hungry prisoners and turned them over to camp authorities for processing according to nationality. Machus reported to a British major, the top-ranking prisoner officer. Barracks lined the company streets for a full quarter mile, housing over 10,000 prisoners. Machus was assigned to the American side, Noyes to the British sector. They shook hands, momentarily reliving the months shared together that had forged a never-ending bond. (p.145)

With more physical space available, Machus renewed his hopes of escape while checking out the American side enclosure during his five-mile hikes each day. Food was at the bare existence level, but an occasional Red Cross packet provided a few candy bars and a tin of concentrated food. Even drinking water was scarce. (p.145)

The first week of June 1944 arrived and the compound buzzed with questions about invasion.

On 6 June Machus and his barracks' mates were astounded when a German captain ran down the street shouting: 'Die Aerikaner und die Englander sind in Frankreich gelandet! The Americans and English have landed in France!' The German officer entered the headquarters room of Machus's barracks and repeated his message to the senior officer. The news was soon announced to the assembled POWs, all eagerly awaiting the official statement that might shed more details on the landing in France.

The prisoner's hopes soared, and a feeling of jubilation swept through the camp. Maybe Germany would make overtures for a truce. But nothing happened, and the brief feelings of exultation faded. A small number of prisoners moved out each day, destined for the big prisoner of war camps deep inside Germany.

Machus's turn came a week after the Allied landings in France. He and eleven other American officers boarded a bus to Munich in the custody of a middle-aged major, an innkeeper in civilian life. It was his responsibility to deliver prisoners to OFLAG 64, in German occupied Poland. Four guards accompanied them. (p.147)

As the senior American officer in the group, Machus was asked to sit with the German major whose American English was near perfect. He had visited the states three times and had hosted guests in Germany. Sharing information to pass the time, they spent all day at the Munich train station before boarding another train. Viewing landscapes through the car's windows, Machus noted destruction everywhere. Finally, the major spoke, "*We should not be at war with America",* he said quietly. *"Germany is committing national suicide."* (pp.147-149)

With a newsboy shouting "*Extra! Extra!*" everyone assembled to learn that an attempted assassination of Hitler had failed. Death sentences would be carried out for those involved. (p.150)

ARRIVAL AT OFLAG 64

Several days later, on a wheezing bus, they drove through gates of a large military complex near Szubin. (p.150)

> *When each new prisoner checked in, he was ordered to strip. The clothes were examined closely, and Machus's long hoarded 30,000 French North African francs, which he had carefully sewn into the waist band of the new British uniforms at Mantova were found and confiscated. The POWs drew new American uniforms, two turtle neck sweaters, wool socks, and two overcoats from the Red Cross store.* (p.150)

POWs arriving at a new camp were often met by someone they knew—an effective practice which inspired comradeship.

Colonel Alger was awaiting the new arrivals when he spotted Machus and approached him during his in-processing. After shaking hands, they spent the next two hours sharing views about the battle of Sidi bou Zid, survival or demise of personnel under Alger's command, and the present circumstances of commanders like Waters and Drake. Camp numbers included about 600 men, all American ground officers. Information also included his barracks assignment and general information about camp organization.

> *Lieutenants Holder, Durgin, and Marlowe heard of his arrival and quickly converged on Machus's barracks. Emotions surfacing were hidden beneath the exuberance of the reunion and the strong handclasps that conveyed an unspoken bond.* (pp.151-153)
>
> *That evening, Colonel Alger met Machus and guided him through the bunk areas on the second floor of the administration building. 'Have a surprise for you,' he said. In one of the closets, at the end of the room, a concealed panel opened to show narrow stairs that led to the attic. They closed the panel behind them and Machus followed Alger to a camouflaged space hidden under the eves where three officers huddled around a small table radio. Alger smiled at Machus's quizzical glance.*
>
> *"Some of our men speak Polish and German quite well. One is our battalion radio warrant officer. He and others made friends with several of the civilian maintenance workers. It was simple. They like American cigarettes. We wanted radio parts. The civilians were escorted in by guards who stayed right with them, so it was a bit tricky slipping our people the parts. Took us almost a year to get everything we needed one part at a time. So now we know the general war situation. I am the S-2* [Intelligence Officer]. *No notes*

> *are taken. One officer is assigned from each barracks to disseminate information. I would like you to handle the job for your barracks*." (pp.153,154)

Machus also acquired information about the camp's operating procedures, including daily roll calls, military protocol between the SAO (Senior American Officer) Colonel Drake—then Colonel Goode when Drake was repatriated—and the German Kommandant, Colonel Schneider. Other services included recreational facilities, thanks to the Swedish YMCA representative, Henry Soderberg, which supplied sports and game equipment, musical instruments, and a library.

Colonel Alger also made Machus aware of the ever-present guards, watch towers and the improbable chance of success by escaping '*under the wires*.' Asked about tunnels, he was told these ventures had been abandoned.

> *A letter to Elaine Machus from Oflag 64 in early September 1944 was the first message received from Harris since shortly before he had moved from Chieti. When he escaped into the mountains in 1943, the Red Cross could shed no light on his disappearance*. (p.156)

The bake shop on West Maple was still open for business and with friends and even strangers volunteering their time. *"People from all walks of life help; the feeling is strong that we are all in this war together."*

MIXED MESSAGES AND HARDSHIPS

In October, Machus was summoned twice about '*missing Red Cross packages*,' with charges later dropped. This was just one tactic used by the Germans to diminish the loyalty Americans shared. Whispers about Germany losing the war became open rumors and this reality soon prompted new rules:

> *All stored items and any valuable objects were ordered turned in. Red Cross packages were moved from the camp, and a new order prohibited the prisoners from possessing more than 24 hours' supply of food on hand. Red Cross boxes must be share between seven men and in recognition of the Black Market value of cigarettes, the new limit per man was three packs.* (p.157)

News about German losses including destroyed bridges and railroads was met with higher morale on the part of the Americans, but this also meant that fewer Red Cross boxes would be delivered. Meals now consisted of coffee and bread for breakfast and soup for supper. As more prisoners were added to the camp's rolls, conditions became desperate.

> *November 1 the first snow arrived and on 10 November, fifty more officers arrived from the Western front, the same day that marked a month without Red Cross packages and a loss of 10 pounds for Machus in one month.*

On 19 November SS Troops confiscated ninety complete American uniforms from the POWs. Machus lost a field jacket and a woolen undershirt. 'Up to no good,' Machus thought.

November 30, Thanksgiving meal was less than hoped for but the men appreciated camp cooks' efforts. Regular letters from Elaine began to appear—offsetting Harris's continued weight losses which mirrored those of other prisoners.

News from the front was mixed: On 16 December, the Ardennes counterattack occurred. Stolen American uniforms used by English speaking commandos created chaos and disorder, but on 23 December, the weather broke and Allied planes and ground troops turned Hitler's victory into failure.

Christmas Day 1944 was celebrated with special rations from Red Cross stores, while camp musicians played during and after dinner. Despite Colonel Goode's good intentions, many POWs were silent, engrossed in thoughts of home and family. 'The second Christmas since the Kasserine Pass battle,' Machus reflected as he sat on his bunk, lost in reverie. In spite of the conditions around him, Machus forced himself to continue his daily five-mile hikes.

Camp strength soared to about 1400 prisoners which placed heavy strain on the already short food supplies. The new arrivals were part of the thousands captured during the Battle of the Bulge, and for the first time included French and Polish officers. No more Red Cross packages would get through the crippled German rail system. (pp.157-161)

January conditions within the camp continued to deteriorate. Prisoners slept in their clothes as the barracks were no longer heated. Skimpy rations led to malnutrition and work details were discontinued. Morales were at their lowest.

News of the war's progress became more important to the POWs as they listened to reports of Russian advances on a 300-mile front. Oflag 64 would be in the path of the Russian troops. The POWs' future now took on a new look, and speculation changed each day on what would happen to the camp and the men. Machus and other listeners briefed fellow POWs in their respective barracks. Lights were out at 10 p.m. Machus observed the movements of many families traveling West away from the approaching Russians. (pp.162-164)

THE LONG MARCH AND ESCAPE

On 20 January 1945 the afternoon inspection "*Keine Musterung!"* was canceled and the Oflag 64 prisoners were alerted to pack for marching the next day.

> *That evening, Machus sorted out all non-essentials and dug out hoarded candy bars and two cans of Spam. Red Cross stores were emptied and each man received a small food box. Wearing every article of clothing he owned (two suits of underwear, his uniform, two sweaters and two overcoats), Machus joined 1200 other marchers departing the front gate around 10 a.m. in minus 30-degree weather. Thoughts were also centered on the 300 left behind in the hospital.* (p.165)

Guards, ever alert for escape attempts within the four columns of marchers, forced the POWs to keep a smart pace through lunch. By late afternoon harsh conditions took their toll when some POWs dropped out—possibly shot—as the march pressed forward. Hearing heavy artillery sounds coming from the East, Machus also noted the removal of town and street signs—efforts to confuse the Russians as they maneuvered their armies forward.

Darkness appeared by 1630, so marchers spent the first night in a barn near Keynia; many POWs were forced to endure freezing conditions beyond closed doors as the barn area filled quickly.

> *Machus noted the guards patrolling outside the fence, again making escape impossible. He, along with buddies Holder, Durgin, and Marlowe, were among those caught outside. No food was given, but the prisoners did have their final Red Cross boxes.*

Facing the reality of freezing to death by daybreak, the men set watch details as they took turns exercising and resting throughout the night.

> *The next morning, the march resumed without issued food or drink. Those unable to continue were left in the barn under guard. The Germans apparently had no plan except to use the POWs as hostages.* (pp.166-168)

> *Colonel Alger pulled a small crudely fashioned sled that carried personal belongings and also served as a hiding place for notes, maps, and parts of the radio. A fellow officer carried other parts. The radio was reassembled at night for clandestine listening to Allied news and instructions.* (p.169)

That evening, three much larger barns located near Osiek Nad Notecia were commandeered. Still, no food was offered but they were warmer. The group of four, trading information among themselves, decided to escape at the first opportunity, but not together—smaller numbers were better. Day three they learned that some of their German guard keepers had deserted during the night—resulting in fewer watchers. This prompted Colonel Schneider to locate SS troops as replacements; therefore, the march was still on!

Confirming with Colonel Alger that he was going to escape, Machus listened as Alger responded: "*I would like to go with you, but I have responsibilities to the POWs and I need to stay with the column to help our guys in every way possible. As you know, Colonel Waters and I are now senior American officers." Machus nodded, aware that Colonel Goode was not well.* (p.170)

The march resumed until late afternoon when Machus requested and received permission to use the bathroom. Noting a few minutes later that the column was still present in the area, he decided to make his way to another hay barn and climbed into the upper rafters. German guards arrived to shoot holes throughout the structure, but Machus was deeply embedded in the hay and avoided being hit. After the guards left with the marchers, he waited until full dark before making his way to a nearby farmhouse and knocking on the door. Immediately recognized by his American uniform, the couple who spoke only Polish bade him welcome by hand signals and fed him generous portions of bread and vegetable soup by their warm fireplace. While sleeping in the attic that night, his mind reflected on this situation and those similar in Italy.

The next morning, after consuming a warm breakfast of sausage and bread, he accepted a gracious gift from the Polish wife of a long overcoat with a pocket filled with a bread loaf. Machus thought, 'At least *the Germans should not pay any attention to me in this coat'. He shook hands with the couple and walked out into the sub-zero cold. The farmer placed his hands on Machus's shoulder and pointed in the direction to go. "Z Bogiem" he said and made the sign of the cross. A renewed confidence stirred in the fugitive. 'Once contact is made with the Russians, all my wanderings and troubles will be over'. A naïve thought he soon discovered.* (pp.169-175)

Traveling among others throughout the day, he slept in an old barn and ate the blessed bread as his next morning meal. Temperature around minus 40 degrees, he proceeded through the new day and heard gunfire but saw no one. Sleeping for another night in a deserted barn, he noted a sleigh ahead.

> *'Me Amerikanski Offizier,' he shouted out the Russian terminology for an American officer, then opened wide his long civilian overcoat to expose his uniform. When the Russian looked puzzled, Machus shouted twice more, enticing the Russian to exit, beat on his chest and display a Russian insignia on his fur hat. 'Me Russki Offizier. Stalin, Churchill, Roosevelt!' Then drawing on his entire English vocabulary of familiar lend-lease name, he added: 'Studebaker! General Motors!'* (pp.176-179)

When asked to be taken to Russian headquarters, the Russian officer declined but pointed in the direction he should follow. Eventually he found the Russian 'headquarters' in a basement city hall. Finding chaos instead of structure, Machus was startled but greatly relieve when he heard and saw the grinning faces of Durgin and Holder, "*Hello, Mac. Good to see you."*

Taken upstairs to see the rich, now destroyed Polish furnishing, they slept on sofas and hoped for a ride to Warsaw. Living on bread and soup the Poles

brought, the trio decided to take action after three days with no rides being offered. Making their way to another town and finding no assistance from the Russians except, "Nyet!", they sought shelter on the second floor of a private house. Returning to headquarters the next day, they received the same response and decided to return to Oflag 64. Entering the now Russian manned main gates, they gestured to their uniforms and their need for bread. Pointed to a barracks by the guard, they found 25 other American officers, ex-prisoners from another POW camp.

Told that the Russians had refused to give them any assistance, Lieutenants Holder and Durgin remembered connections made during Oflag 64 camp days with one of the civilian maintenance workers named Nitka Tadeusz. The next day Durgin found Nitka and returned with bread and an invitation to dinner. Unfortunately, the rich meal left them violently ill. (pp.180-186)

On 2 February, an independent Russian unit provided slaughtered beef meat for the hungry men stranded at Oflag 64, an action which helped to solve one immediate problem. When told by a local Pole that they should find Marshall Zhukov's headquarters at Praga, just across the Vistula River from Warsaw since last summer, Marcus again decided to go-it-alone. Later, viewing a sign that read WARSZAWA, 422 kilometers, Machus exclaimed, '*Gad, that's a long ways!'* (p.187)

At dusk, he was invited in by another family who fed him and offered a bed in front of their fireplace. The same scenario occurred after his next day's journey with one addition—the entrance of a Russian captain and his orderly.

> *A mixture of three languages resulted in an invitation to travel with them to Warszawa. Entering the main East-West highway, the Russian officer flagged an empty east-bound supply truck and they all crowded into the cab.*
>
> *In late afternoon they arrived at Hohenzaltern, where the driver left them in the center of town at an old two-story frame hotel. Paint-peeled and dilapidated, it was still a welcome stop when the captain secured a room with one bed. The three consumed a loaf of bread and turned in, with Machus between the Russian and his orderly.* (pp.187,188)

Their next transportation was aboard an old steam engine in the warm cab. Three hours later, their trip complete, the Russian officer escorted Machus to a Polish home where he ate a goose dinner, exchanged stories about America and spent the night.

> *The next morning, aboard a Russian army truck, Machus rode with his companions until the truck turned toward the captain's base. Receiving directions to move straight ahead on the main road to Warsaw, Machus walked steadily eastward, finding deserted streets to once built-up areas now bearing the scars of German rage and revenge, acts ordered in punishment for the Warsaw uprising.* (pp.189,190)

Entering a once proud home, Machus found instead stacks of frozen bodies—fully dressed in German uniforms. Too exhausted to travel on, he found an empty bed in this macabre environment and fell into a restless sleep. Continuing his walk the next morning through more devastation, he felt relief when he reached the Vistula River and crossed over to Praga, quickly noticing the abrupt change: busy streets with no destroyed homes or businesses!

Discarding the Polish overcoat and displaying his American unform proudly, he requested information on locating Zhukov's headquarters. Finding it eventually, his pleas to see an officer who could assist him, he was shuffled off to a different building which contained dissidents bound for Siberia. Realizing his highly dangerous situation and probable fatal mistake, Machus pushed the guard off balance, returned to the main headquarters and demanded to see the commanding officer. (pp.191-193)

REACHING REMBERTOV

Ignored, cold and desperate, Machus finally achieved the attention of a lieutenant who understood some English. Including him in a group of British non-commissioned officers, they proceeded to the village of Rembertov where Machus recognized Durgin, Holder, and Frank Diggs. (pp.195-196)

Ushered by the Russians through the gate of a large, old armory-type building, the guides then turned and headed back to Praga.

> *The Americans entered the building to find living conditions even worse than they had ever endured at any of the POW camps: no heat, lights, cots, or bunks. Everyone slept on the floor. No running water. Sanitation 'facilities' were the open field. Inside temperature was below freezing.*

Over 300 British and Americans now occupied the building. Russian replies to urgent requests being sent to the American Embassy in Moscow remained the same: *Communications still tied up with war messages.* (pp.196,197)

This prompted Durgin and Machus to walk to Rembertov. Using his overcoat for barter, they received only two loaves of bread. Three days later, urgent messages sent directly to Marshall Zhukov prompted a truck's arrival with captured German rations.

> *The Russian aide presented the rations with a grandiose wave. "Compliments of the Marshall to the American and British officers."*
>
> *"We do not do it that way," the senior American officer told the aide tersely. "We share equal portions in the field. This food will be divided equally among all the enlisted men and the officers."* (p.197)
>
> *The hour was 0200 on 16 February at the Russian detention camp near Praga when Machus awakened to a commotion in the center of the first floor. The Russian aide was speaking: "The American*

> *and the British Embassies in Moscow have been notified" he told his audience as if tremendous difficulties had been overcome*. (p.199)

Five days later, Americans and British marched to a rail station outside of Praga and boarded waiting box cars. Each man received two loaves of bread for the four-to five-day trip to Odessa. Inebriated guards enabled lax discipline, the doors stayed open for fresh air, and rest stops provided opportunities for the men to walk outside and barter for firewood used in the box car's stove. (p.200)

ODESSA

Another seven days would elapse before the train pulled into the rail station at Odessa. The men were then marched to an old Italian Consulate and handed bread. Many were ill from exposure and malnutrition—including Holder who was admitted to a make-shift hospital. (p.200)

Early March arrived with the American and British Embassy aides from Moscow. When asked about the delays, the young aide explained that he had been in Moscow since the US entered the war and still did not understand the Russians. Rumors were spreading that Stalin got everything he wanted and the embassy was not told until 15 February that the Americans were being held at Praga. (pp.200 - 202)

SAILING FOR HOME

On March 10, their ship was ready to sail, so Durgin rescued Holder from the hospital and they all boarded as the ship moved away from the dock. (p.202)

> *A short shower. Food! A comfortable bunk. When Machus slipped between clean sheets the ship shuddered as the tempo of the propellers suddenly increased when the ship's bow faced the open sea. For the first time in over two years, a sense of thanksgiving and security enveloped him. His deep-rooted instincts for survival had won.* (p.202)

Sailing across the Black Sea and through the Bosporus Strait to Istanbul, Turkey, the ship took on fresh supplies and sailed down the Adriatic and across the Mediterranean to Port Said, Egypt. Discarding their ragged outfits, they indulged in long showers, donned new uniforms, and were allotted cash advances in Egyptian money. A special meal was next: New York sirloins and apple pies, a la mode.

> *Five days at Port Said for army and C.I.C. interrogations. Then a week at Naples, Italy before Machus boarded an American troop ship home to Boston. He was detailed in Boston until a State Department official arrived from Washington. Questioning of the returned POWs continued for hours. "No leaves will be granted*

until you all sign an agreement not to talk about the Russians." (p.204)

AWARDS AND DECORATIONS

For his courage and actions under fire during the battle for Sidi bou Zid, Captain Machus O. Harris received a Purple Heart and a Silver Star.

NEWS TRAVELS FAST

When the girl at the Western Union office in Birmingham, Michigan, received the War Department message that Machus was safe, she became the town crier and was joined by 25 others as she ran to the bakery. No word had reached Elaine for months and everyone in the town of 12,000 now knew that one of their own was coming home! (pp.203,204)

CIVILAIN LIFE

The Machus family reunited at his homecoming and through their efforts built a national chain of bakeries and restaurants, including the award-winning Red Fox in Blomingfield Township. Civic minded, Harris Machus was recognized through numerous awards and recognitions, included his appointed Presidency of the National Restaurant Association where he served as its director for 10 years.

CLOSING COMMENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: In reading the manuscript, I am again reminded of the devotion and bravery of our men and of our POW experiences. Our POWs who were at Oflag 64 are among the finest groups of Americans with whom it has been my pleasure to serve.

General John Knight Waters

United States Army, Retired

Crimean Conference

4 February 1945, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and Marshall Stalin, along with their top military aides, met for the historic Crimean Conference. Before the conference adjourned 11 February, agreements were reached on the more sensitive postwar problems and goals, and for the first

time, military chiefs of staff for Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union conferred together on military strategies for the war's duration.

Stories of secret agreements between the Allied leaders and Stalin were denied. But Stalin was now in a position to successfully blackmail his Allies for the return to Russia of ALL Russian POWs and even civilians and their children who had fled Russia years before the war. His pawns were the tens of thousands of Allied POWs now in areas overrun by Russian armies. The secret agreement, and the forced repatriation that followed, became death sentences for thousands, and forced labor in the infamous camps for hundreds of thousands of the more than two million people forcibly returned to Russian soil. *The Last Secret by Nicholas Bethell. Published by Basic Books, 1974.*

Biography written by Kriegy Research Group writer Ann C. Rogers