

Excerpt from the book "The Colonel" by James F. Skells, pp 64-71

From the end of February until the middle of May we were down in Southern Italy near Salerno. There were fine training grounds. As our replacements came in and filled up the companies to full strength, small unit training began. This progressed until the time when it was possible to have full battalion size exercises with supporting arms fire. The Germans had erred at Mount Castellone in not following their barrage closely. Our artillery was good and we practiced forward movement under the protection of close artillery fires to the front.

During this period I got in a week's rest at Sorrento and Capri. This area is very beautiful and interesting because of its historical riches. Treading where Emperors of Rome had lived on the heights of Capri; visiting the world famous Blue Grotto - these are the things that took our minds off the war for a time. These rest areas are very necessary for troops in combat. Later on I was to hear, in Hawaii, of efforts to take Fort De Russey away from the Army. As long as we have troops in the Pacific Ocean area this wonderful rest and change of pace resort will be needed. It was during this period that I received a battlefield promotion to Lieutenant Colonel and the D.S.C. award.

After this recuperative period my battalion, as part of the 143rd Infantry Regiment, was moved by our Navy to the Anzio Beachhead. As we landed a desultory shell was still landing in the water now and then. I moved my battalion into a staging area and awaited developments. Our objective, which we had expected and trained for, was already taken by the 15th Infantry of the 3rd Division. On May 23 we were in a rough line across a valley south of the little town of Velletri. On the evening of May 25 my liaison officer at Regimental Headquarters reached me about half an hour before dark. He brought a change in plans - my battalion was to attack Velletri at midnight. This was contrary to what was expected so I needed a quick look at the ground to be covered during the night, before darkness came. I went out too far and I, my S-3 and my driver were captured by a German outpost manned by paratroopers.

Being caught in this way is the end of the world at the time. I thought to myself, "This cannot be me in this stupid predicament. I must be dreaming." But there we were surrounded by three or four machine pistols.

By stages we were moved back from the front through the Herman Goering Division, Kesselring's Headquarters, Lake Como, a Rome motion picture studio being used as a P.O.W. detention camp, Florence, Verona, Brenner Pass through the Alps from Italy to Austria, Munich, Leipzig, Berlin, to Schubin, Poland, the location of OFLAG 64. The last was an officers' P.O.W. Camp for American Ground Force officers only.

Along the way several interesting events occurred. In Rome an attempt was made to question me but it was not pressed. I was a lieutenant-colonel, or an oberst-lieutenant in German. My captors thought I was mistaken and that my rank was ober-lieutenant or first lieutenant. They just could not believe I was old enough to have the rank I claimed. They may have thought I was a plant or something.

At the way station after Rome, I forget the city, it was June 6 and the Normandy Invasion began. The German guards seemed just as elated as we were at the news. They said, "Now the war will be over soon and we can all go home".

When the train stopped at Innsbruck railroad yards an air raid siren caused everybody outside the locked boxcars we were in to run for cover. We were fortunate that Innsbruck was not the target that time.

At Munich, Bavaria, the P.O.W. site was a collecting point for people of many nationalities. In addition to Americans there were Canadians, British, Russians, Yugoslavians and several other smaller contingents. Many had been there a long time. One individual was a member of the British Royal Family. The Important thing was to try to keep busy and fit. We exercised by playing volleyball with the Sikhs from India and the British. It was a surprise to me that the Sikhs were so large in stature – my idea of India was that all the people were of small build. They were very good athletes too. It seemed that they held Americans in deep respect. When the time came for us to move to another camp one member of their group presented me with a chocolate bar as a farewell present. That gesture, under the prevailing circumstances, touched me deeply. I couldn't help thinking of what an incongruity it was – an American receiving instead of giving a bar of chocolate.

As we were approaching Regensburg I remembered that this was the place of one Napoleonic victory in years past and was memorialized in poetry too. The scene shifted to the present as the train came to an abrupt halt on the outskirts of the city. The reason for this was soon apparent – a huge armada of our planes was overhead. The target was an underground Messerschmidt factory, as I learned later. The view of this attack was like being in a ballpark. They unloaded their bombs, and flames went high into the air ahead of us – it looked like a direct hit. Again that line from a poem read long ago... "We French took Ratisbon (Regensburg)" came to mind.

In the middle of the night our train arrived at a station, or what was left of it, in Leipzig. The air raid sirens started blowing and we were hurried to a shelter. Twice, on the way, citizens started a heated conversation with our German guards. I asked one of the guards later what the apparently irate men said to him. He replied, "They wanted to know why we were being taken to a shelter while their people were being bombed outside". It was not difficult to understand their reasoning. We were fortunate that our guards carried out their orders to get us to OFLAG 64.

At this P.O.W. Camp the main consideration, as always, was to keep busy. The Camp operation was self-administered by our own people. Supplies, the principal item being food, were turned over to our people for preparation and distribution. Such items as food parcels, clothing, books musical instruments, and mail reached us, after a fashion, because of the International Red Cross. I played soccer and walked around the enclosure for exercise. For mental exercise I taught algebra --many of our younger officers planned to resume their formal education after the war.

Upon arrival at this Camp only a small number of officers were there, mostly from the campaign in North Africa. As the weeks went by the number rose to several hundred as those from the campaign in Europe arrived. After Christmas, 1944, things began to fall apart. The German guards became very nervous and we knew something of major importance was brewing. Mail and food parcels ceased coming and all of us began to show signs of malnutrition.

As I recall it was January 16, 1945, when we packed up carrying whatever we could, and began a march toward the West. Later I learned that three Soviet Army Groups were moving abreast across Poland from the Vistula River. After marching all day we arrived at a collective farm near Exin. This farm was arranged with its barns in a quadrangle. We scattered into these to find a place to rest. During the night I decided to stay there and buried myself in a stack of straw bales in one of the barns. In the morning, after the sounds of the departing column died away I came out. About twenty compatriots had the same idea as I had. Our senior officers had told us that we could use our own judgment about doing this.

We paired off in order to avoid presenting the appearance of a hostile force, and each pair was on their own. My partner and I began moving as due east as we could figuring to meet the Russians. Captain Tony Lumpkin I shall never forget; I think we made a fine team. We made no effort to move by stealth and learned from the Polish farmers that all the German people had left that part of the countryside. Toward dark we were hailed a farmer and he fed us and put us up for the night.

During the night another pair of our group joined us. Neighbors came in to greet us every now and then and gave us running accounts on developments. It became apparent that in fact, all German people had left. We ourselves, the day before, had seen such groups moving with all their possessions stacked on a cart or old wagon. Here and there was a wagon that had broken down and been abandoned.

About noon of the next day a Russian patrol mounted upon a Studebaker truck, a White half-track and a Harley-Davidson motorcycle came into the farmhouse yard. Theirs was a festive air with flowers on their vehicles and no distrust of us in mind. Later in the day a column of self-propelled guns stopped on a main road about two hundred yards away. I decided that we had better make our presence known. Later on we might not fare so well if suspected of trying to conceal ourselves.

We approached the column and one of our number who could speak German (none of us knew any Russian to speak of) conversed with a member of the gun crews. They were very proud of their guns, which were larger than usual for self-propelled weapons. Radio operators of the gun crews were women, which was another surprise. All of the Russians seemed friendly until a Major, the column commander, came up. He looked troubled and seemed to be debating whether or not to shoot us. Discretion prevailed and he motioned for us to mount one of the covered Studebaker trucks and gave instructions to the driver as to where to take us. The truck was heated and carried a radio. One of the operators let us know in German that we had come close to getting shot. Russian troops had been warned that Germans might be encountered dressed in American O.D., as we were. This had happened during the Battle of the Bulge.

We were transported to an armored division command post. Much of their materiel was U.S.A. in origin. The C.P. therefore looked very similar to one of ours. After questioning by a Chief Lieutenant, who spoke English perfectly, the Russians were convinced that we were all right. Later that evening a general officer visited us. He was very cordial and presented us with some cigars to smoke. They were of excellent quality, having been captured from a German train. The following day travel to Russian Corps Command Post took place. We were the center of attraction for a sizeable group and were filmed and interviewed by Russian news people. Next we found ourselves back at our old Camp site at Schubin. Here a number of our people had been left behind because they were hospitalized. This time the place was under new management.

The Camp was selected by the Russians as a collecting point for U.S. nationals, for about a week. During this period all were organized for travel. We were then moved by trucks across Poland through Warsaw, which was almost completely leveled, and across the Vistula. This was on a wooden bridge which looked like an engineering marvel.

On the east bank of the Vistula was the city of Rembertow. Here the Polish Military Academy had once flourished. Now it was a collecting installation for many different groups. Most were quartered in one large building; this was once the academic building and had many separate rooms of various sizes. One room was assigned to a group of senior Italian officers. Another was for a group of Jewish women who had been slave laborers, identified by serial

numbers tattooed on their wrists. And so it went, each ethnic group had its separate room. I estimated that there were about 5,000 people in the one building, waiting for disposition.

Upon our arrival the administration of this place was turned over to us. There was no running water so people went outside for snow. The electricity was off so there was nothing but candlelight. Sanitation was impossible with no water. Many of the people were being treated at the Russian hospital but the evidence of pain and misery was abundant. It was the closest thing to Dante's Inferno I had ever seen either by picture or in reality. Among the officers present we had a lot of various talents. Colonel Tom Riggs went over to Warsaw and recovered a factory belt made of leather. We had ascertained this was all that was needed for electricity and water. I had noticed such a belt in passing through Warsaw. One officer became responsible for sanitation.

The Russians got us what they could in the food department, and another officer was appointed to run the Mess Hall. He cleared out all the people in the kitchen and replaced them with those with prior experience. In brief, the place was organized like a military unit, with responsibility for various functions assigned to people with experience in each case. Literally, in no time to speak of, the place was functioning properly. Water flowed, the lights worked, sanitation became evident, the Russian medical people cared for the sick and people ate hot meals.

Ever since returning to Schubin, a Russian Chief Lieutenant who spoke English well had been with us for liaison purposes. He did his best in every way - all foodstuffs and any other supplies had to be obtained by him. Under the circumstances he did a fine job. That soup, black bread and tea tasted excellent, and on one occasion the meal was supplemented with candy and wine.

During this period I slept very little. In the evenings the Russians' liaison officer and I talked about the future of the world. He claimed that it was his belief that communism would eventually prevail over the world because, to a Russian, it was the same as religion to people of the Western World. I am not so sure, though, that he really believed this; it may have been that he was simply saying what he did without conviction. He was not ignorant - he had graduated from the City College of New York and was educated in Berlin, too.

After about ten days of this we boarded a train for Odessa, on the Black Sea. First the train went through Brest Litovsk; a treaty of peace was once signed there as I recalled. That too was supposed to have ended war for all time. We saw enough of the countryside to observe that the tools of agriculture and the mode of transportation in use were near to that used in America about 1900.

Upon arrival in Odessa we were met by representatives of the U.S. Military Mission from Moscow. Their aid was given to us in our processing and in arrangements for departure by sea from the port of Odessa. We sailed on a British ship for Egypt. Further processing was accomplished there and some weight was gained back again. As we boarded another British ship for Naples it was evident that most of us bore a more healthy glow. En route, administration was about completed, including new service records for all. The stay in Naples was short and by early April most of us were aboard the Mariposa bound for the U.S.A. This ship, incidentally, was the same one on which I had left the U.S.A., almost two years before.

We were at sea when the news of President Roosevelt's death reached us. I recalled that day, June 12, 1935, when I had shaken his hand at graduation ceremonies at West Point. I reviewed in my mind the leadership he had contributed to his country, from deep depression

days during the early thirties through the war years for such a long, long time. I thought, too, of what a spot it was for President Truman to follow such a man at such a time, with a war still going on.

The Mariposa docked in Boston and the New England contingent of returnees, including myself, since my family was living in Connecticut, went to Camp Miles Standish. From there we departed on rest and recuperation leave.

This leave period was for forty-five days. It was spent visiting relatives for the most part. During this period an experience with the rationing system sticks in my mind. Getting a tire for the car and gasoline so that I could use that tire when I got it seemed like an awful lot of effort. Eventually the people running the program granted my request. I had no idea what was entailed in this process, having been away for two years. When the leave ended I was happy and I was more than ready to go back to work.

Accompanied by my family I reported to the Hot Springs, Arkansas, General Hospital. There a complete physical examination was completed before assignment to duty.