

GUEST OF THE THIRD REICH

story and illustrations by Jay Drake
Captured November 28, 1944.

Jay Drake was a 2nd Lieut. in the 379 Field Artillery Battalion, 102nd Infantry Division. This is his story of being taken prisoner on the Siegfried Line and spending the war surviving as a POW.

CAPTURE

Early in the evening our forward observer crew was informed that we were to accompany a unit of infantry from the 405th Regiment of our division on a night mission. The objective of the mission for the infantry was to secure a point along the highway that runs between the towns of Linnich and Gellenkirchen and interdict the German supply traffic using the road. Our objective was to call in artillery on any German positions or movement in the area.

Our forward observer crew consisted of myself, Bernard Pelza a radio operator, and Albert Brent driver and radio operator. We traveled a safe distance by jeep but had to abandon mechanized transport in fear of alerting the enemy to our presence. I left Brent with the jeep and a spare radio in the event it was necessary to relay our radio commands to the artillery fire direction center. Pelza and I accompanied the infantry company carrying our two piece radio and field equipment. On our way out we received considerable small arms fire and had to hug the earth several occasions. About half way to our objective we passed a large hay stack that was on fire.

Once we arrived close to the highway we started digging in. I could see artillery muzzle blasts coming from a position on the other side of the highway. As soon as I registered the guns on a "base point" this would be my first target. Pelza set up the radio to call in our fire coordinates could not make contact with either the artillery fire direction center or Brent back at the jeep. We then realized that our radio had taken a round, small arms fire right through the heart. Left without a functioning radio we were forced to attempt to return to our jeep for the spare radio and back to our observation position before morning light.

We started back, following the same route we had taken to the objective. As we approached the burning hay stack, we jumped into a large crater to rest. We had no sooner hit the bottom of that crater and we found ourselves on the receiving end of small arms fire. Looking over the edge I observed a German force of tanks and infantry moving across our proposed route. Three infantry men and a tank were headed toward us. Capture was imminent, as we were no match for a tank and the light from the burning hay stack made concealed escape impossible.

I had a German P38 pistol in a shoulder holster that I removed and hid under a large clump of dirt. It was not healthy to be captured with a German weapon in your possession. Next I removed the wax pencil markings on my map showing the selected base point and the German artillery position. We then raised our hands in compliance to the Germans command for our surrender.

The main interest of our captors was our cigarettes. They indicated that had we been English, French or Poles they would have killed us right there; "Americans goot." A German infantryman then escorted us a considerable distance back to a bunker and turned us over to a line outfit guard used us to load wounded Germans on stretchers into ambulances.

After some time passed I was directed to a bunker for interrogation by a German officer. He wanted to know what we were doing at the location where we were captured. I told him we were lost and had bypassed our unit in the dark. From that point on all he got was my name, rank and serial number.

He gave up questioning me and walked me to the bunker door just as Pelza and a German soldier were to load another wounded. The soldier in charge of the loading crew saw me exit the bunker and directed me to replace the German soldier assisting Pelza. The German officer said "I officer" so I sat in the field while Pelza and the German soldier loaded the remainder of the wounded.

At daybreak I was separated from Pelza and taken by jeep with another POW officer to Dusseldorf. That was the last I saw of Pelza. I later learned that both he and Brent made it back home safely after the war.

Dusseldorf was in shambles from Allied bombings. We were taken into the basement of a large building near a railroad siding and directed to down around the wall with a number of recently captured American soldiers. A German officer was making the rounds collecting the overshoe worn by the POWs. My overshoes would not fit over my combat boots so I had my dress oxfords on under them. I saw the officer coming and removed my oxfords and hid them under my coat. The German officer soon got to me and directed me to remove my overshoes, which I did, upon noting my stocking feet he let me keep my overshoes.

One by one we were led into a interrogation room. On a wall in the room was displayed the information they had on our division and others, including where we trained in the states, our date of arrival in France, etc. After several unsuccessful and threatening attempts to make us talk, they shipped us all out by rail.

Fifty five of us were loaded into a single box car. The helplessness of our situation became evident with the closing of the box car door and the sound of the locking latch being swung into place. Darkness surrounded us. The only light entering the boxcar were daggers of dusty light beams piercing through holes in the roof, torn through by the gun fire of previous strafing Allied aircraft. A constant reminder that death was a passenger.

We were given food for two days; however the train ride from Dusseldorf to Hannover Stalag XI took four days. Packed into the boxcar we were forced to rest in shifts. Half the men layed on the floor and the other half stood up. We were allowed to detrain twice in the four day trip to relax ourselves. The remainder of the time we used a corner of the boxcar.

STALAG XI-B

We arrived at Stalag XI, near Hannover, on December 3rd, 1944. The twelve officers were separated from the enlisted men and housed in a separate building. One of the main problems in our new quarters was trying to stay warm with the meager wood supply provided. Another problem being our trips to the latrine in the dark. As soon as it was dark the shutters on the windows were closed enveloping us in total darkness. Our sleeping bunks were at one end of the barracks and the latrine at the other end. The trip from the bunk to the latrine was about fifty feet, interrupted by many building columns. In order to avoid wacking your head on these columns you walked with your arms crossed in front of you. One night a resourceful POW noticed phosphorescent chips in the wood pile. Each night he would lay a path with the chips and collect them

morning. In the two weeks I spent in Stalag XI-B we were allowed one shave. That was administered by a Polish war prisoner.

On the 19th of December the twelve officers were loaded into a box car along with four guards for transport to Oflag 64 near Altbungund, Pol. This was a six day trip, arriving at our destination on Christmas Eve. We were being moved to an oflag because a stalag is for ground force enlisted men. Oflags are for officers.

OFLAG 64

This camp in Poland housed about 1400 American ground force officers. The air force was a separate branch in the German armed forces; therefore our Army Air Corps boys were kept in separate camps. The POW's were allowed to run the camp inside the barbed wire. They were in charge of the hospital, mess, entertainment and overall duties of running the camp. This was a favorable arrangement for both sides.

Incoming PO's were isolated until they were cleared. This assured us that there were no German plants to learn what was going on inside the camp (ie: escape plans, German and Polish language lessons, lectures on tactics, etc). We also had a short wave radio and each night it was tuned to the BBC to learn the latest war news. The news was then delivered to each barracks by a prisoner called "the bird". Also there was a tunnel that had been dug from one of the barracks to the outside of the barbed wire enclosure.

We received showers once a week. Water usage during our showering period was closely monitored so it was water on, get wet, water off, s up, water on, rinse, water off. Then we would put on the same clothes that were infested with body lice. Col. Goode, our senior American officer required all POWs to be clean shaven, shoes polished and to take daily walks around the compound yard to stay in some semblance of shape. We were issued a safety razor with one blade. The blade was kept sharp by honing it on the heel of our hand.

We received Red Cross food parcels, which were really welcomed, to supplement the meager food allowance from the Germans. Barley was added to many of our soups. Along with the barley you also got the meal worms, which when cooked, sank to the bottom of your bowl. Since you could not afford to discard any food you never looked into your bowl as you spooned out the last of the soup.

We had two head counts a day; one in the morning and another late in the day. We were organized into 26 platoons of fifty men each. To aid Germans in their count each platoon leader would indicate the number of men needed to fill his platoon to fifty men. The extras all came from last platoon.. We would then stand in the cold until all the missing men were accounted for.

In a couple of weeks we could hear the artillery and small arms fire of the advancing Russian Army and on January 20, 1945 we were told to prepare for a march west in an attempt to avoid the Russians. For a number of days previous we had been watching the fleeing German and Polish civilians heading west in their horse drawn wagons filled with their possessions. Those less fortunate carried what they could on their backs. The procession was continuous. The next day we would join them.

THE 39 DAY MARCH

Along with the Red Cross food parcels we would also get packages from home and the YMCA. It wasn't practical to keep the surplus provisions in our individual bunks. We had a warehouse where we could store the items and draw upon them as needed. The day before the march, January 21, all the POWs who had been here for some time (1 to 2 years) drew out their "banked" supplies of cigarettes, socks, scarves, long underwear etc.

Some of us had excess of certain items so we divided them among the more recent POWs who were without. Two days earlier you could not get a cigarette from anyone and today I had three cartons of cigarettes. I took them along for their anticipated trading value with the Polish civilians.

For the long march I had a long Polish Army overcoat, socks worn over my hands for mittens. I used long underwear bottoms for a hat, scarf face mask. Somewhere along the line my overshoes were taken from me so my footwear consisted only of my oxfords, which I can't believe I together for the remainder of my captivity. Fortunately I had a number of spare socks and shoe laces given to me by the old POWs. We each one blanket, rolled and carried over our shoulder, with the ends tied together at our belt line.

We all selected a buddy to help each other on the march. We shared our food with each other and huddled together at night in an attempt to warm. My buddy was Ed Lockert. Ed was a good scrounger and a loyal buddy through the long march.

About 1300 POWs left Oflag 64 in six inches of new fallen snow and temperatures well below zero. A number of weak or sick POWs were left behind in the hospital. The POWs who had dug the camp tunnel also stayed behind by hiding in the tunnel.

150 old Latvian guards accompanied the main body of POWs to keep us in line. We were mingled with the rest of the refugees. There was some assemblage of order for awhile, but as the day continued the stronger men made their way to the head of the column. As long as you kept moving you could keep from freezing.

We were billeted in large barns that first night. The next morning we woke to find that our guards had been ordered to the rear to fight a delaying action. Only the camp Oberst (senior) Lieut. Col. remained for our protection in case we were accosted by German soldiers. About 180 POWs took off that day as there was no one to stop them. My buddy and I (Ed Lockert), as well as the majority of the POWs, stayed as a main group, thinking it would be safer when we met the Russians.

Mid afternoon our guards came back and we set off down the road again. Each day we had hopes of being rescued by the Russians. That hope faded when we crossed the Oder River and observed the extensive fortifications being prepared by the Germans along the west side of the river. Our group turned north at this point and headed toward the Baltic Sea.

We would walk each day until shortly before dark. How soon before dark depended upon the presence of suitable accommodations. Up to this point we had been billeted at night in large barns on farms found along the way. We would stand outside until our platoon leader was assigned a spot in the barn. The Germans would then tell us what could be used for firewood (picket fences, old barn siding, etc). They would also designate a "shitzzan area". By now it was dark and many small cooking and warming fires would start up outside the barn. We would dry our socks and

... and by now it was dark and many small cooking and warming fires were built up outside the barn. The wood dry but green and in tin cans. We would boil our drinking water to keep away dysentery.

In one of the barns I found wheat kernels on the floor and sifted them out until I had two pockets full. Each night we would cook the kernels in a water filled can until they were softer; then we could chew the cooked kernels during the next day's march.

Our German ration each day was hot ersatz (reperked coffee grinds) coffee in the morning and 1/3 loaf of bread with soup and/or potatoes. This was supplemented by additional bread and food that we traded for while passing through the Polish towns. On three occasions we received Red Cross food boxes. God bless the Red Cross.

After the fires were extinguished we made our way back to the barn to find our bed space in the hay. Your one blanket served as both your bed spread and bed sheet. Your shoes were removed and placed next to your skin, under your clothing, to keep them from freezing solid so you could get them on in the morning. You would put on a dry pair of socks and be ready for bed.

Due to the heavy liquid diet it was necessary to make one or two trips outside to relieve yourself. You could not go in the hay as POWs would often be sleeping beneath you on the first floor of the barn. It took an hour to grope down the ladder and find your way outside. The return trip was even more difficult. You had to find our way back to your blanket in the pitch dark. Think finding your seat in a dark theatre is a challenge.

One day during one of our rest periods we were sitting in a ditch along a road when a large group of British POWs were marched through. I had a pack of cigarettes out when a British POW asked "How about a cigarette Yank?" I held up the pack, but due to our difference in elevation he had difficulty reaching me. A guard yelled at him to get in line and then hit him with the butt of his rifle. Just before he got hit he had removed two cigarettes from the pack. He put one to his lips and with a smile on his face offered the other one to the guard. Those British were a tough lot.

On several occasions the POWs who were too ill to travel were loaded into box cars and taken to nearby camps. We soon left Poland and the large barns and were billeted in schools, Hitler Youth Camps, old army barracks, and once in a naval base when we reached the Baltic Sea. Of these buildings had no heat, but they did offer better protection from the elements.

Our final walking destination was Parchine, Germany. We had traveled a total of 580 km, or 362 miles. We marched 33 out of the 39 days. 19 POWs started the march, 490 finished.

OFLAG XIII-B

In Parchine we were loaded onto rail cars for the ride to Oflag XIII-B in Hammelburg, Germany. Upon arrival we left the railroad siding and went up a steep hill outside the town where our German Oberst Lt. Col. assembled us for his last talk. He told us there was a general in charge of camp and that he would likely be sent elsewhere. He said he hoped the war would be over soon and that we would all return home safely.

Once inside the campground we were deloused and then searched by the guards. I had a small compass about the size of your thumbnail called an "asshole compass" as it was where you were expected to hide it prior to a search. I hid the compass in the bowl of my smoking pipe, packed tobacco on top of it and lit the tobacco. The compass came through undetected. I didn't realize how useful this compass was to be in a few weeks. Our short wave radio was smuggled into camp undetected so we continued to hear the latest war news.

We joined about 700 officers from the 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions captured during the Battle of the Bulge. In a separate compound on the camp grounds were kept 3000 Yugoslavian officers.

We enjoyed the rest from the road. We passed the time playing cards and on sunny days sunbathing after what we had been used to on the march from trading and stealing.

One day the Germans changed the orders and allowed us to go to the latrine singly down the main street in the camp. A guard order and shot and killed a POW named Weeks. We all lined the main street in the camp. Weeks was carried on a cart down the street and out the gate to a nearby cemetery. A bugler

