

By Peter Graffagnino

## WINTER SCENE, 1945

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Our mild present winter recalled the memory of a contrasting one 20 years ago. At that time our enforced domicile was Barracks 8A, Oflag 64, the German prisoner-of-war camp at Sczubin, in what used to be the old Polish Corridor. The winter months at a latitude of 54 degrees have some fairy-tale qualities, but most of them are better appreciated outside the confines of barbed-wire enclosures. When good weather prevailed, the days were crisp and clear but remarkably short. Darkness persisted until well past nine in the mornings and returned again by four in the afternoon. Snow was everywhere, and, in the rural village setting near which we were penned, there was a quiet beauty and hush that blanketed and obscured even the drab realities of a prison compound. The nights offered spectacular lightings of the dancing aurora borealis here at this proximity to arctic regions.

In late January of 1945 we were concerned less with the beauty of our surroundings than with the prospect of imminent liberation from our prolonged confinement. The German war effort was collapsing, and the eastern front had disintegrated before the Russian advance. The German garrison that was guarding the nearly 2,000 American officers in Oflag 64 was increasingly apprehensive about its own safety since the foremost salient of the Russian push was aimed almost directly at our camp. Worry was evident on the faces of our captors, and their preoccupation resulted in considerable relaxation of camp routine and discipline. We kept an operational map of the European fronts posted on the bulletin board in the main administration building, and whereas earlier we had always been careful never to alter it except in conformity with official German releases, then we were openly changing the battle lines once or twice daily in accordance with the BBC bulletins received over our clandestine radios. The German guards and officers were frequent visitors to the board, apparently trusting our information more than their own news reports, which inevitably proclaimed heroic battles and great German victories stemming the barbaric Russian advance.

As the Russians drew nearer and the sound of distant artillery could be heard for the first time, there was great rejoicing within the camp. Within a few days we confidently expected to see the Russian tanks and vehicles appear, the camp gates opened, and our careers as prisoners ended. But for most of us, it did not happen that way.

Twenty-four hours before the calculated arrival of our liberators, the German garrison, on orders from **Wehrmacht** headquarters, clamped down on discipline, assembled the prisoners and announced that for our protection they were evacuating us to a safer camp near Berlin. Only the sick and incapacitated were to be left in the camp. With two German doctors supervising, the American doctors (there were over two dozen of us by this time) were instructed to hold sick-calls and weed out all prisoners who were unfit to march.

In the hurried preparations for evacuation; there was great confusion and much indecision among the prisoners. Try to stay in the camp or march out? Since the Russians were our great buddies at the time, all of us would have preferred to stay. But there was also the uncertainty, not only of what might be in store, but of a possible desperate German reaction and reprisal (they still had all the guns) if confronted with a general revolt and uprising of the prisoners. After surviving one to three years of prison camp existence, there was a hesitation on the part of many of us to jeopardize our own personal survival by some heroic but premature resistance that could result in disaster. Especially with the end of the war in sight.

Many of the prisoners did choose to feign illness and turned up on the sick list. In the confusion, and in addition to the truly ill and bed-ridden (among whom was war correspondent Wright Bryan, managing editor of the *Atlanta Journal*), we were able to leave over one hundred "sick" officers in camp along with five or six doctors to care for them.

On the morning of January 21, the rest of us marched out. A holiday picnic atmosphere prevailed as we assembled in the bitter cold and gray light of morning and started through the opened barbed-wire gates. The temperature was 16 below zero, and we were bundled up in all of the clothing we owned, layer on layer and of countless variety, to the limit of what could possibly be worn and still permit motion. Most of us had knapsacks or lugged wooden suitcases, and, in addition, blanket rolls containing other possessions were slung over a neck or shoulder. Some had fashioned makeshift sleds of tin can strips and wooden bed slats, which they pulled behind them, piled high with canned food and odds and ends. POWs are like pack rats, and everything we had ever saved, accumulated, scrounged or made from scraps and empty food tins was draped on our coats or dangled from some pocket, belt or button.

We headed south initially, and the march (which for some of the group eventually covered 234 miles in 60 days) began briskly. Although we marched in platoon groups stretched out in long columns of two abreast, our appearance was anything but military and certainly not in keeping with our status as gentlemen and officers. We were a ragged, attenuated horde straggling and shuffling along like an endless procession of decrepit refugees. The more literary among us were reminded of Tolstoy's description in *War and Peace* of the Napoleonic army's retreat from Moscow, except that in place of dejection and despair, our mood was one of excitement and anticipation. The snow lay everywhere, three and four feet deep over the fields and valleys with drifts reaching as high as eight and nine feet. The heavy, blowing snowfall of the night before had ceased, and the daylight was bright and clear under the hazy sun. The packed, dry snow on the uncleared, rutted roads screeched audibly under the tread of hundreds of marching feet, and our disorderly, strung-out procession, contrasting darkly against the brilliant white, looked for all the world like an unending, disjointed serpent, emitting smoke from every pore, shrouded in the misty haze of the condensing vapors of our labored breathing.

But as we said, there was no despair, only excitement. Our hopes and spirits were high, and no searing, penetrating cold that stabbed with every breath and numbed our hands and feet could change them. We were outside of our pen of barbed wire for the first time in months or years, on the open road, unconfined and unmolested by the dejected and miserable armed guards who marched beside us. The scenery was ever changing. We had no real idea about where our icy feet were taking us. But there was joy and jubilation. We were on the move and somehow, headed home.

## WINTER SCENE (cont.)

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As we marched out of the prisoner-of-war camp in Poland in the sub-zero cold of late January 1945, we knew little of our destination nor what the Germans planned for us. The march had been organized hurriedly by our German captors in an attempt to evacuate the camp before the rapidly advancing Russians could overrun it. Oberst Schneider, the portly, officious commandant of the German garrison and his executive officer, Hauptman Menner, a kindly and apologetic Viennese, bustled impatiently around the camp's barbed-wire gates until the last of the departing prisoners had cleared, and then sped off in their small battered car, scooting and skidding past the marchers to reach the head of the column. The only other transportation available, a decrepit wood-burning truck that followed the column, carried on its open-back platform, supplies and mess equipment, along with a dozen or so grumbling guards to serve as relief relays for those who marched beside us.

The countryside through which we moved was blanketed under deep snow and above a steely hoarfrost haze, the skies were bright and the air was quiet and still. We were bundled in clothing with our heads and faces swathed in makeshift hoods of blankets, scarves and sweaters, but the cold was still penetrating and bone-chilling. The condensing vapor of our breathing crusted in fine icy crystals on our lashes and eyebrows and along the edges of the woolen coverings over our mouths and noses. There was no way to crowd more than a few layers of socks into a pair of GI shoes and it was our feet that suffered most.

In contrast to the unhappy armed guards who slogged along beside us, we were in high spirits. Most of us were burdened under packs and blanket rolls loaded with an accumulated hoard of canned and packaged food that we had squirreled away over the months from Red Cross parcels for just such an emergency. On that first day of marching, however, the discomforts of our staggering loads and chilled bodies were counteracted by the excitement of being out from behind barbed wire and on the open road again. The terrain was new, and our interest in the changing scenery was keyed to a fever pitch of alertness by constant speculation about opportunities to take off on our own and escape.

We headed south initially in the general direction of Posnan, a rail-center about sixty-five miles away, but after covering about six miles, our direction was abruptly changed to west and then again, in a short time, to north. Oberst Schneider, scouting on ahead in his car, had learned that the Russians had cut across below us.

For the next seven days we marched, covering 10 to 18 miles a day. There was no let up in the cold, but the weather remained favorable with only an occasional light snowfall. We traveled mainly on the secondary rural roads, over a zigging and zagging route, northward and westerly, our direction changing from day to day according to the whim of Oberst Schneider and the reports he received on his scouting excursions ahead of the column. It was evident that the whole area was in a state of confusion. At times, and particularly on the larger highways, we encountered streams of civilian refugees moving in the same direction as we; at other times they passed us in the opposite direction.

Znin, Wyrzysk, Kenia, Szamocin, Schneidemühl, Krojanke and Zlotow—we moved through towns, villages, farm settlements, many of them almost deserted and nearly all of them with strange, tongue-twisting Polish names. We slept outdoors on straw piled on the snow, in barns, abandoned farm homes, warehouse, meeting halls, cattle pens, deserted barracks, whatever shelter was available in the vicinity when night came. We ate of our hoarded supplies of personal food, the daily ration of sour, black bread (Goon bread, to the POWS) and the

occasional tinned beef issued to us by the Germans. At the end of a day's march there was sometimes a dipperful of watery stew, compounded from vegetables, barley and horsemeat, doled out by the Germans into whatever containers we had.

As the days passed we marched more grimly and determinedly. The enthusiasm and expectations of the first days on the road had dulled and disappeared in our fight against constant cold, fatigue and hunger. Each morning as we were reassembled and moved on, a group of fifty to one hundred prisoners were left behind. Old infirmities and war wounds, sickness and plain exhaustion took its toll on men already undernourished and unaccustomed to prolonged exertion after the months or years of prison inactivity. By far the greatest incapacitating ailment was the recurrence of old trench foot and frostbite. The Germans allowed one or two of the doctors to remain with the group left behind; more than two dozen of us had started with the column.

All during the march we walked with Arthur Mallory, our double-decker bunkmate for the past five months at Scuzbin. Mallory, a Citadel graduate, had been a company commander in another regiment of our own 45th Division and had been captured in the same convulsive battle on the Anzio beachhead almost a year before. Every night, whether huddled together in the straw piles, burrowed into a haystack or sheltered in some barn, we argued the merits of leaving the column, joining a sick group or hiding out. But by day we were always marching again. There was safety in numbers. There was some compulsion too. Even though our hands were blue and numb, our feet frozen, our limbs exhausted, we were determined to walk as long as others were walking. There was also a medical conscience that would not let us abandon the men and the two or three remaining doctors who still marched with the column. Although there was nothing we could do medically for the sick ones, we were conscious that continued presence of even one sorry, unmilitary pill roller somehow boosted morale of the others.

Once at nightfall we were herded into the barns and outbuildings of a large estate at Charlottenberg. The manor house, a **spired** and turreted mansion with gingerbread gables and piazzas, set in an icy wonderland of snow and crystallized trees, shimmering in cold blue moonlight, looked like a fantasy from an Anderson fairy tale. With Mallory we lined up for chow, the inevitable thick barley soup that was being measured out from a makeshift kitchen under a *porte cochere* of the main house. Somehow the two of us slipped unnoticed into the house itself. We ate our porridge in an elegant music room, lavishly furnished in Victorian style, and after eating, set out to explore some of the ground floor rooms. In the library we came unexpectedly upon a group of unfamiliar German officers busy over maps. We identified ourselves and, on a pretext of some official nature, requested permission to look through the house for drugs and medicines. Whether it was our boldness or the Germans' preoccupation with their own worsening predicament, we were allowed to go on.

We slept that night on the thick rug of a drawing room floor, and no feather bed could have felt better. In our exploration, we had discovered three more levels above us with enough rooms, closets and passages to hide a hundred men. We debated long and hard that night whether to conceal ourselves and hide out, and in the end had fallen asleep, undecided. In the morning we rejoined the others and marched on.

By the ninth day we had covered over one hundred miles, and less than eight hundred of us were still marching. The skies were leaden, the winds biting, and as we marched the snow flurries increased. In mid-afternoon we were struggling forward against a howling blizzard, and the cold was almost paralyzing. The country was flat and open, and there was no protection from the blowing, driving snow.

For miles there was nothing behind to which we might return and, as far as we knew, no hope of shelter ahead. We kept moving slowly, and just as our endurance was at its end, we came upon an unnamed hamlet, a group of four or five deserted farm cottages lined along each side of the road. We stumbled into the unexpected haven, overcome with exhaustion and relief.

We were divided into groups and billeted in the houses. In a short time we had a fire going in the open hearth and had foraged and found enough stored vegetables and potatoes to concoct a hot mush. After eating we stretched out on the bare, earthen floor in front of the fire and slept. The blizzard raged on outside and finally subsided during the night, but none of us knew it. We slept a sleep of the dead. It was the most comfortable night we had passed since starting the march.

When we awakened in the morning, there was none of the usual noise and bustle of previous mornings; no clatter of hob-nailed boots, no prodding with gun-butts, no shouts of "'Raus!" or "Schnell!" The new snow had stopped, and as we poked about, cautiously at first and then with more boldness, we discovered that our German guards were gone.

During the night, Oberst Schneider and his weary, dispirited men had pulled out and deserted us. We were free.

We spent the day organizing and planning. Food parties discovered and rounded up some pigs and chickens, and kitchen details went into action and prepared a feast. With a day of welcome rest, food and warmth, our fatigue disappeared and our enthusiasm returned. Unfortunately, there was no place to go. We were isolated in a vast expanse of winter wasteland in the middle of nowhere. The weather was colder than ever before with the temperature almost 30 below zero. We reasoned that, since the Germans had deserted us, the Russians must be close by, and therefore our best bet was to remain where we were and wait to be found. So we stayed.

With nighttime came the sound of motors, and we hurried out of the houses. Our Russian vocabulary was limited to two words, *Tovarich* and *Vodka*, and we were eager to use them. Our jubilation was short-lived, however; the Germans had come back. Oberst Schneider had run afoul of a motorized SS Latvian unit and had been made to return to take us back into custody. He was frightened and almost apologetic; with him this time were fresh troops and an SS Major who did not smile. We remained in the houses again that night, but once again as prisoners.

The brief taste of freedom, however, had stirred the prisoners. Some were rebellious and unruly, and a few skirmishes broke out between the men and guards. Although there were enough of us in each house to overpower the few armed troops who guarded us, again caution prevailed. The end seemed too near. We had come too far and had survived too long, to risk it. There were some impulsive ones, and there were some bitter ones, half-crazed with disappointment, who resisted. From this house or that one, an occasional pistol shot or the rattle of an automatic weapon kept us awake most of the night. We left a handful of wounded and three or four dead when we marched away in the morning.

When the marching group, with some aid from a shuttling truck, reached Stettin some days later, we were quartered in marine barracks on the shore of the Dammacher See. We were given a day or two of rest, but even so, when it was time to resume the march, there were almost 150 men who could not continue. Along with Lieutenant Colonel David Gold, we were the last two doctors with the group. He assigned us to remain with the 150 whom the Germans had agreed to move by rail. The rest marched on, and Colonel Gold marched with them.

The next day we were taken by truck to the rail yards and loaded into two cars, a slatted boxcar for cattle, and an open coal car for which a tarpaulin covering had been provided. The accommodations were crowded and not very luxurious, but it was better than walking. We were

headed for Berlin, and although Stettin is less than one hundred miles north of the capital, we were four days reaching the rail yards there—the German rail system was having its problems at that time. We marveled then, and have since, at the obstinacy and unreasoning discipline of the German mentality that was concerning itself with moving two carloads of prisoners while its homeland was disintegrating around it.

In the Berlin rail yards, our two rail cars sat out three days and nights, back in the almost forgotten sounds of war. There were day bombings and night bombings, and some of the nighttime fireworks were spectacular displays. Miraculously there were no hits or near-misses in the vicinity of our sidetrack. And then one day we were moving again.

Our final destination was Stalag III-A, the large central collecting camp at Luckenwalde, about 40 miles southeast of Berlin. It was there that the Germans were funneling all of the prisoners evacuated from the many camps in East Germany. It was there, almost four weeks later, that Colonel Gold and the battered remnants of the original walking column arrived, still on foot. And it was there where we sat and waited for the war in Europe to end.