

The Evacuation of Stalag Luft 6

From Memories of an Aerial Gunner and Former P.O.W. #2272

By Leonard Deranleau

Towards the end of June 1944 while I was at Stalag Luft 6, rumors began to float around that the Russians were getting closer as they advanced from the east. This only added to the questions that had been floating around in my mind. What will the future bring? Will I hold up under the pressure? Could it be possible that the Russians will liberate us? The artillery could be heard spasmodically in the far distance. On or about the 12th of July we were told to prepare for evacuation of the camp. We had acquired a substantial amount of clothing by this time, all GI issue sent through the Red Cross organization. Someone came up with the idea, perhaps a British airman, for making a substitute for a backpack. A heavy olive drab shirt was sewed together at the bottom, and the sleeves were attached to the bottom of the shirt. We all had needles and thread and were careful to see that the stitches were extra strong. We took what clothing etc. we chose, and balanced our makeshift backpacks not to be too heavy or cumbersome.

On July 14, we began the evacuation. As we walked to the railroad spur some two miles away, little did we know what hell we were going to experience for the next four days. We were put aboard box cars, standing room only, and in a few hours arrived at Memel, a seaport on the Baltic Sea in Lithuania. We were hurried to a Russian freighter ship that had been captured by the Germans. There was panic and confusion as several guards rushed us through the hatch down a rope ladder, to the deep dark hold in the ship. It was almost like a stampede. The faint light from the hatch revealed the ribs of the inside of the ship. The Germans were shouting as they threatened us with their bayonets. The line of men going down this rope ladder came to a stop as the prisoners tried to disperse themselves throughout the hold while crawling over the ribs of the hull. The remains of small particles of coal and dust were heavy along side the ribs and bottom of the hull. It is almost impossible to stand up and prisoners were forced to make room up the bottom side of the ship where the contour becomes greater.

As I watched this nightmare, the guards were throwing our personal belongings off the backs of these frantic souls, down through the hatch. They kept threatening and hollering at us with pointed machine guns, and waved at us to make more room. There was now no more room, as half of us were sitting while the other half were standing. We exchanged these positions for the next 72 hours. Some were too sick or injured to stand. There were about 1000 of us packed in there like sardines. It was July and the heat added to the savage conditions. Prisoners stripped to the waist, and you could see their sweat as it rolled down their bodies. The first day we were allowed to go topside and relieve ourselves. One poor soul could not take it any longer and made a dash overboard. The Germans machine gunned him to death. Thereafter no one was allowed topside.

You could see the panic in your comrades' eyes, and feel it in the air as you heard some poor soul cursing his predicament. Perhaps he has defecated in his underwear. I will experience the loss of my bowel control many times before my prisoner days will be over. How degrading and helpless this can leave you. There was a Catholic priest on board who was also in our prison camp. They had some respect for this elderly man and left him topside on deck. He could observe the situation down in the hold through the hatch, which was left open for ventilation. I could see the concerned look on his face as he pleaded with the guards to lower some water down in a bucket to relieve our thirst. I was positioned off to the side of this hatch, where I had a good view above me. Eventually I saw a guard lowering a bucket of water tied to a rope. The prisoners below noticed and crowded closer together below the hatch, as the guard lowered the bucket. As it got lower, many arms reached to receive it. There was no sense of order, and in the panic, the bucket spilled. There was random cursing among those involved, blaming one another for this unfortunate happening. They were almost like a bunch of animals fighting over a piece of meat.

One prisoner who realized the consequences of the situation begged for calmness and sanity. He explained the horrifying results if sanity and order were not restored. Reasoning started to take over and a small space below the hatch was created where the bucket could be caught, and passed on back and around to the prisoners. Even so, there was still panic and it seemed that half of the water was spilled from each bucket as people reached for it with their klim cans that they had secured to their belts with a string. What a tragedy that only the lucky ones received any water.

There was a British prisoner in the hold with us and he told us about he had helped to mine these shipping lanes. The fear of hitting a mine, being torpedoed from below or bombed from above only increased our trepidation. We saw the German soldiers wearing life vests as they looked down at us, which only confirmed the danger. The stench from human feces and vomit was unbearable. The extreme heat and lack of oxygen created a stifling atmosphere and people were holding their faces upward and breathing with an open mouth gasping for more oxygen.

You could feel the tension in the air as prisoners became more restless, and searched for a place to sit down. God take care, I kept praying. For some reason I can't explain, as I was praying, one prisoner who was still well composed stood up and said, "Fellows lets have a moment of prayer" and unbelievably calm suddenly filled the air. The only thing we could hear was the voice of our comrade and the throb of the engines in the background as he prayed asking God for care, comfort and safety. Every head was bowed and I'm sure they were praying along with him. This event was repeated several times in the next 48 hours. You can't tell me that prayer doesn't work. You could see it in the faces of the prisoners, as their anxiety receded.

After 72 horrifying hours with no food or water we docked at the port of Schwinemunde. We disembarked from this hellhole thankful to be alive, and I thanked my higher power and bowed my head for a moment. It almost seemed like freedom after what we had all been through. Little did we know what was in store for us just ahead.

We were marched to a railroad spur where we were handcuffed together and crowded to one end of a boxcar where our shoes were removed and our legs shackled at the ankles. The other end of this car was occupied by several guards. After several hours we arrived at a railroad spur called Kiefheide. Our shoes were returned and the shackles removed from our ankles, but we remained handcuffed. We were removed from the boxcars and lined up in a long columns, four abreast. Then we were kept standing in the hot sun for an hour or so after we had no food or water for the last 72 hours.

A contingent of young German marines arrived, along with German police dogs that were tethered and controlled by another contingent of soldiers. A touring car came up with this commanding officer by the name of Capt. Pickhardt. He was red faced and shouted like a maniac as he gave orders to the guards to place themselves two or three between each police dog. They were ordered to put their bayonets on their rifles and spread out on each side of the column. These young marines, undoubtedly Hitler youths, seemed anxious and had blood in their eyes. "Tomato Face", the red faced Captain, jumped back on to the running board of his touring car, and started screaming at the top of his voice, while shooting his pistol in the air. Rouse! Rouse! he screamed, as he motioned with his arms faster, faster.

I was on the outside of the column, on the right side, We were further persuaded to gain speed by the police dogs nipping at our heels, bayonets and an occasional butt of a rifle in the back. Some fell and were picked up by a comrade behind him, or with the help of the person that he was handcuffed to. As I watched this maniac of a captain perform, I glanced out the side of my eye and saw him jump off the running board. He went running toward the side of the road where there were two elderly women standing. I could see them sobbing while holding their hands to their mouths. This maniac took out his pistol and struck them, knocking them down to the ground, for showing us sympathy. Man! This guy is crazy. I ask myself is he going to run us all out into the woods and shoot us? Imagine a long column of men, some stumbling over someone's discarded backpack, or some falling from exhaustion and being dragged by his partner until he regained his feet. It was extremely difficult to maintain a steady pace and stay in cadence with the

person you were handcuffed too. It was almost like a herd of cattle stampeding and running into each other.

I saw one couple fall to the wayside up ahead. Tomato Face was running along side his equally maniacal Hitler youth marines, encouraging them on. He spotted the poor comrades that had fallen to the ground where a police dog was nipping on their legs and ripping their pants. He ran up to one of the older guards and motioned for him to use his bayonet. This guard who was perhaps old enough to be one of our fathers backed off and refused. He was slapped across the face with the back of the hand by Tomato Face and stumbled backward, and fell to the ground. This Captain gone berserk was shouting his orders and flailing directions with his hands as he ran back and forth along side the column.

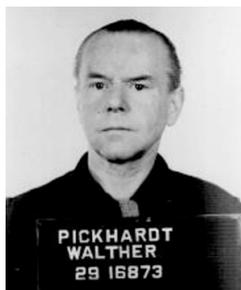
Periodically I spotted a machine gun nestled a short distance back in the woods mounted on a tripod manned by a soldier. I was sure they would have liked to see us panic and make a run for it. The comrade I was handcuffed to, by the name of Conners I believe, was starting to stumble. As I looked at him to encourage him on, he looked back at me pathetically and declared, "I can't make it Len". With my left hand handcuffed to his right, I reached up bending his arm up behind his back and managed to rip his pack from his back. This lightened his burden, and with the thought of being dragged to the ground along with him, I reached my left hand around his waist and grabbed hold of his belt to support him. The survival instinct was in full command now, as I prayed to my higher power. As if in response to my prayer, my adrenaline was released and I could feel my second wind take over. How can I suddenly feel so strong? I felt like I could run forever.

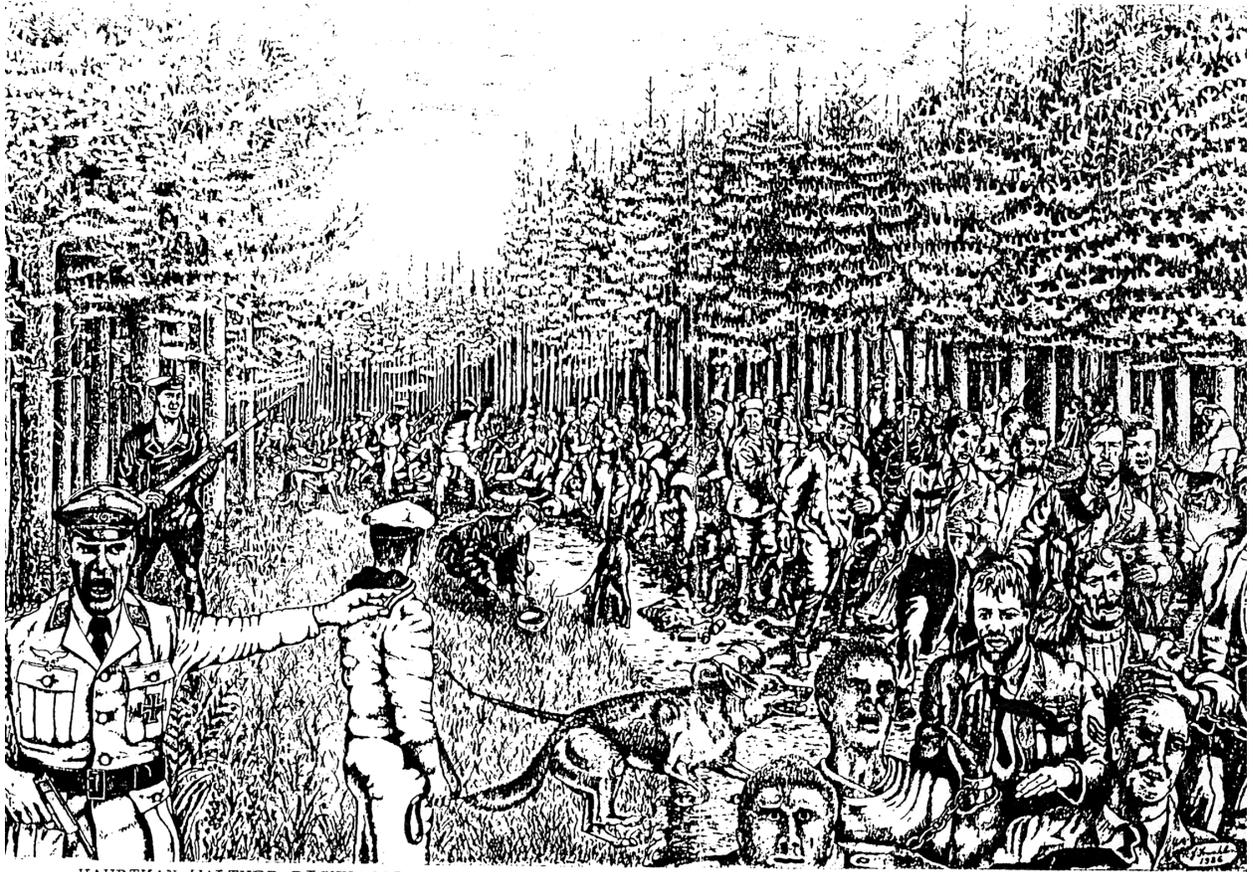
I looked at this young marine running along side of me, and with a defying look in my eyes I told him I could meet his challenge. I could also see that he was tiring. This was not macho or bravery, it was a matter of survival, with the help of God. Two and a half miles later from the start of this hellish nightmare, we stumbled through the gates of this new prison camp, into an area surrounded by guards with machine guns. As we crashed to the ground with those who had entered before us, there were some men weeping, perhaps in happiness that they made it, and others consoling each other with hugs and pats on the back. This is a scene I will portray in my mind forever.

It is sickening and frightening to watch the desperation in your comrades' eyes as they stumble to the ground along side of you, and look at you with fright imprinted on their face. Some were bleeding from their legs or buttocks, some from the side of their heads where they may have been struck a glancing blow from the butt of a rifle. Others had numerous wounds from the fangs of the police dogs. What a heart wrenching sight. How could this be? Why! I asked God while still thanking him for my survival. I wonder how many may not have made it.

A few more minutes and the balance of the prisoners arrived along with the maniacal Capt. Pickhardt bringing up the rear. He made sure his mission had been completed. He walked around scrutinizing his new prisoners with his hands clasped behind his back, stepping in a goose like fashion while shouting obscenities, such as swine, gangsters, and murderers. He had gotten his message across that he was the commander of this camp known as Stalag Luft IV.

Hauptmann Walther Pickhardt was charged with war crimes, but was never convicted.





HAUPTMAN-WALTHER PICKHARDT
MAD CAPTAIN / BUTCHER OF BERLIN

"THE RUN UP THE ROAD"
JULY 18, 1944