

A Prisoner of the Luftwaffe

by Claude Watkins

A brief account based on personal experiences, reactions and observations then, and reflections since.

Part 1 Capture and the Camps

On February 10, 1944, I was a S1Sgt waistgunner/armorer on a B-17 crew based at Rougham, near Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, England. We were part of the 33 1st Squadron, 94th Bomb Group, Eighth Air Force, and on that day flew what turned out to be our last mission. It was the fifteenth; we were over the hump on our way to the completion of the magic twenty-five and we were not supposed to get shot down. Based on all the omens and signs carefully examined and trusted by nervous aircrew members, it just could not happen that day.

Omens and signs? We had been an intact aircrew for about seven months at this time and I feel knew each other fairly well. To the best of my memory, none of us had ever heard our radio operator, Don Labelle, even hum a tune, yet during a pass to Cambridge in December, we marveled at him playing most of the various instruments in a large dance band. On an earlier mission, while we were being attacked by ME-109s, he had ducked from his normal gun firing position in order to operate some fuel transfer controls just seconds before a 20 mm projectile passed through the aircraft where his head had been. He was an American Indian from Wisconsin and some time after this incident, he told some of us that he often had premonitions that came true, and that if any time we were scheduled for a mission and he reported to sick call when we felt nothing was wrong with him, we should also find some way of missing the flight. We already knew the guy was unique. How could hopeful straw grabbers not believe he had some special powers.

Also, I had made friends with a couple of horse racing buffs who owned and operated one of our favorite pubs, and a few evenings previous to February 10, they had given me a souvenir from Newmarket in the form of a horse shoe decorated with a small figure of a jockey on a horse. They said it was a good luck charm and should

be hung near my position on our aircraft. And I hung it there on the morning of the flight.

Additionally, we were normal young individuals on aircrews and in combat; we had all seen acquaintances killed and watched others spin down helplessly pinned in an aircraft, aware of and watching their certain deaths approaching. We knew, however, that it could not happen to us.

Our target that day was an industrial area at Brunswick and we were one of 169 bombers on the mission. We were briefed that fighter opposition could be considerable but not to worry, as a total of 366 fighters (P-38s, 47s and 51s) would be escorting us and meet us in increments at different points so as to furnish continuous protection from the Luftwaffe when over enemy territory.

And away we went. In brief summary, 143 bombers, including ours, made it to the target. Prior to take off, the radio operator showed no sign of playing sick and actually seemed looser than before previous missions. The elements of the fighter escort scheduled to meet us just before and after the bomb run were held in England by weather, and while they did not meet us, Luftwaffe ME4I Os did. Our aircraft was the last of five from our group to go down, and my lucky charm went with it. So much for superstition and optimism.

While it would be easy to look on the day one made a first parachute jump (and that from a high altitude), was injured and then captured as an unlucky one, it can also be looked at as a lucky one, where thanks to excellent emergency procedures planning by our pilot, all ten of us exited a disabled aircraft and lived to be captured. The same was not true for the other four crews.

Getting out of shot-down bombers has been detailed in many books and military-oriented publications, so to be brief, I left the aircraft at about 28,000 feet, pulled the rip cord at what I judged to be 15,000 and drifted eastward while descending. The sudden silence during the free fall and then in the chute as compared to the noise in the aircraft was perhaps the most striking thing about the event. That, and finally hitting the ground.

At five or six hundred feet I drifted over a small village on a hill and

could see people looking up at me. As I descended lower, the wind causing me to drift was cut off by the hill and village and I made a fairly straight drop into brush covered broken rock, and was captured almost immediately by a woman with a pitchfork and two young teenage boys with a rifle and a dog. I was unable to put any weight on my left leg, so the boys had me put an arm around their shoulders and we went up the hill to a barn. A few minutes later some more villagers led the lower hail turret gunner into the barn. He gave me a morphine injection and shortly afterward two German soldiers, one Army and the other Air Force, arrived in a staff car. They took the two of us to a fighter field near our target, and during the ride had a good laugh over all the French francs we had in our pocket Evasion and Escape kits. By the next day, all ten of us had been rounded up and were in separate cells in what had to be the air base guard house.

Our experiences from that point to arrival at a Stalag Luft were routine for captured Eighth Air Force crews. We went by passenger train to the Frankfurt on Main RR station and by streetcar to the Luftwaffe interrogation and processing center in Oberursel, located in the NW Frankfurt suburbs. Following solitary confinement during the interrogation process, some very basic medical attention and a one-night reunion as a crew, the officers were sent to a camp at Frankfurt on Oder, and we six enlisted men went on a long overcrowded boxcar ride to Stalag Luft VI near what historically had been Sillute, Lithuania. This unfortunate country however had been given to Hitler by Stalin, appended to East Prussia, and the name of the town changed to Heydekrug. Lithuania has restored its name and I have visited it twice since then.

In the previous paragraphs, I have more or less skimmed over some possibly very traumatic events. They included a seeming close brush with death and a period of time that included great fears and uncertainties. Ahead lay the slowly dawning but shocking awareness of a loss of something I had so taken for granted I hardly new it existed -- a sense of security.

Arrival at the camp was a relief. Not only were the pressures and uncertainties of solitary confinement, interrogation and the train ride behind us, but we were reunited with fellow servicemen. I remember the cries of "You'll be sorry," from airman already there, just as one always heard when arriving at a new base or camp in the US.

The camp, Stalag Luft VI, was well established and held approximately 6,000 NCOs from the various Royal Air Forces when captured American flyers began arriving a few months before us. The six of us from our crew were there from February 21 until early July. By then Russian forces were advancing from the east, the camp was evacuated and all of the Americans and several hundred RAF members were moved -- first by train, then boat across the Baltic Sea, and again by train to Stalag Luft IV. It was located somewhat more to the west than our start point and near the small town of Kiefheide, about 120 miles NNW of Berlin. After arrival in the village and while handcuffed in pairs, we participated in what has come to be known as the "Heydekrug Run", a morale jarring incident brought about by the actions of one psychopathic German Captain that resulted in bayonet stabs and dog bites to a number of helpless prisoners, and the loss of much of our already meager personal possessions. This incident represented a one-time, but major aberration in the heretofore fair and reasonable Luftwaffe policy concerning the handling and treatment of POWs. The general conditions of our captivity in the camp here, as in Stalag Luft VI were excellent compared to what the POWs in Japan were enduring and American ground troops encountered in Germany following captured during the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans captured over 20,000 Americans during this battle and with their logistical system in near ruins, were unable to support them in the manner previously accorded POWs taken earlier and in relatively small increments.

By early February 1945, the Russians were approaching the Stalag Luft IV area on the drive that eventually took them to Berlin and victory. We were given a few days notice that most of us (by then approximately 8,000 Americans and the several hundred RAF personnel) would be moved by foot to another camp a few days to the west. The sick and injured were to be moved by train.

Thankfully, some of us had spent many hours while in Luft IV walking around the outside perimeter of the compound. We had done it primarily to relieve boredom and with maybe a slight intention of keeping in shape. This activity was to pay tremendous dividends.

We departed the camp on February 6 in groups of approximately 200, and with the departure, captivity conditions changed drastically.

Myself, and the group I started with and that stayed more or less intact, spent 86 days on the road and walked, route step and under guard, 57 of them. When not moving, we stayed in barns or outdoors infields or roadsides, took a 165 mile trip packed into boxcars, and at its conclusion spent 12 days in a huge tent in a corner of Stammlager XI-A near Altengrabow, a camp that seemed to hold captives of all western nationalities. After this break, we resumed walking and continued doing so until liberated at Bitterfelt on April 26, following negotiations the previous evening between the Wehrmacht Captain in charge of all the groups of POWs in that area, and representatives of the 104th US Infantry Division. At the time, American forces were approximately 15-20 miles to the west of us and Soviet forces about the same distance to the East. It probably took very little thinking on the part of the Captain to decide who he should surrender to.

Part II - A Realistic Look at a Long Walk

Much has been made of and written about the forced marches, and I can only report on what happened to me and those around me, and on what I have learned as a result of a great amount of follow-up research and conversations. Some of my comments here will be on events and conditions much reported on before, and I make them knowing some of them will not please those who have written difficult-to-believe accounts of their and others experiences on similar, but much shorter duration marches.

This movement of allied prisoners across Germany and occupied areas taken by a great number of small groups and lasting various lengths of time has been called The Death March, or the Black, or Bread March. I have read accounts of hundreds of Americans that died around the writer, and feel that if all the numbers of the dead in the accounts of the event that have been published in the Ex-POW Bulletin during its history were combined, one would end up with a total of many thousands. Actually, of the over 90,000 of us known to have been held by the Germans, a total of 1,121 are positively known to have died while in captivity. Balancing this small death rate is the statistical probability that if that number of us held there had not been captured, but continued in combat, even with the number of missions limiting such time for flyers, a larger number of us would no doubt have been killed. Of those almost 8,000 of us who started at Luft IV, only 6 are absolutely known to have died on the march. None died in the group I

was in, and although it occasionally changed members when one overtook another, I never heard anyone mention anyone's death. To call my group's walk across Germany guarded by non-hostile members of, first the Luftwaffe, and finally the Volkstrum a Death March, denigrates the terrible ordeal of those POWs who endured the Bataan Death March in the Pacific.

The distances walked certainly varied by groups and the length of time they walked, and no portion of the experience has been more argued or exaggerated. I have read reports that claimed the writer had walked as much as a thousand miles. Cecil Brown, my closest companion on the walk kept notes of each of our 57 days of walking and the distances covered. His calculations were based on the roadside kilometer markers we passed, plus some estimates when none were present. His result is 931 kilometers, or 580 miles. Several years ago, using 1/50,000 scale maps of the area (46 sheets required) and tracing our route over them with a precise cartographic instrument, I arrived at 470 miles. I will settle for the difference, 525 miles, as being a reasonable estimate. The shortest one-day distance was 5 kilometers and the longest 30. The latter was while we skirted the German rocket testing area at Pennemuende on the Baltic coast. Before we began our walk, we knew the end for both Germany and our time as prisoners was not far off. A clandestine radio somewhere in the camp furnished us daily news from BBC, so we knew how the fronts in the west and east were moving. If the radio was taken on the march, it was not with my group, and even if it had been, the lack of accessible power sources would have almost negated its usability. So while on the road our morale and expectations were kept up by things like: the movement of civilians west and German troops east; questions to the guards that would frequently get answers like "Ask Eisenhower, he will be here soon"; and in the last few weeks, the large amount of unopposed American and British air action. As a result, our morale and spirits remained much higher than they could have possibly been had the event taken place before the invasion of the continent. I think a sense of relief and even a sort of elation overcame our fear that anything other than our liberation could finally happen.

As noted, we were far from the only groups on the roads. Often we were paralling or even mixed in with German civilians, elderly people, women and children fleeing west ahead of the advancing Soviet troops. They were walking, and pushing or pulling carts and wagons

containing the only possessions they had; frequently old people and infants were also on the wagons. One afternoon, I pushed a woman's pram with an infant in it. Her possessions were in the pram, or tied to it, and she was carrying a child that would periodically walk for maybe a quarter of a mile before having to be picked up and carried again. We POWs had no idea of the existence of the concentration camps, so the plight of this woman and her children brought home to me the downside of war more than any single thing I had encountered previously. I have often thought about her and the children since then, and wondered about their fates.

As to general conditions for us on the march that I feel pertain to any group starting at Stalag Luft IV: Sanitation was just a word. By any normal standards, we were already filthy when we started the march. We were in the same dirty clothes we had worn for months and there had been no opportunity to shower or fully bathe for months prior to starting. Nor was there any chance of doing so during the march. No one had the energy to attempt to do anything about it and could not have cared less, as everyone was as bad off as he was. No one I knew of ever entered a heated room during this period, so outer garments were never removed until the last few weeks and we were into spring. When liberated, we were unbelievably filthy, all had lice and many had scabies. In addition to the clothes he was wearing, each man had one thin German-issued blanket, so when sleeping in the open we huddled in pairs for additional warmth. In barns, simply being out of the weather and on hay made this unnecessary. Handling toilet needs was as primitive as can be imagined with the absence of any kind of paper adding to our sanitation problems.

The weather and the temperatures greatly affected us until April. It has been called the coldest winter Germany had during the war, and with us inadequately clothed and shod, it caused us problems. I have read and heard some extreme estimates of the low temperatures we encountered and the resultant cases of frostbitten feet. While I can't argue with the possibility of cold-induced medical conditions, I do question the temperatures that have been given as causing them.

Food was absolutely inadequate. When liberated, many men were showing signs of edema to their extremities -- an early symptom of starvation. And I have often wondered how much longer the move would have had to have lasted before real starvation began to cause

casualties. The food consisted of what the Germans accompanying and guarding us managed to acquire in quantity enough to amount to anything when distributed, and then it was generally limited to small rations of potatoes, a rare small portion of watery soup, bread and occasional varied items from Red Cross parcels. Brown's log shows we were given bread 29 times during the 86 days period. On three occasions, the issue was a loaf per man and the others ranged from as much as 1/4 to 1/15. When in the big tent, we were given approximately 12 oz. of very thin carrot soup daily. Mostly in bits and pieces, we each received the equivalent of six and one half Red Cross parcels during the entire period. We added to this by bartering scarce cigarettes and other Red Cross items with German civilians and foreign nationals working on farms, and by scrounging, thievery of vegetables stored in mounds in the fields and even foraging for edible wild plants. We went to sleep hungry, awoke that way and stayed that way during the day. Most conversations quickly evolved into talk about food, often including the impossibly large and varied contents of the meals we were going to eat when we got home, frequently even including the details of preparing each item. I feel I held my weight of about 160 lbs. while in the two Stalag Lufts. When I weighed myself after liberation and a couple of good meals of Army chow that I managed to keep down, I hit 121. Had we remained in Luft IV with the routine and ration situations unchanged during those 86 days, we would have been given about the same amount of bread, more Red Cross food, and a greatly increased German ration. And except for two roll calls a day, one could be (and some were) a complete bed potato and bum up many, many fewer calories. If our long walk required a name, one might be tempted to title it the "Misery Walk" and not be wrong. It feels however -- and remember this story addresses things as I say; and currently see them -- that the absolute knowledge that the big end was very near tempered the misery, hunger and even the uncertainties about the period between any current time and the end.

Liberation As noted earlier, it finally came when we were surrendered to our forces. Knowing it was getting closer each day was probably the main thing that sustained us during our almost three-month-long migration. Just the word itself denotes freedom, but it must be long and hopefully awaited, anticipated and then finally realized for it to have its full, almost indescribable meaning. Liberation. The good guys came and took you away from the bad guys! Your country had the will

and its military had the initiative, the guts and the ability to kick butt and win! To get you and all the marbles.

The events above took place almost fifty-five years ago. Following them and a short break from the military, I reenlisted, and for three years was a crew member on B-36s, B-29s and B-SOs. From that I switched to a new career in the Air Force devoted to training in survival, evasion and escape, and coping with captivity. In this capacity, I attended many training programs, worked with thousands of flying personnel and climbed mountains, traveled on glaciers, rafted and paddled on rivers, hunted and fished, built and lived in igloos on Arctic Sea ice, trekked many hundreds of miles through forests in many parts of the world, attended interrogation schools in two countries and played interrogator as well as POW in many US military and NATO training exercises worldwide. I even spent four more years in Germany. Today, I look back on all of it, including captivity, as one great adventure and learning experience. The enjoyment I find in looking back is tempered however by the knowledge that many who have been POWs never lived to either look back on it, or enjoy subsequent experiences.