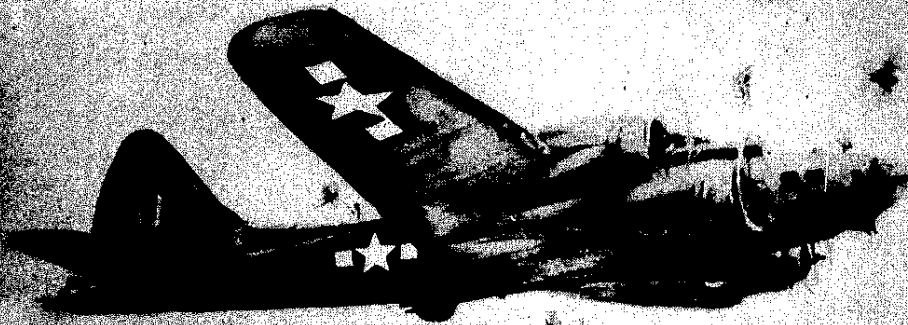


For You Der Var Ist Oufar



By

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Introduction

This tale of my last combat mission during World War II was written in hopes it will serve as a learning instrument for our younger generations. It is time our grand children and their children be apprised of the rigors of war and the life as a prisoner of war. The horrors of war and mistreatment of captured military and civilian personnel in past wars must be learned and remembered by future generations in hopes it will prevent future mistreatment by captors.

I have, from memory and the Diary I kept during my incarceration, written down many of the experiences I encountered immediately after our plane was extensively damaged by German anti-aircraft fire, and the subsequent eight months of barbaric confinement in several different prisoner of war camps. The story ends with my liberation by the Russian Army and the three month trip home to my family.

This writing, in no way, tells all of the cruel and inhumane treatment inflicted upon thousands of Allied Warriors during their captivity. It does however, tell the readers about some of the inadequate housing, sleeping accommodations, and of the insufficient food provided by the captors in Stalag Luft IV and I.

The writings contained in this book represents the personal experiences and observations while confined in the Interrogation Center, Dulag Luft, Stalag Luft IV and I, between 9 September 1944 and 12 May 1945, as well as during my liberation and my trip home. I sincerely hope you enjoy reading this book.

John N. McCracken



Jack McCracken

Photo taken in Oct. 1943, upon completion of
Airplane Mechanics School, Amarillo, AAF, Texas



Jack McCracken

1993

Dulag Luft, Wetzler, Germany

On Saturday morning, 16 September 1944, a large group of us were marched from the Interrogation Center through the streets to the railroad station for movement to Dulag Luft at Wetzler, Germany. During the march through areas that had been severely bombed the civilians threw stones and other debris at us, called us some choice names and spit at us. I had anticipated something like this and made sure that I was marching on the inside of the formation for some protection. The guards were quite concerned about getting us safely to the railroad station. I don't recall if any of the British or Canadians were with us in that march. They were probably taken to another camp.

We eventually arrived at the railroad station and the train ride from Frankfurt to Wetzler was without incident. I don't recall if we were placed on passenger trains or in box cars for that trip. While we were marching in formation through Wetzler - some of us heard a person on the side walk whistling Yankee Doodle. Those of us that saw this person concluded that he was an American evadee and wanted us to know he was still on his own trying to get back to allied control. If he were an American I hope he made it back without getting caught.

While processing in at Dulag Luft, we were given a suit case made of pressed cardboard. These suit cases contained many items necessary for our survival. A list of items are listed in the appendix. These were furnished by the American Red Cross through the International Red Cross. Some of our flying clothing was taken from us at this time. I was issued a US Army overcoat, which came into good use that cold winter.

While at this camp I met our Crew Toggelier, SSgt. Cecil F. Smith, who had flown with another crew on 9 Sep 1944 and was shot down with the other crew on the same day as I. We stayed at Dulag Luft for several days before our departure to a permanent prison camp.

Each prisoner was given several post cards and one or two letters upon which we could write a note back to the states.

Eventually all of the enlisted men were separated from the officers and sent to a Non-Commissioned Officers prison camp in East Prussia. When falling into formation for our departure I tried to keep all of my enlisted crew members together. I believe we were all in the same box car going to the next camp, but there, we were separated. SSgt. Smith and I ended up together in the same barracks room while the other three crew members ended up in the same compound (Lager) but in different barracks and rooms. At least we were able to visit each other at any time.

Stalag Luft IV, Keifiede, Germany

A large group of us American Non-Commissioned Officers were issued an American Red Cross Parcel of food - one parcel for every two men. SSgt. Smith and I shared one parcel. We then marched back down the hill to the Wetzler railroad station where we were herded into box cars like a bunch of cattle. I believe there were 52 or 54 men in the box car that I was in. Our destination was unknown to us when we left Wetzler. We eventually ended up at Stalag Luft IV, Keifiede, Germany, which is now a part of Poland.

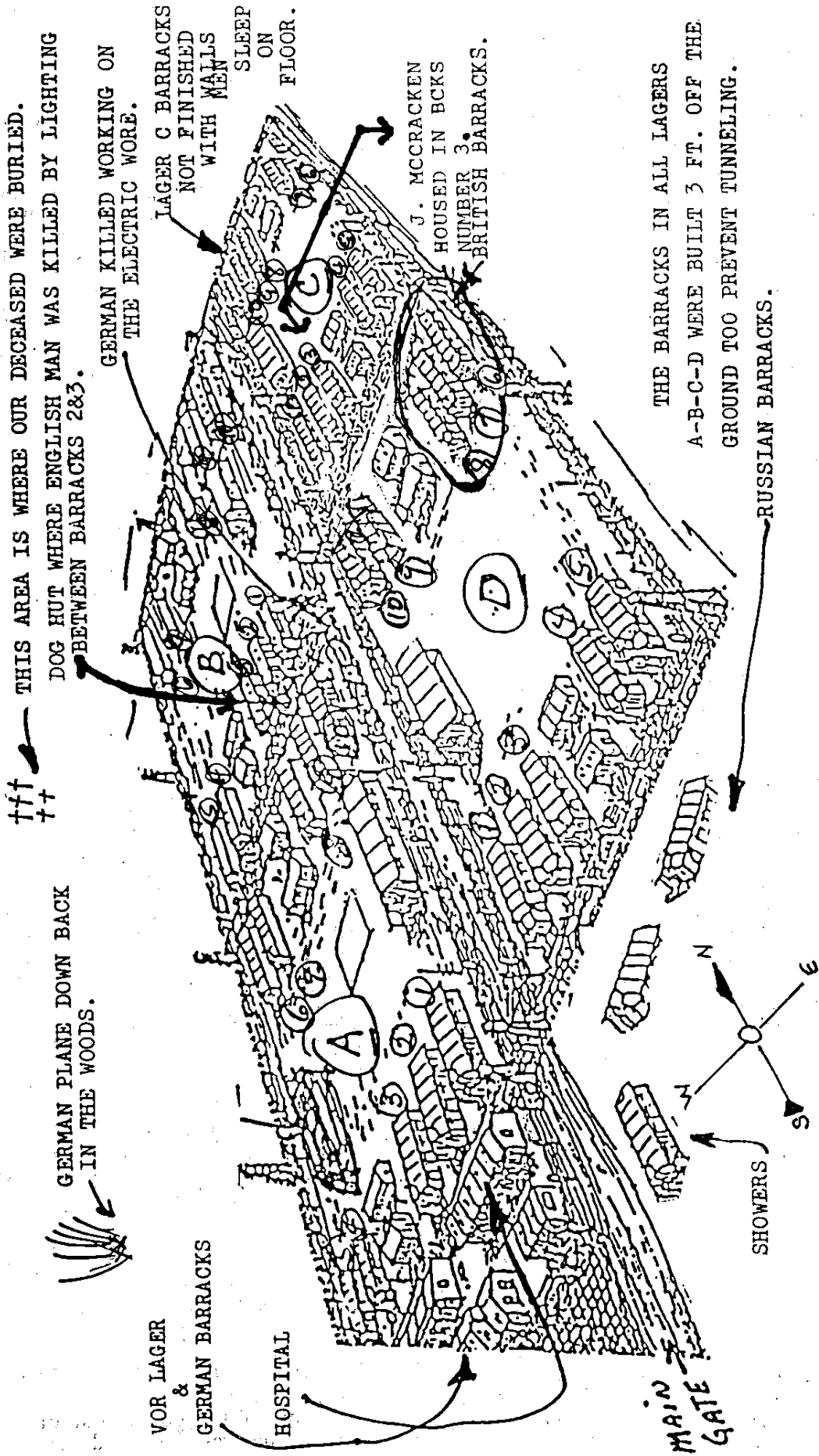
During this three day trip, we went through Berlin and were stopped in the Berlin railroad yards during a night bombing raid, again by the RAF and RCAF. The bombs were dropping nearby and fortunately our train escaped being hit. Because of the extensive damage to the rail tracks we were delayed for several hours.

Upon arrival at the Keifiede railroad station we were unloaded and had to march a mile or so to the camp. We were herded into a long room that had tables setting end to end through the center of the room. Benches for the tables were lined up along both walls. We were marched single file along both sides of the tables. When all were in place we were told to undress and place all of our belongings on the tables. After this they herded us into a large shower room. At first we were a bit leery about going into the shower room as we had heard about the gas showers. Having no other choice we went in and enjoyed a good hot shower, the second shower I had in about three weeks.

While showering, the guards searched all our belongings and confiscated all our food, cigarettes and anything else they wanted. At time of undressing for the shower, I slipped a small compass into my mouth to conceal it from the guards. This was referred to as an "ANAL" compass. I thought the mouth was a better place to hide it, and what's more I didn't have time to hide it in the other end.

Upon returning to our clothing we were told to dress. I put on my under shorts, socks pants and shoes, then turned, facing the wall and put my right foot up on the bench while tying the shoe. The guards were yelling at us to hurry and I realized that a loud mouthed guard was close to me. I hurried up with the right shoe and when I placed the left foot on the bench, I was struck across my bare back with a leather belt. I straightened up from the pain and out came the compass. The guard saw it, picked it up, and then hit me several more times across the back with the belt. The guard then turned to the other guards and after saying something to them took one of the guards out of the building. I presume he was the guard that was supposed to have searched me and my belongings. I quickly

Stalag Luft IV



completed dressing, grabbed my property and moved down the line of men hoping the guard would not find me in the event he came back. However, we were marched out of the building with no further incident.

From that building we were taken to Compound (Lager) A and assigned to tents where we stayed for several weeks. I later learned that the guard that struck me was called "BIG STOOP", named after the comic strip character Big Stoop in the Terry And The Pirates comic strip. "BIG STOOP" was the Sergeant in charge of the camps Gestapo Detachment, and was about 6 feet 9 inches tall with hands as large as a full grown elephants foot. A big and mean man he was.

I lived in a tent for several weeks then was moved into Compound C, where I was assigned to Barracks 3, Room 9, with twenty one other non-commissioned officers.

Stalag Luft IV Room Mates

Nerone A. Franco	Detroit, MI
Ernest M. McKim	Glen Cove, NY
Byron E. Burgin	New Orleans, LA
Melvin P. Demmin	Peoria, IL
William J. Knightly	Wichita, KS
Lester Geisman	Brooklyn, NY
Mike Pesta	Phoenixville, PA
Henry J. Smith	Dalton, PA
William F. Smith	State College, PA
William L. Cupp	Northfield, MN
Cecil F. Smith***	Clearwater, CA
Donald B. Hausler	Cleveland, OH
William D. Stroud	Green Sea, SC
Robert E. Ice	West Frankfort, IL
Vincent W. Landolfi**	New York, NY
R. James Wray	St. Louis, MO
Robert M. Knox	Philadelphia, PA
Russell W. Todd	St. Augustine, FL
John H. McCracken	Ligonier, PA
John H. Rex	Mays Landing, NJ
Robert R. Reed	Roselle, NJ
Edward S. Gates	Durham, NC

** Elected to duty as our Room Chief

Cecil F. Smith was a member of my crew but shot down on same mission as I but he was with another crew that day.

The barracks were constructed of wood and set on posts about thirty inches high above ground level. The open area under the barracks was a forbidden area as the guards kept a close watch under there to ensure we didn't try to tunnel out of camp. There were nine or ten rooms along each side of the barracks with a hallway running through the center

from end to end. One end room was reserved as a community room for bathing, although, no running water was installed. The room was also used during the night when we were locked in, as a latrine. We carried cold water from the outside well pumps for washing and bathing. Our washing, shaving and bathing were done with cold water in our all purpose eating/bathing bowl. The bowl was a regular dinner serving type dish. We had no hot water, only what we could heat in small food cans on a burning charcoal brick inside the pot bellied stove.

Each room was about twenty feet square with one outside window in the center of the room and one door to the hallway, also at the center of the inside wall. Wooden shutters were installed over all windows and were closed at dusk every night and when there was a real or practice air raid drill. The double doors at both ends of the barracks were closed and locked from the outside at dusk every day, also when the guards wanted to punish us during other times.

Each room contained a small table and two or three stools with a pot belly type stove for heating and cooking. There were no beds for the twenty two men.

During periods of real cold weather each room was given three or four charcoal bricks for heating. These bricks were about half the size of an American building brick. Needless to say we didn't have much heat that cold winter. It was reported that the 1944/45 winter was the coldest in Germany for over fifty years. In my room, the charcoal was burnt only at meal time so we could heat our food and beverages. One lighted brick would be placed on the stove grate so each occupant could set his individual can of food or drink on the hot brick to heat or cook. We drew cards to line up to use the stove. It was a slow process but then we had plenty of time. After all were finished with their meal we would put small cans of water on the charcoal, if it were still burning, to heat for shaving.

Food at Stalag Luft IV wasn't plentiful but sufficient to keep us newer prisoners in fairly good shape. Most of the time we received the equivalent of a German soldiers food ration, which wasn't much compared to our daily Army rations. This was supplemented by International Red Cross food parcels. Most food parcels I received were furnished by the American Red Cross through the International Red Cross. Occasionally we would receive a British or Canadian food parcel in lieu of the American one. There were some British and Canadian prisoners in the compound adjacent to mine.