

AMERICAN EX-PRISONERS OF WAR, INC.

NATIONAL MEDICAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE



The European

Story



PACKET NO. 8

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STAN SOMMERS © JULY 1980

THE POW STORY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tom McHale, former editor of "Barbed Wire News, went into combat flying via the Aerial Gunner Instructor route. He flew 20 combat missions as a B-17 gunner. Was shot down on the first Berlin raid and was a German POW for 14 months.

After a 40-year newspaper and Chamber of Commerce career Tom McHale wrote "Dooleys's Delusion" which is pure fiction and reconstructs the rise and fall of his home town and the financial troubles of his boyhood parish in terms of their origins. It is easy reading with parts of history and packed with action.

Tom helped organize the Air Force Association and served as a National Vice President. He is Life Member #137 of the American Ex-Prisoners of War, Inc..

"This story will present the other side of the Air Corps - the side shorn of glamour - the story of the men who bombed Germany and were shot out of the skies to spend the remainder of the war behind barbed wire.

The bombing of Germany took its toll in almost every family - most of their big cities. The most vicious hate was reserved for the "Terrorflieger" and "Luftgangsters" - those fliers who bailed out after their ships were hit by flak or blasted by Focke-Wulfs and Messerschmidts.

Americans from England and Africa, RAF men from all over the world (Britons, Poles, Scotsmen, New Zealanders, South Africans and Canadians), all Non-Coms, lived together in Germany as prisoners under the Swastika. This is the story of how we worked together, how we got information, and how we were shunted from Stalag to Stalag to escape the advancing Russians.

Except for our families and the Red Cross, we were forgotten men. Like the ships we flew, we were expendable.

HEYDEKRUG-STALAG LUFT VI (Near Memel-now Klaipeda, on the Baltic Coast): Parachuting and crash landing out of German skies, air crew men came to Heydekrug from all over the world - RAF and AAF, New Zealanders and Canadians, South Africans and Poles - pilots and navigators from Lancashire and Yorkshire, tail gunners from Texas, first engineers from Washington and static chasers from New Jersey. Some had come down during wild nights out of flaming "Lancs" and Wellingtons or big Sterlings caught in cones of flak and searchlights. Other RAF men blasted by sneak attacks of night fighters had bailed out into the darkness all the way from the Alps to the North Sea. The Yanks had come down during the day out of the Arctic stillness of the upper altitudes into the smoking ruins of target areas or the bleak fields of an enemy country.

The English arrived first in June of 1943 and set up the camp under "Dixie" Dean, a Scotch accountant who had traveled extensively in Germany before the war. Dixie entered the RAF as a pilot in 1936 and was shot down September 12, 1942. Knowing the people and the language, he developed into an Ace camp leader at Barth and Sagon and became an authority on the Kriege's Bible, the Geneva Convention. Among the first Americans to arrive in February of 1944 was big T/Sgt Frank Paules who was elected "American Man of Confidence." Dixie took him under his wing and together they began to organize and prepare for the men to come.

As the intensity of the air war over Europe stepped up in the early months of 1944 more American bomber crew men began to come in. Down through the heavy flack of Hamburg and Bremen - and the Ruhr ("Happy Valley") - out of rocket and fighter attacks in dog fights over Frankfurt, Brunswick and Essen - and finally over Berlin itself, gunners from Forts and Libs hit the silk to start the long trail to Heydekrug. The American compound opened in February and grew like a boom town as groups of new men arrived to begin their long tour in the GTO.

Life was bleak those first days and nights inside the wire. Food was short and Red Cross Supplies inadequate. The compound was either knee deep in snow or a sea of mud. Men accustomed to flying fare found it difficult to adapt themselves to Kriege rations. As stomachs began to shrink they forcibly developed a taste for ersatz coffee, Kolurabi soup and sawdust-flavored German bread.

It took a bit of time to become accustomed to being fenced in like an animal inside the big barbed wire enclosures, to feel easy watching the tower guards swinging their ma-

chine guns during the day, and see the searchlights sweeping the compound at night. It represented a new low in comfort to try to sleep on a ladder-like arrangement of five bed slats covered with a thin straw tick. It took time to get used to the guttural shouting of the Krauts and lining up for roll calls and "Sheep counts" under the watchful eyes of the gray-clad guards.

As Spring (1944) slowly edged into the Baltic, things began to get better. More Red Cross food came in and the men learned to stretch their rations. Kriege-wise the English had their Dramatic League, debating society, auctions, cricket and rugby games and an educational program. We learned from their activities and started new ones. A library and prisoner university were opened. Softball, boxing and theatre groups began to work out. Soon almost every man in camp who wanted to do something found an outlet for his energy. The men began to build a theatre out of Red Cross boxes and junk. The Kriegers built a flashy house that was the "Show Spot of the Baltic." Tom Edwards, a veteran hooper and Boston vaudeville man, whipped together a crack variety production: "Blow It Out". Competition became keen in basketball, football and softball between barracks and compounds. Promoter George Pratt of Boston organized a great two-day International Boxing Show. AAF and RAF groups were allowed to visit and conduct competitive activities between compounds - Kriege life was not so bad.

Then in mid-July "Uncle Joe" stepped up his summer drive. Rumors began to fly thick and fast. Kriegers avidly read BWN and German Radio Bulletins - and other news came out of the sky. We discussed rumors and news far into the nights. It looked as though we might be trapped—we hoped. Instead we marched out and entrained for Memel, where we boarded a coal boat for Schweinmunde, then a train for Stalag Luft IV (near Stargard, Poland).

Our reception at Grosstychow on 18 July 1944 clearly indicated that new prison life would be tougher. Our summer Baltic cruise from Memel to Schweinmunde in the hold of a coal boat had seen the Germans applying their "Strength through Joy" formula in reverse. During our entraining and trip to Keifheide, the men had been shackled in twos and pushed around a bit—but it was not until after unloading that the show really started.

A red-headed Nazi captain resplendent in white cap and uniform and an iron cross and other hardware on his chest began parading up and down in front of our train shouting "Schweinhunde" and other choice German expletives. We were unloaded and lined up, most of us wearing overcoats and carrying knapsacks, cases and packages with our food and other simple POW possessions brought from our first camp. Our guards were young marine cadets about 18 or 19 years old and apparently in the pink of condition. As they began to escort us we noticed they had fixed bayonets. We also noticed the presence of a number of dog men and a sprinkling of Blackshirt SS Men at strategic spots.

From the box cars we began our march of about a hundred yards to the station at a normal pace. Then a lot of shouting started. First we were forced into a fast walk - then double time - and as the tempo of the shouting increased, coupled with the barking and snarling of dogs, we were forced into a run. Naturally, the men began to shed their coats, packages, bags and anything that would permit more freedom of movement. We did not know how long the run would continue. Those on the outside who lagged were slashed with bayonets and beaten with rifle butts. Our friend, the red-headed captain, turned up as ringleader and march fuhrer, shouting and cursing the Americans and urging the guards to greater brutality. Some of those who were not enthusiastic enough, be beat and slapped with his own hands. As relays of fresh guards took up the chase, more bags and parcels littered the road, and the din and noise increased. The Germans became more and more intoxicated with their own frenzied emotion. The last part of the run was not unlike an obstacle race as we kept to the middle of the road looking backward to avoid the thrusts of the guards and forward to avoid tripping and falling over baggage.

We finally arrived at the Grosstychow camp gates and were herded into the Vorlager—wondering what was going to happen next. Many of the men had slashed and beaten badly—many had been nipped by dogs. Some had fallen by the wayside and many had been carried along by their friends and companions. Then came one of those weird instances of German inconsistency. Into the lager came the Nazi captain and gave us a watch that had been dropped by one of the runners on the road. He was much concerned that it should be returned to its owner. This type of reception continued for prisoner groups for several weeks. One AAF man in a later group came in with 63 bayonet wounds. Why this was done we never knew.

Some fell by the wayside and were stabbed and beaten - we expected them to be killed. Yet we were never able to check a definite killing in these runs. They stopped with no explanation. Another problem for those who study the weird Nazi mind.

If the Germans hoped to break our morale and instill fear into us - they generally failed. Instead there was a feeling of deep and sullen hate. The first night in the outside lager we had no water or food. Darkness was coming on and there was no shelter. Then our camp organization began to function. The men began to organize. Tents were put up far into the night. Gradually everyone got under some kind of shelter. The next day our interpreters began getting out a limited supply of water and some soup. The men who had been able to carry in food shared what they had with others. The men gradually began moving into the main camp.

Inside the new camp conditions were overcrowded and morale was lousy. Most of the prisoners had been down a few months and knew nothing of the Geneva Convention. Most of them were underfed and bewildered except a few fat, sleek men in the cookhouse who seemed to be doing OK. Because the "Goons" had singled out our camp leader, Frank Paules and our interpreter, Bill Krebs for special slugging and terror treatment and threatened to turn them over to the Gestapo if they tried to change conditions, we were temporarily deprived of their services. Thus we started at Tychow way below scratch and had to work our way out.

Only part of the camp was opened and the lager in which we were assigned carried more than twice the number of men it was equipped to serve. Some of the men were pushed into already overcrowded barracks and slept on the eating tables at night. Others were crowded in temporary tents that leaked during rains, forcing more crowding of the barracks as men slept in the halls. Red Cross supplies were short and under German control. Many men were sick as the cookhouse crew turned out watery cabbage soup.

From July to September we gradually gained a little ground - but it was slow going. Finally in September our Heydekrug Group moved to our own lager with Frank Paules as leader and the Germans later accepted him as Man of Confidence when the overwhelming majority of men in camp elected him. Lager "D" then became the International Settlement with English, Poles and other RAF men on one side and AAF men on the other. We gradually built a library. Red Cross parcels began to come in better. We got a makeshift theatre and other activities going again. When the men marched out on February 6, 1945, we had a fair camp at Tychow.

On February 6, 1945 our group of approximately 4,000 men marched out of Grosstychow. For several weeks previously groups of Russians, Poles, English had been moving through our camp from further East. The big Russian drive on Stettin finally forced the evacuation of our camp and for a time we thought that we were cut off. Again we hoped.

Grosstychow is located in the midst of a heavily wooded pine belt between Stargard and Belgard. We marched first across East Pommerania and were ferried across the Oder at Stettin at Schweinmunde on Feb. 15. Until then we felt we still had a chance to be taken by the Russians. After that we knew better.

We marched across West Pomerania mostly along the backroads staying mostly on small farms and villages. During the first 30 days of the trip we were officially issued less than a loaf of bread per man. We lived in barns and slept in fields. In the last days of March we were almost as far west as Hamburg where the western invaders began to threaten us. Some of us started with one, some two Red Cross parcels and some had extra cigarettes. With these we traded Poles and French, as well as Germans on the farms where we stayed, and thus we got bread, chocolate and coffee.

On March 29th we were put on trains at Eulzen - 70 and 80 in a box car - and shipped by rail to Altengrabow near between Magdenberg and Berlin. Here we were quartered for about ten days in a big wire corral which became known as "Gooks Gulch". This must have been one of the weirdest prisoner of war concentrations of all time. About 8,000 men were crowded into circus tents (500 to 600 in a tent) and some in smaller tents (100 to a tent). Milling together in this corral were Bearded Sikks, Hindus, Gurkas, Senegalese, Nepalese, French, Scotch, English, Poles, GIs, and a few more assorted nationalities. The place looked like a circus and smelled like one. We had not more than 12 water taps to serve all these men and three pit toilets. Food and sanitation was a big problem, as well as international relations. Almost every night there was a big show as we watched

the RAF stage their big raids and light up the sky around Magdemberg and Berlin, and the big blockbusters that hit would shake us up as we slept on the ground. By day the AAF came over - there were air raids sirens blowing every hour of the day and night.

We could see the P-47's and 38's as they strafed German transport to a standstill. Finally, on April 26, we made an all night march through American lines at Bitterfield. Our war was over."

TO ALL PRISONERS OF WAR!

THE ESCAPE FROM PRISON CAMPS IS NO LONGER A SPORT!

Germany has always kept to the Hague Convention and only punished recaptured prisoners of war with minor disciplinary punishment.

Germany will still maintain these principles of international law.

But England has besides fighting at the front in an honest manner instituted an illegal warfare in non combat zones in the form of gangster commandos, terror bandits and sabotage troops even up to the frontiers of Germany.

They say in a captured secret and confidential English military pamphlet.

THE HANDBOOK
OF MODERN IRREGULAR

WARFARE:

"...the days when we could practise the rules of sportsmanship are over. For the time being, every soldier must be a potential gangster and must be prepared to adopt their methods whenever necessary."

"The sphere of operations should always include the enemy's own country, any occupied territory, and in certain circumstances, such neutral countries as he is using as a source of supply."

ENGLAND HAS WITH THESE INSTRUCTIONS OPENED UP A NON MILITARY FORM OF GANGSTER WAR!

Germany is determined to safeguard her homeland, and especially her war industry and provisional centres for the fighting fronts. Therefore it has become necessary to create strictly forbidden zones, called death zones, in which all unauthorised trespassers will be immediately shot on sight.

Escaping prisoners of war, entering such death zones, will certainly lose their lives. They are therefore in constant danger of being mistaken for enemy agents or sabotage groups.

Urgent warning is given against making future escapes!

In plain English: Stay in the camp where you will be safe! Breaking out of it is now a damned dangerous act.

The chances of preserving your life are almost nil!

All police and military guards have been given the most strict orders to shoot on sight all suspected persons.

ESCAPING FROM PRISON CAMPS HAS CEASED TO BE A SPORT!