

## Fred Weiner 44BG as told to Greg Hatton

I didn't know Hy (Hatton) until the incident that happened at Stalag Luft I. We were warned in advance about the possible evacuation of Stalag Luft IV. This gave us a little time to prepare.

I guess you heard what kind of trip it was. We had a forced march out of camp and then got loaded onto crowded box cars. It took us eight days, going and stopping. They had one doctor for all the medical cases. There were many guys who got sick from the water they gave us to drink! I remember the doctor that treated me had a southern accent. (Capt. Boggess from Miss.)

There were so many of us, that if you fell asleep, people fell on top of you. That's what happened to me; I lost the circulation in my legs and my boots were stuck! My feet swelled up and they were killing me. I finally persuaded the Germans to take me into the box car with a doctor; they had cut my shoes off, just to let my feet out and get my circulation back. While I was there, I watched that doctor operate on some guy with shrapnel in his leg - it had swelled and become infected. All he had was a candle to sterilize a straight razor with. And that's what he operated with! The train only stopped on time to let us go; When it stopped, the guards got out. There was snow on both sides of the track. We jumped out of the boxcars to move our bowels, which we hadn't been able to do. Now here's this beautiful winter scene, with all the white snow. All of a sudden, it's all spotted up! Then back into the box cars again.

The train took us, right to Barth. We didn't know it at the time, but this was strictly an officers camp, which the Germans were expanding to accept the NCOs. They were going to start crowding us in. We didn't know they had segregated the Jewish officers in this camp. Later we found out it was nothing harmful - the Germans hadn't done anything about it, yet.

Well, here we were, new prisoners. We had just come from Stalag Luft IV. We were on that terrible forced march and the 8-day ride on the box cars. - so crowded that not everyone could sleep at one time, it was awful. We slept standing up! The Germans took us and assigned us to our rooms. They put 40 men into each of the bare rooms.

We were all young guys, maybe 20 years old, and you're saying to yourself "what's next - what's next?". I was with your dad (Hy Hatton). At this point I had just met him on the forced march, into camp. We both knew we were Jewish, and we were worried about it, don't think we weren't! We didn't know any of the other American airmen that we were with. The Germans told us to wait in this room and we knew the routine already. We figured they would come in and tell us we'd have to fill straw into a mattress. Then use that to sleep on the floor. That's what we happened in the other camp - we called them "pally-asses".

So anyway there's 40 of us – including your dad and myself. Instead, after about an hour, here come this typical German military sergeant. He's a big guy with a handlebar mustache, and there's two privates with him with their rifles on their shoulders. He shouts: "ACHTUNG". So we all stand at attention and he says "I'm here for a specific purpose. I know there are Jewish soldiers in the room and I'm going to count to three. They must take a step forward!"

Now, I can't answer for Hy, I can only say what went on in my head. I'm saying to myself: "This is it baby! When I take that step forward, I'm finished! So I'm not taking any step forward ... and if they're too dumb to take a look at my dog tag and tell I'm Jewish... then I'm not telling them what to do!" So the sergeant goes: "Eine.. .Swei.. .Drie..." and nothing happens. Man, there's a deathly silence in the room. All of a sudden this sergeant starts to rant and rave in German!! He says in English: "I know that there's Jewish soldiers in here. I'm going to count to three again. If nobody steps forward, the soldiers will be ordered to open fire". The two privates aimed their guns into the middle of the group! So again, in my mind, I'm saying "Now this is too much! I mean, if I'm going to get it, there's no sense in everyone getting it."

The sergeant starts to count again "Eine.. .Swei. . .Drei." As soon as he starts to say "Drei", I start to take a step forward, and my God! I look around and there's 39 men taking a step forward! All 39 men without an order!

Now here's American airmen, from all over the country. I never met any of them (except for Hy) and I had no prearranged signal with him. Every one of them, at the count of three, took that step forward. You could say, it was just American ingenuity!

So, this sergeant became livid! He started to curse again in German. His face turned purple. The veins were sticking out on both sides of his neck. I'm sure he'd never come across anything like that before. The two privates put their guns back on their shoulders and each of them grabbed an arm and dragged him out of there. They just left and nobody ever bothered us again about being Jewish.

I tell you, I really felt proud to be an American! If you planned something like that we probably would have screwed it up! The only other thing that impressed me as much, when I was in the service, was when that damn Liberty ship finally made it to New York Harbor. We saw the Statue of Liberty. I want you to know that we didn't get out in New York. The harbor was so full that they made us turn around, and go down to Newport News, Virginia. We took a train back to New York.

At Barth, I took a job working in one of the German field kitchens, which was to heat up water, because they didn't give us any food to make. I used to heat the water, and that way I could steal a couple of extra lumps of coal. We needed the extra hot water for Hy's back. Near the end of the war, they stopped giving us rations until just before we got liberated. We were there from January until May and we started to get pretty weak.

I was 220 lbs. when I entered the camps and 150 lbs. when I was liberated.

I would say they stopped giving us food, sometime around April. –they did give us a little food - like Kohlrabi, black brot and potatoes. But they had stopped giving us our Red Cross parcels. The Germans were keeping them for themselves. Those parcels are really what kept us going. Oh, and we got pretty hungry! In fact, when the Russians liberated us, we were pretty weak. It was hard for some of us to get up and greet them! We did have some diversion though, like when we were in the service, one of the popular comic strips was L'il Abner. Sometimes, at night, when lights were out, there was nothing to do and nobody was sleeping anyway. So the men in the barracks would take the place of different characters in L'il Abner! We'd act out a whole story. We'd be roaring and laughing so hard that the Germans used to bang on our doors to shut us up. They couldn't imagine what we were up to!

Between the guards and us, it was like a game. Sometimes the guards would steal from our Red Cross packages during inspections. We had to wait outside while they went through our stuff. So, we'd wait until a can of instant powdered coffee was almost finished, then we'd fill it up again with stuff and spike it with cascara pills. Cascara, in those days was a laxative, a pill. We used to shave it down and grind it up. It was a brown color and would blend with the instant coffee. You'd always know who stole the coffee, because he'd be on sick call the next day and he couldn't get back at us. It was against German army regulations to steal.

One bar of soap from a Red Cross package was worth a week with a woman from town (for the guards). They'd steal that too, but sometimes we'd put razor blades in the soap. We'd trade soap for radio parts. The guys would start with one part and then the guard would be hooked. If more parts were needed, we could blackmail him for more because, really, trading was "verboten". They'd threaten him with exposure and he couldn't refuse.

All the barracks were made on pilings (they were never on the ground) and we finally found out why. The Germans made a crawl space so that they could come underneath with a stethoscope and listen to our conversations for intelligence. We always had water boiling at night. When we could detect them under the barracks, we would pour the water between the cracks in the floor. Boy, some nights, shots come flying up from there! I tell you, sometimes, we didn't expect to get home alive. Anyway, that's basically what the background of this whole thing was. Like, if there was an air raid and we didn't get back into the barracks fast enough for the guards, they'd shoot at us. You know, it wasn't food, but security that worried us the most. I traded my food for cigarettes. We were afraid of getting bombed during air raids. They had a flak school and an installation near the camp. Before we got liberated, I saw the Germans blowing up the installations. So, we thought they might execute us. We found out later, they had gas chambers being built were going to gas us off, if they had time. If the Russians didn't liberate us when they did, we were dead!

When we were liberated, the officers told us not to leave camp. Now, you're not going to tell a bunch of American GI's to stay in camp. I'll tell you what happened to me! I got out of camp on a bicycle and rode into town, to check our Barth. When I came back to camp, there were two M.P.s who wanted to lift me off the bike and lock me up! Imagine! Put me in the "hoosegow!" and court-martial me. I was AWOL from the prison camp!!!

Those Russians were a wild bunch. The first ones that came in, were Mongolian troops. **THEY WERE WILD!!!** They were so boozed up with Vodka, they came in on motorcycles, some of them falling, breaking arms and legs.... getting back on their motorcycles... and driving, I don't know how they did it! Stalag Luft I was a tremendous camp, with thousands of P.O.W.'s, and we all saw different things that day (May 1). I saw a tank come through the barbed wire and flatten it out. These big six foot Cossacks were the M.P.'s and they were the guys who took over. Yeah, they went into town (Barth) and got cattle to feed us (which was not good because we all threw up...our stomachs couldn't take it).

Afterwards, the Russians made us wait and wait, until the allies had transportation. On May 15<sup>th</sup>, the Americans flew in to take us to France (to Camp Lucky Strike and so on). These were the recuperation camps in Europe. Once we were in American hands, they took your dad right to the hospital.

It didn't take long to get back to the life in America. Yeah. You wanted to get started , to be part of civilian life. While I was still in uniform, I met Edith (my wife). I wanted to get married, to get a job; so it didn't take long to get going. There are some things that are hard to tell somebody, about the fun we had in the prison camps. In order to go steady with me, Edith (my wife) promised to let her friends meet me before she got serious with me. We had a double date at the Paramount to see Frank Sinatra. So don't ask! We're in a line and have to wait two hours to get in. We're talking and it turns out (the other guy) was a P.O.W. at Stalag 17B. Here I was a P.O.W. from Stalag Luft IV and I so, we started in with the stories. Laughing and telling anecdotes about the life in camp. Well... people gathered all around us, to hear us talk. We could hear them in the background saying **"DIDN'T THEY SAY THEY WERE IN A PRISON CAMP?"**