

“Highlights from the P.O.W. Camp”

by Robt. M. Koenig

From a strictly personal point of view.

“We guys flying combat back in 1943 were pretty uninformed as to the prospects of becoming prisoners of war. We sort of figured that either you got back to the base or else—.

“Percentages at that time were pretty much stacked up against us, so one day our turn came along and we began the ‘life of leisure’ deep in the heart of the Reich.

“The ‘goon’ Chamber of Commerce was waiting to greet us upon arrival and took us on a short whirlwind tour of Central Germany before delivering us to our final destination. You know—all that business of a pat on the back and a few well chosen words—‘for you the war is over’.

“The ‘goon’ interrogation was short and incomplete for all purposes. We told them nothing, so they told us everything—when we were born and where we went to school—what time we lost our baby teeth—when we went through flying school, when we joined the group, when we came overseas, where we landed—they told us things about our own group that we ourselves didn’t know.

“Then we were taken to Stalag Luft 3 near Sagan, Germany, where we were to live for the next year and a half. Here we immediately got into the swing of things.

“The ‘swing of things’ meant meeting all the guys from the old group (most of them were present), flying all of our missions over again, exchanging all the poop from group, and finding out ‘the score’ on this business of being a kriegsgefangenen (kriegie).

“The routine for the next year and a half varied little from day to day. Ten of us lived in a room 16’ by 20’. We slept in double tier bunks. We did all of our own cooking with a larder furnished largely by the Red Cross. Two men would go on cooking for a week at a time and the other eight would eat and bitch about it. Actually the food we ate was damn good—there just wasn’t quite enough of it. Our cooking utensils were fashioned out of tin cans—all of them. One hundred and forty men did all of their cooking on two small stoves (resulting in a continual flop).

“For recreation, we built a theatre and organized a theatre guild of writers, actors and prop men; we formed a sixteen piece dance band (instruments furnished by the YMCA; we organized Kriegie Kollege with academic courses in all subjects (books furnished by the YMCA and the International Students Union of Geneva). This also included a pretty well stocked fiction library. We received phonographs and records from the YMCA; we played bridge, bridge, and poker; and we organized a comprehensive sports program (YMCA equipment). With all of these advantages at our disposal, about half of the men in camp still stayed in their sacks from morning till night till morning. You just can’t satisfy some guys.

“Our guards were segregated into two classes—the ‘goons’ and the ‘ferrets’. The ferrets were the guys that were always snooping around trying to find the tunnels we were building, or the radios we were listening to to get the news from England, or the wire cutters that continually cropped up all over the place.

They were pretty efficient at finding things, but we were even more efficient at hiding them.

"The 'goons' were the guys that weren't ferrets, including all ranks from General on down to soldatten. They spread themselves around camp and tried to discourage the inhabitants from straying away. Their arguments in urging us to remain were (1) We had more food and cigarettes inside our camp than the civilians had outside. (2) Once we did get out, there was no place to go (the night clubs were all closed down). (3) The German women really weren't too good looking. (4) The civilians were at times downright unfriendly. (5) The SS might get hold of us when the Luftwaffe wasn't looking, and above all (6) Germany had reached the end of her rope and the war just couldn't last much longer. They were telling us that as early as the summer of '43—and they actually believed it. So most of us stayed around (Even though they didn't furnish us an officer's club).

"Now and then we would get the urge to drink. In this matter there was little to choose from. Our kriegie brew consisted of a sort of raisin brandy (brewing time—two weeks). Since the making of the brew took a terrific slice out of our sugar ration, we had to content ourselves with having it only on special occasions, like Christmas and the Fourth of July.

"The first Christmas was the biggest and best of these events because the place wasn't quite as crowded as it later became. Everybody got quite stinko. The six full colonels in camp got tossed into the fire pool amid the floating chunks of ice. Captain Jackson (an old Eagle Squadron boy) captured a horse from an unsuspecting 'goon' and galloped all around the camp. One kriegie climbed unsteadily over the twelve foot barbed wire fence in full view of a guard (the guard merely turned him around when he had finally gotten over, and I'll be damned if he didn't climb right back over. Then he passed out.)

"Of course most of us got sick (the stuff was pretty raw) but we had a hell of a good time.

"The second project was a little more successful than the first however. Several men were actually observed ice skating from time to time. Roughly we figured that approximately 1500 men had worked on the average of 100 hours each on the Rink Project. Oh well—anything to pass the time."

"JANUARY-----1945 A.D.

"THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING! THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!

"How far are they from us—200 miles—20 miles—20 feet—OH MY GOD! We're going to be free men! The goons will never move us—they can't move us—they haven't got enough men.

"SO WE WERE EVACUATED

"With a few hours warning—with the sound of Russian guns quite audible in the East—we packed up our tooth brushes and as much food as we could carry on our backs, and marched out of Stalag Luft 3 at 0100 hours, January 29, 1945 into the face of a driving blizzard.

"Brigadier General Vanaman said, 'If my men can walk—I can walk.' And so he walked—as did a score of Colonels—and numerous Lieutenant Colonels—quite a number of majors—a slew of captains—an s.p. full of 1st looies—and a host of 2nd looies. We walked and walked and walked—for about a hundred miles through the Rhineland in mid-winter—with the Red Army on our tails all the way. At Spremberg, we were put on boxcars (packed in box cars I should say) and taken to Stalag 7A, a camp near Munich. This camp was set up to hold about 20,000 and by the time we were liberated, it was holding 110,000. Never had so many men lived for so long in such a small space. It was a nightmare worthy of forgetting as soon as possible. We were there four months to the day and it seemed more like four years. God knows how we managed to get food, but we seemed to—thanks to the Red Cross trucks driving between our camp and the Swiss border.

"Each day we watched the American movements on our hastily drawn maps—getting closer and closer. It was the continued good news that kept us going throughout those four months. Considering the

conditions of the camp, the morale managed to remain remarkably high.

"Three days before the Americans arrived, the 'Goons' packed up and left the camp. We had to station our own guard around the fence to keep the terrified civilians out—they wanted protection from the Russians—and thus we waited.

"The front moved past us on Sunday morning April 29, with the 14th Armored Division moving rapidly through our sector. The skirmish lasted about two hours and we hailed the American flag that was hoisted over the neighboring village of Moosburg. A few minutes later, the Sherman tanks came rolling into our camp. The reception they received has been doubtless unequalled. You couldn't see the tanks for the swarms of kriegies that were climbing all over them. God but we were happy!

"Almost a month has passed since then. Now I am sitting at a typewriter in the headquarters building of my old bombardment group in England. When I landed here the other day, it seemed as though I was finally completing that mission I had started on August 17, 1943. It was a grand feeling to be back. My big ambition now, however, is to see that little wife of mine as soon as possible, and if I know her, she will be waiting pretty close to that Statue of Liberty when I return."

But the roads weren't clogged today. People crowded into the courtyard below, all looking up at that plane lumbering around and around the chimney. They were civilians, but the men all looked alike, all wearing suits made from the same pattern. Dark blue shirts all cut alike, all made of the same material. Civilian uniforms. All gawking at an unarmed bomber going around and around and around.

That bomb sight over there meant nothing any more. Technical Sergeant William E. Walsh had devised a system to train bombardiers. This was nearly two years ago, but no need of it now. Walsh's contribution was to help bombardiers in training. It was not much more than a regular bomb sight and a projector, which reflected a moving, magnified area of enemy terrain. This did not satisfy Walsh. He began his improvements in the unit by first adding the rudder circuit of the automatic pilot, thus giving the bombardier pilotage control such as they have on an actual bomb run.

Then came the major innovations. From the bone yard, a collection of wrecked aircraft in one corner of the field, he salvaged the plexi-glass enclosed nose section and its panel of control switches, the bomb racks from the bomb bay, and the complete bomb release mechanism.

These he incorporated with the original training—well, it hardly seems worth describing now.

Booska flew back the width of Germany just over the tops of the trees, and there are a lot of trees in the Black Forest. Over Erfurt and Coblenz, mile after mile, never a piece of flak. Never a rocket.

Back at Grafton-Underwood he learned how close they had been to the Russians and the Americans, who had linked up only 25 miles away.

The end was near.