

From LES JACSON 154

From D. BENNETT

EAGLE'S CAN WALK

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

When I entered the Army, I choose the Air Corps in preference to other branches of service because I felt I would much rather fly than walk. It was ironical, then, that after being shot down in 1943 and held a prisoner in a camp near Vienna, Austria, I should be forced to walk much further than the average infantry man.

The log begins on April 8, 1945, when we were ordered to evacuate the camp because of the Russian advance on Vienna and will prove to the doubting Thomases in the other branches of service that, although we in the Air Corps prefer to fly -- "Eagles Can Walk."

Irving J. Mills

April 16, 1946

F O R W A R D

One year ago today there were upwards of 75,000 Allied prisoners of war on forced marches throughout Europe. "Eagles Can Walk" is the log of one of them. There have been other logs by other men recording marches far longer and under far worse conditions than this one, but for me this is the most important-- for this is my story. I cannot explain now why I ever started to record the march at all and many times I was tempted to abandon it in order to lighten my pack. I suppose that I had some vague idea that it might be interesting reading some day in the future, therefore, I wrote simply and briefly the thoughts and impressions as they occurred to me at the time of writing. If this log has any interest or value to anyone but the author, it is due, I believe, to the aforementioned facts and not to my literary efforts.

Owing to my status of prisoner at the time of writing, much of the original log was purposely incomplete, therefore, I have added a brief explanatory note as an introduction and footnotes where I feel it necessary. With the exception of these justifiable explanations, no other changes have been made.

April 8, 1945 - Sunday 5:30 A.M. Got up at four o'clock to start for God knows where. Had barley and raisins for breakfast. I am all set to go and have packed the following: two blankets, five pairs of socks, one half a Red Cross parcel, one sixth of a loaf of bread, one pair of long johns, one pair of shorts, eight packs of Camels, one pack of Prince Albert, six bars of soap (five for trading), an overcoat, and a pair of gym shoes. 8:00 P.M. Left camp at 8:15 A.M. (one hour fifteen minutes late) in the first five hundred men. We have thirty nine guards--Army, Luftwaffe, Storm Troopers, and Volkstrum. Marched twenty eight kilometers. (Rough). Stopped four times. Weather fine. Came through five towns snuggled in the mountains. This is the most beautiful part of the world I've seen yet. Army and Storm Troopers have taken over four of the towns. People are friendly to the surprise of everyone. Some very beautiful shrines along the road. Their beauty lies in their simplicity. Fellows in fair condition considering the little food and no exercise they have had in the last two years. Four men did pass out, however. We are to sleep out in the open tonight. Mac, Jim, and I will sleep together in order to keep warm. No food from Jerry yet. Leaving at 8:00 A.M. tomorrow, rise at 6:30 A.M.

April 9 - 7:00 A.M. Cold and damp last night. Not much sleep. 8:30 A.M. Leaving at 9:00. No food from Jerry yet. Jerry Captain so sorry. 12:00 noon. Not bad so far today. Ten minute break every hour. Walked about six kilometers. Stop for lunch one half hour, although no food from Jerry yet. Mountains are really beautiful--but hard on feet.

April 10 - 1:30 P.M. Didn't have time to log last night. Yesterday we marched twelve kilometers at a slow pace. Most of the fellows were dead on their feet because of the twenty eight kilometers walked the first day. Had beautiful weather yesterday. Passed through only three small villages. The S.S. (Storm Troopers) have them all. No food from

Jerry yet. We are stopped outside a village for a twenty four hour rest which we need badly. Last night was very damp but fairly warm. At ten o'clock this morning Jerry finally came across with some chow in the form of barley which tasted delicious, probably because we're hungry. We also received a loaf of bread per eighteen men. All the bread for the last eighteen months has been black. We have had wonderful weather so far. I dread the rain that is bound to come. Wheels^{*1} soon to be leaving too! Two Jerries R.I.P.^{*2} None of us--yet. Got a chance to wash and shave today in mountain stream, cold but refreshing.

April 11 - First time I've had a chance to log today because I'm kept busy. Slept warm last night for the first time because I was in the middle. Eighteen men to a loaf of bread again in the afternoon. This morning up at six, had Jerry beans (similar to dried lima beans) for breakfast, walked nine kilometers to a small town where we had a hot soup which was obtained by Jerry Hollywood style!^{*3} All in all we walked twenty kilometers today. Sunburned, two blisters on left foot, and turned my right ankle today. With the exceptions of these minor details, I'm in good shape. Eighteen men to a loaf tonight--and that is all. We are running out of G.I. chow. Don't know how we'll fare after. We are supposed to sleep in a barn tonight--which ought to be great after outdoors. Still walking in mountains. Weather perfect. Civilians treating us much better than we expected. Jim reasons that they have not been subjected to Nazism because of lack of newspapers and radios back here in the mountains. Been thinking of cokes and ice cream for the first time in eighteen months. Still no idea where

- *1 - Wheels refers to high German officers and others important enough to have automobiles. There was a continual stream of heavily laden automobiles speeding passed our column for most of the march.
- *2 - R.I.P. stands for Rest In Peace. Two German soldiers died from over-exertion the third day out.
- *3 - The German Army confiscated whatever they needed in the style made so notorious by our Hollywood movies. In this particular case, they threatened to burn down an Austrian's farm unless he "cooperated".

we're going! (Think we are walking 'til the end of the war.)

April 12 - We got up at 5:30 this morning and marched all day in a cold downpour of rain. Am soaked through to the skin with no chance to dry out. We marched twenty kilometers and although I am tired, the beauty of the distant snow-capped mountains has not been entirely wasted on us. I would like to bring Joan through this country some day. Still going South. I am writing in an old barn where we are to sleep. I'll try to dry my blankets now before I turn in.

April 13 - 11:00 A.M. Some delay in starting on the march. Clothes still very wet and continuing to rain. Four biscuits today--that is all. Heard from Jerry that President Roosevelt died. He was a very good president. Don't think it will hurt progress of war, but it may affect the peace. Looks like the right wing of Democrats knew what they were doing when they got rid of Wallace and put in Truman.

April 14 - 10:30 A.M. We are in another barn. Weather clearing but rained last night. Marched eighteen kilometers from eleven to five. Hard marching in mud and rain. No food today and no more GI chow. Am damn hungry. Staying here for twenty-four hour rest which we need badly. Trying to dry clothes. Shaved and washed. Face is peeling from sunburn. Still going South. Reached Danube River. To a New Englander these mountains are breath-taking with their well kept forests and sparkling streams. Jerries killed a cow. Guards (39) got one half, G.I.'s (500) got other half. Hope we get something to eat soon. Came through one fairly big town yesterday. People didn't speak, but no violence.

April 15 - 12:30 P.M. Didn't get a chance to log yesterday. Came down out of mountains. Much easier walking. We are now headed West. The people aren't as friendly here. However, Jerry gave us a good hot meal (soup) and a bag of dog biscuits last night. The biscuits were

for yesterday's breakfast and today's dinner. Walked eighteen kilometers yesterday and saw just as many shrines as we did in the mountains. 5:30 P.M. Walked twenty-three kilometers today. Still in valley and followed Danube for a while. Today saw a sight never will forget. There is much truth in our propaganda about the anti-Semitic feeling here. The treatment is unbelievable!^{*1} City stopping in ... tonight thirteen kilometers out of Linz and has been bombed--as has Linz. Hope we get fed tonight as I'm hungry. Weather hot, sun hot, and roads dusty.

April 17 - Today I am 25 years old and growing older every hour. We are staying in town for twenty-four hour layover and rest but so far 6 (six) air raids. I feel like hell as my stomach is in an uproar. Last night nine men to a loaf of bread--that is all. Ran out of G.I. chow about four days ago and am living (?) on Jerry chow, which is edible but not much of it. Cold sleeping last night in shelter with roof and floor, no sides. Still don't know how far we have to go yet. I believe they intend to march us 'til end of war. Anyone of the four horsemen^{*2} could get us. Happy Birthday!

April 18 - 6:00 P.M. The past twenty-four hours were beauties. Walked thirty kilometers today on one cup of Jerry coffee! On the 17th got up at 7:00 A.M. We got one thin cup of soup (very thin) and at this hour nothing more except nine men to a loaf of bread. At 6:30 last night air raid started and ended at 3:00 this morning. Left at 6:00 A.M.

*1 - This was our first encounter with the Nazi treatment of the Jewish race. We met approximately 300 of them marching in the opposite direction. Judging from their clothes, they had been, at one time, very prosperous but now they had degenerated into a dirty, starved, and completely beaten mass that was hard to recognize as once being human beings. They were literally dropping like flies as they dragged along. Those unfortunate to drop received no aid whatsoever from their own group and their filthy, revolting guards would dispatch them from this world with their rifle butts rather than waste a single cartridge. Some of our own guards tried to apologize for this demonstration but from that day on, we hated the Germans as a group.

*2 - REFERS TO THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSES.

and walked twenty-two kilometers before noon. Walked through Linz and crossed Danube during air raid.^{*1} Roll call coming now and still nothing to eat. Still going South West but need food badly. Water was no problem in mountains but down here can't even get water and people not as friendly.

April 19 - 5:00 P.M. Last night at 10:00 P.M. received some soup (not enough to cover a six inch dish pan!) and eight men to a loaf of bread. Left at 8:00 A.M., marched 'til noon, covering seventeen kilometers, and then stopped for day! Reason: Protecting Power checking on conditions. So Jerry gave us five men to a small loaf, seven and a half men to a can of meat, and we bought a few spuds. Jerry promised to give us a hot meal tonight but the stove broke down or some damn excuse. Jerry is very nice while a man from Geneva is around but as soon as he leaves, back we go again to starvation and abuse. This morning I almost dropped from hunger. All we get is excuses from Jerry but nothing to eat! Red Cross man said we would have parcels in a few days. Let's hope so.

April 20 - 6:00 P.M. Still going West. Marched about thirty-three kilometers from 7:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. in hot sun. Very hard marching as weak from hunger. No food yet today. None of us can go on much longer marching thirty-three kilometers a day on a cup of Jerry coffee. The energy we are burning is our youth. We are like a lighter with no fluid, just burning the wick. Country is getting hilly again. The people are more friendly. Have seen at least two old women with tears in their eyes as we went by. I think some of the people would like to trade with us. We use cigarettes and soup^A that we had left from Red Cross parcels (the only thing we have left) to trade. One cigarette

*1 - Linz was the second city through which we passed during which time the Russians were bombing. Twice we were mistaken by American fighter planes for German troops and strafed. No Americans were injured. However, about twenty Frenchmen who were with us were injured or killed.

is worth eight marks, so if the guards with us would let us trade, we could eat. A loaf of bread is worth eighty marks or ten cigarettes. The last town we came through was as near on a peacetime basis as I have seen. The kids were eating ice cream and cookies. We pass hundreds of roadside shrines every day and strange as it seems, with bombs knocking down everything, I haven't seen a shrine hit yet.

April 21 - 1:00 P.M. Staying here for a twenty-four hour rest. Two Red Cross parcels for five men came to us in G.I. trucks and jeeps driven by Swiss. We haven't received them yet but expect to late today. At 11:00 last night Jerry gave us some warm soup, very weak and very little, and no bread. Today I have eaten nothing but boiled turnips. I still have some oats but am going to save them. Shaved and washed today. My right heel has been giving me trouble for five days but can do nothing for it. Men are stealing from farms, from Jerry, and from G.I.'s. (Nature in the raw is seldom mild). Just heard chow came in.---

April 22 - 5:00 P.M. Up at 5:00 A.M., off at 7:00, and walked twenty-five kilometers. Rain, sleet, hail, and snow were the combination for today. I'm soaked through and frozen. More hills and can now see Swiss Alps. Jerry says we should reach camp in three more days. Let's hope so. Yesterday we got a very thin soup and no bread. We did get Red Cross parcels, so this morning I had oatmeal and ovaltine (very good). I received a British invalid parcel which was not bad at all. Today the people are much more friendly. When we arrived here we had a good soup (best by Jerry yet) and five men to a small loaf of bread. Am very tired--shall go to bed.

April 23 - Up at 5:00 A.M., off at 7:00 A.M. Marched twenty-six kilometers in rain most of way. Rumor has it that we lay over here for twenty-four hours then march sixteen kilometers and lay over for awhile. I sure hope so. Very tired again, ankle and foot still up like a

balloon. Joe just figured roughly that we have walked 251 kilometers up to today, the sixteenth day on the road.

April 24 - 4:30 P.M. Today we lay over. Too cold and damp to do much. Didn't even shave. Last night Jerry gave us uncooked barley, horse meat, and potatoes, plus twelve men to a loaf. Today he gave us a very thin barley soup. Have rested most of day. Understand we don't reach camp tomorrow as per rumor. Oh well!

April 25 - On this Wednesday, the eighteenth on the road, we arrived at our "camp"! We marched twenty-five kilometers to about fifteen kilometers South West of Brenau to a forest where we were told, "This is it." There is nothing here. No barracks, no hospital, no water within a kilometer--just forest. We arrived at 3:00 P.M. It is now 7:00 P.M. and five of us, Jim, Joe, Al, Ray, and myself have built a shelter out of pines. Jerry gave us seven men to a small loaf of bread last night. There is a field kitchen here but not set up yet. There were roughly 4000 men (American) who arrived here with me. We walked eighteen days and 276 kilometers according to my guess. The Red Cross arrived with 3200 French parcels.

April 26 - 5:30 P.M. Had to break off last night to get water, then it was too dark to log more. The 3200 parcels were given out today, three of them to four men. The parcel is O.K. Lots of sweets and cake but also bulk food to be cooked and biscuits. Jerry gave us our first food in two days--barley (very, very little), soup (water), and eighteen men to a loaf. Tonight we get sugar (spoonful), coffee (one cup), and potatoes (three per man). It was damn cold sleeping last night! Nice weather today so we rebuilt our home. It is roughly 12' x 18', over about 2/3 of which we have been able to put a roof of pine needles. We worked all day and I'm tired as hell but feel good to be off the road and know the Red Cross (thank God for the Red Cross) is feeding

us and knows where we are. The Jerries would have killed us all long ago by starvation. I have a feeling the end of the war is near and that we won't be moved from here. We Americans are getting organized for the first time since I've been a prisoner and I hope on a military basis. We need it and need it badly. I have seen men at their worst and although I lost my temper, at least didn't resort to stealing. I'm still amazed at the punishment the human body can take and still survive. I got a chance for the first time in three days to wash and brush my teeth. Tomorrow I hope to shave.

April 27 - 5:30 P.M. Today some more Red Cross parcels came in here. Don't know how many of them or when we will get them. Today I shaved and looked in a mirror. Have lost some weight but if Red Cross parcels keep coming in and the weather stays like it is or gets warmer, I'll be O.K. Got up at 8:00 A.M. Jerry had a roll call at 10:00 this morning. Yesterday, for the first time since I've been a prisoner, he missed counting us. Went for water, built a fire place, and put more roof on shack during day. No bread from Jerry today but did get raw barley and a little butter. We are almost free here. We can wander in the woods, go down to the river, and do almost anything we want. A week or two like this in the open air with good food (I am eating better than I have in eighteen months) and pleasant weather will do me a world of good. It gets cool at night but I have a Jerry and a G.I. blanket, plus an overcoat, to keep me warm. I am told we marched, all in all, 330 kilometers. Some walking for the Air Corps!

April 28 - Rain!

April 29 - Rain! Am busy drying out.

April 30 - 3:00 P.M. What a life! Haven't had time to log for two days. Started to rain 8:00 P.M. the 27th and rained continually 'til 4:00 A.M. the 29th. Didn't sleep at all until last night. The hut

didn't leak too much but while getting drinking water, fire wood, and cooking, we got soaked to the skin. So with that and the blankets being so damp, we didn't dare go to sleep or even lay down on the ground as resistance is lower when asleep. The weather is still cool and damp and always threatening to rain. Sitting by the fire did dry us out but the smoke ruined my eyes and yesterday I could hardly see but that is a small price to pay, so near the end, for not catching a helluva cold. We have a new place to get water and it is twice as hard to get, a 100 foot sheer drop to a natural spring. At 4:00 today I go to help build our hospital. We cut the trees, saw them, trim, and put them in place for a log hut. We got 1/4 of a French and 1/4 of an American Red Cross parcel yesterday and as Jerry has given us nothing but a little raw barley, salt, and a few potatoes, the parcels come in damn handy. Munich fell yesterday so that cuts us off from the Swiss and Red Cross parcels but in another week we should be free.

May 1 - Rained last night. Damp and cold sleeping last night and still cold today. Nothing new. Jerry gave us twenty men to a small loaf and a little raw barley.

May 2 - 4:00 P.M. What a life! Last night it snowed, rained, and our roof leaked like hell! I didn't get much sleep and was soaked to the skin and chilled to the bone. At this hour the sun is trying to shine. I have spent most of the day trying to dry out myself, clothes, and blankets. Jerry gave us a little more raw barley--that is all. I understand that is the last of Jerry chow. American troops took Brenau last night so by Saturday, this is Wednesday, at the latest we expect to be recaptured. 5:20 P.M. Was just announced American officers are here and Jerry officers have surrendered camp to our forces at 3:00 P.M. today! American troops three kilometers down road and expected any minute. Roll call (American) to read Articles of War!

And so it looks as if this unholy life that started October 14, 1943 will end May 2, 1945. This log includes road trip and time spent in woods.*1 It's been rough but I'm alive and feel fine. It could have been worse! 6:25 P.M. American tanks arrived in camp! End of long, hard journey!

FIRST IMPRESSIONS UPON SEEING AND SPEAKING TO REGULAR G.I.'S

These men, of the Thirteenth Armored Division, look very well fed and their neatness and cleanliness is amazing to us, who show up very badly in comparison. Upon talking with them, they seem soft spoken, cheerful, and willing to do anything for us. Their politeness puts us to shame.

I guess the worst, the so-called beast in man, comes out in men under trying conditions. Just seeing prisoners all the time, I didn't think most of us looked too bad, but upon seeing G.I.'s again, I can see that we are in none to good a condition. As far as being gentlemen, we must have dropped all pretense of being civilized men. It will be hard to get back into the swing of things without any repercussions. I think I can do it.

*1 - Actually we did not leave the woods until the sixth of May and during that time the conditions were much worse under the Americans than they had been under Jerry. Nothing was written about this at the time because of censors. Nothing will be written now because it is water over the dam.