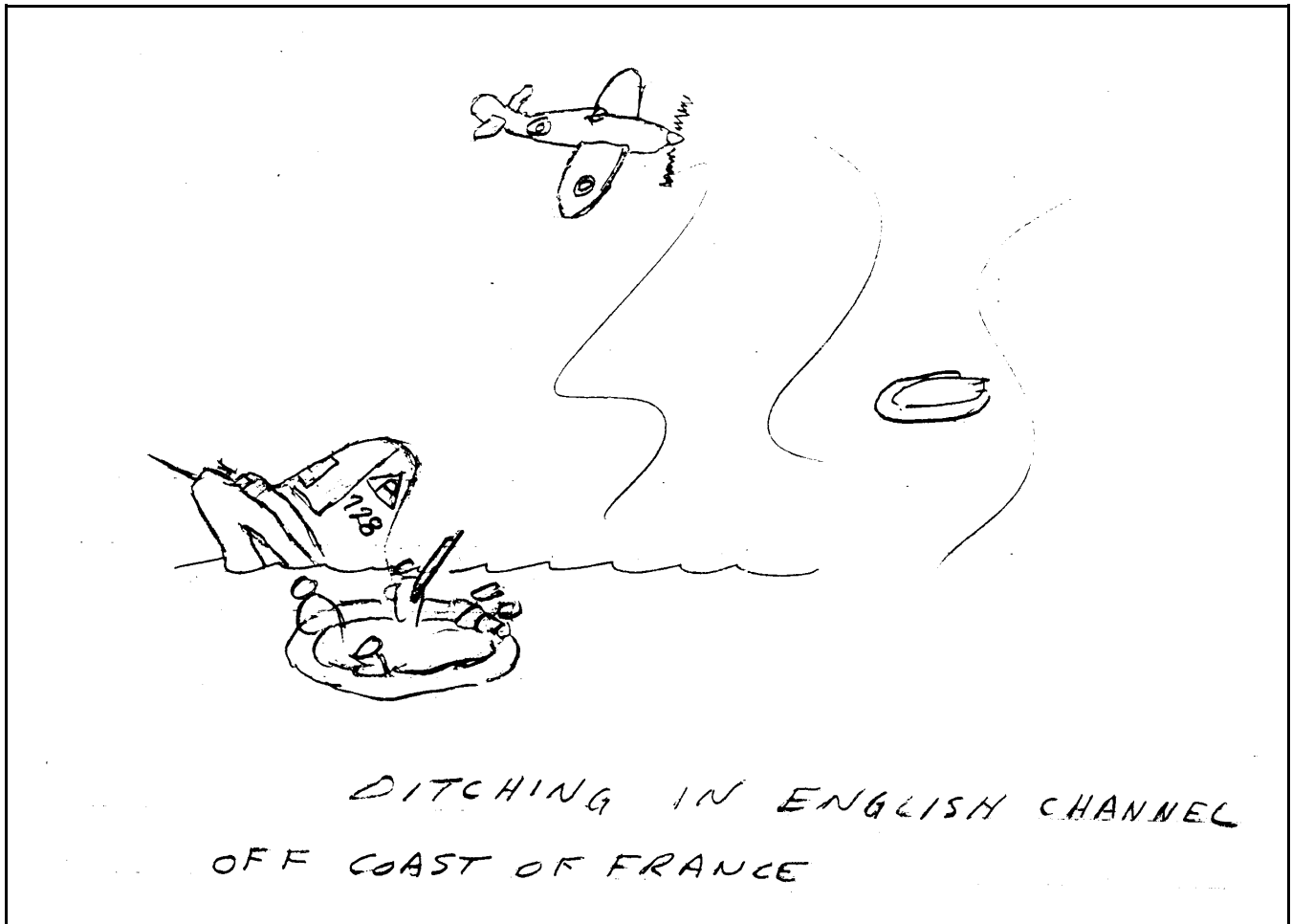


MY STORY

“THE FIRST FOUR DAYS”

By Franklin C. Hitzeroth



DITCHING IN ENGLISH CHANNEL
OFF COAST OF FRANCE

Preface

This story was written in the spring of 1944 in Stalag 17B at Krems, Austria. It was written, actually printed in upper case letters in the form learned in Radio School, in notebooks received from the YMCA. It is copied here exactly as originally written including the grammar (groan!), flowery language and impressions at that time.

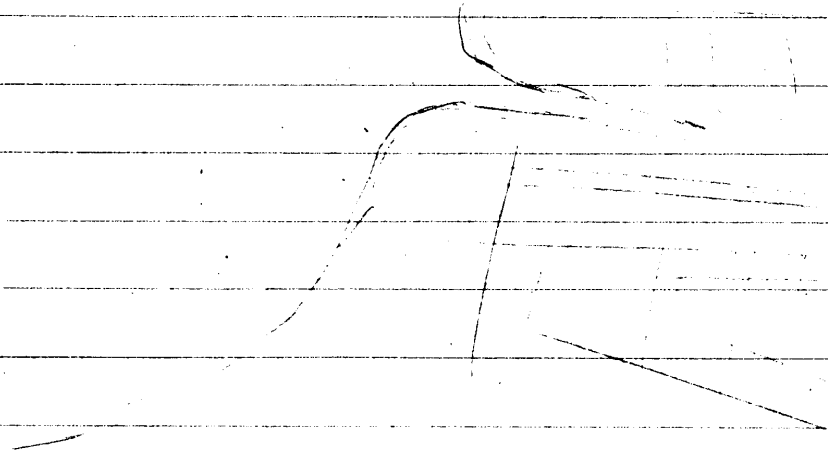
The form of the story was written not to include any military information or individual names, with the exception of Reilly, because it could be found and read by my German captors. It covers the days from my capture on September 3 to September 6, 1943.

The notebooks also included sketches of what was remembered of the ditching, the room in the interrogation camp and the latrine at the interrogation camp as well as a collection of Kriegie (prisoner of war) poetry and drawings and sketches done to entertain or pass the time.

I spent 21 months as a prisoner of war in Stalag 7A, Moosburg, Germany; Stalag 17B, Krems, Austria and marching across Austria, near the end the war, to the Wielhart forest at the Austrian - Bavarian border where I was liberated on May 3, 1945.

Franklin C. Hitzeroth
(Columbia, Missouri - August 1994)

LIGHTENING PLANE BEFORE
DITCHING



'Twas a fateful September morn, September third to be exact. The time was approximately 11:00 o'clock a.m. when I made my last landing in an airplane as a free man. It was a rough landing. In fact it could be called a crash landing, for B-17's aren't made to land in water, but all that is another story.

All ten of the crew came through the "ditching" alive. The bombardier received a cut in the head, but aside from his injury the rest of us (were) in good condition aside from a few bruises and strained mental states. We were all soaking wet, but the sun was shining so we didn't notice the dampness of our clothing so much. We picked up the emergency radio and tied the two dinghies together. About this time two Spitfires circled us and waggled their wings. Our spirits were high in spite of the ordeal we had just gone through. We knew in our minds that the British Air-Sea Rescue would come by evening. After all we had gotten an SOS off before we hit the water and now two British ships had circled us and had probably sent in our position. Shouldn't our spirits be high?

Now we settled down to prepare for the wait. Making sure our boats were fastened together tightly, inflating the boats, taking stock of our rations and figuring our plan of waiting. Our rations weren't plentiful, but we could sustain life for quite a while. We could see the French coast faintly outlined on the horizon. The

Navigator figured we were about 75 miles as a fish might swim to the English coast on the opposite horizon. We thought it might simplify the rescuers problem of finding us if we paddled toward England.

We started paddling but didn't seem to accomplish anything but keep headed into the waves. Some of which insisted on dampening the inside of the boat. Shortly after noon the sun became clouded over. With the waning of the warm sunshine, so waned our spirits. A slight wind came up which made us cold because our clothing had not had time to dry in the sunshine. We talked of what we were going to do when we got back to England. London was never going to see itself painted so red as we intended to paint it. As the afternoon hurried on, we became more anxious. We saw P-51s heading for enemy territory way north of our position. They didn't see our flares. They were too far away. Several other times we saw planes circling on the horizon toward England. We imagined they were looking for us. We sometimes had difficulty distinguishing birds from airplanes.

Twice that afternoon we also saw the top portion of a fast boat just over the horizon. By this time our flares were beginning to be used up. As night drew near, we were cussing the British Air-Sea Rescue and resigned ourselves to a miserable, uncomfortable cold night spent in the cramped dinghies. During the afternoon we had gotten the emergency radio operating. We must have cranked out a lot of SOS's.

As dusk started to come on, two planes appeared from the French coast. They began circling nearer. Soon we recognized them as German Focke-Wulf 190's. All hope of seeing England again for a long time disappeared. The German planes finally found us, buzzed us a couple of times, tipped their wings when we waved and headed back to France. After dark we heard the sound of a motor launch and saw the occasional flash of a search light on a moving boat. We were miserable - chilled to the bone and hungry. The boat circled for some time, circling closer and closer. Finally we realized the jig was up and flashed our blinker light towards them. They trained their search light on us and came up closer. They had all kinds of artillery trained on us and were hollering all kinds of stuff that was strictly German to our ears. The only thing we could understand was "Komme hier". As long as we had no other pressing engagement we stayed where we were and let them throw us a rope. I guess I was the first one on the boat. I found I couldn't walk without help. I stumbled about like a drunk. They took me to the opposite side of the boat and made me sit down on the deck. After the others had been brought on board and our dinghies had been pulled on, they guided us towards the front of the boat, through a door and down into a small room. No rough stuff – just politeness. When we were all below, the injured were bandaged and we were given blankets. We were certainly cold, but it was warm down there. The guard gave us cigarettes and tobacco with papers. I of course I was left out with all that good will. (I didn't smoke)

They told us we would be in port in three quarters of an hour. The port was Le Havre.

We were right on time. We were guided to the deck again where we saw quite a reception committee. They all had guns. One came on board and asked, in very good English, if any of us were injured. We pointed out our casualties. Then he asked how long we had been in the water. Our answer was, "Nix versteh". In our estimate this was military information. He just laughed knowing darned well we understood. We were marched out to the dock where an ambulance waited. We received our first surprise by finding it was an English ambulance captured during Germany's more victorious days. We were taken to hospital where the injured were bandaged again and we all had our temperatures taken with thermometers placed under our arms. They registered in centigrade. "My!" I thought, "What a backward people." Some hot liquid that was supposed to be imitation coffee or tea was brought in with some bread. We couldn't eat or drink much despite the fact we hadn't eaten since 4:00 o'clock that morning and it was now close to midnight.

After we had completed our business, we were taken out again. This time to some kind of orderly room or headquarters. There we were interrogated and searched. We became terribly sleepy now that we were in a warm room and some the anxiety of the dinghy had disappeared. They asked us our name, rank and serial number and tried to get some other information that was strictly military. They took my watch, and other stuff I had in my pockets. After they finished, we were piled back into trucks and returned to the hospital. There they had more hot liquids, more bread and sausage. We ate more enthusiastically this time.

We were given sheets and were shown our individual beds. The beds had good springs and mattresses with plenty of blankets. We took off all our clothes and hung them on the banisters in the hall to dry. Then to bed. It was about 5:00 o'clock. Twenty-seven hours without sleep and after what we had been through - we were thoroughly fatigued. Oh! Sweet peaceful sleep-----!

I was awakened the afternoon of the fourth by voices - women's voices. "Hmmm!" I thought, "Nurses".

Presently I heard someone come into the room. I opened one eye slightly and saw not a nurse, but a civilian girl. One of the other occupants was awakened by her and soup placed on his bedside table. Then two more girls came in and I also received my soup. It looked good and tasted good. It was packed with vegetables and contained some meat. If this was an example of how I was going to be fed, I was going to be satisfied.

It was about 2:30 P.M. by the time I had finished eating. Our clothes had been taken outside to be dried in the sunshine. The girls, which turned out to be French girls, would bring them in as soon as they dried. When we had dressed, we ate some more of the bread and sausages we had left over from the night before. After shaving and washing, I felt like a man with a new lease on life. ----- I guess I have-----.

The German guards were very friendly and treated us very well. I tried to talk to some of them with my limited German, but couldn't gather much. The French girls were very nice. I knew no French to converse with them but "Kamerad". They understood that. They thoroughly agreed by showing the "V" for victory sign. They tried to give the impression that they didn't like the Germans.

Some civilians had gathered in some trees that bordered the hospital yard. One of the guards, that was the loudest, started hollering at them. When they started to run, he shot behind them. The Germans thought it was a great joke. I could see that France was a bullied nation.

Germany was laughing now, but the day is not too far at hand when they would be laughing at the point of a gun.

About 5:30 we were taken out into trucks. Guards filed in behind us and we were headed for the railroad station. It seemed that we had turned every corner in the city before we stopped in front of station. We were marched through a modern station to a waiting train. We got on a modern railroad car in a first class compartment. We were really riding in style. They had split us up so there were five of us in each compartment with two guards. I had begun to notice that all Germans had a gun at all times. Very unlike Americans. We enjoyed the ride considering the circumstances. The railroad followed a canal for a good distance. It seems that we were heading to Paris.

It was dark when we arrived in the Paris station. We all would rather be in Paris under different circumstances. After all Paris is a famous place.

We were taken from the train to a waiting bus. Four more Americans joined us. One was an officer who was badly burned. The other three were unhurt. The bus wound through the darkened city. We didn't see very much that made us believe we were in Paris except lovers were strolling through the street arm in arm.

The bus took us to another station where the people would have helped us to hide if we could have slipped our guards. The train we were put on was not as modern as the last, but then "beggars can't be choosers".

This time we pulled guards that were going home on leave. One fellow was 33 years old, the other was 19. The older fellow was sweating profusely. He explained that he had been drinking - reason enough.

Shortly before the train left, two young officers came on the train and introduced themselves as pilots on Focke Wulf 190's. They further introduced themselves as members of the famous "Abbeville Kids" squadron. They could speak a little English laboriously, but took great pride in this accomplishment. When he heard we were on a B-17, he put his hands to his head and said the guns were like flashlights. He also remarked at the accuracy of the guns at long range. He asked us what we thought of the F-W, we praised it. He said our Thunderbird (P-47 Thunderbolt) was "sehr schneller". With the accent on schneller. The Spitfire also came into his praises. He pointed to small bandage on his head and told us a B-17 had shot him down the day before. He didn't seem to mind though. He asked us if we were thirsty and sent one of the guards out for something to drink. He gave us cigarettes also. Before they had to take their leave, they prided themselves with knowing two modern American tunes. They were "Sleepers Creepers" (Jeepers Creepers) and "Elexender's Regtime Bendt". Yes sir, they were great guys, and were fighting guys like them.

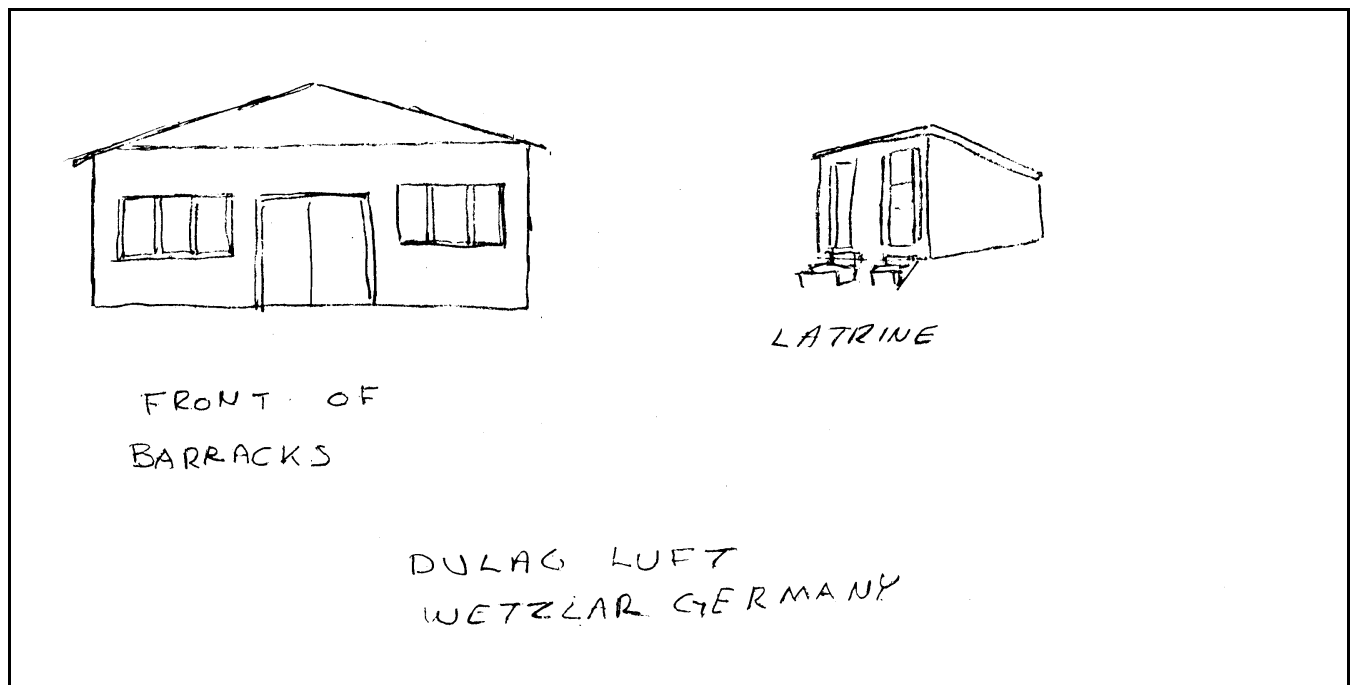
The train left Paris about eleven-thirty o'clock. I conversed with the older German for a long time. He was a pretty good duck. He gave us some pears and offered us sandwiches. He showed us a picture of his wife and three children, and denounced the war and was anxious to go home to stay. He said our

destination was

Frankfort, Germany. I finally went to sleep. I woke up several times and found the two guards asleep. The younger guard seemed to think my shoulder was soft because he used it as pillow half the night. Even with these two sleeping there was always someone stirring in the corridor outside the compartments. It was very cold and uncomfortable - my second night as a German prisoner.

Dawn finally came. I was stiff and cold. I wasn't riding in the style an American is accustomed to. The younger German seemed to be comfortable. The older German was as stiff I was though. I inquired as to when we would arrive in Frankfort and was told at eleven o'clock. The morning wore on and we were now traveling in Germany.

People were now standing in the corridor outside our compartments. I realized that the passenger space was just as acute as in England and U.S.A., if not more so. It was Sunday and all the Civilians were dressed in their bib and tucker. I noticed one big - rather avoir-du-pois - feather merchant that had a top coat on that resembled the American type tailoring. After while, and much staring on my part, he spoke. At first I didn't understand him because I expected him to speak German and he was speaking English. He struck up a conversation. It turned out he was an American citizen who had been caught by the war. He was an engineer for Barretts in Chicago. He was here building a large steel plant near Berlin. He said his home was in Chicago. It certainly was a sensation to see someone from so near home. He said his home in Berlin had had the windows blown out of it three times by bombs. I didn't say I was sorry.



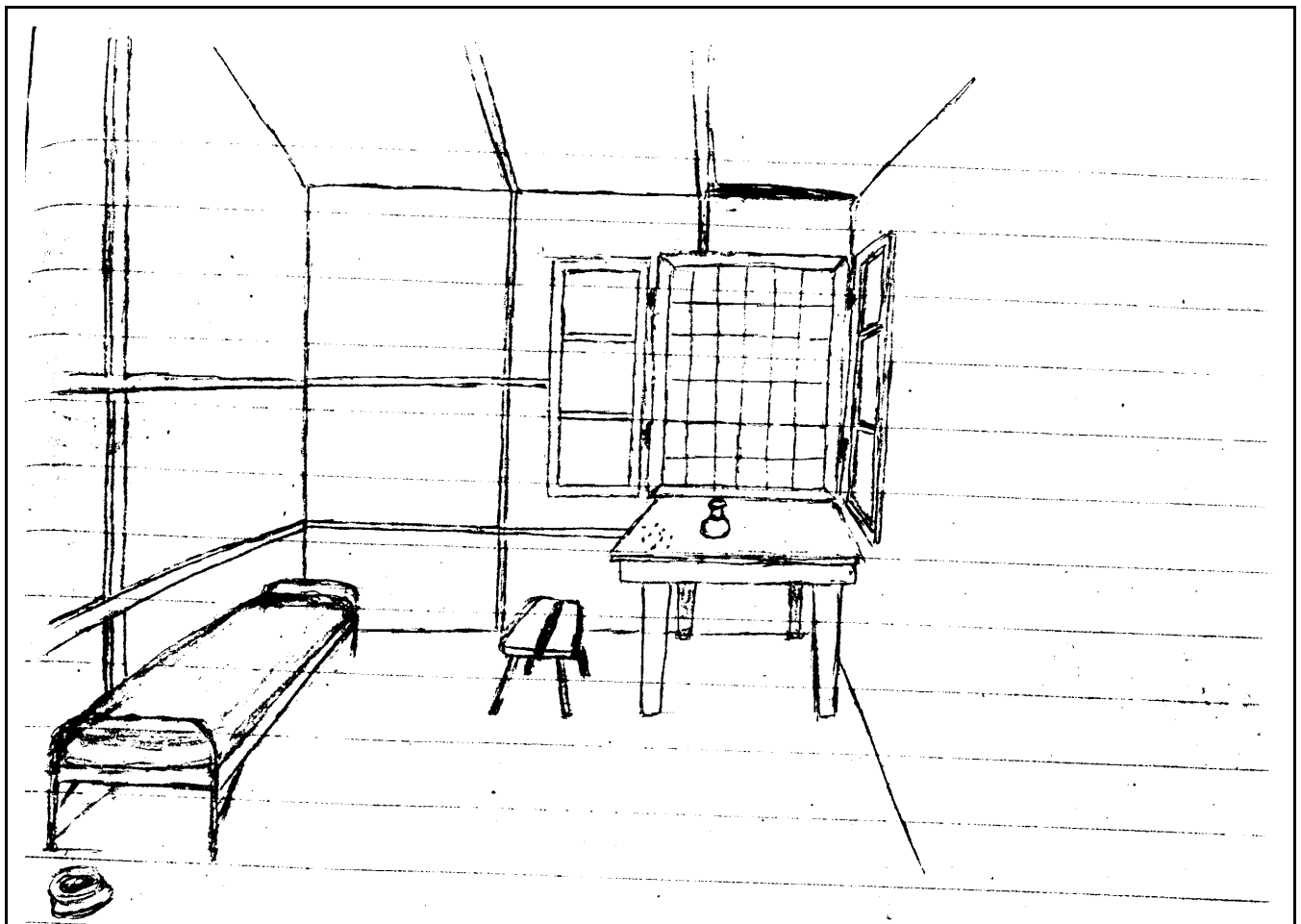
In Frankfort we were taken off the train. I could see there were more us of than left Paris. There were about fifty in all. There were even three Free-French fliers. After parading around in front of the civilians in the station, they put us on another train. We rode for about two hours and got off in a small town. There we had to go on an electric interurban car that would take us to our destination. Finally it came and we rode through until we came to a small whistle-stop which was our destination. We were marched about a block to where a long low building stood inside a double barbed wire fence enclosure. All you

could hear was the hollering of the prisoners and the guards trying to drown them out. I saw guys going out in small groups to the shack that I presumed was a latrine.

Our names were taken outside the fence and were turned over by our guards to the new ones. The guards that brought us there, shook hands with us and took their leave. We were then taken inside the enclosure one at a time. I was the last one to go in. Once inside the building, I had to strip off and my clothes was searched.

Then I was assigned to a room.

There were five fellows already in the room which measured approximately six by twelve feet. There was one bed with slats that held up a straw mattress that was covered by two light blankets. Besides this there was a table in one corner by the one barred window that allowed sun to enter the room. There was a small glass vase on the table. Beside the table there was a stool. In the corner was a small pot already filled with urine.



FIRST CONFINEMENT ROOM AT DULAG - LUFT
PRISONER OF WAR CAMP NEAR FRANKFURT
GERMANY

THERE WERE 4 BRITISHERS AND 2 AMERICANS
INCLUDING MYSELF.

There was one other American than myself in the room. The other four fellows were British. Two of the British had been shot down the night before on a raid on Berlin. One of these had bruises all over his wrists from chains. One of his thumbs had no feeling. The two other British had been down a little longer. One had crashed his plane in Holland. He had gotten into the underground there. The underground smuggled him into France. There he stayed almost a month and a half. There he learned French and bided his time until an opportunity came when he could go into Spain. Finally he was taken with 20 other

fellows to a Hotel room to await departure to safety. Two hours after they arrived in the hotel, the Gestapo came and took them prisoner. The men then spent a most undelightful two weeks in a Paris prison. The remaining Britisher almost died from exposure after spending 6 days on the North Sea in a dinghy. He had been in a hospital almost a week, but he was still weak.

I was in time for evening chow which consisted of two thin slices of bread with a thin coating of butter between them. The small vase was filled with imitation tea or coffee. A most unpalatable supper.

The guards on an average were not a very good lot. Maybe it was the prisoners fault, but they did not mind pushing the prisoners around. The guards seem to begrudge the necessity of the latrine. After much pounding on the door they might come and see what you want. When you did get out, they gave you barely enough time to finish your business. As the evening wore on the guards seemed to get rougher. One of the Englishmen had gas on his stomach and had the urgency to go to the latrine often. The head guard was very irritable and at one of the answers to our insistent knocks he opened the door and commenced hollering German about our making too much noise. He refused the gaseous Englishman the necessity of the latrine. The Englishman turned - thinking he had left - and allowed a circumnavigated belch to pass. The guard heard it and thought it was aimed at him for he turned around and roared & bellered and thereupon swung the butt of his rifle. The blow glanced off the Englishman against the wall. The Englishman turned red with rage, not thinking he had done anything wrong and would have made for the guard but for the physical restraint of two of his countrymen who pulled him into a chair on the opposite end of the room. The guard fumed and frothed like a mad dog and pulled a round into the chamber of his gun, then released the safety. I do not know what stopped him to this day. During this whole episode I was petrified. I did not know until the whole thing was over, what caused the outburst. I was scared.

This was not the only show of violence by this same guard. In the neighboring room, my radio operator was confined, also in the same predicament. He had been knocking on the door and hollering "hunger". The guard arrived just as he began one of the knocking pleas, whereupon the guard threw the door open, grabbed Reilly, threw him against the wall and brandished his moral persuader again.

These episodes made me realize my interment was going to be no safer than combat. In fact, combat had not really ended.

Later in the evening they took our shoes and we prepared to retire for the night. The other American and the Englishman, who was still suffering from exposure, took the bed and one blanket while the rest of us laid the remaining blanket on the floor to sleep on. Little did I realize the floor would be as soft as any bed I was to have later on. There was not much room for turning in your sleep. I certainly could have more if I had been able to keep warm. God knows I was tired enough.

Morning came with its sunshine. It was gratifying to have some warmth. Breakfast finally came. Two thin slices of bread with a lubrication of some jam between the slices, with some ersatz tea. At least we thought it was supposed to tea. The morning passed quickly with conversation and noon brought dinner consisting of potato and barley soup. Not too good, but it was hot. The day being Sunday, we spent the afternoon as we watched the people parade by in their Sunday finery.

Just before evening chow time I was called out of the room and was marched out of the enclosure across

the road to where an officer sat. He was very friendly. After taking out a form with a red cross on it, he proceeded to advise me it was his job to establish me as prisoner of war and in doing that he would have to ask me some questions from which he would realize that I was not a spy. The form he would fill in so my relations could be informed I was still living. I gave him my serial number, my name and rank. But he didn't stop there. He insisted on knowing my group and squadron, the target of the mission I was on, then he wanted to know the positions of the crew. The first he pointed out to me, the second he guessed wrong on, and the last he had all screwed up. Finally he started inquiring into my family, after he realized it was none of his business, he finally dismissed me. During the interview I helped myself to some candy he had on the table. Very good!

I was the first to be interrogated, therefore I had to wait 'til they had done the quota. About dusk they had around 25 fellows. We were then marched to the much heard of Dulag Luft.

Dulag Luft is the reception center for allied air corps prisoners. At the time I was there, there were three barracks. One containing enlisted men, one containing officers, the last one being the mess hall. The barracks were divided into rooms with double tier bunks without springs and with straw mattresses. One corner of the room contained a small stove. The barracks had a washroom, a shower room and a latrine.

The kitchen was run on bulk Red Cross supplies by Englishmen and a few G.I.s. They put out five meals a day - two of which were heavy meals and three meals constituted of broth or a beverage with bread and jam or honey or just biscuits. The meals were morale builders as well as strength builders, since most of the fellows hadn't eaten a decent meal in days and in many cases weeks.

We were processed before entering Dulag and our fingerprints were taken. Afterward we were taken inside the main enclosure of Dulag. We were met by an English W/O who gave us a package of French cigarettes apiece. This was a welcome innovation for most since we hadn't been allowed to or mainly had not the cigarettes to smoke previously. My innovation came where the mess hall was and I received the first really good tasting food since I left England. It was made of hot broth and cracker, but it tasted like a steak dinner to my hungry stomach. I slept that night in Dulag Luft before being assigned to a prison camp.

Afterward

It is interesting to notice the differences in language and attitudes of people and nations in the fifty years that have passed since World War II. There is a new set of slang and music for a young soldier. The enemy or opponent or aggressor has changed several times and some are now considered our allies. The why of a war or conflict is more openly questioned than ever before. Congress debates whether the President should be allowed to deploy troops here or there.

Even after all this change, the reason for why America is a great country has stayed constant. The American fighting man and now woman are born in a free country and trained with the belief that they fight to keep America and her allies free from aggression or oppression. They fight or deter when called upon because that is their duty whether public opinion is for or against them. It is for the President and Congress to allay the fears and doubts of the public as to the military's mission.

In addition to those who lose their lives in a conflict there are those who endure an ordeal that few can fathom. These are the Prisoners of War. Whether held for a short time as in Desert Storm or for long periods such as the Vietnam War, they are a special breed of American who has given a supreme sacrifice for their nation.

As part of my Navy training I participated in a POW/survival scenario. It was the best training I ever had and I never, ever, want to do it again. I ordered a pizza when I got home. I can not imagine the daily struggle for survival to see his fiancé' (my mother) again that my father went through.

I traveled with my father to the site of Stalag 17B in 1988. The camp is now a small flying field just outside of Krems, Austria. My father had visited there in 1970 on his first "unrestricted" visit to Europe. There is a stand of trees near the site that my Dad had talked about. The stories about his internment talk about how if someone could escape and make it to the trees they would probably have a good start. He also talked about the prisoners who had died and were taken for burial in the trees. We walked through and then around the backside of the trees and returned to the rental car. The wooded area couldn't have been more than a few square acres. My father mentioned later than in 1970 he could not make himself go into the trees. It never occurred to me to think about that or ask before going in. I was just curious. I was moved by the moment that was shared and will always remember it.

This booklet was created to preserve a memory before the original manuscript faded. Please pass on the memories of the Veterans, Ex-POW's, and fallen Heroes that you have called friend, brother, pal, buddy, and son.

Ryan Hitzeroth
Alexandria, VA – August 1994