An American POW in Germany

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Normandy
During mid-May,1944, units involved in the Normandy Invasion started moving toward the marshaling areas near the English coast. George Rosie's unit, the 3rd Battalion of the 506th, traveled by train to Taunton, Devonshire, in southwest England, then by truck to Exeter Air Base. One of their prior night training jumps had been made from that air base. The area was sealed off and guarded; no one was allowed in or out. They lived in tents and had great food, including ice cream for the first time since arriving in England. They even had movies in the evening.
The mortar platoon studied maps and sand tables of their objectives in Normandy. The paratroopers were issued metal crickets for identification purposes. One squeeze, click clack was answered by click clack, click clack. The cricket was a simple, but effective signaling device. They were also issued ten dollars in French money, 5x3" American flags which were sewn on the right sleeve of their jump jackets, ammunition for folding stock carbines, two hand grenades, and K-Rations. They checked their chutes out and were ready to go. The date was June 4, 1944. The men were fed steak, green peas, mashed potatoes, white bread, and ice cream for their "last supper." As they were enjoying their meal, George remarked to Ronzoni, "They're fattening us up for the kill."
The weather was marked by strong winds causing their departure to be postponed until the following evening. At 8 o'clock the next night (June, 5) they were again down at the planes. By 9:30 some of the planes were starting up, and the men were getting into their chutes and tightening their harnesses. George's thought was, "This is it." With two chutes and full combat equipment, the men boarded the planes at 10:30 p.m. They had so much equipment, they could barely walk and had to be helped up the ladder steps. At 11 o'clock, with 18 parachutists plus their equipment and bundles, the plane took off very slowly. It vibrated and shivered until George

thought the rivets would pop out. He looked around at the men. Some were sleeping; some were smoking; some were talking. Others were just sitting there staring straight ahead with blank looks on their faces. George was nervous and a little afraid, but he was so naive and innocent that he had no thoughts of being wounded or killed. Not so with Ronzoni. When they talked about home, with all their friends and family waiting there, he said, "I'll never see home again." Some of the men really felt they were not going to make it and Ronzoni was one of those men.

With a bright moon lighting the sky through broken clouds, they formed a very tight formation and headed for the English coast. The skies were filled with airplanes. Over the channel they could see hundreds of boats starting toward the continent. George had a feeling that they were a part of a big chunk of history. At 1 a.m., June 6, 1944, George heard one of the men yell, "There she is boys." They all knew what "she" was--the coast of France. They were nine minutes to drop zone. Flak and machine gun tracers could be seen to the right and left. George thought, "It looks just like the Fourth of July." A few seconds later, the plane on his right blew up and hit the ground in a large ball of fire. Twenty men were wiped out. This was no Fourth of July celebration. Welcome to the real war.

The red light in the door came on. They stood up and hooked up. Then came the green light and they were out the door; quite a struggle with all their equipment. Someone fell down and had to be helped out. When George jumped, he felt like every tracer in the sky was zeroing in on him. He was sure the rest of the guys felt the same way. He thought their plane must have been flying very low because he could only remember swinging twice before he hit. He could see a man and a woman standing in the front yard of a house just beneath him. He hit the road, took two steps, then went head first through a wooden fence, knocking out two teeth and cutting his lip. He rolled over and tried to get his carbine out. He couldn't, so he sat up and looked around for the man and woman but they had disappeared. He finally managed to get out of his T-5 parachute harness, (those snap harnesses were a bugger to get out of) and pulled his folding stock carbine out. He could hear some soldiers coming down the road. He started up a hedgerow, but felt someone holding him by his belt. He stopped, tried to move again; same thing. He slowly turned around and found that the shroud lines from his parachute were tangled up in the fence. George could hear the sound of hobnailed boots getting closer and closer. He finally got the shroud lines unhooked and climbed to the top of the hedgerow. As he fell over to the other side, forty Germans came marching past where he had been. He could have reached over and touched them. After they passed by, he moved in the direction he thought his plane had come in. George had no experience in his young life that he could relate to being so totally helpless and alone. It was a unique and indescribable feeling.

After a short period of time, he encountered a medic, John Gibson, and one of their 81st mortar men, Charles Lee. It was the greatest feeling in the world, as if he had found a long lost brother. They could hear a German machine gun firing in their

area; small arms a little further away. George looked up and could see troopers bailing out of a C-47. The plane was flying in a semi circle at about eight hundred feet The left engine was on fire and flames were streaming alongside the plane near the door. At about six hundred feet it was coming straight at them, troopers and crew still bailing out. The last one bailed out at not more than two hundred feet. The plane went over top of their heads, hit in the enjoining field, and burst into a thousand flaming pieces that lit up the whole area. As four men came running toward them from the direction of the crashed plane, George realized they had been on the same plane he had dropped from: Phil Abbie, Francis Swanson, Leo Krebs, and Ronzoni. The downed C-47 had hit in the area where they were hiding and damn near killed them.

The small army of seven decided to head for the river and find the bridges that were part of their unit's objectives. Hoping to hook up with more of their unit along the way, they stayed close to the ditches and hedgerows for concealment. With Abbie as their scout, the men made their way to a field near the river. Daylight was breaking as Abbie stepped out on the road, with Ronzoni was just behind him. Approximately one hundred Germans were concealed in the field on the other side of the road. Twenty of them stood up, firing their machine pistols. They killed Abbie and Ronzoni. George and Krebs could see a German officer running back and forth on the road in front of them. Krebs said, "What the hell is wrong with that guy? Is he nuts?" Leo and George both shot at him and he went down. A short exchange of gunfire followed, but the remaining American troopers were in a hopeless position. Surrounded by Germans, they were quickly captured. Charles Lee crawled into a wooded area to the left and got away. George was able to get a look Ronzoni and he had been hit in the chest four, five, maybe even six times. He was sure Ronzoni never knew what hit him. After they had been disarmed, George and three other men were lying in a shallow ditch with their hands over their heads, a guard with a rifle on either side. With bullets flying in all directions, Leo Krebs remarked, "God, these guys are lousy shots." Charles Lee began shooting at the guards from his hiding place about fifty yards away. George told Krebs he had a hand grenade in the pocket of his jumpsuit that the Germans had missed, and if Lee could shoot one of the guards, he was going to throw the hand grenade at the other one, giving them a chance to get away. But the Germans circled around Lee and killed him. George left the grenade lying in the ditch. He had lost so much that morning; Ronzoni, Abbie, Lee, his freedom.

After they were taken prisoner, George and Krebs had to pick up the German officer they had killed and carry him back to the farm where the Germans were headquartered. He was the first dead man George had ever touched. When they picked him up to put him on the shelter half, he broke wind and was making strange sounds like he was still breathing. As far as George could tell, they had hit him several times in the chest area and he knew damn well he was dead. Still, those sounds gave him strange feeling.

That night the men were housed in a small stone building. Fear itself was enough to keep George awake, but he also had a swelling knee that he had injured when landing on the road, along with the pain of the raw nerves of his broken teeth. The following morning, Leo Krebs, who could speak German, talked to one of the guards about George's teeth. The guard spoke to an older soldier, whom George thought may have been the cook. The two Germans sat George down on a bale of

hay. With Swanson and Krebs holding George's arms, the old German started toward his mouth with a pair of rusty old pliers. The German's hands were shaking, and at the first grab he got the remaining portion of the first tooth, along with a large chunk of gum. Never in his life had George felt such excruciating pain. The second time the old German's hand was shaking even more. His first attempt to remove the second tooth was a failure, but he got it on the second try. It hurt like hell but at least the pain of the raw nerves was gone.
That same day they were marched down the road, collecting other prisoners along the way. They were taken to a schoolhouse where they joined other American and British paratroopers who were to be interrogated. George was interrogated by a major who spoke perfect English; English that indicated he had been educated in England. However, his English education was all but forgotten when he became angry because he would shout in German when the troopers refused to answer questions about their units. They gave him their name, rank, and serial number which was what the Geneva Accord stated a captured soldier was required to do. Twenty men, including George, were taken outside and stood in front of a stone wall. Two Germans with machine guns were seated about twenty yards in front of them.

George was certain his time had come be killed. After two hours of standing in front of the wall, the men were loaded into trucks to be transported to St-Lo. Approximately two hundred men were in this convoy; Americans, British, Canadians, and some wounded Germans. There was one truck that had a small Red Cross flag on it, but it couldn't be seen from any distance. There were no POW markers on top of the trucks and no other Red Cross markings. As they were moving toward St-Lo, trucks began to pull off to the side of the road. Someone yelled, "Air raid." Men started scrambling out of the trucks and into the ditches. Four British Spitfires came screaming down the road, strafing and shooting up everything within their line of fire. In one of the trucks were two individuals on stretchers, Zol Rosenfeld, a G Company supply sergeant of the 3rd battalion, and a Canadian. Neither was able to move. After the planes made their first pass, both men were screaming for someone to get them out of there. George and several others ran to the truck and pulled them into the ditches. When the planes made their second pass, the truck they had been in was hit. It was a big explosion. Zol told George there were benzine cans in the truck. George estimated thirty Americans were killed on the convoy. The men scrounged up some shovels and buried them the best they could.

What was left of the trucks took them to the outskirts of St-Lo. They were unloaded and marched to the other side of the town where they were locked up in stables. The town was bombed three times that night. All the prisoners could do was lie there shaking and praying as the bombs were going off all around them. They could see the damage as they were taken outside the next morning; the church next to the stable had been totally destroyed.

That same morning George ran into Jim Bradley who was a corporal from his platoon. They were together for the next eleven months, sharing food, bed, and

living space. The name for it was "POW Mucker." In St-Lo they were introduced to a POW diet; one small bowl of very thin soup and a small loaf of bread divided among seven men. George was well on his way to being thin for the first time in his life. They were allowed to walk around in a barbed wire enclosure outside the stable during the day. Allied fighter planes would fly over very low and wave their wings. They knew the POWs were there. George's sister, Mamie, saw a Chicago Tribune photo of some paratroopers sitting against a wall in St-Lo and thought that one of them was George. The one she thought was George was actually Marty Clark from the machine gun platoon. Clarence Kelly was also in the photo, plus two other machine gun men from Hdqs 3/506. Bradley and George were there at the time the photo was taken, but were either to the right or left of the camera. They were a sorry looking bunch of men, having been in captivity for a week with no bathing or shaving, and very little food. They had been through some hellish times.

The POWs were marched sixteen miles out of St-Lo to a monastery. It was a three story building surrounded by expansive grounds and a high wall. There were a lot of books in Braille so George assumed it was a monastery for the blind. The monks were being ushered out as they arrived. The POWs dubbed that monastery "Starvation Hill" because they stayed there for two weeks with very, very little food. Their diet consisted of thin soup for the first three days. Actually, it was little more than warm water. The hunger was so bad that if a man was sitting down and stood up too quickly, he could black out. They learned to get up very slowly. It was all but impossible for the Germans to move any food to them, especially during the day. Anything that moved during the day would be fired on by the allied fighter planes. After a few days at the monastery, one of the guards found some cows and milked them, so each prisoner received about a half cup of milk. It tasted fabulous. George thought some of those cows must have ended up in their soup because for the next couple of days it had some body to it, even a couple of pieces of meat.

Each day more prisoners would join them on "Starvation Hill." Rangers, Canadian paratroopers, and some infantrymen from the beaches. George's little pal, Jack McKintry, showed up. Jack had been was in George's squad, and at only 140 pounds, had been George's relief on the base plate of the mortar. On maneuvers George would carry the base plate for four miles, then Jack would take it. He could only carry it for about a mile before he started wobbling and staggering. George would tell him, "Hey, you little shit, give me that base plate back." They had gotten separated on the way to Germany. George was working in the serving line the day McKintry showed up at "Starvation Hill", and was able to serve him up some thick soup.

A French farmer told the men that the front lines were about two and a half miles from St-Lo. They could hear the artillery as word was passed along that four hundred of them would be trucked further into France. They left in open trucks and there was a steady rain all night and all the next day. They looked like drowned rats by the time they arrived at a newly organized transit camp in Alencon. They were given a bag of rye biscuits, a bunk with a real mattress, two blankets, and a loaf of bread to be shared by eight men. One man would cut the bread as evenly as he could. The man who cut the bread always got the last piece. Along with the bread,

they were given a little jam and a cup of barley soup, which was a real feast. Later that evening they received some thin pea soup. Between the food and the real bed, George actually slept for the first time in his fourteen days as a POW.

The next day George's group was taken into one of the main streets in Alencon. They were told if one man escaped, ten men would be shot. They were given picks and shovels and told to dig down to bombs that had gone through the streets, but had not exploded. The Germans would either pull out the bombs or detonate them. The troopers would dig very carefully while the guards stood on the other side of the building, occasionally looking around the corner make sure the POWs were working. While the guards were out of sight, Jim Bradley broke the handles on the picks and shovels so they couldn't do any more work. The next day the Germans showed up with a truck full of handles for the picks and shovels. That took care of Jim's good work. Although George's group never did get down to a bomb, they heard an explosion down the street that made them think another group had found a bomb and had been blown up. The following day, as they were leaning up against a stone wall taking a break, they saw a P-38 coming over. He came flying up the street, very low with machine guns spitting, and bullets flying everywhere. Luckily nobody was hit.

The POWs found themselves on the to move again. This time they traveled all night in covered trucks. They were taken to Chartres, another transit camp, and placed in some old warehouses, with the Americans, British, and Canadians being separated. Again, they had a small loaf of bread for six men and some peppermint tea. The warehouse, containing about three hundred Americans, had cement floors covered with straw. Being involved with straw usually meant lice and fleas. Both became a part of being a prisoner of war. Breakfast the next morning consisted of bread and tea, with thick soup at noon. The Americans could hear their Air Force bombing an air strip near the enclosure. They were told that as soon as the railroad was repaired, they would be on their way to Germany.

Two days later, eighty Airborne men were taken by truck to Paris. The Germans marched them through the streets of Paris. They had loudspeakers on the accompanying trucks announcing that the troopers were murderers and rapists let out of prisons to fight in the war. Men and women would hit them and spit on them as they marched by. George's blood ran cold at the sight of a Frenchman just walking up and smacking one of the soldiers on the head. Jim Bradley was walking in front of George when a young girl started running along side the group, spitting in men's faces. As she started to spit in Jim's face, he spit in hers. George thought, "Boy, are we going to catch hell now." But the guard just pushed her back into the crowd and they moved on. They were taken down to the railroad yards to be put into boxcars going to Germany. While they were in the yard, the German guards would light up a cigarette, take a couple of puffs, and throw it on the ground. It had been at least fourteen days since the prisoners had had a smoke, and some of the men would scramble for the discarded cigarettes. George, a smoker, and Jim Bradley, who was guts personified, both became angry that some of their airborne

buddies would do such a thing. When a guard would throw a cigarette toward them, either George or Jim would immediately step on it. They would also step on any grasping fingers that might be trying to grab it. They were cursed by their own men, but they ended the humiliating show.

The men were packed into boxcars with locked doors and no windows. Standing room only. On one end of the car was a bucket with a lid on it for their toilet, and on the other end was a small can of water. Their destination was Limburg, Germany and Stalag 12A. Shortly after the train left Paris, it was strafed by fighter planes. George thought they were trying to destroy the boilers on the engine, which they did. But in the process, some of the boxcars were hit. George's boxcar ended up with 8 or 9 holes in the side which allowed the light to shine through. The train was stopped for several hours while waiting for another engine to be hooked up. The cars were packed with men, with the only ventilation coming from the holes made by the strafing. One had to believe there were no heathens in those boxcars. Everyone was praying up a storm. They moved in the cool of the night. When the train was stopped in the early morning, the doors were opened and they were allowed to empty the latrine buckets and get some fresh water. Then the doors were closed and locked again, and they were off and rolling.

Germany

At 5 o'clock the next morning, the prisoners were unloaded at Limburg and marched through the gates of Stalag 12A. The guards had huge police dogs that constantly circled the columns. The men were individually searched and marched to the showers. It was the first time George had bathed in fifty days. He could have stayed in that shower for a week. Their clothes were sprayed for fleas and lice, then they were moved into circus tents with straw on the ground. The camp had stone latrines with running water, and for the first time since being captured, the men could wash regularly. The following day they received their first Red Cross parcels from the International Red Cross. The prisoners began receiving the parcels on a semi regular basis, usually once a week. Most of the time they would get one box for two men, although occasionally, it was one box for four. George was convinced that the International Red Cross boxes made the difference between life and death for many of the men. With good management, they could have oatmeal for breakfast, a German issue of bread and soup for lunch, and perhaps spam, cheese, and crackers for dinner. However, after fifty days of bread and soup, the Red Cross parcels of powdered milk, chocolate bars, cheese, and spam proved to be too rich. Many of them ate too much and had diarrhea, which was a real problem in POW camps. In fact, some men died from it.

Air raids were frequent in the vicinity of the camps. If the prisoners were outside when the air raids occurred, the rule was to go into the tents, which didn't make much sense to George. They were given cards to fill out which the Red Cross would then use to notify their families that they were prisoners of war. George's family had been notified that he was missing in action. They received German dog tags which were a rectangular piece of metal perforated down the middle. If a man died while a POW, he was buried with half of his dog tags in his mouth for

identification. George didn't think much of that. The men were asked what their former occupation had been while a German wrote down their answers A couple of the smart-ass Airborne types answered, "cowboy". Others said "professional soldier." A lot of them said "student." Another said, "rum-runner." George said "golf pro." Of course, one clown said "pimp."

The POWs had dealt with very few mean Germans in France, but Germany was different. They soon found out when the Germans said "move", they moved, and fast. Limburg was another transit camp with French, Indians, Italians, and some Russians. Russians were treated particularly badly by the Germans. They did not receive Red Cross parcels because the USSR refused to recognize the Geneva Accord and the International Red Cross. Many Russians paid for that refusal with their lives.

After a short period of time in Limburg, four hundred of the prisoners were moved to wooden barracks, showered, deloused, and driven to the train station. Their boots and shoes were taken before being loaded on the cars. They were given enough corn beef and bread for three days. The train started at dark, which gave them a feeling of security because they were not strafed as often at night. In the morning the doors were opened and good ol' fresh air came in as they were allowed to empty the latrine cans and get fresh water. The guards told them they would be in their new camp by the next morning. Their boots were returned when they arrived at Stalag 4B in Muhlberg the following morning. They were marched into camp where they were given typhus shots and vaccinated. Upon arrival at the barracks, each man received twelve cigarettes and a quarter of a British Red Cross parcel. They were issued two blankets and slept on slats in bunks that were three high and two across. The compound was primarily English with approximately twenty Americans to each barracks. The English ran the compound like it was just another British colony. They all answered to their "Man of Confidence," who was elected by the men. This Sergeant Major was also the prisoners' direct representative to the Germans.

Of the four camps George had been in, Stalag 4B was by far the best run camp. The Brits had everything organized. The Sergeant Major let the men know in no uncertain terms that he was in charge of the barracks. The Red Cross parcels and the food could be bartered at their exchange store; the money was cigarettes, and every parcel had a cigarette price. The men received Red Cross parcels regularly, along with some fairly decent German rations. After a period of time, they began to regain some of their strength, and were even able to gain some of the weight they had lost on their near starvation diet. For exercise, George and his pal, Jim Bradley, would walk to the Canadian, Dutch, and French compounds. Russian compounds were off limits. The camp had athletic fields where the British and Scots played soccer on holidays. There was also a basketball court, so the men came up with five teams: three American, one Canadian, and one Polish. In the process of lining up a basketball team, George noticed a trooper named Pat Bogie, 82nd Airborne, 508th Parachute Regiment, who was from Wisconsin. Bogie handled himself very well with a basketball, and he was recruited for the American team. Jim Bradley and George adopted him as one of their Muckers, so that made three of them sharing

their rations. This worked out very well because Bradley was a non-smoker which allowed them to use part of their cigarette rations to buy more food. Some of the duplicated items from the Red Cross boxes could be traded in for other food enabling the Muckers to eat three meals a day. Their basketball team won the league. There were six Americans captured at Dunkirk who were in the Canadian army. Canadian people would get names of POW's from their newspapers and send them cartons of cigarettes. Because these Canadian/Americans had been in Stalag 4B for so long, they were getting as many as twelve cartons of cigarettes a month, which made them rich men in POW camp economy. They would wager cigarettes on the basketball games, then give two or three packs to the winning team. Since George's team won most of the games, each win was a very big deal because it meant more smokes, and more "money" to buy more food. George felt the cigarette payments made them professional basketball players. During the time George was playing professional basketball, Privates and Pfc's were being shipped out on work details to factories, farms, repairing railroads, etc. The "Man of Confidence", who played on the Canadian basketball team, was in charge of all records. He changed George's records to read Corporal instead of Pfc, so George would not get shipped out. Who said that athletic ability didn't pay off. George Rosie may have been the only American to be promoted while in a POW camp.

As more Airborne came into the camp, George learned that his buddy, Walter Ross, had received a shrapnel wound in the side while in Normandy. He had been in a first aid station that was liberated by the British paratroopers. George was relieved to know Walter was okay and back in England. The weather turned very cold in November and the men had no heat in the barracks. Bogie, Bradley, and Rosie were sleeping in a double bunk with six blankets with each man taking a turn sleeping in the middle-- they called it the warm spot-- until they discovered George was the only one who didn't have to get up in the middle of the night to go to the latrine. That was how George became the night resident of the warm spot.

In early January, 1945, men from the Battle of the Bulge started coming into camp. Some of them were Airborne, but most were from the 106th Division, a very green outfit that the Germans chewed up during the Battle of the Bulge. Soon after that the men started hearing talk about another move. On January 6th, they were taken down to the railroad station and put into German army boxcars. Each car had a small stove with a small supply of coal, along with three days of rations. The old experienced POW's, Bradley, Rosie, and Bogie volunteered to tend the stove so they could be closer to the heat. They were again packed in like sardines, so between the body heat and the little stove, the men were able to keep from freezing. Things were going fairly smooth until some of the new POW's started getting sick-- the men called it a sour stomach-- and started throwing up and had diarrhea. One of the poor guys was crawling to get to the other end of the car to the latrine bucket. He couldn't see where he was going in the darkness, and he was pleading for someone to help him so he wouldn't mess his pants. Men were lying in his path, kicking and swearing at him. George got up and opened the stove door for some light. He started toward the bucket, kicking heads, feet, or whatever was in his way until he made room for the man to get to the bucket. When he went back to the stove, Bogie said, "You could have gotten the hell kicked out of you, you dumb

ass." George told him he wasn't too worried about any man lousy enough to refuse to help someone with a sour stomach. They all had been through that kind of pain.

A few days later, they unloaded at Stalag 3B at Furstenburg/Oder. The barracks had not been used for quite some time, so the first thing the men had to do was try to clean up the mess. The bunks did not have enough slats which made them horribly uncomfortable. The next day they went into the compound and found other barracks that were empty, gathered all the slats, and took them back to their barracks. That evening they were issued twenty French cigarettes, but no food. The following day they were given a hot shower, clean underwear, (which was a minor miracle), and one American Red Cross parcel between two men. They were also given German rations that were probably the best rations they had been given since becoming POWs. There were Americans in that NCO stalag who had been captured in Africa in 1942, and they knew how to deal with the Germans. Trading with the guards was simply a matter of exchanging a package of cigarettes for a loaf of bread or anything else that could be bought or sold .

Things were "normal" for a couple weeks, then the men began to hear talk of moving again. They heard over their radio that the Russians were moving fast. In Stalag 4B, they had been worried about the Eastern Front, but in 3B they had to be more concerned with the Western Front. On January 31, 1945, more than four thousand Americans started on a six day march. The temperature hovered around zero and George was as cold as he had ever been.. The men had been given some old overcoats, which was indeed a blessing, but no hats, gloves, or boots. They knew that the Russians were quite close because the Germans kept moving them, all afternoon and all night. They were given a half hour break the morning of the second day, but no food. The men had started out carrying everything they could, but the trek was becoming so difficult that they began to throw things away. The road and ditches were littered with precious possessions as they moved along. They were given a few short breaks during the day, and in the early evening they stopped near some barns. Again, no food. One POW walked over to an old German woman, who was standing by a fence, and tried to trade a bar of soap for some food. One of the guards walked up behind him and smacked him in the back of the head with his rifle butt. The POW dropped like a sack of potatoes. The others walked by him as they were marched into the barn, but George could see no sign of life. The back of the man's head was smashed in and bleeding badly.

The men slept on hay that night, and by morning everyone was cold and stiff. It was day three and George felt 90 years old. On the road again. No food. German civilians, with their possesions on small carts, were evacuating along with them. During a short break that morning, three or four of the men, along with two guards, had gone off to the side to relieve themselves. As they were coming back to the column, George glanced over at them and recognized Mike Michelson who was from Winnetka, Illinois. Goerge had played with him in a semi- pro, fast pitch softball league in Chicago. Their afternoon break was near a Jewish concentration camp. This was George's first look at so called political prisoners. To him, they looked like skeletons with black and white uniforms hanging on them. He could see guards beating them with clubs. As they were moving out after the break one of the

POW's yelled out, "You lousy goddamned Krauts. God will get even with you some day. He will. He will. He will." That started others hollering and swearing at the guards. George wondered why they didn't get themselves shot, but the Germans didn't pay that much attention to them. They could see Jews digging gun emplacements and trenches. A little further down the road, a guard pulled out a revolver and shot one of the Jews, dropping him into the ditch. Later that same day, they heard a shot as they were getting back on the road from a break. At the head of the column, one of the Airborne men didn't get up quickly enough to suit one of the guards, so he shot him in the forehead. As George walked by, he could see the man lying on his back by the side of the road. It had been a day the POW's would never forget.

That night they slept in barns on a farm. No food. No water. Some of the men ate snow which really didn't help. Day four found them back on the road, moving very slowly. No matter how much noise the Germans made, or how much they tried to speed the men up, they were just getting so weak from the hunger and cold that they couldn't move very fast. That evening they stopped in a small farming community where there were several small barns. George was placed in a barn with a group of thirty other men, and the old farm woman came in with what they called their slave labor-- a young Russian girl-- and gave the men a few potatoes and some soup. The following morning -day five- as they walked past a small sad looking group of civilians, George saw a Coca Cola sign. What a strange place for a Coca Cola sign. He sure could have used a bottle of Coke right then. Later that same day, they crossed over the eight lane Berlin Ring Highway, which was probably the biggest highway George had ever seen in his life. But it was completely empty. Not a car in sight. That night they were divided into small groups and housed in small barns. The Germans gave the men small cans of cheese, which was the first food they had distributed since beginning the journey. The morning of the sixth day brought them into the city of Halle where they met another column of POWs heading for Stalag 3A. On the other side of Halle, the Germans issued food-- one loaf of bread to five men, and one can of cheese to nine men. The food was handed out while the men were walking down the road. Lodging that night was in a mock village of war damaged wooden buildings which the Germans had used to train troops. The men were issued some soup, and the following morning they were given bread; one loaf to four men. They reached Luckenwalde the next day. Again, they were marched past a few quietly staring civilians, arriving at Stalag 3A just on the other side of the city.

They were herded into a compound containing seven huge circus tents. With approximately seven hundred men to a tent, there was just enough room for each man to stretch out and lie down on his side. George was told that of the four thousand and eighty men who had left Stalag 3B, only two thousand, eight hundred had actually made it to 3A. However, the men slept very well that night, and the next morning they were permitted to shower and their clothes were deloused. They were told there were no Red Cross parcels in camp, and were issued a loaf of bread to be divided among five people. Bradley, George, and Bogey had managed to stay together during the long, cold march, and they were joined by George's old friend from Chicago, Mike Michelson. Mike had been a first sergeant in the 106th

Division, and he told them that the 106th Division was full of untrained men, some of whom had never even fired an M-1 rifle or pitched a pup tent. He said that many of them had been washed out of pilot training because the end of the war was near. Another guy named Tony joined their group so they now had five Muckers.

George had been at Stalag 3A for three days when he ran into John Lorenzo Mordini, an old high school buddy. John was in an artillery unit attached to the 106th Division. Mike Michelson decided that if Mordini's unit had given the 106th artillery cover, they could have stopped the Germans. After listening to Michelson for several weeks, Mordini realized that his unit had been called for artillery fire on December 20, 1944. John said, "Son-of-a-bitch, you've been on my case for four weeks, and my unit was captured on the 18th."

There were thousands and thousands of POWs on the road taking the same grueling march George and his group had taken. POWs from all over were coming into Stalag 3A as they were caught between the Russian front moving in from the east and the Allied troops coming in from the west. George was told that some Airborne officers had come in from Poland. He managed to visit their compound and found Captain John McKnight, who had been the company commander of Hdqs 3 when George had first joined. While in England, McKnight had been transferred to I Co. 506th. Like the others, he was thin but okay, and George thought it was great to see him. He liked Captain McKnight, and thought he was a real good officer. Actually, George could say that of most Airborne officers. He personally felt they were the cream of the crop.

There were approximately eight thousand men in Stalag 3A. To the left of George's tent were two water spigots, but one never knew when the water would be turned on. There were times when a POW would discover the water spigots were on in the middle of the night and return to the tent to inform the others so they could go outside and form a line to get their water. The guards were mostly in their fifties and sixties. There was one small guard, probably in his sixties, who stood about 5'2" and was heavyset. Every other morning he was on duty in the tower just to the left of where the water spigots were located. George and his buddies would sit there and watch that little guy, with a rifle slung over his shoulder, try to climb up the ladder to the tower. He had just one hell of a time. The rifle would keep slipping off his shoulder and he'd have to reach down for it. Even though they did feel some sympathy for the little guy, the POW's would sit there and laugh at him. There was a guard in George's tent who didn't have a mean bone in his body. He was doing a job because he had to. Every morning he would come into the barracks and yell, "Raus mit Euch. Roll call. Aufstehen." The men could hear his voice echo throughout the tent. Then they could hear guys mimic him throughout the tent. The POW's would check out a new guard by having someone stand behind him, saying something very threatening, while the guys in front of him would watch his eyes. If he flinched or looked startled, they knew he understood English. Most of the older guards could not speak English. There was one guard who read the roll call in the morning. The men knew right away that this guard was not very smart. He would call off, "Rosie, George," "Bradley, James" and so on down the line. After about a week of this, one of the men, instead of answering "Here" or "Present" began

answering, "Here, you dumb shit" or "Here, Pisshead" or "Here, you S.O.B." The POW's would stand there roaring with laughter while the guard just stood there scratching his head, trying to figure it all out, which, of course, he never did.

Stalag 3A was about 25 miles southeast of Berlin. Everyday, at around noon, hundreds of U.S. bombers, flying very high, would turn just as they passed the camp, heading for Berlin. The POW's could hear the sounds of exploding bombs, and the guards would point up to the sky and say, "Luftwaffe, Luftwaffe." The POW answer was, "Your ass."

There were no Red Cross parcels, and the rations were bad; nine men to a loaf of bread, four men to a little can of cheese. Somehow the men in 3B had pieced together a radio and they were able to get some news. They heard that the 9th Division was at the Rhine and the Russians might even be closer. One day Max Schmeling, the boxer, visited the compound. While some of the POW's rushed to meet him and get his autograph, George thought the entire event was a disgusting display. To him, Schmeling was just another Kraut, and he didn't bother to go see him.

March came in like a lion and many of the tents were badly torn. It was at least a week before a little Russian was sent down to repair them. The Russian worked very slowly, probably because some of the men were giving him food. He was certainly in no hurry to return to the Russian compound where they were physically mistreated or literally starved to death.

Red Cross parcels came in and were distributed. With one parcel per man, it was pig out time. The weather was getting warmer and the bombers were still going over every day. Even the bun freezing outside latrine slits were a little more pleasant. The men were getting a little slow at roll call, so the guards threatened to send in the dogs. That got their attention. Then a nasty rumor -- POW camps thrived on rumors -- they were going to be moved again. Bradley asked, "Where in the hell could they move us." The only place left was Berlin.

The men could hear artillery in the distance, and P-38s buzzed the camp every day. They also heard the disturbing news that Roosevelt had died. On April 23, one of the men in George's tent was up early to check the water tap. He went outside and found there were no guards, not even on the main gate. He went back to the tent yelling for everybody to come out and look around. Around 9:00 a.m., a Russian Sherman tank outfit knocked down the main gate and then flattened the barb-wire fences. One of the tank commanders was a husky thirty five year old woman. At one point, she jumped off the tank, ran over to one of the half starved Russian POW's, picked him up and hugged him. He was her brother, and she thought he had been killed. There were also female soldiers carrying rifles and tommy guns. The half starved Russians in the POW camp were given rifles and were back in the army. George thought that it would have been hell to have been any German that got in their way as they marched on Berlin.

The POW's were liberated. Oh, God, what a great feeling. The American officers

took charge of the camp and began to reorganize. Warnings were posted stating that joining the Russians, or any unauthorized departure, would be a court martial offense. Red Cross parcels, found in a warehouse in Luckenwalde, were distributed. A tour of the Russian compound revealed living conditions much worse than the other POW's had endured. The officers installed reveille, had the men start doing calisthenics, and began cleaning up the camp.

Some of the men began to resent the POW officers and their return to regulations. George talked to Captain McKnight about leaving. Although he advised against it, he said he didn't think a court martial would hold up. Six of the men decided to take off. Their group consisted of two Rangers who had been captured in Africa, Mike Michelson, his pal Tony, Bogie, and George Rosie. Bradley, somewhat smarter, decided against going. He wanted to wait for the U.S. Army to pick him up. The six men walked out into no man's land between the Russian and Allied lines. They moved cautiously and quickly all that day. That night they found lodging in a farmhouse inhabited by a woman with two children. There was a photo of her husband in uniform, whom she said was on the Russian front. She served very good soup, bread, and cheese. They took off again early the next day, and pushing hard, headed for home. They could see some Germans out in the fields, but no guns. They too were headed west away from the Russian front. The second night the six men slept in a train station in small village. The following day, around noon, while walking in open farm country, they could see a town in the distance. George sensed that something was wrong. Complete silence was all around them as they moved quickly toward the town. As they approached the town, the six men realized the Russians were dug in, and they were checking them out. Two of the Russians had guns on them. Tony, who spoke some Polish, managed to tell them that they were American POWs trying to reach the American lines. One of the Russians told Tony that the area they had just walked through contained Germans who were dug in. They hustled through the town, and as they reached the other side, shells started coming in from the field. They moved even faster until they reached a river. The bridge had been bombed out and the Russians did not want to let them cross, but Tony talked them into it. It was a big river and George couldn't swim. The bridge was so badly damaged that in places there was just one wobbly plank. Most of the men walked across with no fear, but George had to crawl on his hands and knees. They reached the other side of the river and found a barn to sleep in that night. It was around 3 a.m. that George heard the barn door open. Standing there in the moonlight, he could see the silhouette of twenty Germans, rifles and machine guns in hand. They looked in the barn, turned around and left. George was thinking about how smart Jim Bradley had been to stay in the compound.

The next day, around noon, the six Americans entered a small town. There were white flags waving, and the civilians said everybody had turned in their guns to the city hall. The men went down to the city hall, and armed themselves with revolvers and rifles; they were back in the army. They commandeered a hotel pub operated by a man and his wife. The couple had two daughters, (one twenty and another one about twelve) who helped with the serving of food and drinks. The American soldiers had good food and wine, and even had sing-a-longs with the host family. They had been living like kings for two days when a truck full of Russian officers

came into the town. The Russians were very cautious of the Americans until Tony was was able to tell them who they were. Then the Russians decided it was party time and told some German citizens they wanted 20 bottles of booze or 10 people would be shot. In ten minutes the booze was there. By 5 p.m. all of the Russians were drunk, as were the two Rangers who were part of George's group. The Russians were not only drinking, laughing, and singing, they also were bothering the man's wife and both daughters. George thought they were real animals, so he took the twelve year old out for a walk. When they returned, they went in through the back door and George took the young girl upstairs to her mother and dad's room to avoid her having to deal with the Russians. George and Bogie went to bed at 10 p.m., and by midnight, the Russian party was out of control. They began shooting through the ceiling and there were bullets and splinters flying all over George and Bogey's room. George, wearing pants only, ran downstairs, cussing up a storm. The Russians thought it was funny. The next morning they were not around, but by 5 p.m. they had shown up again with more bottles of booze. George stayed up late that night, half afraid to go to bed. Somewhere along the line he had picked up a small G.I. knit hat. There was one Russian who kept grabbing the hat off George's head and putting it on his own. After George had retrieved the hat for the fifth time, the Russian slapped him in the mouth. George turned and hit the Russian with a right hand shot, knocking him over a table and onto the floor. The Russian, bleeding profusely from a split lip and a couple of broken teeth, looked at George, wiped his hand across his mouth, looked at the blood, and started to laugh. George thought for sure they were in deep trouble, but that was the end of it, except for his own bleeding knuckles. All of the Americans agreed they should get the hell out of there while they still could. So the next day, Michelson found a German who had a truck. They scrounged some gas from the Russians, and went off toward the American lines, which were approximately 20 miles away.

They were stopped several times by Russian patrols, but again, Tony was able to talk their way through. In sight of the Elbe River, they ran into a dozen Americans in fox holes with machine guns. They stopped the truck, jumped off, and ran up to the GIs. They hugged them, they kissed them, they danced. George thought they couldn't have been a very attractive sight: skinny, dirty looking POWs, but the GIs gave them everything they had: K-Rations, cigarettes, chocolate bars. The truck driver was afraid he was going to have trouble getting back, but Mike Michelson borrowed some paper from one of the GIs and wrote a note stating the German driver had delivered eight American POWs to the American lines and that he should be allowed to return to his town. He signed the letter Colonel Mike Michelson. George sure hoped that poor fellow made it back home.

The GI reunion was interrupted by twenty Germans who wanted to surrender. The Germans preferred the Americans to the Russians, so they all crossed a bridge together and went to a two story house that had central heating and a refrigerator. Super! Great! George took a long, long, long shower, then shaved with a brand new razor. They were issued new clothing: underwear, socks, pants, shirts, shoes, jackets-- all new! After all this, they had a real beer from the refrigerator. God, what a treat.

They were flown to France, near Mourmelon, and there George ran into Jim Bradley. He said the rear echelon of the 101st was twenty miles up the road, but the commanding officer said they couldn't go. They jumped into a truck and took off. When they reached the 101st, they were taken over to the mess hall where there was an enormous amount of eating, drinking coffee, talking, hugging, laughing, handshaking, and backslapping. "I thought you were dead, you son-of-a-bitch," was a phrase George heard several times.

There were many stories flying around. One concerned a cook named Zeoli from New York, nicknamed Mr. House. It was said that while in Bastogne, when they had to get out of their foxholes and retreat, Zeoli got shot in the butt. His nickname in Ramsbury was "Blackass Zeoli." George also heard that Walter Ross had been in the hospital, but had gone AWOL so he could rejoin the 101st when it invaded Holland. It was really great to see some of the old gang. Lt. Pete Madden took Bradley and George by jeep to Camp Lucky Strike, which was the camp from which the men were shipped back to the United States. When they reported in, one of the officers was raising hell with them, threatening them for having left the group. Finally Lt. Madden said, "Shut the hell up. They're back and the war is over." During their two week stay in Camp Lucky Strike, the Army tried to fatten the POW's up with three meals a day, which consisted of chicken, turkey, mashed potatoes, jello, pudding, egg nog, but nothing fried. They had nothing to do but lie around, and the summer weather made living in tents fairly comfortable.

Eventually, they made it to the harbor and the troop ship. There were a hundred POWs on one ship, and because they were POWs, they pulled no duty or k.p. The men were being spoiled and they loved it. There was a little ship newspaper, and a few days out, George was interviewed. The next morning somebody was kicking his feet, yelling "Git up for k.p." Without even turning over George said, "I'm a POW, you son-of-a-bitch." Then he rolled over and was looking right into the eyes of Major John Detmer. It turned out that George had gone to school with the Major's brother, Eugene. He told George it was not nice to call majors S.O.B.s.

They docked in Newport News, Virginia, which was a bit of a disappointment to George because he had been looking forward to seeing the Statue of Liberty. However, the first evening found them in the cafeteria style mess hall. Helping yourself was rather a dangerous situation for ex-POWs. George drank a whole quart of milk, and he was sick within an hour. Next they were issued more clothes, had their records brought up to date, and were put on a troop train to Chicago. There was one officer in charge of each group of twenty men, and the officers had one hell of a time keeping track of those wild men on that train.

The train reached Chicago and was split up, with some of the cars heading west. A half dozen men left the train at the switching yards and headed for home on their own. The rest of the train went to Fort Sheridan, just north of Chicago. The Northwestern Railroad ran from Chicago to Milwaukee: right past George's backyard. It was 6:30 in the morning and the train was moving very slowly when it passed George's house. He had the window wide open and could see the light on in the bathroom, which meant his dad was up getting ready to go to work. The light

was also on in the kitchen which meant his mom was making breakfast. George was screaming and hollering and waving his arms. Of course they couldn't see or hear anything, but he was home by 6:00 that evening. Those eleven hours were the longest in George's life. The feeling of being home after being in hell for such a long time was impossible for George to define. He had to keep pinching himself to make sure it was real. There were lots and lots of hugs and kisses.

For the first two days he was home, George's sister, Mamie, kept reminding him that he had to call the Ronzonis. He knew he had to do it, but he also knew how difficult it was going to be. He telephoned Mr. Ronzoni and was invited to their home. There was little conversation during the first ten minutes--just a great deal of hugging and tears. George thought it may have helped the Ronzonis to hear that Francis had been killed instantly and had not suffered needlessly. Mr. Ronzoni asked if Francis had been killed on June 6, because the government telegram had stated it was June 9. George told him that June 9 may have been when the grave registration took care of him, but he knew Francis was killed on the first day they were in France and that was June 6. Mrs. Ronzoni sat with tears in her eyes and said very little as George sat there talking with Francis' father and sister. George couldn't help but think, as combat soldiers do when they get back, "Why me and not my buddy?" He felt Mrs. Ronzoni must have been asking that same question. Three weeks after George's visit with the Ronzonis, Donald Ronzoni returned home on furlough. He was a year and a half younger than Francis, but they looked like twins. Both quite handsome. On the second evening of Donald's furlough, George and Donald took their dates out for dinner and dancing. George was sitting at a table watching Donald and his date as they were dancing. Suddenly, overcome by emotion, George found himself in the men's room, crying. He threw cold water on his face, dried off, and went back to his friends. Approximately one hour later the same thing happened, but this time he didn't even get away from the table before he started sobbing. Back to the john, cold water to the face. He went back to the table and apologized to his date. She said she understood.

George returned to work as a golf pro, and later he went to work at Parchment Paper Company, retiring in 1980. He married Agnes Marvin and together they raised four children. George served for five years as National Secretary-Treasurer of the 101st Airborne Division Association. He also served as Chairman of the Board, Vice President, and President of the Association. Agnes passed away in 1993. In 1995 George became engaged Mig Cameron, whom he had known since they were five years old.

After the war, George tried for two years to get back in touch with Walter Ross, but no luck. Jim Bradley put out a search and sent George a letter telling him Walter had died of acute fatigue approximately six months after discharge. George also had a hell of a cry over that news. Walter was a super little guy. POW stories never end. In 1974 when the 101st Airborne Division Association reunion was in San Mateo, California, George went down early to breakfast one morning. In one of the booths was a man sitting all alone. George asked the man if he wanted company, then sat down with him. George looked up and saw Joe Byerle standing by the cashier. He waved him over and introduced him to the man he was sitting with.

When the man told George and Joe it was his first reunion, they asked him why. He answered, "Actually, I was a little ashamed." George asked him why. He said, "I was captured at Normandy on D-Day." George looked at Joe and smiled and said, "Well, you sure picked two great guys to sit down and have breakfast with. Joe and I were both captured on D-Day as well." Few men expected to be wounded, killed, or captured. George did feel some frustration at first. But his option was to die or be captured, and he was still here. Jim Bradley died of a heart attack in 1985. He always said George would not have lived through POW days without him, and then he went off and left him. George will give him hell when he catches up. His wife Rosie said Jim handled the finances, but they had an agreement she would go first. She's also planning on giving him hell when she catches up with him. As National Secretary of the 101st Airborne Division Association, George had to make receipts for people who had made donations to a memorial fund in Jim's name. Those receipts were made with tears in his eyes. Jim Bradley was a best friend and Mucker. Pat Bogie died in 1986 of kidney failure. He and George had gotten together on quite a few occasions. Mike Michelson lives in Illinois and George has seen him once since the service. George drove to Libertyville, Illinois, where he visited Francis Ronzoni's grave. It had been forty seven years since he had witnessed the shooting of Ronzoni and actually standing at his graveside was a very moving experience. George tried unsuccessfully to contact Jack McKintry after the war. In 1983, when George was National Secretary-Treasurer of the 101st Airborne Division Association, McKintry's brother saw his name and office address in the VFW Magazine and asked Jack if it was the Rosie he knew. McKintry phoned George, but wouldn't say who he was. However, his Brooklyn accent gave him away and George said, "You Little Shit, where've you been?" They arranged to meet at the dedication of the Vietnam War Memorial that year in D.C.. It was really great to be reunited with his so-called relief on the 81 mortar, Jack McKintry, affectionately his "Little Shit Buddy."

At this point I will give credit to Tom Gintjee. Tom was in the 508 Infantry Parachute Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. He kept a diary and basically his diary is my diary because I was with him all the way except for one short period. After the war, Tom Gintjee gave Jim Bradley his 148 page diary replete with cartoons. Jim made a copy for me and I have since made a number of copies for ex-POWs. I never could have recalled all of the details of my POW days without Tom's diary. To be truthful, there was a period of time when my recall of POW days was almost nonexistent.

Sources:
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