

From Wingen to Stalag 10C

by Mel Baker, 398-A

Mel Baker, 398-A, wrote this several years ago in response to a questionnaire for a book that was being written entitled Whatever Happened to Company A? by Cal Norman.

I was born in Marysville, Pa., (a small railroad town) on November 21, 1919. My mother was English and my father was Pennsylvania Dutch. I was one of seven children. I attended eight years of grade school and two years of high school. Times were bad in the 1930s so I quit school and went to work in construction.

I met my wife, Doris Gingrich of Summerdale, Pa., in 1939. We got married while I was in the army on October 17, 1943. We built our home ourselves in 1948, and have lived there ever since. We have three married children, eight grandchildren, 14 great-grandchildren, and two on the way.

After working in construction, I went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad in October 1939. When I retired in November 1979, I had over 40 years' service with the company except for 44 months that I served in the Army, which counted for railroad retirement.

As a hobby, my wife and I built and remodeled a few homes, did cabinetwork, and built furniture. Now, on retirement, as a hobby we build a multitude of things such as grandfather clocks (76), granddaughter clocks (25), and grandson clocks (3).

We walk every other day and keep active and in shape. I am 82 and my wife Doris is 78.

Sincerely,

Melvin L. Baker

1. This is the story of my life as a prisoner of war in Germany during World War II as I remember it. I do not remember the names of the men except for a few because before combat and imprisonment I was in the Anti Aircraft battalion in Camp Tyson, Tennessee. Our outfit was disbanded and we were sent to the 100th Infantry at Fort Bragg, NC, for infantry training for a few months. I was a T/5 at the time. We were then shipped to Germany on the US *General Gordon* and landed in Marseille, France. On our voyage over the Atlantic Ocean we were followed by German submarines but we were protected very well. In the middle of the ocean, however, we ran into a tornado, which threw our ship into the other ships and tore the life raft and boats off of our ship. This was pretty frightening. We made it safely through the Mediterranean Sea to Marseilles, France, in October 1944. We embarked over the side of the ship via a cargo net and onto the shore over sunken ships in the harbor and at this time we were attacked by German dive bombers. The Army succeeded in blacking out the harbor with smoke and we were safe. We got our gear and started to hike in a muddy field to our campground in Septemes, France. It took from October 21 to 31. We stayed in pup tents for several days. We moved onto mild combat and then went on a couple of reconnaissance missions with our platoon. We usually had one or two jeeps with a .50-caliber machine gun mounted on top of it and we would shoot at anything that moved. I don't remember hitting anyone with our fire; we were just trying to clean out pockets of resistance. After working our way through the Vosges mountains, we went toward Wingen, France, on December 2, 1944.

I remember very well feeding my men after we arrived on the ridge south of Wingen. Everyone had eaten except for me and all that was left was a canteen cup of pineapple chunks. It was my last Army meal until after liberation. The weather was fair and not too cold.

2. We could not see the town from the backside of the ridge, but the next day when we got closer, we could see some of the outer buildings and a small farm. Company A moved in around one of the buildings and soon received mortar fire. At this time, my assistant squad leader, Sergeant Stanley had a mortar explode while he hit the ground and it blew the front sight off of his rifle. I went out and brought him back to the building. His next trip was back to the rear. I never saw him again.

3. We were told by Captain Kiernisky that we would have an armored column on the road on our left and Company B and C on our rear and right flank. I did not see any of them. As I remember it, one squad

went in first and then the second one went in. Many were killed or wounded before I went in with my squad. I only had eight men from the platoon. I don't know where Lieutenant Greenwood was after he sent my squad in to Wingen. I didn't know there were so many casualties. Enemy fire had stopped as we were going down over the hill from the woods and from the buildings.

I saw a man going into town from another building and I wanted to shoot him but from the top sergeant, I was advised not to. I think to this day, that man gave our position away. At the bottom of the hill as we were about to cross a small stream, my radioman was shot in the heart by a German sniper. He died instantly. I cannot remember his name. At that time, someone shot toward the town. I did not like it because I thought he also gave our position away.

4. Orders were to take the town at all costs from Captain Kiernisky. We crossed the little stream going into the town and took a few buildings and then it became dark. I just had these eight men so I put four outside as guards and the rest of us went inside this place, which I thought was a small hotel or boarding house. The four men on the second floor were resting, while the other four were on guard duty.

I got my stripes on the ship going overseas and remember I wasn't with this squad very long so I don't remember their names.

Next thing I heard was a concussion grenade going off in the basement. At this time I think my guards had already been captured. I had just pulled a drape off of the window and was about to set down on the floor and get a few winks when I heard an English speaking German holler, "Surrender or we will blow the building up." I decided to fight it out but after looking out the window and seeing dozens of Krauts, it would have been suicide. I then talked to my men and we decided to tear our rifles apart and scatter them about. We went down the steps and out the door to our surrender. Outside, there were probably 100 or more Krauts. At the door on my way out, I handed the Kraut a hand grenade and he pitched it back in the corner of the room. I thought if he shot me, he would get it too.

5. How did I receive the surrender? I'll say it was the surprise of my life. Never did I think I would be captured. I had thoughts of getting an arm or leg blown off or getting killed but never captured.

6. When they marched us away, I then realized there were many of us captured. There was not much talking going on. I remember I had a hand full of .30-caliber shells in my pocket and a German change purse in my jacket pocket. As I was walking in the mud, I dropped the change and tramped on it. As we walked, our own artillery was firing over us. It was terrifying and I was glad there wasn't a short round.

7. I have no idea what happened to the Company D's machine-gun squad.

8. We walked part of the night to a building. I did not know where I was. The Germans were good to us. They let us sit around all night and interrogated us one by one. My turn came and I got the usual questions, name, rank and serial number. I told the interrogator this then he asked what my outfit was and for the name of the ship that I came over on and I said "you know I cannot tell you that" and he said, "Okay, I'm not trying to press you." I thought this was funny. I was then searched. I had a compass, bottle of Halizone tablets, my pay book and pictures of my wife, mother, father and brothers. He took the compass and tablets and let me keep the rest.

9. I cannot remember anything except for interrogation and walking.

10. Then I was off to Stalag 12A. The shoepacks were taken from some of us and replaced with wooden shoes. Luckily, I kept my shoes but lost my jacket and helmet and was given a blue French overcoat, which I wore through my internment. The problem at Stalag 12A was there was little food, no heat, and little water. During my stay at Stalag 12A, British flares were dropped at the rail yard at the camp. Bombers came over and they dropped bombs at the edge of the camp and hit an American officers' POW barracks and killed 69 out of 70 officers. Later we had to clean the mess up. By this time I was pretty weak and couldn't pick up three whole bricks, so I had three half bricks and needless to say, I got slapped and a going over from the German guard.

During the bombing a timber fell from the ceiling in my barracks and just missed my head as I lay on the floor.

11. I arrived at Limburg 12A on December 23, 1944 and was not allowed to work after that on account of being a staff sergeant. I did work once after that. I walked to a cemetery (I don't know where) to dig a grave for an English soldier. In six to seven hours I couldn't dig more than an inch deep in the ground

because the temperature was about 25 degrees. I then walked back. This may have been outside of Limburg, I cannot remember.

12. We were locked in boxcars for three days and nights with a cup of coffee and a ring of bologna. In my boxcar, I got a severe case of frostbite. There were so many in the boxcar that we couldn't all sit down at once. (Other camps) The only other man I remember that was with me was my scout, J. C. Brown, and I remember Captain Kiernisky. I don't remember where they got to. I heard in 1990 that J. C. Brown died in 1977. I never could locate him, and yes, I tried to locate my assistant squad leader, Sergeant Stanley, but could not find him. I always walked from one camp to another except when we left Limberg by train.

Other camps that I was at in their order. 2D Stargard, arrived 1/22/45; 2A New Brandenburg, arrived 2/7/45; 2B Bremerforde, arrived 2/22/45; 10C Westertimke, arrived April 15, 1945. Left 10C for Belgium after being liberated by the British Second Army, then to France and finally to Lucky Strike. Donuts and coffee there were delicious. One man ate six donuts and four cups of coffee and died on the spot. We marched across Germany from one camp to another. Once we started with 1,000 men and ended up with 800. The men died on the way or were bayoneted as they lay in the snow. Some were put on the mule-driven cart and probably froze to death. We were all cold and fed about 1 percent above starvation.

15. I did not go on work detail except to try and dig a grave and clean up after the bombing of the POW offices at 12A.

16. I saw German military in many neighborhoods. In fact, before capture, we stayed in a building and the next morning found out that there were Germans living in the cellar. All surrendered to us.

17. Once we saw an American-German dog fight. I think it was at 10C.

No, only when the British 2nd Army liberated us and kept us in their army for two weeks. We wore their uniforms, hobnail shoes and all. We had tea and cookies at 1000 and 1400, along with three meals a day. It was great after eating grass soup, turnips, marrow out of bones, raw potatoes, and some kinds of tea (I think made from tree leaves).

18. No contact with the Russians except in some stockades.

19. We were at 10C near Westertimke where we were liberated. All the guards left us the day before liberation. We planned to walk to our own lines, but decided it might be too risky. The next day, April 28, to the best of my recollection, the British Army took over the camp.

20. What a joyous day! We saw white bread for the first time in six months. It brought tears to my eyes when we got that bread. There was a German mortar squad on the hill outside of camp who fired a couple of rounds toward us. I don't think anyone was seriously hurt. What a JOY!

21. We were all very weak and skinny. I, myself, went from 175 pounds to 130 pounds. The good Lord was with us.

22. As far as I can remember, Captain Kiernisky told the lieutenants that after we tried to take the town earlier in the day, that we were to take the town at all costs. Well, we did, but the Krauts set a trap for us.

23. I talked to a man by the name of Buniecky and he said he was in a building at the edge of town with some wounded and saw a lot of the action. I hope you have contacted him.

24. I don't know why some of the battalions stayed in the rear.

25. I hope the memory of my experiences help you in your search for information of Company A, 398th, 100th Division.

Some of our biggest problems during captivity in the winter months were no food, no water, and no heat. All we had was body heat. Once we went out to gather dead branches to make hot water, but when we arrived back at camp, the Krauts took the wood from us.

We only had three showers in about six months. Once, I went to the Russian compound to trade a cigarette for a potato. On the way back to my compound there was another guard on duty. I thought he was going to shoot me but I was able to give him a cigarette to get back in.

One time they put us in a barn filled with hay and said if anyone started a fire with a cigarette, we were in there to stay.

I think my radioman's name was Salesnice, I'm not sure though.

Once, we were kept in a dungeon and a Kraut came in with a long pan and someone said "oh boy, chocolate cake." What a surprise to find it was blood sausage!

I didn't see a lot of combat, but I remember going through Nancy, Metz, Etwal, Raon l'Etape, and Baccarat.

I remember very well those cold and rainy days and nights in the Vosges Mountains. One rainy night I was so cold that I put my gas cape on and crawled under a rock and fell asleep but woke up soon and colder yet. I think if I would have stayed there longer, I might have frozen to death.

While in the Vosges Mountains, I went on a couple of patrols that were pretty scary.

It was so dark in the Vosges Mountains that to move we held onto the belt of the man in front of us or we would have gotten lost.

In the northern part of Germany as we POWs were walking through the fields and woods to our next camp, a camp friend (a Yugoslavian) gave me his Stradivarius violin and said "I'm too weak to carry it, you take it back to America." I carried it for a while and couldn't handle it myself so I left it at the base of a tree. When I got home, I found out it was well worth \$120,000! Oh well.

Some of my close buddies at the POW camps always asked, "How come you look so good with the conditions we have." I told them that I prayed often and the Good Lord was with me. Besides, we had cigarettes at the time of capture and after capture I would gather up cigarette butts and stuff them in my pockets. They were worth money. I was able to buy some food with butts from some POWs who worked on farms and at other places.

I saw many things like Hitler's train, Germany's political prisoners in their stripped suits, and at one place they would dump them out of the little rail carts right onto the ground. I saw one place where they marched people into a building for a shower and someone said it was a gas chamber. I don't know, and I don't know where it was as we marched all over Germany.

Somewhere in northern Germany, while walking through a town and nearly frozen and terribly hungry, a little old Polish lady came out of her house with a tub of mush and I was lucky to get a tin of it. She may have saved my life and I still bless her.

I remember getting two 10-pound boxes of food from the International Red Cross in six months. Each 10-pound box was divided between 14 or 15 men and I thank the Red Cross for that also. The Germans usually took the cigarettes out of the boxes so I think we each got a bit of this and a piece of that.

Each prisoner was to get a 10-pound box of food each week from the Red Cross, but it was impossible to transport it to us. Besides, the Germans needed it, too, and they would steal it. Once I saw six American Dodge trucks painted white with big red crosses painted on the sides.

Maybe some of you soldiers remember the showers we had at that old saw mill before we went into combat. I think it was around Thanksgiving because we had a turkey dinner. Showers were very ingenious. There were barrels mounted overhead and all you had to do was pull the lever and down came the delightful water.

Well, anyway, weather would soon be much colder so I put on two sets of wool long underwear. What a blessing. I wore it till I was liberated in April 1945.

10 C Westertimke at one time was a naval officers POW camp. At least that is what we were told. It had a swimming pool and some fancy buildings, but the pool was filled in with rubbish.

Once at a camp, we had straw beds and my Yugoslavian friend and I slept together and he had lice so bad his skin looked like a piece of coarse sand paper but I never got any lice. I talked to my family doctor after coming home and he said the same thing had happened to him during World War I. I said that maybe we stank too much the lice wouldn't come near us.

At one camp I was so weak that if I tried to get up off of the floor in the morning, I would black out and fall back down and lay there for maybe a day or two, I'm not sure.

The first part of my time in the POW camps was the worst for me, but then I learned quickly to adapt to the situation.

Since my return, the VA has taken good care of me—lots of therapy for my frostbitten legs and good treatment for my irritable colon.

Postscript (written in 2004): During my internment they fed us just 1 percent above starvation and I lost 50 pounds, but being in good health I struggled on and had faith in God. As I was walking across

France and Germany I would repeat to myself the lines in the 23rd Psalm. “Yea, though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me.”

I am 85 now and doing well—Praise God.

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