Robert R. SMITH: U.S. Army Service Story 1943-1945

I enlisted in the Army Specialized Reserve Training Program (ASTRP pronounced Asstrap) in August of 1943. I was sent to Iowa State College in September of 1943 and completed one quarter. Having attained my 18th birthday during the quarter, I was ordered to report to Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, for induction into the active force. On December 20, 1943, I entered on active duty and then waited for shipment to basic training. Having messed up Christmas and New Years the army finally decided to send me to Ft. Benning, Georgia, for Infantry Basic Training.

At Ft. Benning there was an area known as Harmony Church. It had been a POW area but the army decided the quarters were inadequate for POWs so they moved the POWs out and put the Basic Trainees in them. I lucked out and arrived to benefit from this decision. They were lovely rectangular tar-paper buildings with double deck bunks along one side. Three at each end and two on the side where the doors were. In the middle of the building was the central heating unit, a pot belly stove. When the stove was fired up, those along the sides were too hot, those at the ends of the building could see their breath.

After two and a half months of mud and misery interrupted by one pass which permitted a visit to beautiful Phenix City, Alabama, my ass was trapped and I was sent to Lovely Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, to join the 100th Infantry Division. There I completed my training and from there left with the Division for an all expense paid tour of Europe as a member of the 2nd Platoon Company B, 398th Infantry Regiment.

My job was that of lead scout for the squad. This provided me the opportunity to be the first to see the territory and to meet the local inhabitants. Some, of course, were tourists from another country and frequently objected to our trying to take over their accommodations.

By December 20, 1944 (see date in first para) the platoon I was assigned to had a strength of 13 men and one officer. (Since it started at 42 and had had 14 replacements of enlisted men and one officer (Lt. Fred Spiegelberg our original leader had assumed command of the Company), I felt pretty lucky). On that day my platoon was the reserve for the Company. The Company came under mortar fire and everyone hit the dirt. Since forward movement had been essentially in single file I waited for the platoon ahead to move out. After a few minutes word was passed that two people ahead had been injured and contact broken with the rest of the Company. Small arms fire could be heard but due to terrain and the wooded area it was uncertain where it was coming from.

The platoon leader ordered Pfc John Peter (Pete) Smith and myself to work our way forward, contact the Company Commander and get instructions for the action to be taken by the platoon. Pete and I worked our way down the hillside and encountered a flanking German patrol. We signalled enemy in sight and hit the dirt to delay them. I was carrying a BAR and Pete an M-l. Unfortunately (2) the BAR jammed and brush denied Pete a clear field of fire. We were about six feet apart and one potato masher type grenade exploded between us. Moments later, two 15 ft. tall Germans, each with a 200 MM Schmeiser automatic rifle pointed directly at Pete and I, were about six feet from us. (I admit there is a small exageration about the size of the Germans and the caliber of their weapons but at the moment that was my estimate). We were quickly taken into custody and hustled to a larger group of about 12 people. (We later learned that our signal and the activity had alerted the platoon to the flanking attack which was successfully repulsed.)

We were escorted to a rear headquarters probably battalion level and questioned about our unit, objective and other items which I have forgotten. We limited our responses to those allowed, name, rank, serial number, even though our questioners told us what our regiment and division was. Pete and I were then taken by vehicle to a compound in Zweibrucken. (You can’t

find the city if you look on a French map or travel in France because they refer to it as Du Ponts or two bridges).

The building in the holding compound in Zweibrucken was a prefabricated type and the floor supports had collapsed. It was unheated and had no beds. We slept on the floor, along with several other American POWs. Food consisted of rye bread, which the first day seemed inedible, the second day could be tolerated, and by the fifth day was looked forward to like mom's apple pie.

Christmas and New Year's day were spent in Zweibrucken. Little as I enjoyed Christmas and New Years at Ft. Leavenworth, I must say I liked them even less at Zweibrucken.

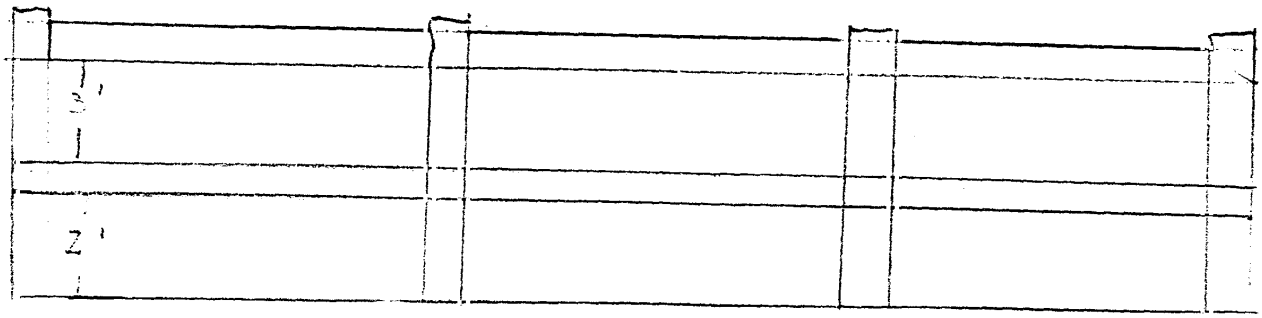
On what I would now estimate to be the fourth or fifth of January, 1945, the group gathered Zweibrucken(about 75 prisoners) and were marched to Kaiserslautern. The Air Corps had recently bombed the area which upset the local citizenry. They displayed their anger by spitting on us and throwing an occasional rock.

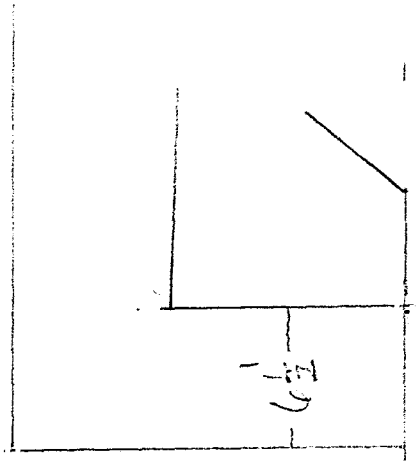
At Kaiserslautern we were put aboard the German Army version of the Orient Express. The cars were of the classic 40 et 8 type. I would estimate that we actually had about 35 men in our car. Sanitary facilities consisted of a bucket in one corner. No seats, blankets or other comforts were available. The train stopped twice daily and we were allowed out once a day. A piece of bread was provided at one stop and usually a thin soup at the other.

After three days we arrived at Villingen and were in our first regular prison camp or Stalag. The accommodations were somewhat less than first class but better than Zweibrucken.

There were three levels of shelves which occupied three of the four walls. The shelves were approximately 6 1/2 ft wide and about 3 ft between levels.

Front view of room





End or side view

We had food delivered to our room twice a day. There were about 70 men in the room which was probably 20 ft by 30 ft. The food consisted of a thin soup (small amounts of solids), a potato and some bread (always a heavy rye bread). We were allowed outside to go to the latrine three times a day and to exercise once a day.

Each person had one thin blanket and there were no pillows. From the time we were captured to the time we left Villingen no shower or laundry facilities were provided. As you can well imagine the group was a little gamy.

In other parts of the Stalag there were British and Russian prisoners. On one occasion the Russians refused to come out for head count and a dog was sent in to force them out. The dog was killed and thrown out. We could only see other prisoners. There was no intercamp communication.

We were moved from Villingen (near the Swiss border) to Stalag Ill-A at Luckenwalde, Germany (about 40 mi. south of Berlin). The Germans used the same travel agent for this leg of the trip as they had the previous one so we had the same luxurious travel facilities as before.

Luckenwalde was a more established prison camp than the others. Beds were wooden double deck bunks. Wooden slats rising slightly at one end provided support. Straw filled burlap pads were the mattresses and each person had a blanket.

I would estimate that there were about 120 bunks in the room we were in. As mentioned before the bunks were double deck in groups of six. Three in length and two wide with common posts providing the support at the head and foot of each bunk and a board down the center dividing the bunks.

As part of our welcome we were deloused, permitted to shower and issued an overcoat and a warm, billed cap. It was a Belgian Army great-coat but quite warm. All of our clothing was stamped with a black triangle and the letters KGF (for Kriegs Gefangnen or War Prisoner).

Food was slightly improved. In addition to the 200 grams of bread per day we had either soup or a boiled potato. Once a week each prisoner would gat a pat of margarine, a teaspoon of sugar and occasionally a slice of salami or some other sausage.

Heat was provided by a ceramic stove in the center of the room. The Germans provided enough wood to burn about three hours per day. A few bed slats were burned but they were irreplaceable so not many went into the fire.

About a month after arriving at Luckenwalde we were again to go to another location. We were told we were to go to Magdeburg. We heard later that those who did go there wound up working in a brickyard.

Our travel agent must have been on vacation so instead of a train the Germans invited us to hike to Magdeburg. We marched from about 9:00 a.m. until dusk. We came to a very small village as it was getting dark. As with many small villages it was about 3 blocks long and a block wide. I stepped out of the outside file onto the sidewalk and no one said anything. I got back in ranks and said to Pete, “Let’s get out of here”. We both got on the sidewalk and when we came to a corner turned and the rest of the group marched on ahead. We hurried up the road and out of the village in the darkness. As we scurried away from the village we could hear shouts of “zwei mannen” (two men). Our absence had been discovered but neither of us were aware of any search effort. We continued on for what I would estimate to be two miles and found a machine storage building. It was the only building around and had a storage loft. We broke into the building and spent the night there. The next day we developed phase two of our carefully planned escape. We decided we would go east and meet the Russians because they were probably closer than the American forces. Bear in mind we had no compass, no maps and actually no idea where

we were. While planning this clever strategy we ate the rations that had been provided for the trip to Magdeburg.

That evening we started for the eastern front. There were no stars and of course the countryside was blacked out. We got on a roadway and started walking. After what I would guess was two hours someone said “Halt”! It wasn’t Pete or I.

We decided that we would comply with the strangers request. He flashed a light on us and called for assistance (Corporal of the Guard, Post 4?) When the others arrived we saw they had black uniforms with lightning bolts on the collars. Lucky us. We had walked to the entry of an SS training camp.

We were searched, questioned extensively and fed. The SS troops thought it hilarious that we had so easily escaped from the Wehrmacht. That probably worked in our favor. We were asked about treatment in the prison camps and told our story. The camp commandant said “You should be better cared for than you have described. Someone in authority should be made aware of conditions”. He placed a call to Berlin and made an appointment for Pete and I to tell our story.

The next day we went in the back of a covered truck to Berlin. A Dutch member of the SS who spoke excellent English was our guard. His mother had had to leave Amsterdam because of his status and had an apartment in Berlin. He said if we would agree not to escape we could stay with him at his mother’s apartment that night. We quickly agreed and proceeded to the apartment.

That night was a social event; son home for a day from the service, friends came to the apartment, refreshments served and records played. Most memorable and still a nostalgic favorite Duke Ellington’s “Mood Indigo”. Twice the evening was interrupted by air raids. We would go to the basement of the building and in maybe half an hour go back to the apartment.

The next morning we toured Berlin via the subway with our guard. In the afternoon Pete and I spoke to a Colonel in the German army. Each of us was interviewed alone. After I had complained about conditions and lack of Red Cross packages I was told that our rations were the same as German civilian-s received and that Red Cross packages would be distributed if the Allies would stop bombing the railroads. At the close of the interview he offered me a Chesterfield cigarette (from a Red Cross package).

The Colonel told our guard that we should not stay in civilian quarters. Arrangements were made for us to be locked in a cell in a jail in Berlin. On the following day we went by train back to the area of the SS camp to await return to Wehrmacht control. We had dinner with the camp Commandant one day (horse meat though we didn’t know it before eating. The animal had been killed by Allied aircraft and meat salvaged for human use.)

After three days we returned under guard to Luckenwalde and Stalag III-A. For escaping we were sentenced to 6 days confinement on bread and water. There was a compound within the camp which was essentially a jail. Two-man cells with barred doors and windows. Between cells were ceramic stoves to heat the building.

The jail was operated by French prisoners. They would sneak us soup and potatoes so we ate better than in the regular camp. Another prisoner in the jail was an English soldier. He gave us a tin of bully beef which was delicious. He had obtained it from a British Red Cross package. He was awaiting transfer to a criminal prison for assaulting a German civilian. He had been on a work detail supervised by the civilian. The civilian had left a camera on the seat of a horse drawn wagon being used in their work. The Englishman took the camera, when the superivsor was away from the wagon and threw it in a ditch. When the civilian noticed the camera was missing he accused the English soldier of stealing it. This irritated the soldier who told us: “I’m an honest

man. I'd never steal anything. Destroy something that belongs to a Kraut, yes, steal, no. So I stomped him".

After six days we were put back in the regular prison camp compound. All of the prisoners were new to Stalag III-A having been moved from near the Polish border area due to the Russian advances. A few days after our return to the regular prison area the first Red Cross packages to come to Stalag III-A arrived. Pete and I always felt that was partially due to our efforts.

Two weeks after we were back in the regular prison the Germans needed two people to go to a work camp. There were probably 800 prisoners in Stalag III-A by then but guess who was chosen. Another reward for escaping.

We were sent to a place called Juterbog. It was a warehouse area about 35 miles south of Luckenwalde. The warehouse area was for foods of various kinds. Our living area was a compound within the warehouse area surrounded by a fence about eight feet high and topped with barbed wire.

The first assignment Pete and I had after being sent to Juterbog was to clean a warehouse that was used to store root crops (beets, carrots, etc). There were still some bagged onions in the warehouse. We put one bag of onions in the wheelbarrow we were using to haul out the dirt and covered the bag with dirt. We took our wheelbarrow near the prison compound fence to empty it and left the onions hidden by the dirt from the warehouse. On the way back to the warehouse the wheelbarrow broke and we were unable to finish our job. We sincerely regretted the fact that the wheelbarrow broke.

There were about 75 Americans at the Juterbog Arbeitskomand (work camp). The onions became valuable trading material with the other prisoners who had access to other items. Carrots, salami, potatoes were smuggled in by the prisoners.

We also snacked during the day when possible. One warehouse had canned meats. I had a "ten in one" can opener on my dog tag chain and could open cans very neatly. Pete and I would take a few bites, put the can back on the shelf and go about our business. All prisoners were searched several times looking for a can opener but it was never found.

Pete and I were usually supervised by a civilian named Herman. Herman was not terribly anxious to work or get much done so I found it more interesting to try to learn some German by talking to Herman than I did to work. I was able after a month to carry on a limited conversation.

On a few occasions we were taken outside the warehouse area to load bales of straw on wagons to be brought to the warehouse rail head for loading. The straw was used for bedding for horses which were still extensively used by the German army on the eastern front. There was a civilian foreman who supervised those activities who was very unpleasant. His temper was not greatly improved when we nearly succeeded in knocking him off the wagon with a bale of straw rolled from the topmost part of the stack to the wagon.

While on one of our straw hauling days I did two things which could have caused serious problems. First, I tried to catch a chicken and that upset our armed guard. I think he must have been a bottom of the barrel troop but he did have a rifle. We had a brief unpleasant discussion about the quality of American versus German troops and I told him I could leave the area if I wanted. He had his rifle slung over his shoulder and to show him I could leave, I grabbed the rifle and took it away. It immediately dawned on me that it was a dumb thing to do, so I handed it right back and turned away. He shouted a lot but must have realized he had a problem if he had to tell why he shot a prisoner who was not escaping.

The Germans had some boxes of cookies stored in one of the warehouses in a locked room. We found out the lock could be removed and decided to steal a box. On our first attempt a

German civilian interrupted us as we were about to leave. Pete started berating the guy loudly in English and we both walked out like he was the interloper. Later in the afternoon we succeeded in stealing a box of cookies and hiding them in a hay barn. Almost every night we were taken out of our building due to air raids in the area. We went to trenches near the hay barn and could get some of the cookies while out. We were searched every evening after work but not on the return from the air raid shelter.

We also received another Red Cross package while at Juterbog and Pete was selected to work in the bakery. Life was improving. With our rations, Red Cross packages and with what we could steal we were no longer constantly hungry.

On the evening of April 22, 1945, we could hear either artillery fire or bombs exploding in the distance. There were several low level passes by aircraft with Russian markings that day. On April 23 our guards told us we were going to go to Bavaria and marched us out of the warehouse area. We could see preparations being made to destroy it.

We marched for three days. Toward the end of April 25th the guards said “The Americans are about two kilometers ahead. Go to them”. Pete and I were assisting another prisoner who had badly blistered feet and bringing up the rear. An American GI came up on a motorcycle and said “Where the hell have you guys been?” We were back in American hands. This occurred near Halle, Germany.

During the time we were prisoners neither Pete’s parents or mine knew what had happened to us. We were listed as missing in action until returned to U.S. control. The 100th Infantry Division’s “The Story of the Century” still has us listed as missing in action.

I am sure that no period of four months in my life has ever had so much impact as the time I was a POW. Daily I am affected by it. John Peter (Pete) Smith is my closest friend. I met my wife when on a special leave period afforded Ex-POWs. My discharge date was determined by the fact that I was a POW. As an Ex-POW I get some added V. A. benefits which I very much appreciate.

One final benefit. My own personal favorite bureaucratic story. (I spent 28 years as a bureaucrat). In 1948 the Congress decided that since POWs had not been fed by the Army during their period of imprisonment they should be given $1.00 per day for the days they were POWs. Each former POW was sent a form which asked “Date captured; date released. Did you escape? Date of escapes.” I reported the escape and they deducted $2.00 for the days I was free. A year later the Congress decided that if an individual was a prisoner for 60 or more days it was prima facie evidence that he had been mistreated and the imprisoning nation should pay him $1.00 per day. Result: $2.00 was deducted from my entitlement. Final result: Escaping cost me $4.00.

Added note: The story of the $2.00 deduction doesn't end here. Dad re-told this part of the story at a POW award ceremony in Sacramento at Congressman Doug Ose's congressional district office. After hearing Dad's story, Congressman Ose dug into his pocket, pulled out $2.00, handed the money to Dad and said he was sorry it took so long, but here's the money we owe you. It was a light-hearted moment and everyone there shared in a laugh.

Robert R. Smith WWII P-38 Ten-in-One Can Opener Story

My father, Robert R. Smith, was a prisoner of war in a German prisoner of war camp in Juterbog, Germany in the early months of 1945. Then-PFC Smith was serving as an infantryman in Company B, 398th Infantry Regiment, 100th Infantry Division when he was captured near Bitche, France in December of 1944 along with his battle buddy, PFC J. Peter "Pete" Smith. Together since basic Infantry Training in the U.S., they had learned and were practicing various techniques to survive the ordeals of captivity.

POW's were required to work, but Arbeitskommando (work camp) Juterbog proved to be a camp with advantages over some others where they had been held. Team Smith and about 75 other American POW's were detailed to work in various food warehouses the German army operated. Many of the prisoners were able to steal vegetables and other small items they could eat, and traded among each other for some variety when they could get the food back to the barracks. Fortunately for Team Smith, my father had kept his P-38 can opener (sometimes called a ten-in-one opener) on an I.D. tag chain around his neck. From time to time, they were assigned duty in the warehouse where canned goods were kept. The cans were institutional sized so they were impossible to smuggle out, but Dad was occasionally able to open a can, share some of the contents with Pete, and put it far back on the shelf so that it would be some time before the opened and spoiled can of food could be discovered.

Every POW in camp was searched repeatedly for a can opener by the German guards, but none ever noticed the P-38 in plain sight around Dad's neck. That small piece of steel helped keep Team Smith alive when every morsel of food was needed for survival. Even so, the skinny 19 year old who was captured in December of 1944 at about 140 pounds weighed barely 100 pounds when he was repatriated by US forces on April 25, 1945.

Today Dad proudly displays a few treasured items in a shadow box holding mementos and awards from his days as a Soldier in World War II. Among them are a Silver Star awarded for his actions during the fighting on the day of his capture, a Combat Infantry Badge, and a simple steel chain that holds a set of I.D. tags and a P-38.

At the age of 82, Mr. Robert R. Smith continues serving Soldiers and Veterans today as Commander, Forty-Niners Chapter, American Ex-Prisoners of War in Sacramento, California. (www.axpow.org) He is also an active member of the 100th Infantry ("Century") Division, also known as "The Sons of Bitche!" (http://www.100thww2.org/anecd/sons.html)

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Robert R. Smith WWII P-38 Ten-in-One Can Opener Story