Excerpts of an Ex-POW

by Edward J. Kulas, 397-E

In December of 1944 as the 100th Division cleared the Vosges Mountain area of the enemy in southern France, Corps Commander General Brooks asked General Eisenhower for permission to cross the Rhine River at Strasbourg, but General Eisenhower sent an order to General Brooks to move the 100th Division north to help General Patton. We were moved by trucks one night to a location on the Maginot front line. After fighting the enemy for a few days, my company, Company F, 397th Infantry, assaulted a hill for two solid days with no success. Many were killed or wounded before the company withdrew to the rear. The eighty-eight shells came whistling in as we dug our slit trenches. One shell hit into a tree near me and a chunk of it hit my helmet, bouncing off the spare felt shoe pack insoles we stored in the helmet liner. I was in the air jumping into the foxhole when it hit and when I woke up it was dark. I got out and searched, finding my helmet and gun, then ran down the hill searching for the CP area which the men helped me find. I have my helmet to this day with the big hole where the shell hit it.

A few days after New Year's Day, January 1, 1945, we moved from our reserve town of Rohrbach to the town of Rimling, moving after midnight. Because the 398th outfit had moved out several hours before, the Jerries had moved into the foxhole area, so we had to shoot our way into the line. In the morning we found a wounded German soldier hiding in the bushes in back of our foxholes. This line was supposed to be our winter holding sector but Hitler had sent many battalions of SS panzer tanks into our area. When the Battle of the Bulge did not succeed we were shelled day and night while in reserve. On the front line it was more severe, even having US shells falling behind our lines. We lost quite a few men to shell wounds.

Willard Eagle, who took over my foxhole at the bend in the road to the east of Rimling was wounded in the back by shrapnel and later died of his wounds. During the last night on the front we knew something was wrong in the town because our telephone was not working; so in the morning we circled to the north of town and coming down a small hill we found this part of town deserted. A few of our men went to check with our Company F CP while the rest of us kept to one side of a house until one of our men came out of a cellar offering us some apples, placing them in the middle of the street. We all surrounded the bushel and were eating them until someone spotted a tank up on the hill with infantry alongside. Everyone thought it was a US tank but because it was covered with spruce boughs and snow, we were unable to see the outline of the turret and gun. Someone soon realized the infantrymen had on German uniforms, so some of us ran into a barn and some scattered into the houses down the street. Soon the two tanks were in the street and with about fifty or sixty soldiers proceeded to flush us out, lining us up in a row. They then gathered up all their wounded from various homes and laid them onto the backs of the tanks. At dusk with half of our group behind each tank and with guards on both sides they led us off. I did not like the way we were captured so easily and was planning to make a dash for freedom if we came to a hedgerow but we never came close to any. (We never knew what happened to our wounded until almost fifty years later when we met various buddies at our yearly reunions.)

After spending the night in a house in Landstuhl, we were interrogated by an officer the next morning before being transported by truck to a small military camp. From there we were transported by train, with from twenty to thirty men to a boxcar, little or no food, water, or sanitary conditions, to Bad Orb in Bavaria, a camp of about five thousand prisoners.

During the second week of our stay at Bad Orb, we heard that three hundred and fifty men were to go to a work camp. They were the American Jews who were segregated in a barracks at the end of our camp. Another day some camp officials came into our barracks and talked to the barracks leader who pointed in our direction and asked fifteen men to step forward and line up with men from the middle and other side, a total of fifty men, so our barracks filled the quota of which fifteen were from Company F, 397th.

The next day we were sent to the showers, and the third day we marched down the hill to the train. As we were boarding the boxcar we were handed a chunk of bloodwurst about six inches long and a half loaf of bread which was to suffice as our only food during the two-day trip to our work camp near Berlin. We

put this food inside our shirts so there would be no stealing. This was the largest amount of food we had in our possession in many months so we were guessing and wrongly hoping they would feed us real well at the work camp.

As the train rolled along to our new camp which was to be Berga, on the Elster River, someone suggested we all kneel and say a few prayers that we would survive what the Germans had in store for us. I do not remember even one single thing about arriving and getting off the boxcars or marching to our new camp, a row of green huts on cement pads situated halfway up a hill which had a dense spruce forest on the crown of the hill. The first several barracks were for Jewish US prisoners. I was in the last one with mixed US prisoners. The hospital was in our room with a Mexican medic serving as a doctor. He used the sulfa from the wound dressing kits to treat pneumonia cases of which there was a steady stream. The men started dying the next week, as we had to line up in front of the hut at 5 a.m. for a count of prisoners. Some men were dragged out of their bunks to line up and when the cold February night air hit them they dropped down in their tracks. After the US camp leaders had a meeting with the Nazi commandant to put a stop to this practice, we were lined up and counted after having one cup of ersatz coffee. The guards would then open the gate and we would walk down the hill in complete darkness with guards and police dogs on both sides of our column.

We went by the edge of the town through a field over a railroad bridge to get to the tunnel project. The Jewish US GIs worked in the tunnels while the other GIs, in groups of ten or twelve, did service work for the project. My group hauled clay that was used to pack the dynamite holes. They had a box-like carrier for this job that was also used to lug supplies from the warehouses on the opposite side of the Elster River. From town to the project we also pushed rail cars loaded with railroad rails, ties, and other building materials. On certain days we hauled the ties and rails on our shoulders up the line to extend the rail line to the other end of the project on both sides of the river. Our day consisted of twelve hours on the job and one coming and going on the project. We could have our soup at noon on the project but we voted to have it at supper with our bread ration. Supper consisted of a small chunk of cheese sausage or marmalade. We ate nothing all day unless the Russians ate turnips and threw the peels in the river. We then had long sticks to guide the peels to the bank where we would grab and eat them.

One day we got on a freight car on the side of town where our camp was and stopped for a break in the middle of a plowed field when someone said we should eat the dandelions and other small roots growing there for the valuable vitamins they might contain. They did make us sick to our stomachs but they gave us valuable nourishment which our bodies needed. As soon as we ate our food each day everyone would take off their GI underwear and turn them inside out to kill all the lice we could find. Vitamin deficiency ulcer like sores were on the backs of my hands and on my lower lip and chin and the rocks scraped the mess clean to the flesh. After washing off the blood in the river several times, I went to the blacksmith shop and said to the Germans, *"Haben zee fer das bitte"* pointing to my bloody sores. After a few *"Yavols,"* I was handed a good-sized bandage. I said *"Danke shain,"* but after a few days I peeked under it and not liking the looks of the mess, I went back to the river on one of our no food lunch breaks, took off the bandage, soaked and washed off the pus and scab. I did this for a few more days for I was worried about an infection. We did have the hospital in the corner of our barracks but the men were dying of other strange afflictions besides pneumonia and starvation. One man had a leg that kept swelling until he died a few days later, and a man being beating in the tunnels by the Germans could cause black and blue bruises getting infected.

Alfred Dasher of Lebanon, Pa., one of the fifteen men from Company F, was sick at this time, so I got his job—carrying the sharp jackhammer drills from the blacksmith shop to the ten tunnels near the town of Berga, then returning the dull bits to the shop. This went on for the entire twelve-hour-day but it was fairly easy work compared to the tunnel bull work.

The German worker leaders hung their coats on spikes at the entrance to the tunnel and while delivering drills I passed near a row of coats and saw a paper bag sticking out of the pocket, probably someone's lunch, I thought. On my way back passing close to the coats, in one swoop I took it and went over a steep bank to the river making believe I was washing and wolfed down the sandwich. In the next tunnel I found another sandwich and this was a real treat for my empty stomach.

That night at the barracks the older men who gave a report on the day's events preached to us to do anything we could to survive until the war's end, but do not give the guards or the civilian Germans any reason to beat you up. Many of our men died that day and many got a beating in the tunnels. I learned that Arnold Adler of my platoon received a beating in the tunnel that I stole the sandwich from. I didn't realize at the time that the Germans would blame the Jews working with them so this ended my feast, didn't even look at the coats after that for fear I would be tempted to swipe another sandwich and I have felt a terrible guilt all my life for being the cause of Adler's beating, more so when I learned from Al Dasher that he saw two Germans while he worked in the tunnels, kicking Adler in the groin, ribs, and head while he was squirming on the ground. The next day after a city in Germany was bombed they vented their hate and rage on us poor Americans, with several beatings. I received a beating near tunnel No. 1 trying to trade three or four gold wedding rings for a loaf of bread for each ring for my fellow prisoners.

Roman Mucha, who wore the Nazi prison clothes and worked in the kitchens in town, would meet me near No. 1 tunnel two or three times a week to dicker about the trade, but I was told not to give him the rings before he produced the loaves of bread. He wanted to deal in the reverse and this was the reason for so many meetings.

One day as we were discussing the deal Roman yelled at me to run. I turned to see the German who sat among the trees at noon to eat his lunch near tunnel No. 1, running towards us with a big stick in his hand. I took off and he came after me raining blows to my head and shoulders. I ran as fast as my skinny body would go and finally outran him. I did not go there again for some time.

We later met past the power house by the bridge, but the men who owned the rings instructed me to check out Roman's honesty and if he was sincere I was to give him the rings, which I did the next day. I waited for Roman to show up with the bread every day for a week but by then we all knew we had been taken by a slick con artist. The men involved were mad at me and insisted I would have to give up my bread ration to them each day, but the only reason I was involved at all is that Roman was Polish and I could speak his language and they could not. The barracks leaders hearing the argument came over and told these men that they made the decision to take a chance on Roman's good faith and lost so they were not going to be allowed to let this man starve to death or they would get no bread at all.

Easter Sunday, March 1945, our first Red Cross packages were to be given to us only if we were all clean shaven and no one tried to escape. Three men were to split one package. Norman Martin had been begging our commandant for months to get our one pack per month per man which was the amount allotted by the Red Cross. Getting them sooner would have saved a lot of lives from starvation. The deaths per day had been increasing from February into March from one to three a day at the hill top barracks to three, four and five a day at our new barracks by the river. We never saw the dead at the hill barracks, but here they stacked them by the fence near our exit gate. I never looked directly at them, just a glance to check the size of the pile.

There were other things to upset us, the beatings of our men in the tunnels, and seeing the guards beating the black and white striped European prisoners with clubs who were pulling a heavy electrical cable into the woods above the tunnels.

My group had been lugging twenty foot rails all day long through rough rubble to new tunnels up the line. At day's end we were forming to return to our barracks when a German from the blacksmith shop came to our leader and told him to have us turn over a steel like scoop (5 x 7 ft) so they could weld the opposite side. We were deployed around three sides of the scoop but our first attempt did not even budge it. A fanatical German then rushed toward us with a hammer in his hand and proceeded to rain hammer blows onto the backs of the men to my right. He came up to the man next to me when someone yelled "Heave!" We must have mustered what strength our tired bodies had and turned the scoop over. The German walked away at this point and my back was spared his blows. He probably went away happy that he beat up some Americans.

While carrying the rails I slipped on the rubble and put out my hand to stop my body from sliding down the slope and the sharp rocks tore off a yellow puss scab on the inner side of my wrist almost two inches in size. I also had two more of these.

Our departure from Berga came as a surprise two or three days after Easter Sunday in April 1945. If we had been forewarned we could have taken our blankets for many men lost garments to thievery. I lost a vest sweater and my woolly bugger.

We marched along fairly well till the latter part of the day when lack of food and water took its toll. Local folks would hitch up a horse or steer to a straw-filled wagon and pick up our stragglers as they passed through our columns, giving them a bit of comfort. It was the strangest sight as their bodies and heads lurched with every step the animals took. That night we stopped at a small town maybe thirty miles from Berga where the camp leaders must have arrived before us and had the people cook up a potato soup for us. This soup was in steel tubs and half barrels in a row and was much better than any we had in the camp.

We were then led to a big barn for the night where we slept in the hay loft and in other places. The next morning the dead were hauled out and put into a wagon for burial outside of the cemetery wall. One big hole was dug for the seven or eight bodies with one dog tag left on the body and the other was kept by Andrew Dowdell to be turned over to the Army when they liberated us.

Back on the road again we went along at a fairly good pace and coming out of a long wooded road we saw a lone bomber with ack-ack guns shooting at it. Soon smoke poured from it, the crew bailed out and was being shot at. Some of them might have been hit.

As we went down a sloping road into a small town, the wagon with about ten men who could no longer march passed through the center of our two columns. On our left were a group of old people and children lined up to a doorway holding buckets, probably waiting for their daily milk ration, and as the wagon came into view with the sight on the men with their heads rocking back and forth with each step the animal took, as one they all started to cry and sob. The young children will remember it to this day, as I do all the bodies scattered near our foxholes especially in Rimling where our Company F got captured.

From December 1944 to March of 1945 the bodies of our soldiers and theirs lay rotting until Co. F retook Rimling, according to Wilber Blanchard, my buddy from Ludlow, Vermont, who wrote about this to me in a letter after the war.

We stopped for the night in a small town where our leaders informed us that the Burgmeister would not feed us unless we turned in all the money we had and after they collected francs and American dollars they gave us some supper. Next morning again the dead were put into a wagon for burial and we resumed our march, stopping to rest every few hours by the sides of the road, where the men were all strangely quiet. I wondered just when all this was going to end, for I did not see any of my Company F men for many days.

We stopped for the night at a town with a very large courtyard with our group of two columns stood down the right side, the back side and most of the other side. They told us to stay put until they got things organized. Some commotion erupted, and it was two Mexican GIs who darted into a chicken coop and stole some eggs. The commandant again threatened not to feed us but our leaders managed to calm him down so we had some good potato soup that night.

The next morning when the bodies were loaded into the wagon, an old lady came charging at the commandant, took hold of his clothing and proceeded to slap his face screaming terrible words to him, telling him he should use the town hearse for the bodies. In awhile the hearse did arrive and the burials took place. Our group then began the march to Hof, which is west of the northwest point of the Czechoslovakian border. The soup was cooked and waiting when we arrived at the large barn where we lived and slept. Most of the group went out the next day, milling about in a near meadow or sitting near the barn. We had our potato soup at noon each day and it was much better than we ever had. This helped us recover from the long march. Day two, April 11, we were all ordered out to get the news that our president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had died.

When a group of small bombers flew in and bombed the city of Hof, many of our men were disturbed that they were only hurting innocent civilians. I also felt that this was so.

Later on Russell Johnson, of Greenfield, Mass., came over, put his arms around me, laid his head on my shoulder and said “Ed, I messed my pants,” sobbing so pitifully, I said “Russ, we will take care of you.”

I called to some men to help bring some blankets from the barn so we could pull off garments, cover him, and put him in the hay mow. I knew it was the end for him. He was a very handsome lad, just turned nineteen. His mother told me this some twenty years later when I decided I should visit his family. I went alone, and when I entered the living room and saw his picture in military uniform, it was just too much for my sensitive system and I choked up with tears. When I recovered, I learned from his mother that an aunt in White Plains, N.Y., was contacted by Andrew Dowdell and he related the fact that he went with a US military unit to recover the bodies, for reburial in a US military cemetery in Belgium. I have a copy of the letter his aunt wrote to his mother of her visit with Andrew Dowdell. He told her of the heavy labor Russell had to do, like carrying acetylene tanks on their shoulders all day and other work. His group and mine would meet on our way to the tunnels, where I would visit with Russ and others I knew. Russell was so pleased with each visit.

During our stay at Hof I got into trouble cooking some meal in my cup. I had found three bags of meal in the hay mow and a friend found a small piece of wood, so we tried to cook the meal. The guard caught us so we had to be punished by standing outside by a fence post all night long with a guard. Our last day at Hof we were having our potato soup out of several tubs and realized as the line went through there was going to be a lot left over.

The men began to chant "Oh boy, seconds, oh boy, seconds."

Hearing this, the commandant flew into a rage and kicked the tubs over spilling all the soup. This angered everyone back in the camp. Every morning he ranted and raved if some men were hiding under the bottom of the lower bunks. Then and there I planned to escape if possible.

The next morning after the dead were buried we were lined up and took to the road marching until dusk. Someone in front of me passed the word that guards were hassling Alfred Dasher, who was barely able to walk because he had been ill for weeks and had not recovered his strength. The escape idea came into play.

I filtered forward slowly inside the two rows until I got to Dasher and helping him along, I whispered, "Al, when I shove you, go, we're going to escape."

I shoved him, but fear blocked out my memory of how we got to the woods where we saw two German soldiers. I asked Al to duck under some nearby bushes but he said, "let them shoot me, I don't care anymore." The soldiers walked right past without even glancing in our direction. Coming to a road, a barking dog drew our attention to a house on our left. A man came out and greeted us. I asked if he could *specken Americanisch.* He replied *"Nix,"* so then I asked if he could speak Polonish. *"Yavol,"* he replied so in Polish I asked for something to eat. He gave us each a slice of bread and a cup of coffee. I asked if we could sleep in his barn but he said if he harbored us he would be punished. He then told me of a big pine tree, pointing to it a short distance back up the road.

As the man went back into the house Al said he was still hungry so I said, "OK Al, we'll try one more house." We came to it soon and I rapped on the door. When it was opened, I again asked for some bread and the man motioned us to come in. He set up two chairs for us then took out a loaf of bread and cut a slice for each of us. Al then told me to ask how far away is the United States Army, which I did and he replied, "Ten kilometers." He kept looking at Al devouring the bread so he gave him one more slice. I had not seen Al for a long spell for he was in the sick bag of our unit and he looked so haggard that it upset this man. Al was gobbling the bread so fast the man opened the drawer, took out another loaf, cut it in half, handing it to us. I thanked him as we left.

We then went over to the pine tree where we made a bed of pine needles with a covering of big branches, and with a small one on top, I covered Al. He lifted my side so I could roll under and there we spent the night. The next day we decided to go in to the little town where we found six men from Berga who were settled in a barroom and slept on straw the night before. The townspeople fed us one slice of bread three times a day each in different homes for five days.

Al was content to sleep and lay in the straw all day long while I walked about the town visiting with displaced people who worked for the farmers. Michael Bernat and his wife ran the small farm for an old couple and he came to talk to me while she gave me breakfast of one slice of bread and one cup of coffee. The third morning she poured melted fat on the bread but I told her it might make me sick for I had an

iffy stomach. She then gave me a plain slice which was a very good diet for our stomachs and helped to regain our health. The feeling of freedom can best be described thus: “My heart was singing” a song which I have on a tape of folk songs in Polish. I play it quite often.

The last day of our stay in town, Norman Martin, the camp leader of the Jewish group, asked if anyone knew how to butcher, for the *Burgermeister* had a veal calf he was saving to have a celebration at war’s end. I knew how, but I felt I had done enough for Al and myself. The men were all commenting, though, that this would be the best kind of a meal for our tender stomachs so I said if they would help me, I can do it. They then grasped my arms and the entire crew marched to a barn where all was ready.

A pulley and rope hung from the barn ridge beam and in a matter of minutes I had the job half done when the artillery barrage hit the town. We all ran into cellars, coming out when it stopped so I could finish the job. We then went back to the barroom to wait for our feast where a person came for us in late afternoon. We all sat at a big table in the *Burgermeister’*s dining room with a huge glass bowl in the middle of the table with the veal stew. It sure was good.

Later the town’s residents lined up along the road with us to welcome the American Army as they came over the small hill. My group kept shouting “Anyone from Pennsylvania? New York?” and I asked “How about Massachusetts?” The GI leading the column answered, “Pittsfield, Mass.” He said his name was Donald Rabideau. Twenty-nine years later I learned while working for the General Electric Company that he was near my place of work many times through the years so I spent time looking him up to thank him for liberating me on April 19, 1945.

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