

Stalag VIIA: Christmas, 1944

by Bud Lindsey, 397-E

A. L. (Bud) Lindsey was a member of Company E, 397th Infantry. He wrote this article in 1999, and it is now part of the 100th's archive at the Marshall Library.

The winter of 1944 in southern Germany was a bleak time. The German guards at Stalag VIIA, at Mooseburg, near Munich, were hardly able to contain themselves as the “Battle of the Bulge” was in progress and they thought that they were winning WWII. We knew better, even though we did not have access to a radio, but we could see the air war going on over our heads and we knew that the Allies were committed and the Battle of the Bulge was a mere setback.

As we found out after the war, the prison camp known as Stalag VIIA was one of the more deluxe POW camps operated by the Germans, they being host to approximately 50,000 American, German, French, British, and the British subjects by April 29, 1945, when the American troops overran the camp. We were hungry but did not suffer from hunger as did the POWs in the more northern camps as we were near Switzerland and the Red Cross. Delivery of the Red Cross food parcels was erratic, but better than in other areas of Germany. Then, as the war was winding down with the Allies advancing over the Rhine River, the German transportation system was in chaos curtailing the delivery of the food parcels.

As a private, I, along with my peers, was required to work for the Germans in non-military duties as agreed to by Germany and the US according to the Geneva Convention dealing with POWs. We were herded into railroad boxcars before dawn each morning, shipped to Munich, shoveled snow and removed debris that was a result of the almost every day bombing by the Americans and British.

I was somewhat surprised to find that Christmas decorations were in place in Munich in some windows of the buildings. Trees with icicles and other ornaments, much like back home in Brady, Texas. One thing for sure, though, the food was better in Brady. And it was warmer in Brady, than in Mooseburg, Germany. The fact that Munich and Mooseburg were in southern Germany makes it sound warmer, but it was a far cry from warmer.

We were housed in the main camp in barracks that contained 100 or so POWs, sleeping in so-called bunk beds in tiers. We were all privates or PFCs and were supposedly watched over in each barracks by a cadre of noncoms from the British army. The British cadre (there were three, if I remember correctly) were housed in a room at the end of the barracks and kept to themselves mostly. I got the impression that they felt the American soldiers were an unruly lot and beneath them socially. Perhaps it had something to do with the Boston Tea Party. Perhaps we were unruly by their standards. We looked upon them as being “uppity.” Maybe they looked down upon our social behavior some of which would be demonstrated when one of us (certainly not me) had to expel a large amount of gas from an orifice. The diet of the black German bread and rutabaga soup did create a generous supply of gas which had to be dealt with in some way. This gaseous person would yell “Match!,” jump upon a table, and position himself so that a lighted match could be held near his posterior. Thus when the gas ignited, it created a blow torch effect. Some might look upon this type of behavior as being unruly and uncouth, but Christmas time in late December of 1944 did create a certain aura of goodwill with the British cadre and the German guards. We had a larger delivery of Red Cross parcels and were able to cook up individual meals that were special for that time and place.

Some of us decided we should give the British cadre a Christmas present to help bridge the gap between the unruly and the uppity. The perfect gift for a prisoner of war in Stalag VIIA would have to be cigarettes—the money and medium of exchange in the economic system of any POW camp. We took up a collection among the men in our barracks, #53, to present to the British cadre. I do not recall how many cigarettes that the committee collected, but it was probably a goodly number as most of the men put aside their opinion of the uppity British noncoms and contributed one cigarette to the gift. A person with any extra 30 or 40 cigarettes was considered to be “well-to-do” at Stalag VIIA.

We sang a few Christmas carols, cooked a special meal, and presented the gift of cigarettes to the British cadre. I guess that they said, "Thank you," and I know that they did not give a gift in exchange. We, their charges, did not expect anything, nor would it have been possible.

I don't recall that the British cadre became anymore friendly. They couldn't have been much older than we, perhaps 25 years of age, but were brought up in a different lifestyle to be rather stiff. The British way. So, there were no great changes in behavior. We remained unruly and they uppity after the Christmas of 1944.

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