

Stalag 7A: “O, Come All Ye Faithful”

by Vernon Patterson, 397-G

Vernon Williams Patterson, Jr., was a member of Company G, 397th Infantry Regiment, and served from March 1943 to 1946. He was a POW at Stalag 7A from November 19, 1944 to April 19, 1945. He recalls his wartime experiences with the help of Jimmy Calvert, 925-B Progeny.

Buddies

While I was at Fort Bragg I became the good friend of Richard C Rennie, who I just called R. C. From Richmond, Virginia, he was a tall boy with blond hair, had a great personality. Before being drafted, he had played football for VPI which was a big rival of my alma mater, VMI, and like me, R. C. was also a twin. As our training came to an end and since he hadn't been married long, I gave him my three-day pass to go home to see his wife.

November 19, 1944

On the evening of November 18, the kitchen truck had come by with our Thanksgiving chow. I took a turkey sandwich and stuffed it inside my coat for later. As I sat there for some strange reason it came to my mind to break down and clean my carbine to make sure it was in good working order.

On the 19th we were ordered to move forward to a hill southeast of Raon l'Etape. As we advanced up the slope of the hill we came under an enemy shelling which isolated us from the others. The hill was heavily covered in trees and as the shells blew out the tops of the trees around me, all I could do was hug the ground for all it was worth. As the shelling came to an end we continued our advance up the slope of the hill, pushing the Germans back as we went.

Finally making it to the top I found a hole between two large trees and felt it would give me the best cover in case the Germans counterattacked. In no time at all the Germans counterattacked and it became an all-out firefight with me firing to my right and as I fired, my carbine jammed a number of times. Tossing it down, something told me to look up and as I did, there stood two Germans about 150 feet away, one of whom had his rifle trained right on me. The only thing I could do at the time was to duck behind the larger of the two trees for cover. Peeking back around the tree, he stood there with his rifle still trained on me and beckoning me to come to him. I stepped out and started walking slowly towards him.

Just as I had gotten within feet of him, the other German who stood beside him was hit by a bullet, killing him and before I knew it, I found myself being beaten to the ground with a rifle butt to my back. As I lay there, this German kept yelling at me to get back up.

Within fifteen minutes things became quiet as they gathered the six of us together who had been captured, one of whom told me he had walked past R.C.'s foxhole and that he was dead.

(After returning home I was living in Charlotte. R. C.'s wife came from Richmond to hear from me that R.C had really been killed. During the whole war she couldn't bring herself to believe that he had been killed in action.)

Before marching us off we were each searched and as they searched me they found my sandwich which they took, but allowed me keep my New Testament, VMI ring and watch. We were then marched down the hill to a CP where we were interrogated by a German who spoke English better than I could.

Being only a PFC and knowing I didn't know much, I was asked only which company I was with, to which I gave them no answer. At the end of my interrogation I was asked one last question on what my thoughts were on Hitler. Looking at them I said I thought he was a crazy maniac. To my surprise they just sat there looking at me.

Scared to death and uncertain of what lay ahead of me, I didn't sleep any that night. During our time there, we weren't given anything to eat or drink.

Early the following day, I found myself, along with a number of others, being force marched towards Germany. We were given very little in the way of food or water on the march and when we were given something, it was a small piece of black bread.

Nights along the way were spent in old jails, houses, schools, and even a rat-infested old barn which we were kept in for a week.

During Day Two of our march, we passed by a Catholic Church where a number of nuns stood outside, watching as we marched by. We noticed they would make faces at the German guards every time they caught the guard's backs to them. As we passed through the towns and villages schoolaged kids would express their anger towards us.

For the most part as we made our way down the roads, our biggest fear was having one of our own fighters accidentally strafe us. We were continuously watching the sky for signs of fighters.

One day as we marched along, a P38 came over and as he approached, we took off our coats and waved them in hopes he would see that we were American POWs. As he pulled up skyward, he tipped his wings letting us know he had seen us.

As we made our way deeper into Germany, we came to a town where we spent the night in a school that had a picture of Hitler on the wall along with a Nazi flag. The following morning we marched past a group of kids heading to school; as they passed by they shook their fists at us.

Just outside of Stuttgart we were kept in a rat-infested old barn for a week. Just before arriving there, I had managed to trade my watch for a piece of bread from a Russian POW. As I laid down that night I had placed the bread over my head and unknown to me during the night a rat got into it. The following morning I grabbed the bread, only to find it had a number of holes in it along with a number of droppings. Starved and hungry as I was, I cleaned the bread off the best I could and ate it.

One day, a dogfight broke out over the barn and as we heard the two planes fighting, we rushed to the windows to watch, only to be forced back at gunpoint by the guards.

For two long weeks we continued our march deeper into Germany until we had reached Stalag 7A, which was located outside of Moosburg.

Arriving there I again found myself in front of a German officer being questioned before being handed my POW ID tag. It didn't take long for me to see that the camp was filthy, desolate, cold, and the odor from latrines almost unbearable. During the six months there, I was only allowed to have two showers.

The wooden barracks were poorly constructed with no heat, drafty, no insulation, and no lights, with wooden bunks two high and no mattresses. The POWs really didn't talk much but that was due to so many of them being cold, sick, and just trying to survive the hardships of the camp.

I recall times lying there in my bunk at night, watching the light from the searchlights shine through the cracks in the walls and hearing the guards as they passed by the barracks making their rounds.

The nights were very cold and there weren't enough blankets for all the prisoners so those of us who didn't have one used our coats as blankets.

The guards' ages ranged from between 30 to 40 and were all in uniform; a number of them were able to speak good English.

It wasn't long before I learned that Stalag 7A had some 10,000 POWs made up of not only of American soldiers, but also Russians, Polish, and British. If you happened to have a Jewish last name or background you didn't let it be known.

It wasn't long after arriving I was sent to Munich by train on work details. There we worked all day clearing the debris at the railroad yard and houses caused by the bombing raids.

Days started at five each morning with the guards along with their dogs making their way through the barracks, yelling as they did telling us to get up, hurry up, and fall in for roll call outside. Breakfast for the most part was a soup we called hedge soup as was supper. This soup was so thin it was clear. The first time we had it, we used it to shave in, which angered the Germans.

Shortly after eating, we were lined up and searched before leaving the camp and sent out on work details. As we returned from these work details, we were once again searched for anything we may have picked up, like food while out working. This was our daily routine six days a week, no matter how cold the weather was.

While out working we were always looking for small things to eat like potatoes that we could hide inside our coats. If we were lucky enough to find one and to slip it pass the guards during a search, we would drop them in a fire to cook.

I recall that one time while out on a work detail I came across some wheat lying on the ground alongside a railroad track. Looking around to make sure I wasn't being watched I reached down and stuffed as much of the wheat as I could in my coat. Arriving back at the camp my biggest fear was them finding it as they searched me, but luckily they didn't. Getting back into my barracks I boiled some water and put the wheat in, making a paste to eat.

One day while out in the compound we watched as a German jet flew over which the guards quickly pointed out as being one of their super weapons.

On occasions American planes flew over the camp dropping leaflets which told us how the war was going and where our lines were. Of course we weren't allowed to pick up these leaflets or read them but I was able to get my hands on a couple of them without being seen.

The guards at times could be very harsh.

Just before Christmas, we heard the news about the Battle of the Bulge from the German guards who also advised us that they would be in Paris by Christmas.

Christmas morning we put together a small party with some of the guys and had even made some raisin wine. At first we thought the Germans were going to break it up but as we started to sing, some of the officers came in and sat in the front row to listen as we sang "O Come All Ye Faithful." As we finished, they got up and thanked us as they walked out.

As far as Red Cross packages went, we very seldom saw one and when I did, one package was divided between six guys. Each of these packages contained powdered milk, cigarettes, canned cheese, crackers, high protein bars, and canned meat.

One day while out on a work detail, we were on a hillside and as we sat there, we watched as a group of B17s came over dropping their bombs on the railroad yard where we had been working. I remember watching as the lead bomber dropped the smoke and no sooner had he than the others dropped their bombs. As soon as it was over and the smoke had cleared, we were taken back down to the railroad yards and started clearing the rubble again.

One day as we were out cleaning up the rubble near some houses from the bombing the night before, a lady came out and said she was going to fix us something to eat but before we could get it, the air raid alarm went off and we were rushed down into a shelter.

Throughout the whole time I was a POW, I carried my New Testament with me and each day I repeated to myself Psalm 91. In my heart I knew God would get me through it all and never gave up hope. In the back of my testament I wrote the things I would like to eat when I returned home.

There were nights I laid there listening to the explosions off in the distance from the bombs being dropped on one of the cities.

Sometime in early March they had moved twenty-some of us from Stalag 7A to an area near Altheim, Germany. It was here for the following month we worked in the area and lived in a barn which was near a road. I guess they needed more room at the stalag for the new POWs that were coming in.

On April 28 while out on a work detail we watched as a US Piper Cub flew over us. I knew that this meant our day of freedom was drawing nearer.

On the morning of April 29 while out at the latrines I watched as a number of German tanks and vehicles rushed past as they retreated down the road. No sooner had they gone than the shells started falling all around the barn. Everyone scrambled for cover and dug in. The shelling stopped as fast as it had started. We learned later on that a German priest had told the artillery gunners there were American POWs in the barn.

It wasn't long after that we noticed that our guards had also run off, leaving us there in the barn alone. Not knowing if the guards would return or not, we all went inside the barn and waited. As we sat there all at once we could hear this column of vehicles coming up the road. That's when one of the guys yelled out that they were American tanks coming up the road. OH WHAT A GREAT DAY THAT WAS! In no time at all we ran out to the road crying and overcome with joy to meet these guys.

As they passed by some of the vehicles stopped and the soldiers came up asking if we were alright and how we had been treated; I told them OK and told one of the guys how our guards had protected us from

the SS troops that were in the area. They, our guards, had explained to us that there was an SS unit in the area and if any of us were caught out alone, there was a good chance we would be shot.

As I woke the following morning, a great feeling came over me knowing that the nightmare had come to an end and I was once again free. I thought mostly about going home to my family.

That morning a kitchen was set up to feed us but my stomach had shrunk so much due to having very little to eat for the past six months I couldn't eat much.

After we had been fed, the chaplain explained to us that they were going to do their best to have us all home in two weeks.

That day we were moved to Regensburg where we spent the night before flying out the following morning on a C47.

During the flight, the pilot asked me to come up there with him and be his co-pilot. Don't ask me why, but he did. As I sat down in the co-pilot's seat he handed me some earphones which I put on. He had the radio tuned to Armed Forces radio which was playing music.

During the flight I learned the pilot was a Lt. Bellairs who was from Flint, Michigan. The only stop along the way was at Rheims for refueling before continuing on to Camp Lucky Strike. It was here at Camp Lucky Strike I was able to clean up and was given a clean uniform and for the first time in five months I felt like a human once again.

At Camp Lucky Strike I boarded a ship at Le Havre that was heading to Southampton, England, where we made a brief stop long enough to load some war-time wives before heading on to Boston.

From Boston I traveled by bus to Charlotte and arrived at two in the morning. At the station I was able to catch a cab and asked the driver to drop me off about a quarter of a mile from my house. I wanted to walk the rest of the way and it would allow me the time to collect my thoughts, knowing when I walked through the front door there would be an emotional reunion with my parents.

In 1947 while attending VMI a special ceremony was held where I was awarded the Silver Star which was pinned on me by Mrs. Burress, the wife of General Burress.

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