

WWII Experiences Cement Friendships

by Pete Smith, 398-B

All good things come to an end. I don't know how many of my buddies from Company B, 398th, are left, but I lost two of my best friends this past year: Sol Bielowsky and Robert R. (Rabbit) Smith.

Sol died of pancreatic cancer in March. I was able to visit him a week before his death and marveled at his peace and acceptance. Sol did not believe in an afterlife, but I said to him, "Solly, soon you will be very happily surprised." He smiled and said, "I hope so!" Sol introduced me to all things Jewish. He left two daughters and a son.

Dear Rabbit, by far my best lifelong friend, and I were taken POWs at Bitche on December 20, 1944. We stayed together and saved each other's lives more than once. We escaped Stalag 3A (Luckenwalde) while the Krauts were taking us to another prison camp in January 1945. We were finally recaptured by the SS who, believe it or not, treated us better than the prison guards. They bound my wounds and when we complained about our treatment, they took our written statement and sent it to Berlin to General Wagner, local head of the SS and POW prison system. Believe it or not, we were ordered to Berlin to make our complaints in person!

In the middle of the war, they sent for two very thin PFCs for a statement. Our SS interpreter was a Dutch SS man named Bob Hovius who asked that we request him as our guard for the trip of some sixty kilometers because his family was in Berlin and the US 8th and 15th Air Forces had just bombed the city. He was worried about his family. We made the request and it was granted.

We found his family OK and, again, believe it or not, but Hovius and his family/friends called off the war for the night and had a party for us! We bathed and used an indoor bathroom for the first time in weeks, were fed and met his family and friends. Some were pro- and others were anti-Nazi but all were Hollanders! We danced to recordings of Red Nichols and Duke Ellington and swapped stories. His brother, who worked in Nazi defense, told us that they soon would have a weapon which would obliterate NYC and win the war for them. We laughed at him! Hmmm!

Next day we met with a major at General Wagner's HQ. Rabbit, who better understood German, was interviewed. The major asked us to join the SS because they were the last bastion to stop the Bolsheviks! He said our country would be proud of us. We declined!

We made our complaints and were sent back to Stalag 3A and placed in solitary confinement for a couple of weeks as a punishment for escaping! Wasn't all that bad. We had a private room, better food, and some heat!

They then sent us to Jtiterbog, a place where the Germans had storehouses of food for their troops and we were among sixty some American POWs working there. Things really began to look up from this point on because we stole them blind! (The German commander said that we were "worse than the French!"—we took it as a compliment!)

Near the end, late in April, when the Russians one day began to blow up everything around us, the Germans took us through their lines and marched us south for some five days. They were trying to get us to Bavaria where they were still strong. On the fifth day, Rabbit and I said to each other, "enough, already" and we escaped again for the second time and the two of us headed west! We picked up another of our guys who was lying on the side of the road and took turns carrying him. We got to the crest of a hill overlooking a town and saw lots of German troops massed in the town—but they looked strange. Their greatcoats came down to the ground.

Rabbit said, "Those are not grown men—they're kids!"

I said, "Maybe so, but their guns can kill you just as easily as a grown up's!" So, we skirted that town and finally over the crest of another hill saw an American GI riding toward us on a motorcycle! He looked like a refugee from Mauldin's Willie and Joe! He had a cigar stub in his mouth and he was loaded with German weapons! He was out souvenir collecting! How American!

Said he, "Where in the f_ have you guys been?"

Through some tears, I yelled back, "Where have we been?"

Well, he was part of an advanced unit of the 9th Army who were stopped at the Elbe River waiting to connect with the Russians. He directed us to a small village a mile or so away where we found a lieutenant peacefully sitting in a jeep; he was a forward observer (FO) of a field artillery unit of the 9th Division. The village was full of white sheets hanging out windows. The lieutenant in the jeep asked if we'd seen any Germans and we told him of the town with the German kid soldiers in it. He got on his phone and called in to his artillery group and soon over our heads came tons of shells toward that town! I suspect that was the end of it and its occupants! To this day, I regret telling the FO about that town!

Rabbit and I left the kid we were carrying with the FO jeep and made our way back to the 9th Division. They greeted us warmly—gave us a good meal of bacon and eggs, new uniforms—and finally sent us to Camp Lucky Strike near Le Harve.

Interestingly, we were never interrogated or medically examined by the U.S. Army! We were parked in a tent with other ex-POWs in Lucky Strike for a couple of weeks.

One day in the middle of the second week, a C47 landed on our airstrip. I happened to be going for a shower when a few of us gathered around the plane when it stopped. Who should get out but General Dwight Eisenhower! We were stunned.

He stood at the entrance of the plane and said, "I just wanted to come by and see how you fellows were doing and thank you for all you went through for us."

One of our guys yelled back at him, "When are we going home, Ike?"

The General asked, "How long have you been here?"

"Two weeks," came back the reply.

The General went back into the plane for a minute and then returned and said, "You'll all be on a boat within three days!"

And we were! You will not be surprised that we all became instant Dwight Eisenhower fans! In fact, in 1947 I was at the forefront of a group in NYC who drafted him to run for president (he was the last Republican I voted for!).

Rabbit and I stayed close for the rest of his life which recently ended in Sacramento, CA. He suffered from leukemia and was placed in hospice care. He stayed alive through blood transfusions and survived the six months in hospice care. He proudly said that he "flunked out of hospice!" But eventually the transfusions were of little help and he decided to stop them. Like Sol Bielowsky he was very peaceful about dying.

I visited him for the last time about a week before he died. He leaves Marion, his wife, and two sons, Carl and Paul—both service academy grads!

Robert R. Smith was a truly great man to whom I owe so much—including my life. RIP, old buddy.