

Company F, 397th Infantry Capture Told by POW

by Richard L. Van Deusen, 397-F

The Reverend Richard L. Van Deusen was born May 1, 1925 to American missionary parents serving in Shandong Province, China. At age 13 his parents brought him to the United States, enrolled him in boarding school, and they returned to China. Richard graduated from Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts in June 1943.

Drafted in January 1944 from the University of Tennessee, where Richard had completed a term studying civil engineering, he was sent to Fort Oglethorpe in Tennessee, then to the induction center at Camp Shelby, Mississippi. He was assigned then to Army Specialized Training Program at Fort Benning, Georgia for basic training, and from there, to the 100th Division, 397th Infantry, Company F, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

In October 1944 the Division embarked from Staten Island, New York for Marseilles, France. Richard was glad that his unit was on the George Washington troop ship in the convoy, in that it was a stormy crossing of the Atlantic. He spent most of his time on deck, because the ship was so crowded.

One of his treasured memories of the trip over was when he played bridge with three friends and had a perfect bridge hand—four aces, four kings, four queens and the jack of spades. How lucky can you get?! Of course, he bid “seven no-trump” on the first round of bidding!

Upon arrival in Marseilles, not long after the harbor and city had been captured from the Germans, the troops on the Washington had to be taken ashore on smaller boats, because there were sunken ships in the harbor preventing the use of what docks there were. After several nights bivouacked in fields outside the city (some of it in rainy weather), they were trucked to the front lines in northern France, where they took over from the 45th Division of the 7th Army. Richard arrived with his company, Company F, outside Baccarat in the Vosges Mountains. The next morning they attacked German positions on a mountain outside the city. He was assigned to be a runner for the captain. The company stayed in the mountains for the next fifty days, taking one German position after another. At the end of this time period the Vosges Mountains had been liberated from German captivity.

Richard remembers that most nights were spent in foxholes dug by someone else, probably Germans. He also remembers many times moving forward under fire, and hearing the screaming of German 88 shells landing too close by. Once he and his comrades received heavy bombardment from what seemed to be friendly fire, but that was the only time. They could count on fire coming from Germans in entrenched positions near the top of mountains.

One time the company was pinned down on their way up a mountain in the Vosges. Richard found a very convenient foxhole that he jumped into. Word came down the line that one of the lieutenants had been killed.

Just about that time the captain came crawling over and ordered Richard to get out of the foxhole so he could get in. Richard suggested he find his own foxhole. The captain quickly crawled away. Richard has often wondered if he was right in doing what he did.

It was later in the action on the same mountain that Richard was lying momentarily behind a tree. He saw a bullet shatter a root of the tree right in front of his knee. It was at that point that he promised God that if he were to survive that war experience, he would do whatever God wanted him to do. He was sure that what God wanted him to do was finish engineering school, and go back to China to help bring the country of his birth into the 20th century, but that was not to be. Soon after the war, China was taken over by the communists. And God had other plans for Richard.

Very soon after he arrived on the front lines, Richard was moved to being an ammunition carrier for one of the light machine guns in the company. Later he became second gunner. On Thanksgiving Day 1944, Company F was being served their first hot meal in several weeks in an open field near the front line. Half way through the meal, they were attacked by a German force from woods nearby. Richard's

first gunner, Pfc. George Locker, set up their machine gun, and Richard got ready to feed the ammunition into the magazine. They returned fire to give the rest of the Company a chance to escape from their exposed position. Then suddenly a German bullet shattered the bolt action rod on their gun. If it had struck a fraction of an inch higher or lower, it would have gone right into George's face. Pieces of the bolt and bullet struck both soldiers in their faces. The gun, being disabled, was abandoned and George and Richard followed the rest of the Company back to the shelter of woods below the field. For their performance under fire, both men received Purple Hearts and Bronze Stars for bravery.

The 100th Division completed clearing the Vosges Mountains of German forces just about the time that the Battle of the Bulge started. Patton's 3rd Army, to the west of the 7th Army, turned and attacked the flank of the Bulge. At the same time, the 7th Army spread out to cover the front of both armies. The 100th Division went on a forced march for several days from the Vosges Mountains west. Richard's company took up positions protecting a village in the hill country there. It was near Christmas time and that part of the front seemed to be fairly quiet. Richard remembers spending Christmas Eve with his squad in a home in the village. They sang carols in English along with residents of the village who sang in French.

Later, in another village farther west, Richard and another soldier, armed with rifles, were sent through deep snow up a hill outside the village to a previously dug foxhole northeast of the village. Beside the foxhole lay the dead body of an American soldier whose helmet, bearing a bullet hole in the center front, lay in the snow in front of them. For several days both men occupied this foxhole, trying to ignore the presence of the body. They subsisted on K-rations and water.

Then one afternoon the word came down the line that German tanks were on their way to attack the village. The lieutenants ordered the whole company to pull back into the village, and told them that they were already surrounded by the Germans and that their only possibility of escape was down one particular road under cover of darkness. The problem was that the captain of the company had taken cover to the rear and failed to give the order by radio to the lieutenants to pull the company back. The lieutenants decided they had no alternative other than to try to hold out there in that village. A cannon had been abandoned in the street, and as dusk fell on the evening of January 7, 1945, several of the soldiers turned it in the direction that German troops were expected to attack, and announced that they had put a shell in it and that it was ready to fire.

That night, about 2 a.m., Richard was in the basement of a building on the down hill side of the street with the lieutenants and several other soldiers. More Company F soldiers were on the second floor, the floor above street level. Others were in a building across the street. Suddenly, the officers realized that the man that had been assigned to stand guard at the entrance on street level was standing there in the basement beside them. They sent Richard up to stand guard on street level. He climbed a steep ladder-like stairway, but when his waist reached the threshold of the first floor, a green light was flashed in his eyes and a German voice commanded:

"Come out!" (speaking in German, of course). Richard threw his rifle back into the basement to alert the officers. Richard was taken out onto the street by an SS officer, who held a Luger to Richard's head. Other Germans rushed into the first floor of the same building. The officer was called by another SS Officer who was by now inside the building on the first floor to bring Richard back inside. This other officer spoke broken English. He demanded to know how many Americans were in the building! As Richard hesitated to respond, one of the American soldiers on the second floor called to him, asking what was going on. Richard shouted that the Germans had occupied the first floor and the street and there were tanks in the street as well. All the Americans in the building heard this and immediately surrendered to the Germans. Apparently the members of Company F across the street surrendered as well. This saved Richard's life!

The Americans had their weapons taken from them, and they were lined up in the street. They were then marched out of the village and up the road to the west and north of the village, and to the top of a hill where they were told to sit in the snow beside the road. Encircled by German guards, they were held in a tight group for quite some time. Twenty-five or thirty German tanks of a panzer division rolled by, along with German soldiers in white uniforms. By now it was dawn, and all of this activity drew artillery fire

from an American position on a nearby hill. Phosphorous shells landed all around where the Company F soldiers were sitting in the snow, but, miraculously, no one in sight was hit!

An hour or so later, German trucks arrived to transport the American prisoners to the rear of the German lines. It was bitterly cold. Richard remembers standing there on the bed of the truck, opening a can of sardines that his parents had sent him in a “Care Package” the week before, and eating the contents with gusto. (He’s loved sardines ever since!) When the trucks stopped at a forward base camp, each American prisoner was interrogated by a German intelligence officer who spoke perfect English. Richard refused to give any information beyond his name, rank, and serial number; but he was told by the officer what company and regiment to which he had been assigned. That same morning, Richard and the others were put back on trucks to be transported to a prisoner-of-war camp. Along the way the trucks stopped in the central square of Frankfurt, and the prisoners were given a chance to “relieve” themselves. The central square of the city had been leveled by Allied bombing. Not a building in sight was standing. That same day, January 8, 1945, the trucks arrived at a prison camp on a mountainside at Bad Orb (Stalag 9B) in Germany, overlooking Frankfurt and Manheim.

This camp at Bad Orb had been a concentration camp for political prisoners until the time of the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans had captured so many Americans at the Bulge and along the 7th Army front that they divided the camp in half with barbed wire, crowding the political prisoners into half of the space and using the rest for prisoners of war.

Richard spent about a month there in a crude barracks, sleeping on a straw mat on the floor. Food each morning—a day’s ration—consisted of a liter of weak “broth” and one slice of black bread, mostly sawdust. In this unsanitary situation the prisoners were plagued by lice and dysentery.

Every night in the barracks in which Richard was confined, one of the prisoners would tell his life story. When Richard was asked to tell his story one night, he told about being born of missionary parents in China. He then told about his experiences in schools in Ohio, New York, Massachusetts, and Tennessee. An amazing coincidence came of this. Richard’s brother, Dr. Courtland Van Deusen, was assigned to an Army hospital in Northern France. As prisoners of war were liberated and trickled back through the army medical facilities, he kept asking all the prisoners he met whether they had encountered his brother. Surprisingly, one ex-prisoner said, “Yes, I heard Richard tell his life story in the Bad Orb camp.”

Another incident that happened at Bad Orb was frightening to all the prisoners. An allied fighter plane strafed the camp several times early in the morning before the doors were unlocked. Richard and the others felt totally helpless while this attack was going on.

Another morning in Bad Orb, German guards awakened everyone in the camp before dawn, and made all the prisoners line up in the snow. Floodlights were on, and machine guns in the towers were trained on them. Word came down the line that two German guards had been killed in the night in the kitchen area. The prisoners were given one hour to produce the perpetrators or fifteen prisoners would be selected at random, taken out, and shot! All were returned to their barracks. As it turned out, bloody clothing was found in one of the barracks and those who had killed the guards were identified. They were taken away.

After spending about a month at Bad Orb, Richard was selected along with 74 other prisoners to be taken to a work camp in central Germany just west of Leipzig. The work camp was located near the town of Weisenfeldts. The group was herded into two boxcars that were then attached to a long train. About half way to Weisenfeldts the train stopped. Within seconds the prisoners heard dive-bombers attacking the train. Shells landed on both sides of the tracks, very close to the two boxcars. The cars were both thrown off the tracks with large gaping holes torn in their sides. It seemed truly a miracle that there were no injuries in either car. After the attack had ended, all of the prisoners in Richard’s car fell to their knees and asked him to lead in a prayer of gratitude!

Shortly the guards came and unlocked the doors. The American prisoners were gathered together at bayonet-point and marched through the village at that site. They could see why the train had been attacked! The two boxcars had been attached to a long line of flatcars laden with military vehicles!

The civilians in the village were so angered by the bombing that they threw stones and shouted at the prisoners as they passed. Some distance beyond the village they were again marshaled into boxcars on another train.

When the 75 men arrived safely in Weisenfeldts, they were impounded in a small camp surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. The sleeping facilities were double bunks with straw mattresses. The food was the same as at Bad Orb.

The next morning the prisoners were divided into work gangs and were marched by armed guards to a coal briquette factory about two miles away. Each gang had a German civilian supervisor and a guard. The work schedule was twelve hours a day, seven days a week! Richard was assigned to the "electric crew" of about ten men. They had to dig holes in the frozen ground that were at least seven feet deep to receive massive poles for a high tension power line. When each hole was dug to the supervisor's satisfaction, four men carried a pole to set it in the hole. In their weakened condition on a starvation diet, this proved to be one of the most difficult challenges of endurance! Occasionally, the march to or from the factory brought the prisoners in close proximity to other prisoners of war marching in the opposite direction. Some British soldiers had made for themselves a crystal radio set and were bringing in BBC. Along in the early spring word was passed to the Americans that both the Allied and Russian armies were fast approaching.

On the morning before the day that President Roosevelt died, the prisoners were awakened at the usual time, 6 a.m., and were marched by the guards in the opposite direction from the factory, toward the west! The road was crowded with both Germans and prisoners of war, fleeing the Russian army, which was reported to be rapidly approaching. They were marched all day. As evening drew near the guards herded the prisoners into a farmyard. Richard and some others spent the night in the farmhouse.

The next morning the guards had disappeared. Richard and three others walked away from the farm. They saw, in the distance, a column of tanks and trucks of Patton's Third Army. They walked the mile or so over to the column, which was halted at that time because there was action at a village farther up the line. The four men spoke to an officer in a Jeep, asking if there were any way for them to be transported to the rear. They were told that the infantry was about 65 kilometers to the rear and would take about a week to get there. About that time an ambulance approached from the front of the column. The four men asked the officer to stop the ambulance, which he did. They were told that the ambulance was full of wounded soldiers, but that, if they wished, the four could ride on the front fenders and the running boards of the ambulance. This offer was eagerly accepted!

When this overloaded vehicle arrived at the field hospital, Richard's condition necessitated his being taken by stretcher into the examination tent. He spent a couple of days in the field hospital where he was bathed, fed, and provided with fresh clothing. After having spent 70 days on the front lines and 97 days as a prisoner of war, he now weighed a scant 100 pounds, down from 165! From the field hospital Richard was put on a DC-3 filled with wounded men on stretchers. They were flown to Verdun, in northern France, where Richard spent the next month in an army hospital. After his stay there he was taken by hospital train to Marseilles, placed on the hospital ship, Algonquin, bound for Charleston, South Carolina, and again hospitalized for a week before being transferred to Valley Forge Hospital in Pennsylvania for an extended stay of a month and a half. There he received treatment for malnutrition.

From Valley Forge he was transferred to a Redistribution Station in Asheville, North Carolina, to be reintroduced to American life. While there, because of his typing ability, he was kept on the staff to write morning reports. Richard was housed in a downtown hotel and commuted on the bus to a small campus that had been taken over by the Army as headquarters of the Station.

In November 1945, Richard was sent to Camp Butner, North Carolina, to receive an Honorable Discharge. He had only been in the service for 23 months; but what challenging experiences he had during that short time period!

After the war, by pure coincidence, Richard and his wife were walking up an alley in Wooster, Ohio, on their way from their apartment to class at the College of Wooster, about a mile away. At the end of the alley, across the street, George Locker, Richard's first gunner in Company F, walked out of a house that

turned out to be George's mother's home, whom he was visiting! George's mother was a nurse at the college infirmary!

George invited Richard and his wife in, and they had a long chat. George told them that since he had been on R & R at the time of the capture of almost the entire company (except him and apparently a few others, who escaped capture), when he returned to the front they made him top sergeant and built a new Company F around him. Word also came to Richard from somewhere that the officers of Company F, after the capture, were killed by friendly fire from the air as they were being marched along a road in Germany.

Richard had many memorable experiences during his time of service with the 100th Division. He grieves for those of his comrades in arms that did not survive; but he is grateful that he was among those who did return from the war to live productive and fruitful lives.

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