

The Price of Freedom

by Robert R. Smith, 398-B

Private First Class Bob Smith, from Lincoln, Nebraska, is one of the few men who can truly calculate the price of freedom in concrete terms.

Smith was a scout assigned to a rifle squad of 2d Platoon, Company B, 398th Infantry, from Fort Bragg until 20 December 1944. On that day, with his platoon down from 42 to 14 men present for duty, it was being held in reserve as the company advanced northward, west and south of Bitche. In the middle of a German mortar barrage, 2d Platoon lost contact with the rest of the company. When the barrage ended, the platoon leader sent Smith and another soldier, Pete Smith (no relation), to reconnoiter ahead, locate the company commander, and get further instructions for the 2d Platoon.

Out in front of the platoon, Pete and Bob led their outfit forward through the dense mountain forests until they spotted a German patrol off to their flank. They silently signaled, "Enemy in sight" to their squad leader, hit the dirt, and attempted to engage the enemy. Unfortunately, Bob's weapon jammed, and Pete couldn't get a clear shot through the brush and closely-spaced trees. While they tried to solve their respective problems, a potato masher grenade exploded on the ground between them. As they tried to shake off the shock of the detonation, two Germans rushed forward and, pointing their weapons directly at the two Smiths, took them prisoner. (Bob later found out that their signal had been understood, and the rest of the platoon was able to fight off the German patrol and successfully break contact without further loss.)

Bob and Pete were escorted to the rear and began the long, sometimes humiliating, always frightening trek to a German PW camp. When they were interrogated the Germans' battalion command post, they simply refused to answer questions about tactical details, and limited their responses to the name, rank, and serial numbers required by the Geneva Convention. From there, they were trucked along with other American PWs to a holding facility in Zweibrücken, and after a few days (including Christmas and New Year's Day) were marched to Kaiserslautern. En route, they encountered German civilians enraged by recent RAF and USAAF bombings: they displayed their anger by spitting on the PWs and occasionally throwing rocks.

From Kaiserslautern, they were loaded aboard a boxcar for transportation east. There were no seats, blankets, or hygiene facilities, other than a bucket placed in one corner of the car. Twice daily for the next three days, the train stopped and the prisoners were fed either a single piece of bread or a cup of thin soup. The rations did not improve at their destination, the PW camp at Villingen, near the Swiss border. After a few weeks there, Bob and Pete were shipped to Luckenwalde, about 40 kilometers south of Berlin. Here, their diet improved slightly, and consisted of a daily ration of thin soup, 200 grams (about seven ounces) of rye bread, and a boiled potato. Once per week, they were issued a single pat of margarine, a teaspoon of sugar, and more rarely, a single slice of salami or sausage.

At neither location were other aspects of their living conditions good. The barracks in which they lived were crowded and filthy. There were no showers or laundry facilities at all at Villingen, and the situation was only slightly better at Luckenwalde. It was mid-winter in Germany, and the Germans provided sufficient wood to keep the stoves which heated the prisoners' barracks going about three hours per day.

In April, along with hundreds of other Allied prisoners, Bob and Pete were ordered to march to Magdeburg, due west of Luckenwalde. On the first night, while marching through a very small village, they saw their chance, and simply slipped away from the column by turning down a side street while the rest of the group trudged ahead. Although their absence was soon noted by the guards, there was no discernible search conducted, and Bob and Pete holed up for the night and following day in the loft of some sort of machinery storage shed.

Without compass, map, or anything more than the most basic idea of where they were, Bob and Pete set out the next night for what they hoped was the way west, back toward American lines. After only about two hours on the road through the blacked-out countryside, they were stunned by the command

“Halt!” from the darkness to their front. Shortly, late on the night of their second day of freedom in four months, they were taken back into custody. Bob and Pete noticed that their new captors wore a slightly different uniform than their original ones; there were lightning flashes on the left side of their collars. They had escaped from the German Army only to walk into a training facility of the SS.

After being searched and extensively questioned, the SS men fed Bob and Pete their first food in over 24 hours. As Bob put it, “The SS troops thought it hilarious that we had so easily escaped from the Wehrmacht. That probably worked in our favor.”

Surprisingly, the two wayward GIs were not treated harshly. On the contrary, after regaling an SS officer with the facts of their imprisonment, he responded, “You should be better cared for than you have described. Someone in authority should be made aware of [these] conditions.” The SS officer placed a call to Berlin and made an appointment for Bob and Pete to tell their story.

They were escorted to Berlin by a Dutch SS guard, whose mother lived in Berlin. The guard, who spoke excellent English, extracted a promise from them that they would not attempt escape, and brought them to his mother’s apartment, where Bob and Pete partook in an impromptu “welcome home” party attended by some of the Dutchman’s friends and family. Bob remembers that among the records played by the SS man and his pals was Duke Ellington’s recording of “Mood Indigo,” which remained a nostalgic favorite ever after.

The next day, Bob and Pete were taken to an Army headquarters and questioned extensively, though again not harshly, by a German Army colonel. The colonel insisted that the American prisoners were receiving the same rations as German civilians, and that the only reason they were not receiving their Red Cross parcels was that the Allied bombing interrupted rail service. At the end of the interview, the German colonel offered Bob a Chesterfield cigarette . . . stolen from one of their own Red Cross shipments.

Bob and Pete were ultimately returned to Luckenwalde, where, after serving six days’ confinement on bread and water for escaping, they were reintegrated into the general prison population, which by now consisted of recent arrivals from camps further east. A few days later, they received their first Red Cross parcels, which Bob and Pete felt was probably a result of their efforts.

After a transfer to a work camp near Juterbog (just south of Luckenwalde), Bob, Pete and several hundred other prisoners at the camp were eventually simply released and told to start walking west on 25 April 1945. Within a few hours, they made contact with an American soldier on a motorcycle.

They were free again.

Although Bob feels that he was well-treated by both the Army and the Veterans’ Administration in the days and years to come, two aspects of his treatment allowed him to precisely calculate the cost of his and Pete’s brief episode of freedom on the road to Magdeburg. In 1948, Congress decided that since the Army had not been able to feed PWs during their captivity, the government owed each prisoner his ration money-\$1.00 per day-for each day of his captivity. However, the law also provided that the Army did not owe “back rations” for any day that a soldier was not in enemy captivity. For the two days that he was on his own with Pete somewhere between Luckenwalde and Magdeburg, Bob’s ration check was docked \$2.00.

In 1949, Congress decided that anyone who was a PW for more than 60 days should be compensated for mistreatment, and that the imprisoning nation owed each ex-PW \$1.00 per day for their misery. Once again, Bob missed out on \$2.00 as a result of the two days in which he and Pete had ducked away from German hospitality.

For the two Privates Smith of Baker Company, the price of the freedom they gained by escaping in the middle of dark night in central Germany was the risk of their lives at the hands of the dreaded SS . . . and exactly \$4.00 each.