

MY SURVIVAL AS A PRISONER OF WAR

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My story begins on March 6, 1944, when my plane "My Darling Also" was shot down. I heard many people coming in from all sides after I landed with a bullet hole-filled parachute, so I just lay there. I had lost a lot of blood and had no more strength. There were many civilians with guns pointed at me and they stripped me of my chute and any thing else that they wanted. The German Army came up and knocked the guns out of the hands of the civilians. I guess they were thinking of shooting me, because of all of the loud talking. I learned later that Hitler had given orders to shoot all Allied Airman. The German Army then placed me in an oxcart and it was not long before Sgt. Jim Davis came up and tried to give me some morphine, but they would not let him. By this time, I did not know if Sgt. Jim Davis had gone. All I know was that it took a long time and was a long ride. When I came to, I was on a stretcher in an old Theater, which the War Department called 9-C and was taken to a small room on the second floor where they held me down on a table. As I lay on the table, I thought that this was the end, so I fought like hell. There were two other American airman in the room that had been injured, which one had lost a leg. We were in the town of Magnaburg, Germany.

I do not know how long we were in Magnaburg, but they would removed us from the theater during the night and day raids and keep us in an air raid shelter because of the English bombers striking. One day I did see three flying fortresses flying real low in formation with Swastika on the sides. One Italian boy would help with my stretcher and would sing old Bing Crosby songs, which he knew well. We used to sing them together to pass the time. I had a hard time healing my leg, but they still shipped me to the interrogation center. I was shipped in boxcars full of prisoners and I had to lie under the lower bunk. When I arrived for interrogation, I was injured so bad that they didn't spend a lot of time with me. I gave them my name, rank, and serial number. The German knew more about the States and my family than I did. He knew that my oldest brother Don was in Hawaii in the service and much information about my bomb group. They were well informed of what was going on in this theater of operation.

On the train leaving the interrogation, my leg began having gangrene. When they stopped the train, they took me off and I had two guards escort me to the Red Cross Station. They informed me that they were protecting me from the civilians. It was not uncommon for these civilians to spit and throw stones at Americans. We finally arrived at a Red Cross Station where a young girl took care of my leg and used paper as bandages, because they had no cloth bandages. Then, I was escorted back to the train and placed with the other prisoners. The boxcars were called 40 and 8, with benches to sit on or laid under. They were completely packed full of prisoners.

Then we arrived at the POW Camp Stalag 17B in Krems, Austria. It was some distance from the train station to the POW Camp. We were forced to march and had dogs biting at us all the way. I had to struggle to keep up with the group. We were taken into a room, stripped naked, took showers, then they observed how bad my leg was and they sent me to their hospital. While I was in their Hospital, my original ball-turret gunner Chuck Clark from Youngstown, Ohio heard I was there and came in to see me. Chuck was unable to fly our last mission of "My Darling Also" because he had been sick. Chuck had later been shot down flying with another crew. Another airman, Wade Luce, was brought in and

placed in the bunk next to me and I learned he was from Ashtabula, Ohio, the city I grew up in. He later turned out to be my nephew's father-in-law years later after the war.

When I arrived at the Barracks 29B, I was bunked with Chuck Clark, who helped me get back on my feet. I was treated the same as all others. When they called for Roll Call, I had to hobble out quickly with the rest. This was so they could count us and check our barracks. I was a non-commission officer, so I did not have to do labor, but we did have to walk in large circles during the daylight. There was about 5000 Americans in Stalag 17B. One unpleasant event was when they made us stand outside in the cold and rain for days while they searched for an intruder in our barracks. The Camps records were destroyed when we were forced march out of there on April 6, 1945. They used silver nitrate to seal my wound in my leg. I was on the tail end of the march from Krems, Austria to Brunow, Austria. It was rough, because we slept outdoors on most nights and even had snow on the ground. I walked with another hobbling airman from Long Island, New York named Bob Blackburn. We would sleep close together and used our two overcoats, so our body temperatures would keep us from freezing at night. Food was very scarce.

We passed some Jews being marched in the opposite direction toward Russia. I heard the stragglers being machined-gunned down and saw the bodies being placed in oxcarts. We had been marched some 300 miles to Brunow, Austria and were put in a wooded area on a hill. The groups that had arrived before us had built cabins, T-Pees, and lean-tos for shelter. The Germans left us there for the U.S. Army's 13th Armored Division to liberate us. We could hear the Army coming to take Brunow below, and the Germans had blown the bridge up, so the Army had to construct a make shift bridge to cross to our side. When the Army reached us, I remember a Jeep with a case of eggs and they were all eaten by the other P.O.W.'s. They mobbed the Jeep and I never got to see a complete egg.

I remember going into Brunow and was offered a dozen boiled eggs, when I ate them, I got sick as a dog. Later, we were loaded into some big trucks to cross the river and were taken to a big modern aluminum factory. There we stayed until a C-47, a twin-engine plane flew us to Camp Lucky Strike on May 9, 1945 in LaHarve, France. We were than clothed and well fed. I was honored to sit at a table with General Eisenhower and he asked us how did we want to go home. Most of us chose to take the boats home, because we didn't want to fly at that time. So, we waited for the boats to arrive.

We boarded the boats for England, where we were assembled with others for the trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Protected gun ships escorted our ships out of English waters. When we arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, the Red Cross had coffee and donuts for us. Then, we were fed at a place that used German POW's to serve us, which almost started a ruckus. We then boarded trains for Camp Attabury, Ind. where we were taken off flying status and given a 30-day furlough. This was my first furlough home that I had since I went into the service.

I took a bus to get to the train, but the bus broke down on the way and another bus picked us up to take us the rest of the way. The train took me to Cleveland, Ohio. When we arrived in Cleveland, all Veterans were allowed to get the taxis first. I got a taxi to take me to the bus station. But there were no buses for Ashtabula till the following day, so I rode a streetcar east to the end of the line toward Willoby, Ohio.

Then, I decided to hitchhike and walked a long way before a car came along and pick me up. After this family picked me up, their car had a flat tire, so I help them put their spare on and we traveled on east. Just before we got to Ashtabula, the car had another flat tire. I was able to walk and find a phone. I called my brother Howard, whom was living at my mother's house and owed a service station. Howard was able to get a tire and come fix the flat for this family, so they could travel on to their home. It was

about 3 AM, so Howard took me to my mother's home. My mother and I sat and talked along time. I had been gone for over 2 1/2 years and my dog recognized me after I called her name. Then I started off to my room and my mother said that Chuck Clark was sleeping in there. Chuck had come up to tell my mother about taking care of me in the prison camp. I was surprised to see him there. Throughout the years, Chuck and I have been very good friends ever since.

I happen to be in Cleveland when the celebration took place that the end of the war had come. The Atomic Bomb had been dropped in Japan. After my 30-day furlough, I was sent to Miami, Florida to be re-classified. I was able to send a hundred dollars a month and a war bond of \$17.50 to my mother. After some time, I came back to Patterson Field in Dayton, Ohio. I was waiting to be released from service, when I saw a friend Glen Loveland. Glen had entered the service with me on the same day and we were leaving at the exact same time.

Years later, I married Laura Lahola and had a son Brad and daughter Barbara. We have three grandchildren named Michael, Jennifer, and Andrea. We now live in Lithia, Florida on five acres that we call a farm. I have had a wonderful and fulfilling life since my military service.

** I have a book "Kriegie Memories by Ben H. Phelper that tells the story and shows pictures of Stalag 17-B. My P.O.W. number was 105059. I also have a book made out of cigarette wrappers and have a piece of barbwire from the Stalag 17-B guard fence that reinforces some of my memories.

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