Stalag Luft 3

Once on the ground after parachuting from the burning B-24, we became guests of the German Government. From an Austrian jail, we went to the Hans Udet Flying School. Hans Udet was a WW1 German flyer, an Ace, meaning he had shot down 5 allied aircraft and a hero to the German people with many more victories over allied airman, mostly English and French. After the war was over and Hitler took over he became prominent in the rebuilding of the German air force (Luftwaffe). Pilots were trained using gliders but eventually Udet became disillusioned and committed suicide. To many of the German people he was still a hero and respected.

Germany had signed the Geneva Convention which set forth the rules for treating Prisoners of War. On the whole they lived up to its terms as far as the United States and England were concerned. The rights of the people they conquered were ignored.

The English and the Americans had only one organization for handling POWs. The Germans had three.

If a POW was regular army, the Wermache ran the Camp. If the POW were airman, then the Luftwaffe ran the camp and if the POW was Navy, the Kriegsmarine ran the camp. All kept the officers separate from the enlisted men. Officers were not allowed to be put to work, Enlisted men were. All POWs were to be paid by their captors at the same rate as corresponding ranks in their own armed forces were paid. American Held POWs were paid in US dollars and did very well compared to their old German army pay. Americans held by the Germans were paid in Marks which could purchase very little. All pay went into a 'kitty' which was used to buy local items cups, dishes some food but not much was available.

All American POWs were considered to be on their last mission, with flying pay (50% over base) until the they returned to US control This included Quarters, meal allowances and monthly pay which was accrued for them. After the war German reparations paid for any personal property that was confiscated by the Germans; watches, uniforms etc. Officers bought their own uniforms with a clothing allowance in the regular U.S. Army.

All US flying personnel were either Officers or Sergeants. In the event of capture it increased their stature in terms of the Geneva Convention. Many British air crews were all non commissioned personnel which permitted the Germans to use them as forced labor.

First stop after leaving Udet was the German interrogatory center at Frankfort at the Baltic Sea. Here you were put in solitary. A cell about 4 X 6 feet had a bunk and a bucket. You got 2 meals a day – usually boiled barley and/or potatoes. Sometimes it contained a piece of sausage. 'Coffee' was made from dark roast barley. The Germans had not had real coffee for years.

You knew you would be in the cell for from 10 days to 2 weeks. Past occupants had written Morse code diaries on the walls. You were often wakened in the middle of the night and asked where your German relatives lived if your name had any counterpart in Germany. After about a week you were questioned by a German officer who said you were a spy under investigation by the Gestapo and asked you to prove your innocence by identifying your Group, Squadron and mission. The whole thing was quite transparent after reading the Morse code messages.

Finally you were escorted to the Interrogator room where a German officer sat behind a desk with a pistol on the desk top. You were told that you were a spy and would be turned over to the Gestapo unless you positively identified yourself by Group, Squadron and airfield location. Actually this could have been the case for past cell occupants since they never mentioned their final destination. If you followed the rules, which I did, you only gave your name, rank and serial number which were on the 2 Dog Tags you always carried on a chain around your neck. The Germans took one of these from you on capture.

After I gave name, rank and serial number, the German said " we know who you are and your base, see -" and he handed me some original US papers dated about 2 weeks before which showed the arrival of several replacement crews to my Squadron – their names, aircraft numbers etc.

The town of Cerignola, where we were based was not safe to enter by yourself at night. Even in the daytime, if we went to the Town we were armed and never went alone. It would have been very easy for some of the locals who worked at a winery on the field to pilfer papers since the Group office was at the Winery and security was pretty much limited to the identity of tomorrow's target.

From his office I was taken directly to a 'holding cell' with other POWs to be sent to a camp in Upper Silesia which was Stalag Luft 3. The camp was between Breslau and Berlin near the Oder River. That area is now part of Poland.

The camp had been originally built for British prisoners but as the Americans began to arrive in large numbers, it was expanded by the addition of more Compounds and after 'The Great Escape' Americans and British were segregated.

The trip from the Interrogation Center to Stalag Luft 3 was by train. Coaches (4 single wheels) were used and the windows barred. There was one notable incident enroot. It was summer and the windows could be opened. We learned later that Train Crews always painted POW or a red cross on the roof of the train so that allied fighters would not shoot at the train.

At one place enroot the train stopped so that our car was opposite a rail gondola car full of waste paper bales. Before leaving the Germans had given us some Red Cross food parcels to feed us on the way. These always included some cigarettes. I rarely smoked so I would light a cigarette with German box matches and then flick it into the gondola car. I did this with all my supply of cigarettes. After a while the car started to smoke a bit and some Americans said I should stop or we might get into trouble. The British though, gave me more cigarettes. A few minutes later the train started to move and we all gave a sigh of relief but after a few cars stopped again. This time we were next to a Tank car that looked as though it might contain oil. Fortunately the stop was only momentary and when we started again, the train turned so that we could see the gondola. The Germans apparently didn't notice the smoke until we were gone since the locomotive was making a lot of smoke. That was the one and only attempt at sabotage.

When we arrived at the Stalag we were photographed, given a German Dog Tag and turned loose in camp. In order to be assimilated and to be sure you were not an Undercover German agent, you had to be identified by being recognized by someone who knew you. I was recognized and assigned to a barracks. If you were so new to a squadron that you were a stranger, you were questioned about your home town, army career, and flight schools until you were pronounced genuine. Occasionally a spy did turn up, so the practice was useful.

In June, days are very long in Germany. Rome has the same latitude as New York so most of Germany is east of Labrador. In winter it is dark by 3:00 PM and England was on triple daylight time in Winter.

Prisoners were counted twice a day at dawn and dusk, in a process called 'Appelle'. It lasted until the Germans were satisfied they had an accurate count. The POWs could confuse and delay the count by moving from line to line, which was done on occasion to hide some covert activity. Or to delay the knowledge that someone "had flown the coop".

The camp itself was under the command of the Senior Allied Officer present, who, if I remember correctly was Col. Spivey. He was primary contact with the German commander who was a Luftwaffe Officer. Fortunately he had Gearing's support and was able to keep the SS or Gestapo from taking over POW camps after the 'Great Escape' which was a real embarrassment to the Germans.

The Germans tried to keep tab on what was happening in camp with the use of unarmed Luftwaffe personnel who could speak English. They wore coveralls instead of a uniform and we called them 'Ferrets' because their primary duty was to crawl under the barracks floor to look for tunnels and just snoop.

Each one was tracked and followed from the instant he arrived till he left. If it looked as if he were headed to a specific barracks, they were warned with hand signals or by a call "Ferret in the area".

The rankling German Non com in camp was a sergeant names Schultz. He resembled in no way the Schultz of the American TV series. The real Schultz had a crippled arm from his service in Russia and was a no nonsense individual. Many years after the war, he was invited to a POW reunion along with a woman who had censored POW mail. When the Camp was abandoned to advancing Russians; she took some of the mail to be delivered with her. At the reunion there was 'Mail Call' and some was delivered after 50 years!

Since Stalag Luft 3 was an officer camp, no one could work. There were a few enlisted American POWs and some Russian POWs to do camp work. On occasion the America POWs would be taken out of camp to help clean up bomb damage. They always had a list of items needed – radio parts, cameras, film and things otherwise unobtainable.

For the first months, there was adequate food. In fact we had better and more food than the German civilians in the area. Each POW was issued the standard German army ration and in addition got one Red Cross food parcel each week. The Germans punched a hole in each can so that food could not be hoarded. This situation did not last as the rail lines from Switzerland were destroyed by bombers and strafing. German rations consisted of bread, potatoes, boiled barley, margarine, jam, a few grams of meat – usually blood sausage – or in soup (horse head with teeth) , caulroby (sp.). As the war progressed these rations became smaller and smaller until they virtually disappeared. Red Cross Packages decreased from 1 a week to 1 a month- if we were lucky.

There were 4 kinds of RC parcels, American, Canadian, India and British, in order of desirability. All weighed about 12 pounds, the Geneva set limit.

American packages contained : Klim (powdered milk), corn beef, crackers, margarine, sugar, D Bar (chocolate), powdered eggs, canned salmon, cheese, raisons and prunes, dry coffee, candy, sardines, soap, tooth paste and separately, 5 packs of cigarettes.

Canadian packages were much like American but contained a pound of canned bacon and real butter.

Indian packages were based on a vegetarian diet and were mostly dried beans of various kinds with a variety of spices.

British parcels were least desirable – but the British were very short of food themselves. Their packages often were filled with canned goods with a lot of liquid in the can - canned fruit, tomatoes etc. They did have oatmeal, condensed milk, marmalade, crackers, tea and they came with Players cigarettes. Not very popular when Lucky Strikes were available but they made good barter with the German guards. There was also a can of margarine that had been made from whale oil. It was not very palatable but it did make a decent but smoky candle. Punch a hole in the top[, put in a cotton wick and you were in business.

German issued barley, potatoes and soup were precooked and usually hot enough when obtained – usually not at mealtime. For the rest, a representative went to the distribution point for issue.

Each barracks was divided cross wise by a wall in the center. Each half had a heating stove and a cook stove at each end. The cook stove was in a small room to one side of a corridor which ran the entire length of the building which was about 100 feet long and 30 feet wide. (30 meters X 10 meters) Opposite the 'kitchen' room was the latrine for night use since if you went out after dark you could get shot. POWs took turns emptying the buckets in the main latrine in a building of it's own. This facility was serviced by a "Honey Wagon", a wooden tank on a horse drawn wagon and operated by a German civilian.

Each half of the barracks was shared by 'Combines', a group of men who used their bunks as walls to carve out semi private living space. Each space had a table with attached bench seats and a light bulb hanging from the ceiling,. Originally there were 6 men to each combine but as time went on the number grew to 12 with bunks 3 high. Bedding was a burlap bag filled with straw and 2 old, worn German army blankets. You generally slept with your clothes on, particularly in winter. Each stove got a fuel allowance – compressed coal bricks, about the size of s building brick. In winter there was never enough coal and heating fuel was most often diverted to the Kitchen stove. Each combine pooled their food – even those few who had been there long enough to get packages from home which the Convention allowed. The Combine population was paired with each pair taking turns cooking, washing dishes, getting water from the public water spigots (which served the whole Compound). There were 2 water supplies one drinkable, one not. The Germans supplied each Combine with two pewter containers holding about 2 ½ gallons (10 liters) each, one was labeled "Trink Wasser", the other " Kine Trink Wasser".

The bars of soap in the Parcels were small but adequate for an occasional wash with your undershirt while you were washing your clothes in the laundry room. During my stay I had one hot shower. Needless to say you were inhabited!

The British, one of whom was shot down the first day of the war which he didn't know had started, had developed the best way of surviving under POW conditions. Their system worked.

Next to food, the biggest problem was boredom. Card playing was popular and new arrivals were asked if they played Bridge, Hearts or other card games. Poker was popular, played with imaginary money or cigarettes. Bridge players were in demand and if didn't play, you were encouraged to learn Hearts, then Whist and finally contract Bridge. Everyone played the Club System.

I learned Bridge but couldn't play all day so my partner Win Gredvic and I learned how to convert dried milk tins into useful items. Since fuel was short, small heaters were popular. They consisted of a small tin can firebox attached to the end of a blower whose fan was made from a tin can end. A handle and pulley wheel combination blew air into the fire box which would generate a lot of heat from wood splinters, straw, paper or cardboard from RC Parcels. Very little was thrown away.

Of course every POW had a "I was there story". Win's was unusual and he swore that after the war he was going to find the b------ that had downed his plane and put him in the hospital. Win's plane had been downed by the B-24 in front of his! It seems that the bomber ahead had been shot up and was having trouble staying in formation. The pilot told his crew to lighten the plane by tossing out whatever they could. The waist gunners tossed out their guns and ammo without looking. They fell into the props of Win's plane and tore loose a few blades. The unbalanced engines would not feather and the plane started shaking itself apart before the engines tore themselves loose. Win and his crew had to bail out and became POWs. Since we never ran into this crew as fellow POWs, we assume they made it home.

We also made plates, pots and pans, cups and all kind of sheet metal items. You could make waterproof seams by applying British margarine to the seams and then letting them sit on a hot stove and carbonize.

There was a small library in which I found a copy or "Eli Whitney – Clock Maker". There were pictures and plans of his pendulum clocks which we thought we could make from tooth brush handles, phonograph needles, razor blades, tin cans and wood scraps. We built our first demonstration model and were ready to take orders when the Germans told us to prepare to move since the Russian Army was approaching.

Going back to out arrival in Camp, we found that every day each barracks was briefed on the latest news by a POW we know only as 'Shorty'. He read us the latest BBC news. Each Combine had a "Situation Map" showing the latest Front Lines and the Allies progress. It was several days ahead of German news – if they announced any. The Germans knew we had the Maps and that they were accurate but they couldn't find the radios which supplied the data..

Long after the war at POW reunions, I learned that radios were made from parts the British had smuggled into the Camps inside baseballs (note direction of stitching for ID on those to dissect) and other items, from the GIs who were cleaning up bomb damage and from bribed guards. The radios were hidden in a post holding up the roof and ceilings. Nails provided power in and sound out. Home made earphones from nails, wound with wire and a tin can end for a diaphragm. With the number of men in camp you could always find the necessary skills. More advanced ones were portable and when we left camp, they went with us. A deck of cards could turn into a map of Europe's road system with preferred escape routes shown.

Lack of adequate food was our biggest problem. This was not a deliberate act of denial as with the Japanese, the Germans gave us food when they had it. There was some pilferage from the Red Cross freight shipments – mostly civilians breaking into freight cars at night but because of the condition of the Rail Roads, trains were not getting thru. By war's end, the German army went back to the horse and wagon mode of transport with some use of Charcoal burners on cars and trucks. These were peculiar devices where charcoal and water were used to generate so called 'water gas', a mix of carbon monoxide and hydrogen which was a very poor substitute for gasoline but it did make the engine go putt, putt!

Without the Food Parcels the menu was sparse and monotonous. The main vegetables were caulorabi and potatoes. The basic food was the so called 'black bread' spread with margarine. A loaf weighed about 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) and each POW got about 1/6 loaf a day when it was available. It was often moldy (green – probably penicillin) but quite edible if you toasted it on the top of the stove. With the food packages there was more variety. A favorite dish was a dessert pie made from graham cracker crumbs (crust) and a filling made from a boiled mix of Condensed and powdered milk, with banana flakes which we occasionally got in an Indian Parcel or raisons or a chopped up D Bar. Although the Condensed milk was sweet, if we had extra sugar we added it.

After getting home, I made a pie using the same recipe to show my parents our best dish. It tasted terrible after being exposed to regular food. I never made another!

By the time I arrived at the Camp the details of the Escape which had taken place about 3 months before my arrival was fairly well known around camp. This was in part due to the arrival 'out of the Blue' of General Vanaman. Before the war, the General was an Air Attaché of the US embassy in Berlin and knew Herman Goering. The official story was that he was observing a mission in a bomber when the plane was hit and damaged. The pilot signaled for a 'bailout' and the General jumped. Then the pilot found he was able to control the plane and it returned to England. Not a very plausible story.

The story that makes more sense is that he deliberately jumped to give orders to the various POW camps. Before being sent to the special Generals prison camp he convinced Goering to let him visit various POW Camps. He spent a few days in each and when he left, the general orders were no more escape attempts. At the time it was believed the war would be over by the end of 1944 and that POW effort could best be used to help look after the German Cities and Towns where Public Utilities had been destroyed. Camp records listed me as a Graduate Chemist so I was assigned the job of teaching a class on how water works purified water. Some books were available so I explained water purification chemistry!

The Movie, "The Great Escape" is really a documentary. It is an accurate description of life in the Camp, its construction and of the Escape itself. The only fiction is the motorcycle chase. A recent TV program went on location in Sagan and parts of the original tunnel were excavated, although the camp itself has long been gone and a forest has taken over the site.

In the first tunnel scene the diggers are using candles made of British margarine. Later a tunnel scene shows electric light bulbs. The camp did have some of the James Garner type people. One day 3 German electricians came into the camp to do some maintenance work. One Garner type prisoner quickly made friends and invited them into his barracks room for some real coffee, chocolate and cigarettes (from Red Cross food packages). The Germans hadn't seen these for years and bit. While they were enjoying their treat, their supplies were being stolen. When they realized what had happened they were in a quandary. They finally decided to say that they had not requisitioned enough materials for the job and got more. Later when the tunnel was discovered by the SS, the wire and bulbs were found and traced back to the electricians. When I was in the camp, a notice was posted on the bulletin board by a POW, who translated local newspapers which said that three men (the electricians) had been executed by firing squad for collaborating with the enemy,

In January of 1945, in the middle of a snowstorm, the Russians were getting close to the Stalag Luft 3 camp in Sagan between Breslau and Berlin, we could hear their artillery. We were marched to another camp at Moosberg in Austria, about 20 miles NE of Munich. This was a long, cold, hungry march. We did about 20 miles a day when we marched. There were some detours and delays. Some of us went thru Dresden not too long before it was bombed. Dresden was a rail center and was full of German troops. It deserved bombing. The people who have been criticizing the bombing weren't there. I got some frost bite in my toes and after 60 years they still tingle a bit.

A few years ago Congress made a few laws regarding ex POWs. I received a letter one day telling me to report to the VA Hospital in Manchester for a Physical exam. I went, was given a very thorough physical and about a month later received a letter yelling me that I was classified as 40% disabled. 10% for each frost bitten foot (the cause of the tingle) and 10% for each hard of hearing ear (engine noise damage). I was told that I was entitled to VA supplied hearing aids, dental care, eyeglasses, and any required medication, all free. Included is nursing home care if needed and a check on the first of each month. I asked how to report the monthly check to the IRS and was told that it was tax free since the VA doesn't tell the IRS of the checks.

The camp we stayed in (Stalag 7A) till Patton's army rescued us about a week before VE day was formerly occupied by Polish and Russian POWs. Most died in a typhus epidemic which occurred just before our arrival. The few that were left did the dirty work at the camp.

A week or so before the war ended, the Air Force established a 24 hour air watch over the camp. There had been rumors that Hitler was going to hold US POWs hostage and we got word (over radio receivers which some POWs had made - we always got BBC news and could make transmissions in an emergency) to set the camp on fire if there was any attempt to move us. One day, one of the patrolling planes (a P-47) flew low to waggle his wings at us and was shot at by one of the German machine guns in one of the guard towers. That was a BIG mistake for the P-47 shot back and the eight 50 cal machine guns he carried made kindling of the tower. Shortly thereafter a parade of hay wagons arrived and the guards piled hay around the bottom of the towers. Any time, any of the airplanes pointed it's nose in the general direction of a tower, the occupants jumped into the hay. As soon as the pilots noticed what was going on, the guards got jumping exercise several times a day.

Just before Patton's people came, the German SS, which was the rear guard, killed off most of the Luftwaffe guards who had orders to surrender. The SS wanted them to join up and fight, when they said no the SS started firing on them. Patton's people killed all of the SS. The GIs said that they never took a prisoner who wore a black uniform. The SS, who always wore black, had killed their wounded men at Malmedy in the Battle of the Bulge. It took some time before the GIs realized that German tank crews also wore black.

When Patton's tank destroyer outfit rolled into camp one sergeant shouted from the top of his cannon "any one from Worcester, Mass.". I shouted back that I was from Millbury. He then said that he was really from Farnumsville, Mass. and asked my name. When I told him he said AI used to work for a John Singer@. I then said that if it was at "American Woolen Co." in Farnumsville, you worked for my father. He had, and for as long as he was in the area he kept me supplied with fresh bread and all kinds of rations since we still hadn't got a food supply set-up. His outfit stayed in the camp area getting resupplied since they too were short of food, gas and ammo

Shortly after Patton's men arrived, a couple of the Russian POWs asked if I would lend them a knife which my father's former employee had given me. They were very friendly since we (the camp POWs) had fed them with Red Cross packages which the Swiss finally were able to truck in about 2 months after we arrived from Sagan. The Germans didn't have many trains left. I did loan them the knife and from then on Win and I got a fresh chicken every day or so.

One day he was cooking a chicken when a Red Cross Girl was making a tour of the camp. She saw him cooking and in a sweet young voice asked "can I have a piece of your chicken?" Without thinking, looking or noticing that it was a woman's voice he roared "Go get your own f------ chicken". When he finally woke up he was more than a little embarrassed. I visited him once after the war in Oregon but we lost touch when he moved to California. His father owned a chain of Beauty Parlers but he didn't like the business because he said most of the male operators were gay.

On VE day, some C-47s landed near Moosberg to fly us to Reime's army hospital... After we boarded the plane and were lined up for take-off, a Ju-52 flew over the field at about 100 feet waving white flags out of the windows. The British gunners who manned the AA guns put a lot of holes in the plane before they saw the flags. After the plane landed there was a conference with the Germans and the C-47s taxied to the side of the field. Shortly thereafter there were over a hundred German aircraft - everything from trainers to bombers landing to surrender. They wanted to surrender to the US rather than to the Russians. Bulldozers pushed them into a big pile.

When we finally took off it was almost dark and when we got to Rheims, it was dark. Everyone on the ground was celebrating and shooting everything skyward. The C-47 pilots couldn't find the airport because the field lights were lost in the flares, tracers and bonfires on the ground. We also took a few bullets thru the wings but no one was hurt. After a while they were directed to the field and after landing, we were hustled to the hospital at Rheims, given a blanket and told to find ourselves a bush to sleep under and that we would be taken care of in the morning. Next morning, we were stripped, our clothes burned, deloused and showered (the first since February when I took a "shower" under a pump decorated with icicles) and given new clothes.

I did manage to keep my A-2 jacket which I still have. It is a collector's item and worth more than $1000 now. We were given a complete medical and fed small meals 4 or 5 times a day - mostly eggs (fresh), steak and turkey. I had lost about 30 pounds during the previous year and I started out at only about 160 lbs.

We were taken to Camp "Lucky Strike" in France in a Hospital Train and after a few days put on a Liberty ship (with the same diet) bound for Camp Kilmer in NJ. The ship had been converted to transport German POWs to the US. When we docked, we were given all kinds of ration coupons and gas allowances, told to check in at my local city or town hall (where I was given more gas and ration coupons and told to come back for more if we ran out) and then after 10 days "delay in route" to travel 60 miles home which didn't count as leave, to report to Atlantic City for an R&R stay. Once there, I was given the choice of either being discharged or making any choice of any assignment I might want if I chose to stay in the army. I had decided to go back to Graduate school so I requested discharge. With an accumulation of Sick leave, earned leave, delay in route, rest and recuperation leave I was still in the army with pay until the end of December. I could still get flight pay by driving to Fort Dix and riding as copilot for an hour or so each month.

After I chose "out" of the army, I proposed to Naomi (Nome) Jane Brierly, she said yes. I was also admitted to graduate school at Clark University, moved back into the Dean's house at Clark until Nome and I married in July, 1946 at which time I moved in with Nome and her parents who lived only a few blocks from Clark. Actually I was still in the army using up accumulated leave and not yet eligible for GI Bill benefits - I had to pay my own tuition for the semester - but it was only $ 100.00 and I was still collecting Army pay. After I started Grad school, the GI Bill paid the bills and Married subsistence benefits kept us solvent even though I insisted on paying the Brierlys for room and board.

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I can honestly say that the time spent in the Air Force and the POW experience during WW 2 was perhaps the most interesting and decisive time of my life. It certainly showed what you could and would do under difficult situations and it provided the opportunity to plan the beginning of your future life - providing of course that you had a future life! The Germans had threatened to hold POWs as hostages and kill them rather than surrender unconditionally.

When I tried to get a copy of my Army 201 file which is a complete record of your time in the Army, I found that unfortunately the big St. Louis fire in the record warehouse shortly after the war had destroyed my file.

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John J. Singer

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2nd. Lt. 0-692973, Discharged as 1st. Lt USAAF

Joined Reserve but never active. Discharged in 1951. I was approached by the air Force for possible recall during the Korean War but when Air Force learned I was a former POW and had a Q Clearance from the AEC for Oak Ridge, I was informed that both were grounds for no recall to active duty and that no holder of a Q clearance would ever be allowed in a war zone at that time.