

THE EVACUATION OF STALAG LUFT VI (Heydekrug, East Prussia)

by Lester Schrenk, sent to www.airmen.dk on 28 January 2009

I was shot down on February 22, 1944 while on my 10th bombing mission and sent to Stalag Luft 6, near Heydekrug, East Prussia (now Lithuania) on the day I was shot down, the 8th air force had lost 76 planes on just this single raid.

Of the flying personnel in the 8th Air force, less than 50% survived combat, or imprisonment

When the Russian army started its offensive, they soon advanced near our prison camp. We were not allowed to go out of our barracks at night. Also all windows had a solid shutter placed over the window, but we could see flashes of light. In the Eastern sky through the cracks in the shutters, also clearly hear the distant sound of artillery.

At this point, the Germans either had to leave us to be liberated by the Russians, or to evacuate us.

I had already been a POW for 6 months when the Germans decided to evacuate our camp in Lithuania, We had been on starvation diets, all of us had lost most of our body weight. Many still had battle wounds, severe burns from bailing out of a burning plane. Some had shrapnel embedded in their bodies, that oozed puss. None of us were fit for what lay ahead.

I remember one POW that had his face burned so badly. Most of his facial features were gone. One could clearly see where his helmet had protected his head, also where his oxygen mask protected his chin. Another had his toes blown off, while yet another had severe shrapnel still in his legs. There were also many other injured, but the above 3 were personal friends of mine. None of these men were given even the least medical attention. We were also heavily infested with both body lice and fleas.

The United States and Germany had both signed the Geneva convention document, promising to obey rules governing humane treatment of prisoners of war. However when we were captured, the Germans informed us that we were not to be governed by this treaty, as they put it, "You are Luft (air) gangsters, killers of women and children. And you will be treated as such."

Now In WW2, bombing was not too accurate. There was always very heavy antiaircraft fire that would explode all around, battering the plane, bursts would violently rock the plane, there was no way the bombardier could accurately aim his bombs. I will admit that a lot of bombs completely missed their target. Many did fall on civilian targets. As a result of this, nearly every family suffered in some way. Most had someone, such as a relative, or friend, killed in bombing raids, or had their houses destroyed. Pets killed, or were just scared out of their wits.

Unless you have been subjected to a bombing raid, there is just no explaining just how awful they were. While I was at Dulag Luft awaiting interrogation, there was a British air raid. 6 POWs were killed that night. The Germans deliberately placed this camp right next to a big Chemical plant. I had dropped bombs there myself.

To say that we airmen were hated, is to put it mildly. Fliers that were unlucky enough to be captured by civilians, were most often clubbed to death, or thrown in the bomb fires alive. My crew was lucky; we were captured by the German Military. Although later we were spit on, taunted, also had water thrown on us. One POW was at a train station, when someone pushed him into the path of a train. He was killed.

The Germans marched us to box cars and literally jammed us into the boxcars, slammed shut the doors, and left us in total darkness, no water or sanitation. The cars were so crowded that we could not sit, but we had to remain standing. This was a hot July day, so we were soon desperate for water, but none was given. That evening they took us to Memel, a port on the Baltic. The next day they again jammed us, this time, into the hold of a coal ship, The Masuren. Again there was not enough room for us to sit, and, no sanitation, except a dual-purpose bucket passed around. Water was again almost non existent. When water was passed around it was the same bucket that we had used to relieve ourselves. There was about 6 inches of coal and coal dust on the floor. We were on this journey for 3 plus days. All during the time, in the boxcars and the ship, we were not given any food. This ship took us to Stettin, Poland, where we were again put on a train, this time Guarded with young Hitler Marines, they were all 12 and 13 years

of age, very arrogant and defiant. We were made to put on our overcoats, even though it was a hot July day, and were shackled with iron shackles. Again, we had no food, water or sanitation.

When we got off of the train, we were met by a red headed German Hauptman, who spoke excellent English. He told us that today was to be our lucky day and they would give us 2 Red Cross parcels each. Now this was unheard of. In the past, we never received more than one Red Cross parcel to be divided between 4 men. This time each of us were given 2 American Red Cross parcels. We still were shackled, and had to place a parcel under each arm.

As soon as the parcels given to us, the Hitler Marines were ordered to affix bayonets. More German Guards were brought in with very vicious dogs. The order was given for the dogs to attack and the Hitler guards were ordered to jab with bayonets. The run up the road had begun. For the next 5 kilometers we were jabbed with bayonets and bitten by the dogs. Some of the unfortunate prisoners received as many as 60 stab wounds and others were wounded with many dog bites.

All this time the German Officer was in a command car barking out his orders, at times he ordered the Marines to shoot us, but the order was not carried out. If someone stumbled, he was jabbed and beaten with rifle butts. The poor man shackled with him, also was beaten until he carried his fallen comrade, or got him to his feet.

When we reached Camp (Stalag Luft 4) near Grosstychow, Poland, they made us lay down in the hot sun, still shackled with our overcoats on. We had to wait for a strip search. Again no water was available. Some of the men had to wait for 2 more days for the strip search, all without food or water.

By sheer perseverance, I managed to still have my Red Cross parcels. During the search, this big brutal guard, about 6 foot 5, came. We had named Ham Hands, as his hands reminded us to be the size of a ham.

He insisted on keeping my parcels for himself. I could speak some German, and I kept insisting they were mine, given to me by the Red Cross. He took out his German Luger (pistol) Five times I insisted, and five times he hit me on my head and chin with the but of his pistol. Blood was running down my body. I knew if I kept refusing, he would beat me to death, so I had to give in. Later as I lay in the compound, he again came looking for me. I saw him coming, and hid my bloody head, so he could not see me. I knew that if he found me, that he would beat me to death. He walked back and forth, cursing in German, but finally left. I still have a scar on my scalp, also one on my chin.

There was a rumor in camp that he had lost a daughter in a bombing raid, this I do not know for certain, but anyone near him would receive his wrath, in one form or another.

It soon became apparent, the reason for giving out the Red Cross parcels was so we would drop them while we were on the run with the bayonets and dogs. The Germans could then have all of the parcels and the prisoners would have none.

That night we received our first food and water. The food I received was 2 very small raw carrots the size of my little finger. I was so hungry that I ate them unwashed, leaves and all.

I was at this camp for another 6 months, then on the German Death march for another 86 days. These are some of the incidents of my captivity during the evacuation of Stalag Luft VI. The death march was far more brutal than the evacuation Of Luft 6 but that is another story.