

MY POW EXPERIENCE By S/Sgt. Lester F. Schrenk, sent to www.airmen.dk on 28 January 2009

I flew with the Army Eighth Air Force, 92nd Bomb Group, 327th Squadron based near Podington, England. I flew in a B-17 Bomber on combat missions over German targets from December 1943 to February 22, 1944.

On our 10th bombing mission, which was on Feb. 22nd 1944, our target was Aalborg Denmark. We had bombed the target and were on our way home over the North Sea 20 minutes from the nearest land.

We were attacked by a group of JU 88, and ME109 fighters. Our number 4 engine fuel tank was set on fire.

Periodically there would be a loud explosion, the entire airplane would quiver. We were trailing a plume of fire of about 20 to 30 feet long. During the winter months it would have been fool hardy to bail out over the water and expect to survive and be rescued as one would remain conscious only 5 to 7 minutes in the cold water at this time of the year. With the explosions becoming more frequent and louder our pilot headed the plane towards Denmark hoping to make land before the wing would be blown off. Our pilot put the plane in a shallow dive so as to reach land sooner. During this time I had sufficient time to get out of the ball turret, find and put on my parachute. We were just over the coastline of Denmark when there was a very loud explosion and the right wing of the plane blew off. At this point we bailed out. While we were descending with our parachutes the enemy planes were flying very near us making passes past us. I don't really know if they were trying to kill us or spill our chutes. There was also ground fire. When we reached the ground we were immediately captured by the Germans and taken prisoner.

The B-17's had a reputation of being a very tough airplane. This certainly turned out to be true with the plane we were flying. Our plane was named POT OF GOLD and was a B-17G, serial #42-31377. This airplane and my parachute certainly saved my life.

Nine of us parachuted to safety. Unfortunately my pilot, Lt. William Lavies, was killed. He was one of the best pilots I have ever known. I feel very indebted to him. Soon after I was taken prisoner, I was asked to identify our pilot. To this day I'm not exactly sure in what manner he met his death. I am inclined to believe that he tried to control the aircraft so as to give the rest of the crew time to bail out and in so doing he didn't bail out in time. He was the kind of person who would always place the safety of his crew above his own. I have never met a man that I hold in as high regard as I do this man.

The Germans had me identify him as our pilot. They would not let me examine him as to cause of death, I did rush over to feel of him, but was quickly kicked away.

The next morning the Germans took us to a train station. That day was spent traveling to Hamburg in a very over crowded boxcar. They unloaded us and took us to a bombed building which had been a jail, but all of that left of that building was the basement. They locked us into a very small room, with no chairs, tables or beds, only the bare room with water on part of the floor and it was pitch black with no light. We spent a very uncomfortable night. The next morning we were again loaded on another train in a boxcar and taken to Frankfurt for interrogation. This place is called Dulag Luft, and it was a terrible place. Our men were badly burned and injured in every imaginable way and they were given no medical treatment of any type.

Interrogation was dreadful. We were in a room that was very crowded. The Germans would take one POW out at a time, and that was the last we would see of them. In the background you could hear screaming, sounds of beating, etc.. Even the German guards would make you wonder. I can remember the German guard who took me was a very short squatty-type of person. He only had one arm, and a huge scar across his cheek. In his remaining arm, he carried what we called a burp gun. It is about the equivalent of the Thompson machine gun. When I entered the room there was a German lieutenant that acted like as if he were my best friend, until the interrogation started. All I would give was my name, rank, and serial number. Although I did give the address of my parents, so that they could be notified that I was a prisoner of war. This information was already on my dog tags the Germans seemed to know all about us. They named my parents by name, even before I did. I was slapped around and beaten, but not too badly. I certainly was relieved when the short squatty guy kicked me in the rear as I made my exit.

I later learned, that if I had given even the least bit of information, they would have beaten me to a pulp to gain more.

A day or two later we were again put on a train. Our shoes and stockings were taken away from us to keep us from escaping. The weather was very cold, and there was snow on the ground. I do not remember exactly how many days we were on this train, I believe it was about four or five days. This train took us to Memel, Lithuania. The name of the camp was Heydekrug, but better known as Stalag Luft VI.

Here we were issued clothing, most of it used. Part of mine was American, the other part English. But that clothing was very inadequate, as the weather here was very cold. Food was very minimal. The Germans also had a habit of puncturing canned goods with a bayonet, leaving it to spoil, and then giving it to the prisoners. We were eating rotten fish that would bubble and ooze. Of course we got severe dysentery. We were constantly hungry, also suffering from the cold. We were so hungry that we would eat anything. I remember holding my nose take a bite and swallow very quickly. There was a very large pink stone in the compound. It had a very salty taste. We used to pound and scrape bits off of this stone and eat it along with rotten fish. It was so salty, that it would partially mask the taste. Like I said, this was a huge rock, half was gravel, half salt. By the time we left this camp, it had long ago been consumed.

The prison camp was very large, there were both British and American prisoners, but they were kept in separate compounds. There were approximately 50 people to a room. I was in room G-3. We were made to stand in formation twice a day to be counted, some times it would be hours before they let us back into the barracks and it was very cold inside too. We always wore all of our clothing, Sometimes in the middle of the night, we were forced out by the dreaded SS troops. They were very arrogant. If you did not have all of your clothing on while sleeping, you were made to go out as you were. We always slept with our shoes on. Beds were most uncomfortable. The mattress was a huge gunny sack, about 4 inches thick, filled with a small amount of wood shavings. The bed had a wooden frame and for supports there were 4 boards, running crosswise, each board was about 6 inches wide. One board for the head, another for the shoulders, hips and feet. Very uncomfortable to say the least.

When the SS raided, we were out in the cold, standing in formation for hours, with snow on the ground, temperature could be below zero -- it didn't matter to them. When we were allowed back inside, everything was in shambles, mattresses slit open, contents in one huge pile. If we had food, it was mixed in with the debris.

There was no sanitation in the rooms -- No running water, only a large bucket, which would be overflowing by morning. At 3 PM we had to place shutters on the windows, and the shutters could not be removed until 8 AM the next morning. No one was allowed to leave the rooms during this time. One day one of the men left about 10 minutes early and he was shot dead.

The latrine was quit a distance from our barracks, and it had only cold water. It is not too pleasant taking a bath in an unheated room with cold water. We were only allowed to bathe 2 times at this camp. It also was almost impossible to wash clothing. We had only one set of clothing, this included under clothing. If you washed any of your clothing, you went without until it dried. With no heat, and bitter cold, you can imagine.

We were supposed to receive Red Cross parcels, one parcel per week, to help with a very inadequate diet. We never did receive one parcel per week and each parcel had to be shared with 3 or 4 men, and many times up to 9 men had to share a single Red Cross parcel. Even with this there were many weeks with no parcel at all.

One of the German rations was bread, but it was no way near to what we think of bread. The only thing in common with the bread we think of, is the shape of the loaf, and that it could be sliced. The first thing was its weight. For an equal sized loaf of our bread, their bread would be about 5 to 6 times heavier. The color was very dark brown. It was made with no yeast, so it was almost solid. After the war, I saw the list of ingredients. The bread contained about 1/3 sawdust, and the balance was mostly rye flower and also some sort of vegetable, like ground rutabagas. Surprisingly, the taste was not that bad. We looked forward to receiving it. Most rations were a loaf of bread to six men, and issued at approximately once a week when I first was captured. Near the end of the war, the rations dwindled to most nothing. This was one staple we could hoard, and we never ate it all at

once, but rather saved it for such times that the Germans would withhold rations. Withholding rations happened often, like when someone would do something stupid, such as one day when someone desecrated a photo of Hitler. Also when the Allies would have a big victory, or when we were on the march, or on the ship when we would not have anything else to eat for days. The bread was so firm that it could be sliced as thin as 1/8 inch, and this we did. It is surprising how such a small piece of bread could partially take away the hunger pangs, which we had constantly all the days of our imprisonment. The bread we received almost always had some thing wrong with it, like an unbaked center, some had big cracks from drying out, but we made it do, and it filled in when we would have suffered even more without it.

We arrived at this compound around the first of March. In early July the Germans decided to evacuate the camp because the Russians were closing in. The Germans marched us to the railroad station, and literally jammed us into a boxcar. The boxcar was so crowded that one couldn't even sit down. Also this was a hot July day, and they give us absolutely no water. We were very uncomfortable. There was absolutely no sanitation of any type. During the night they took us to a port on the Baltic and put us on board in the closed hold of a very crowded dirty coal ship. It again was so crowded that you could not sit down. There were several inches of coal dust on the floor, no sanitation, and very limited drinking water. We were on this ship for 4 days. during this time we were given no food We arrived on the Baltic Sea port of Stettin, Poland.

We were again placed on a train, in a boxcar that was guarded by the Hitler youth. We were also shackled, and I was made to put on my overcoat, even though it was a very hot day in July. We were then taken to a town called Gross-tychow, Poland. When they unloaded us from the train, there was a redheaded German lieutenant, who spoke perfect English. He told us how lucky we were that we were to be given 2 Red Cross parcels, which at that time was unheard of. The most Red Cross parcel I had ever received was one parcel divided by three-men, and now they were giving us two. I could hardly believe it. But as soon as they handed out the parcels the Germans fixed bayonets, and in came the dogs. The German lieutenant was telling the Hitler youth to start bayoneting us and to shoot us. The dogs were frantically biting at our heels. Anyone near the guards was bayoneted, not to kill, but to wound. One of our men had 60 puncture wounds. They ran us this way all the way to our next camp, which was about five kilometers away. It soon became very obvious as to why they had given us the Red Cross parcels. They wanted us to drop them, so they could pick them up as if we didn't want them. Most of the guys did drop their parcels. It was very difficult to run with your hands shackled to another person. I did manage to keep both of my parcels. However when I went through the strip search, there was this large, brutal guard that we called Ham Hands. He insisted on taking both parcels away from me. I kept on insisting that they were Red Cross and therefore were mine. He took out his pistol, and started to whip me with the butt of the pistol. Five times I insisted it was mine, and five times he hit me on my head and chin. At last I knew there was no use, and I had to let him keep them. My head and face was a mass of blood. But I finally got away. Later when I was laying out in the compound he came out looking for me. I am sure that he intended to finish me off. I saw him coming and hid my head so that he couldn't see any blood. He walked back and forth past me, cursing in German, but finally left.

As I said before, it was a hot July day and we did not have food or water for the last four days, except for the tiny sip of water I had on the ship. The Germans kept on pumping water from a well, and letting it run on the ground, but would not let us have any water. They kept some of the men out in the compound for two more days, with no food or water. That evening I had the first food that I had in days. It consisted of two small raw carrots that were about two inches long. I was so hungry that I ate both carrots as well as the leaves.

At this camp, which was called Stalag Luft IV, there were no provisions at all for taking a bath. The only thing one could do was to take a sponge bath with either a stocking or some other piece of clothing to be used as a wash cloth. Food at this camp was even more inadequate than at the last camp. The rooms were very crowded and were meant to accommodate 12 men. Instead there were twenty-four men to each room. They also had the same rules, that you had to barricade yourself into the room each night.

The only form of entertainment, was walking around the compound, which I did daily. But, being in a weakened condition, even that was hard to do. There were no provisions for heat, not even one stove in this building, only body heat.

I am going to mention the slave labor.

Most of the slave laborers were Russian, and it was the Russian prisoners that I got to know the best. We were not allowed to talk with them, nor they with us, so all our contacts were when no German guards were visible. Looking back, I believe that the slaves knew that they were doomed, so they really did not value their lives, but rather tried to give the Germans as many problems as they could. The Germans in turn, hated the Russians, but were kept from killing them, because if they did, then they would have to do the hard, dirty labor themselves. The Russian that I knew best and became friends with was Ivan. We would speak in German, as he did not know English and I did not know Russian. One day I asked Ivan how old he was as he looked so young. He said 16 and went on to say that at age 14 the Russian Bolchevists had come to his village, shot his mother and father and they took him forcing him to join the Russian army. He was captured at Stalingrad, and brought here as a slave. One day Ivan brought a small wooden puzzle, that he had made and gave it to me. I carried and hid this puzzle from the Germans. If the Germans had found it, they would have taken it. I still have that puzzle today. Every time I look at it, I think of my friend Ivan. I have grave doubts that he survived the war!

There are several incidents showing just how stubborn the Russians were. In one incident, they were atop a roof repairing it. Night was coming, the German Guard blew his whistle, for the Russians to come down. The Russians all run to the other side of the roof and as much as the Germans tried, they would not come down. At long last, the Germans were forced to climb atop of the roof, fixed their bayonets, and chase the Russians off. As soon as they were down, they all scattered and hid. The Germans had to round them up one by one. I often wonder what punishment they received!

In another incident, the Germans were expanding the camp, by adding a huge tent. The Russians were to build bunk beds 4 tiers high. One day when Germans were not looking, I sneaked into the tent. What I found was that the Russian had driven in as many as 20 to 30 nails on the end of a 2x4 and no nails anywhere else on the 2x4. If even the least pressure had been applied to any of the bunks, they would have collapsed.

The above two incidents happened at Stalag Luft 6.

This next was at Stalag Luft 4.

It was bitter cold. Our latrines were slit trenches, which had to be pumped out almost daily. This was done by Russian slaves. They had a machine that they would do this with. It was mounted on a wagon, and pulled with a team of oxen. It consisted of a large tank, and atop was a huge iron valve. which looked a lot like a man hole cover. On the back of the tank was a large hose which extended into the latrine ditch. There was a pump like device mounted along side the tank. They would pump a gasoline mixture spray into the tank. Then they would light it and then there would be a loud explosion. The man hole cover would fly up, then clamp down and this would cause a vacuum. The sewage would be sucked into the tank. Now, this worked very nice, until one day when the Russians decided to sabotage it. The German Guard was not paying too much attention, the Russians started to pump the gasoline mixture, and did not stop, but just kept pumping for the longest time. When the German Guard realized what was happening, it was too late. The first Russian pumped all the harder, the second Russian one lit a match. There was a very loud explosion, and the tank split wide open. We were standing in formation a few feet away and everyone was sprayed with a good dose of sewage. The next day, both of the Russians were back, this time pumping by hand.

Things went relatively well, until January. At this time, one could hear cannon fire in the distant. The Russians were again closing in, and again the Germans decided to evacuate the camp. We took the few belongings that we had, and set out on foot. The weather was beastly cold, and our clothing was most inadequate. We had been wearing the same set of clothing for over a year. The only footwear that we had, was a worn out pair of shoes, and a pair of stockings that were completely worn out. At the most on this March the Germans gave us one meal a day, but there were many days that we received no food at all. In the morning, the Germans would give us a cup of hot water, and for this we would have to stand in line, out in the cold, sometimes up to an hour. The Germans would march us during the day, and if we were very lucky, they would let us sleep in a barn for the night. The only covering we had, was one very thin blanket. We would use the buddy system, and sleep real close to each other sharing each other's blanket and body heat. We were always cold. I can not say what the temperature was as we had no way of knowing, but this was northern Germany, along the Baltic. Later on we found that the winter of 44- 45 was one of the coldest on record.

The food was most inadequate, we were so weak that we could hardly walk. The typical meal we would receive at night would consist of a potato. The German farmers had provisions for boiling potatoes for their pigs. They would scoop potatoes that still had dirt on them into the hog cooker, cook the potatoes, just as they came from the field. When we received the potatoes, they would be very overcooked, and if they came from near the bottom of the cooker, there would be as much dirt mixed in with the potatoes as potato itself. We would be lucky to get the equivalent of one potato. It turned into a watery mess of potatoes, dirt, and water. Another kind of meal was clover, boiled in water so as to make a type of soup. Maggots and insects were commonplace, and we were so hungry that one would consume everything in its entirety.

If we did receive meat it would be from bomb victims, perhaps beef, pork, sheep, horses and even dogs. If the weather had been warm, well,... we ate it anyway,

Looking back, I think my lowest ebb was on a day in either late March or early April. Days became blurred, and we lost sense of time - never seeing a calendar. Anyway on this day, the Germans got us up very early. We stood in line to get a cup of hot water. That would be the only thing we would receive all day. We started on our march. Snow had fallen - there was about 7 to 8 inches on the ground. The road we were on was a secondary road. The road was constructed of field rocks, laid side by side. This type of surface is very hard to walk on. Each time your foot came down, it is forced into another angle and with the snow, it made you slip all over. When walking on this type road, the muscles in your legs and feet would take a beating and at the end of the day one would be in a great deal of pain. Soon the snow turned to a freezing rain. We had no rain gear of any type, and were soon wet to the skin. The Germans kept us marching until 11 o'clock night. They had us stop in a clearing and told us to bed down for the night. I remember scraping the snow off of a spot, trying to get to the bare ground where four of my friends and I spent the night. As I mentioned before, we would all huddle together as close as we could sharing each others blanket. When we awoke the next morning, we found our blankets frozen to the ground, we pried as best we could with our table knives, so as not to tear the blanket.

We were over-joyed when we saw them hand out Red Cross parcels that cold morning. The ration was only one parcel, shared by 9 men, but at last we had a little to eat.

Trying to share food, when there is no way of evenly dividing, was solved in a fair way. First the food was placed in 9 piles. Due to the fact that one shared unit may be a can, and another a jar of jelly, made no difference. The amount could not be divided evenly. The next step was to find sticks, or even pine needles, which were broken into nine pairs, making certain that no two pairs were the same length. Next we placed half a pair of the sticks atop each pile of food. The remaining pairs of sticks were held behind one person's back and each man drew one and match it to his allotted food. Each food parcel only weighed 4 pounds. There was not too much to divide. Most parcels came from the USA, but the best ones came from Canada, or New Zealand. The parcels from the US had problems. The US parcels contained margarine, made from animal fat, and the seal on the margarine container was not good and the margarine would be very rancid. Sure, we ate it anyway. The instant coffee would always be all dried up and would be a sticky glob about the size of a nut on the bottom of the bottle. The US Red Cross parcels also contained a bar of soap, which in our situation was of little or no use. The space taken up by the instant coffee and soap could have been better used for high energy food. If only they would have filled the whole carton with K rations, we would have had so much extra food value. Things like crackers are fine, but when one is starved, one needs high energy foods. As for dividing food, I can honestly say, I never heard any one complain about how the food was divided, as it was always done as fairly as possible.

The only article of winter clothing that we had was an overcoat. Perhaps at this time I should list all the clothing that we had.

- ! pair shoes, worn to having large holes
- 1 pair stockings (so worn out that most of the foot was gone)
- 1 Pair trousers
- 1 Pair boxer shorts
- 1 army shirt
- 1 Royal Air Force cotton jacket
- 1 pair knit gloves
- 1 Army overcoat
- 1 knit army cap
- 1 Army blanket
- string to bind the blanket for carrying

A set of knife, fork and spoon
numerous tin cans for preparing and eating food out of
A parcel in which to carry items such as food

I also had contraband note paper
1 small puzzle, made by my Russian Friend
1 pencil, about 1-1/2 inches long
1 American Dog tag
1 German POW Dog Tag

We were so infested with lice and fleas, that on any break, one would see any number of POWs remove an item of clothing and proceed to remove lice and lice eggs. As for the fleas, their eggs were so small that they were impossible to see. The lice were found at the base of any hair root. and when they were full of blood, they were the size of a pencil eraser. I literally pulled hair out of my privates trying to discourage them. We also had bed bugs, but I only observed a few.

The Germans had a no fraternization ban, and they were not allowed to talk to us unless it was Military. However I was the interpreter of our group, so many times that did not apply to me. One day a very old guard was walking beside me. I asked him his age. He replied that he was 81 years old. He was complaining that he was too old to be expected to be in the army. He was carrying part of a heavy machine gun. I offered to help him carry it. He looked very surprised that I would make such an offer but he declined. I believe this incident may have saved my life.

Stealing food was punishable by death. One could be shot on the spot. One night while the Germans were placing us in a empty barn, I noticed some Leek (a type of onion) growing alongside the barn. Later in the evening, I went outside to go to the latrine. Instead I knelt down and started to dig the leek out of the frozen ground. All of a sudden I heard the slam of a rifle bolt right behind my head. I turned to see this 81 year old guard. He demanded to know what I was doing. I replied in German that I was very hungry. I am certain that he recognized me. He replied " yes, me too". He did not shoot me, but gave me a kick in the rear and sent me back into the barn.

As I stated, we were forced to sleep outside in the elements, which posed one type of problem, sleeping in barns had yet another. Barns were always very crowded, It was next to impossible to find a spot to bed down. As soon as they had you indoors, they would close the doors, resulting in pitch black. Another was with dysentery being so bad, there was always someone crawling over people to get out, or back in. Coming back in was another problem, in a large dark area, it was next to impossible to find the place where your bed was. Then too the barns in most cases had animals housed in them prior to your arrival, the floor could be littered with animal droppings.

Dysentery was so bad that one could not remove his clothing in time. We were positively filthy. Most of the time there was not sufficient water even for drinking. You never had a chance to wash, brush your teeth, or to shave. At most, we would remove one piece of clothing and proceed to pick off the lice and lice eggs.

Believe it or not, even at this stage, there was still humor. One of my buddies was complaining about something, I told him that he never had it so good. After all he was getting paid at the rate of \$2.25 a day for not working, also was provided with a roof over his head, and even a Red cross parcel about once a month. One thing some of us would do was to spread a wild rumor, like some great allied victory, then wait to see how long it would be before we again picked up that rumor, also to see just how much had been added to it.

When we were on the march we must have been some looking group. All of us had tin cans hanging from our necks, always 2, most of the time 3 or 4. That was the only utensils we had for eating or drinking. The handles were made from the narrow strip of tin used to seal the powdered milk that was in the American red cross parcels. We also had hand made stoves used for cooking. Some of the men made very elaborate stoves, complete with small blowers to flame the wood that we would pick up along the way. Many times the Germans would not allow us to have a fire. Then we would have to eat whatever we had either cold or raw. A good portion of my diet was frozen sugar beets found along the way, that had fallen off of wagons on their way to market. Eating frozen sugar beets caused severe dysentery. We knew this would happen, but it was eat or starve. Along with all of the cans hanging about our necks. we were in severe rags, -- the same clothes that we had now worn for

well over a year, with never a change. We hardly ever had a chance to wash. The last sponge bath that I had was over 3 months, and that was taken with cold water in an unheated latrine in January, so we were extremely filthy. The same was true for brushing our teeth or shaving. I had never worn a beard or mustache. Now however I had an unkempt mob of hair on my face, as did everyone else. Our clothes were all soiled with the constant dysentery, no toilet tissue, and dysentery so bad, that you could not drop your pants quickly enough. I can only imagine how we must have looked or smelled. This along with the fleas and lice must have made it hard for the English that liberated us to even come near. Also we had all made makeshift bags that carried all of our meagre belongings. I still have many items that I carried all of the way on the march. Our group only had one blanket each. Many of the other groups were lucky enough to have two blankets. It seemed like the Germans hated the POWs from Stalag 6, more than the other groups. The other groups also received many more Red Cross parcels. I think Red Cross parcels went to feed our German Guards. The German rations were very meagre as well. I remember finding a flat piece of tin. I used this for frying potatoes. I made a potato grater out of the top of a can, punching holes in the can. In this way I could make a form of potato pancakes

We tried to eat snow, but the Germans prevented this. We drank water from ditches, and men also relieved themselves in these same ditches. Thirst can drive one to extremes. The cold, the hunger, the thirst, the filth, and the dysentery all took their toll. All during the time we were prisoners, we did not have toilet paper. At this point it was really bad and there was nothing we could do for sanitation. We were told to chew on bits of charcoal to alleviate dysentery. This did help, but with the diet we had, dysentery was a never ending problem.

During the time the Germans were marching us, if a prisoner could not keep up with the group, a German guard would drop back, one would hear a rifle shot, and soon the guard would rejoin the formation, this time without the prisoner. This happened very often. Another thing that bothered a great deal, is the fact that we were filthy with lice and fleas. Fleas can be miserable, you can feel them crawl all over your body, kicking as they go. However lice are a real danger as they carry all sorts of diseases.

During the march, my feet, legs and knees gave me more and more problems. Often I would find that I had again suffered from frost bite, also the muscles in my legs would tighten up, and would give me much pain, my knees were always very sore. It was hard to stand up, much more effort was needed to walk. All during the march, I did not dare to remove my shoes, my feet were swollen to the point where I feared that if I did remove my shoes, that I would not be able to get them back on. Also in the bitter cold, there would be no reason to remove one's shoes, we had absolutely nothing to treat our feet with. Not even another pair of stockings to put on. The stockings that I did have on were worn to the point of not having the foot portion left. Also, the shoes were English combat shoes, and were constructed with metal cleats across the soles. which was very bad. The metal conducted cold to the inside of the shoes, and the metal made the shoes very unstable on the cobblestone rocks, we were forced to march on. The cobblestone rocks were round field stones, resulting in ones foot to slide. At the end of the day, one's ankles would be very sore. The shoes were all worn out, and had big holes worn completely through. The shoes that I was given were already well worn when I received them, and I wore them for another 14 plus months. During this march we walked, or mostly staggered, for a distance estimated to be between 600 to 800 miles. Some of the prisoners in the earlier marches were more fortunate than my group and were placed in various prison camps along the way. My group marched the entire length of the march, the longest of any of the groups for a total of 86 days. We were liberated by the English Eighth Army on May 3, 1945. Experts later estimated the march to be between 600 to 800 miles across northern Poland and Northern Germany, many times back tracking between the Allied and Russian lines so as to avoid capture by the Allied forces. Most of the German guards were from the Eastern Front on leave and had permanent visible wounds. Some of the guards were as young as 12 years and the oldest was 81 years old. The 12 year old guards belonged to the Hitler Youth, were from all branches of the German military and were very arrogant. However the most arrogant and cruel were the German SS Troops.

We were always in the extreme cold, never had a chance to remove any clothing, we all suffered from frostbite, blisters, severe dysentery, hunger, lack of water, very inadequate clothing, and badly in need of a bath. We were so weak that we could hardly walk at all. Everyone suffered from trench foot. In my case it was so bad the trench foot reached to the tops of my shoes but there was nothing we could do. We never had a chance to remove our shoes. Dr. Leslie Caplan (Major Caplan) was with our group for a very short time. He tried to do his best for us,

but with the situation as it was, there was not much he could do. He did suggest that we eat a bit of charcoal in an attempt to alleviate the dysentery.

Of the various groups in this march, we were the very last group to be liberated. On May 3, 1945 we were liberated by the English Eighth Army. They treated us very well. At long last we had a chance to bathe, and the English gave us their English uniforms to wear. During the war the English army was rationed and received only allowed 2 meals a day. The English shared their rations with us and were very generous despite there were such a large number of men in our group. At this time my weight was approximately 100 pounds.

We were with the English Army about a week and a half. The American officials for some reason did not come to take us back. The English told us several times that they had notified the Americans a number of times and that they would pick us up at any time. This never happened. Finally in desperation, the English called for the Royal Air Force to come to evacuate us. They flew us to Brussels, Belgium. The Americans had no provision for us at all, and the next day they took us to Camp Lucky Strike which was in northern France. Here again, the Americans had absolutely no provision for us. Also they had no American uniforms to give us. So we remained dressed in our English army uniforms. We could not help but notice that all the German prisoners of war in this American camp were wearing American uniforms, but they had none for us. Also, we were sleeping in a tent, with only one blanket. The weather was very cold, and we could not use the buddy system to keep warm. We were confined to the immediate area. There was no entertainment and absolutely nothing to do, but we get did very good food. They could not tell us how long it would be before a ship would come to take us back to the United States. This went on for over two weeks. I, for one, was very disappointed.

It was at this time that I learned that the army had again not given me the increase in rank that I was entitled to. This goes back to when I (and others) were in flight training. My M.O.S. (duties as an aerial engineer) called for a rank of S/Sergeant or higher. I was only a Sergeant. They did not give us the promotions, but promised to give them when we finished training. This never happened. Next, they promised the increase in rank when we were sent overseas. Then the increases in rank were promised when we flew combat. This also never happened. Finally, at long last, my name appeared on the bulletin board stating that I would be promoted to S/Sgt. on February 23, 1944. I was shot down on February 22, 1944, the day before my promotion was to be effective. Now, they tell me my promotion did not go through because I was "detached from my unit". This was not corrected and I feel cheated as I did not receive the increase in rank nor the increase in pay I should have had during my flying days and days of my captivity. (Finally, at the time of my discharge I received the increase in rank effective 2 days before my discharge). With out back pay. To this day I feel cheated.

One day an American plane landed and I told the guys back at the tent that I had had it. I was going to see if I could hitchhike a plane ride back to England. I approached the pilot, still in my English uniform, and ask him if he was going back to England. Of course he assumed that I was English, and asked if all my papers were in order for my trip back to England. Of course I told him, yes sir. I didn't have a paper to my name. He took me to England and I made it back to my old Air Force Base, which was in Podington, England. Much to my dismay I found the base closed. I did however see an army personnel in the distance. As I approached him, I recognized him. He was now a Major and he said to me, "don't I know you"? I replied yes Sir you do. You and I used to ride on the same bus when we were going to Northampton on leave. Often I would sit with you, and we would have a conversation while on our way. He replied, what are you doing in that uniform? I gave him the whole story, and his reply was, "Good Lord, if you are caught in that uniform, they could charge you with desertion and you could be court martialed. Can you come back tomorrow?" I said certainly Sir. The next day I returned and he had a complete uniform for me. Also, he said he saw the finance officer and he had obtained a partial payment of \$200 for me. He certainly turned out to be a friend in need.

At this time during my stay in England I stayed at a Red Cross Service Center that had sleeping facilities. The Red Cross assumed that I was on leave and asked no questions. When the rest of my friends who were back in France learned what I had done, they too managed to hitchhike a ride to England. There must have been approximately 100 former prisoners of war that came to England the same way I did. After several weeks, we all decided it was time to go home. We decided the best thing to do was to go in mass to the military police. We told them our story.

Needless to say they were not too happy, but there wasn't much they could do. All they could do was to send us to Southampton, so they could put us on the next ship going back United States. About a week later we were on board a LST bound for Norfolk, VA I arrived home the last part of July 1945. All I wanted to do was to recuperate.

I was captured on February 22, 1944
Liberated on May 3, 1945

After arriving home I found that my parents had a telegram dated March 8, 1944 by the War Department stating that I had been missing in action as of February 22, 1944, but they did not receive further word that I was a prisoner of war until well into May 1944.