

Donald Linton Davis
Excerpts from His WWII Story

Fighting in the European Theater

We were picked to relieve an outpost which was a “bear trap”. It was in so dangerous a spot that the new shift did not go up until after dark. No squad was supposed to remain there more than 24 hours. While we were there “sweating it out” the rest of my comrades in Company K were going to enjoy a day’s rest in the Battalion C.P. area. The post lay approximately 1km in front of the American Line, supposedly in no man’s land. After it was full dark, our squad of 11 left cautiously for our destination. In order to reach same we had to pass completely thru the French Village of Port sur Seille (Province of Lorraine & a part of Germany from 1870 to 1914). We didn’t feel at all secure when we saw there were still civilians around, because, although they were friendly to us they were afraid of “Jerry” (German soldiers).

Thirty yards in front our position (a stone barn) laid a partly demolished bridge over a stream. Six of us stayed on one side of the street that was the approach to the said bridge and five went to the other side. The Boche was known to be on the opposite side of the stream somewhere. It was our duty to notify battalion headquarters by telephone if we saw enemy movement. The next afternoon we spotted some activity about one thousand yards to our right front. Headquarters did not take us seriously, however. We were ordered to maintain our positions. We weren’t seriously alarmed because we were due to be relieved after nightfall. We didn’t like it at all, however, when we were informed we had to “sweat out” twenty four hours more. It was during my guard shift at 4 A.M. that movement was first heard in the village. We knew that the French civilians did not stir out of their homes after the setting of the sun. Some smart officer back at the Battalion C.P. thought we were “nuts” when we informed him there were Jerries in the village. Even after we reported German voices, Battalion did not take us seriously.

At dawn on Tuesday (September 27th) we realized our fears, because three “Krauts” came down to inspect the bridge. As we waited for them to approach (they hadn’t seen us) we heard a yell. You should have seen those “Jerries” scatter. You guessed it – one of our French friends had warned the enemy & we did not even get a shot at them. We immediately sent a man to warn our buddies on the opposite side of the street. That is the last we ever saw of him. To this day I don’t know what happened to him and the other five. I know they weren’t captured, and it is doubtful whether they were able to infiltrate back to our lines.

About two minutes later – it seemed an eternity – we decided to try to break for safety. I stuck my steel helmet out the doorway and a machine pistol immediately opened up. The Germans who discovered us had obviously returned with reinforcements. When a buddy tested the other exit two automatic weapons commenced firing. Then we knew we were in a trap. We decided to fight it out.

One “Jerry” was foolhardy enough to try to run across the doorway to fling in a hand grenade. I fired from the hip. One doesn’t need any marksmanship training to make a hit

at fifteen yards. It was not fatal, however, and he was able to crawl away after I shot him moaning in agony. Another came at me from around the corner of our position. I don't know who was more surprised, he or I. I regretted this later because it almost caused my end. In the meantime my buddies had succeeded in killing and wounding several of the enemy.

Surrender

About this time the Germans got wise. They realized we had only a small range of vision, so they closed up in the blank arc. Then they began to fire continuously through the doorways and at the walls, thereby pinning us in. When the bullets began to break right through the crumbling mortar walls, and concussion grenades (fragments from one hit me in the arms and legs – my only wounds in combat) began landing close by, we knew it was either “kamerad” or “kaput” right then. We weren't anxious to be buried in France, so we cast out our weapons and came out with our hands up. We didn't know what to expect because a soldier of any nationality is likely to be trigger happy when some of his buddies have become casualties. Luckily for us our captors were a regular Wehrmacht unit. However we hadn't stepped out a minute too soon, because the officer in charge was just preparing to launch a bazooka shell into the barn where we had been.

They searched us immediately and took away all firearms and ammunition. I had the foresight to hide a Luger in the straw before leaving the barn. Soldiers don't like to find their own weapons in the possession of new captives. I was surprised that they did not take my watch, fountain pen, knife, cigarettes and money. It was at rear echelon stops that I was parted from these personal belongings.

It was good that we had not tried to make a break for it. Their company C.P. was located three hundred yards closer to the American lines on our only route of withdrawal. Gun installations had already been set up. There were more than 25 of them and all of them seemed to have an automatic weapon. We had been fighting impossible odds and we were glad that we hadn't tried to make a break for it especially when we observed combat patrols being sent down the road toward the American lines which we had traversed only 36 hours previously. This would indeed have been valuable information for our battalion commander. As we arrived at the C.P., I saw the German who I had wounded coming out of their first aid station on a stretcher. Unfortunately he also recognized me. He pointed me out to a buddy who was accompanying him. This friend drew a revolver, and then I really began to sweat. I figured my luck had run out, and this was really the end. It is hard to imagine what a helpless feeling one can have at a time like that. Just about that time an officer prevented the soldier from taking revenge. I was never so relieved in all my life.

Transfer to Another Stalag Camp

The three and one-half day ride from Limberg to Moosburg (home of Stalag VIIA) was, without doubt, the worst episode of my internment. Fifty of us were herded into each miniature box car. Again there were no benches and so we had to sit on the damp floor. The doors were opened four times during the entire trip. The can furnished for toilet

facilities quickly overflowed because many of the boys were suffering from diarrhea and other ailments.

The average food ration for each day amounted to two slices of bread thinly spread with margarine. Water entered the car only once, and then it was only three gallons. I was in a corner, so I didn't get a drop. By the third day, some of my fellow occupants were in a deplorable condition. It rained that afternoon. Everyone who could clustered beneath a single window to catch raindrops rolling off the dirty roof in spoons, tin cans, etc. Some even licked the damp shirts they hung outside in order to get a little moisture into their parched throats. The meager quantity thus collected only seemed to increase their thirst. The first water I drank at Stalag VIIA was without doubt the best drink I EVER had.

They crowded all of us into one barracks in the north lager (All incoming prisoners were kept there until they were deloused). We were given one old rag (supposedly a blanket) and told to sleep anywhere we found room. I was one of the last ones in, so I had to sleep out in the dirt aisle, as all the good spots were already occupied. That evening we were rationed one-fourth loaf of bread and three ounces of bologna. It felt pretty good to be able to loosen my belt on this occasion anyway.

Two days later on Thursday, October 21st, we were deloused and moved into permanent barracks. It was then that I really began the routine life of a prisoner of war. Lean times continued until after Christmas, however, due to lack of parcels. Stalag VIIA was populated by prisoners of all nationalities. At the time of my arrival there were only two or three thousand Americans. Living space was overcrowded at that time. Conditions didn't really begin to get bad until they moved in prisoners from evacuated camps as the Allies advanced.

During the first three months of my stay at Moosburg I was fortunate to live in a barracks that had electric lights and running water. We slept on three-decker bunks, our mattresses were burlap bags filled with excelsior. The latter had more to do with drawing the bugs than any other single factor. I now sympathized with scratching dogs even more so.

For the first month one hundred fifty lived in my end of the barracks – an area approximately 35 ft x 75 ft. At the end of November one hundred new captives from Italy were crowded in. During the middle of January one hundred more came in from another compound. Their barracks had been cleared to make room for incoming officers who had been evacuated from a camp near Berlin as the Russians approached. There was no more room for bunks, so the newcomers slept on the floor. A week later it was announced that our compound was also going to be used for officers. In the meantime, all the British non-coms and some of the privates had departed to another Stalag. Nine-tenths of our compound moved into the barracks vacated by them. I was among the unfortunate tenth that was compressed into the south lager.

Here there were no electric lights. Illumination for the barracks was furnished by two carbide lamps (equivalent in candle power to a five watt bulb). The fumes from these

lamps were very unhealthy. Every morning one's mouth was coated with carbide. One water faucet outside provided for 900 men. It was sometimes necessary to wait in line an hour to get a cup of water. I never knew what the term crowded meant until I was quartered here. One hundred and fifty of us lived in an area of 20 ft x 40 ft. There were two foot aisles between bunks and a five foot center aisle. All the rest of the space (approximately 90% of the total area) was occupied by bunks. We did all our cooking outside.

We moved with no regret to the open compound one month later. The barracks there were similar to the one I had lived in for the first three months. We had been comfortably settled for just a month when the order came to move again. American forces had captured Nuremburg and twenty thousand evacuated prisoners were due to arrive. This time we were quartered in a tent. These further inconveniences were endurable now because we knew that Germany had reached the "end of the rope". I was in that same tent when the 99th Division liberated us (April 29th).

Winters were cold in Germany, so naturally there was a fuel problem to contend with. "Jerry" furnished us none whatsoever. However we always brought wood in from work detail. We were warm enough during the winter months except during a period in December. On that occasion the camp was quarantined for three weeks. The supply on hand was exhausted within a week. After that we "simulated heat". The temperature never did drop below freezing because there were so many of us that the heat from our bodies kept the temperature up somewhat – something like cattle in a barn.

Christmas In Captivity

On one occasion on Christmas Eve, we even had good comradeship with the German soldiers. An air raid started as we were in transit to the Stalag from a work detail in Munich and this halted us. As a lad of nineteen, I did not know that most Christmas carols were German in origin. We began singing Christmas carols. The first one we sang was Silent Night. Our German guards then sang it back to us in German. We continued doing this and sang several carols with a German reply by our guards several times to use up the time. We did not arrive back in the Stalag until after midnight. This was one time when we had good will with the Germans.

Treatment in P.O.W. Camps

I have very few grievances against the German soldier as an individual. Most of them treated us all right. After talking to P.O.W.'s from other Stalags I consider myself fortunate because they had not shared our generally OK experience.

However, on one occasion I was mistreated. It was in November, just after an air raid alert in Munich. Several work groups had occupied the same shelter and were disorganized temporarily. One group had formed and was one man short. A guard from that group thought I was the missing party. There was no interpreter present. At the time I didn't understand German, and he spoke no English. I thought it was best to go with him obediently. After I was in the ranks he began to curse me in anger. Then in fury he

began practicing the butt stroke on my back. After three or four blows I was dazed. He struck me thirty or forty times altogether from my shoulders down to my ankles before an English lager policeman (non-coms who saw that the Geneva Convention was adhered to) was able to stop him. It is amazing to me that I was able to stay on my feet. Only a jacket and overcoat protected me from more permanent injuries. Even so, I bore bruise marks for weeks afterwards. The English lager policeman tried to get the name of the guard from him and also from the German Officer in charge. Both refused. At chow time I received bribes in the form of an extra bread ration and extra soup. This only made me angrier.

A report of the incident was turned over to the International Red Cross, but nothing ever came of it. That guard had beaten other prisoners too. He made the mistake of remaining at the Stalag on Liberation Day. He didn't live long enough to regret his error.

Liberation Day

On Liberation Day I was cooking breakfast in the Stalag when machine guns opened up. There was token resistance by the Germans, but in an hour or so it was all over. It made me feel very proud when I saw the American flag raised at the front Gate. I could have hugged that first dust-stained doughboy I saw, he looked so good to me. As far as I am concerned April 29th will always be V.E. day.

At this writing, I am in Mid-Atlantic, homeward bound. Even now those seven months of POW life seem like a nightmare, not reality. I could not have experienced the misery I encountered. Like a typical G.I., I gripe. However in the future when something does not agree with me, I'll have something infinitely better to bring back my temper than the old practice of counting to ten.

When things get me down, I will know that the seven months of Hell that I had gone through were the worst experiences I would ever go through during my lifetime, would then "perk up" out of the doldrums, and exclaim to myself, Thank God I am a citizen of the best country in the world.

You see, I learned something that money or education could never teach me in the United States. I now have a real appreciation for the American way of life.

By Donald Linton Davis