

# Kriegsgefangenen

POW In WWII

William Hurley Miller



## FACTS THAT I REMEMBER MOST:

Captured: November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1944

Freed: May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945

March from STALAG III B: February 1<sup>st</sup> to February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945

Liberation from Germans: April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1945

Trip Across Ocean on Liberty Ship: July 1<sup>st</sup> to July 13<sup>th</sup>, 1945

Discharged: September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945

Our forward observer team (FO) consisted of four persons: Pvt. Howard Hatfield, utility man; Cpl. Doyle Spence, jeep driver; T5 William Hurley Miller, radio operator; and Lt. Larry Schlitten, forward observer. We were with the 255 F. A. Bn., unattached, therefore we were with an Infantry Company under the command of a Capt. Lujon (or perhaps Littlejohn). November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1944, we advanced 13 miles on foot, carrying our 30-pound radios plus our other equipment. All along this march, I saw men that were the outpost, in trenches and all had been shot in the forehead or the throat. In retreat, the Germans had caught these men off guard and killed them. This I will never forget and still have dreams about. This day, we reached our target – a small German town – and captured the town without firing a shot. After finding no Germans in the town, we talked to a man that lived there. He invited us in for a meal that night, and we accepted. It was a very good meal, including a roast with Schnapps. We then asked if we could sleep in the basement and he said “No, the S.S. Troopers would kill me if I was caught”. He told us to sleep in the barn across the street. We now believe all the basements were full of German soldiers.

The next day, November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1944, the Infantry Capt. Lujon (or Littlejohn) and my Lt. Schlitten got their heads together and decided to get a feather in their caps by capturing the next small village. We took it with no resistance and set up on Observation Post on the outskirts of the village. Not having orders to advance, we had outdistanced our radio and had no contact with our Field Artillery. We settled down for the night and heard tank motors. Thinking they were our tanks, we did not check them out. When machine gun, burp gun, and small arms firing began, we knew we were fighting German soldiers at close range. The battle lasted all night, tanks had fired on the building we were in and it was burning. A German called to us to surrender, we politely declined. Lt. Schlitten and I decided to leave and stepped outside. They fired at us with small arms, we dived into a basement window. I tore my uniform leg from knee to ankle, but was not harmed. We landed in

a coal bin. I chewed my radio code into a small wad and threw it into the coal so it could not be found. Lt. Schlitten said he was going for help and gave me a “direct order” to stay with the radio. He then left. As soon as he was gone, I used a sub-machine gun to destroy the radio, as it was no good to us. Hatfield and I then went upstairs with several other soldiers. Around 2 a.m. a German soldier ordered us to surrender or he would throw in a concussion grenade. We refused. He again issued the same order. This time a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. (the only officer left alive and I did not know his name) stated: “We have so many injured in here, we are not going to get them killed, we are going out”. (That morning our jeep driver, Cpl. Spence, had returned for supplies at the Bn. His jeep had four flat tires and was shot full of holes, but he was not injured.) With Lt. Schlitten gone, this left only Hatfield and me out of the original four of the observer team.

We were so tired we did not lift our hands as we walked out of the building. A German shoved a gun into my stomach and asked if I had a pistol. I answered “No” and he asked, “What’s that?”. I showed him a “K” ration. He grunted and walked away. That “K” ration was all I had to eat for the next three days. They put us – about 200 total – into a large barn and told us the war was over for us, that we were lucky, and offered us Camel cigarettes. I knew the cigarettes were taken from other U.S. soldiers, so I refused them. After spending the night in the barn, we were lined up the next morning and a German officer asked a question. When no one answered him, he became very angry and started yelling something. A U.S. soldier stated that if someone did not answer him, every tenth U.S. soldier would be shot. We forced that soldier to talk with him. He gave orders that we were not to try to escape and must continue to walk under guard as ordered. I had two knives that they had missed when I was searched. Often, I thought of killing a guard, then I did not think the odds were that good - one for me -. Finally, they took my knives and everything else from me. They even wanted my combat boots, but somehow, I kept them. (I still have them today).

We were captured at four kilometers from the German Border, near Saarbrücken. We walked three days without food or water, to Limburg. This was STALAG XII A. Here we were given a meal of bran and horse meat. Being hungry, it was good!! The next day I was called in to be interrogated. The German Officer asked me question after question. I gave my name, rank, and serial number. Then he told me where I had taken my training in the U.S.A., my commanding officer's name and rank, the type of radio I operated and more. But he did not know the type of howitzers we had. We had the 105 light howitzer, but I was not going to tell him. He also informed me that he had trained in Florida before he returned to Germany. That was where he got all the information on my outfit.

Life in STALAG XII A began at 6:00 a.m. with roll call outside the building. Then a horse-drawn wagon with large whiskey barrels on it, would come to the gate of the compound. We were given a cup of weak tea for breakfast. At noon the same wagon and barrels would arrive with dehydrated rutabaga soup. Again we got one cup of soup with tea mixed in it. Maybe a slice of black bread that actually had sawdust in it. We also ate grass when we could find it. One night a large tom cat was captured, killed, and cooked. I could not eat the cat, although I was very hungry. After the morning tea, we would go inside the building and spend the rest of the day killing body lice. I threw away my underwear when the lice became too much. We had only one blanket and about froze at night, but I could not take the lice.

Although we had very little to hide, when a German officer entered the building, a signal of "AIR RAID" was given so we could hide everything. The Germans, not knowing it was a signal, would yell "AIR RAID" when they entered. We had a room under the floor and had hidden the radio we made so we could get BBC. One day roll call was announced and we could not get two men out for the roll call. They had to stay in the underground room. The Germans

counted us several times, we were two short and had to stand in the snow for two hours. Finally they let us go inside. That night when we were counted, all men were there. They never did find out how it was done. On our radio, we heard President Roosevelt had died. The Germans were surprised the next day when we told them we knew he was dead, but that would not keep us from winning the war.

Knowing the U.S. POWs would need laws to abide by, a government was set up. When someone would steal something, he would go before the board. If food was stolen, the punishment was severe. For a second offense, I saw a man thrown into a toilet pit. Take into consideration we had no water and you can see how severe a punishment this was. He had to wait for rain to get cleaned up. He almost died from the lime in the pit. Our only water was one faucet turned on for one hour per day. Sometimes we did not get water for several days. No bathing, no washing clothes, no drinking water. We lived in dirt, lice, and bad odors.

The Russian POWs were our next door neighbors. A barbed wire fence separated us. When we had cigarettes, soap, etc, we would trade for food. One day a U.S. soldier carved a bar of soap to look like cigarettes, put them into a pack, and traded for food. That stopped the trading as the Russians no longer trusted us. Another day the Russians were very bad. The Germans turned two large dogs on their compound building. Later the door opened and two collars and two dog hides were thrown out. The Russians ate the dogs. When a Russian would die, the others would hold up his body to be counted at roll call so they could get more food rations.

When a freight car would come in with food rations from the Red Cross, the German soldiers would take what they wanted, then ration one box to ten POWs. If we got a can of food, a hole was

punched into the can so we could not store up food. If we got something that needed to be cooked, we built a blower-type machine that used very little fuel. This was made of tin cans (when they could be found). Attached is a drawing of the blower. The Germans made a statement they were afraid we would build an airplane of tin cans and escape. The Red Cross did not oversee the distribution of their parcels. I received one-tenth of one parcel while in POW camp. The American Red Cross parcel consisted of: 1 can powdered milk, 1 can soluble coffee, 1 oleomargarine, 1 liver pate or peanut butter, jam, 2 cans sardines, 1 box prunes, sugar, K2 biscuit cereal, vitamin tablets, 1 can corned beef, 5 packs of cigarettes, 2 candy bars, and 2 bars Swan soap. Again, I stress that the Red Cross did not oversee the distribution of the parcels. We were hungry!!!!

The POWs were classified into three groups. New ones would talk about their girlfriends, the second would talk about going home, and the third would talk about food. We would dream about eating. My dream was always about peanut butter. When I wrote home and asked for food, I wanted pancake flour, peanut butter, and cigarettes (to trade). To this day I love peanut butter.

The new POWs would write poems. Here is one by a POW in STALAG III B.

**“We Know”**

**As we sit here in this compound  
The days are rolling by  
We know we’ll be home safe and sound  
Our love for freedom will never die.  
This war’s going to be over  
We’ll all go home again  
To be leaving home – never –  
I’m a peace loving American.**

Often I am asked, “Were you mistreated?”. Yes, more mentally than physically. When I tried to escape (I did get away for three days) I was returned and put into a room six feet by six feet with a very small, high window. I was there for three days. This room was bedroom, dining room, and bathroom. Think how one would use all the facilities. I did receive one slice of black bread (complete with sawdust) and one container of water in those three days. After three days, I was again questioned and then returned to the compound. I also saw a soldier shot in the stomach when he started to pick up a cigarette butt. The most cruel thing I ever saw was a captured Frenchman killed. The Germans said he was a Jew. They tied him into a tree with a wire around his testicles. They took turns shooting him with a burp gun. YES – we were mistreated!!! No food, no water, no clothes, lots of lice, and illness.

By this time, the war was getting closer to Germany, and close to our camp. The Germans decided to move us away from the front. We were placed in boxcars with so many men to a car that we could only sit down. We had one five gallon bucket for bathroom purposes and most of the men had dysentery. What a mess! We were placed on a railhead and did not move for three days. Our Air Force came over and bombed us. They did not hit the cars, but came close enough that the cars rocked and rolled. We prayed! The third day we pulled out. The next stop was Furstenburg – am – Oder or STALAG III B. This is where they had the showers hooked up to gas. I was in the shower, but did not get the gas treatment. Why?? I also saw hundreds of men hauled out on wagons like cordwood. They had died from gas, cold, or other means. Later on, I saw the kilns where they cremated people. Most were buried in a single grave dug by a bulldozer and covered by a bulldozer. This camp was about the same as the other.

We were moved again. This time we marched 120 miles on solid ice. On this trip I saw a Sgt. Johnson from Carmel, Indiana shot through the head when he sat down to rest. I also tried to get away again and was almost killed. I was behind a tree when a German on horseback saw me. He would make his horse rear up and strike at me, but I would always manage to get behind a tree. Just before I got back to the group, the German pulled his gun. I ducked low and mingled into the group of POWs. Talk about being lucky! While on this march, we were fed one can of cheese per three men. Our can was spoiled, so we would steal eggs, rutabagas, and anything else we could eat. At night we would milk the cows and drink the milk. Our destination proved to be the final POW camp we would be in. It was STALAG III A located in Lukenwald.

The Germans realized the end was near for them and this camp was a little easier to live in. We were fed a little more food, but still dirty containers. I got dysentery so bad I was transferred to a



POW hospital. Here I had a cot to lay on. I also met my best POW buddy – Archie O’Conner. He took his slice of bread and mine, burned them black and forced me to eat them. After a French doctor told me I would die, Archie stopped my bowel movements and saved my life. From then on, Archie and I were never separated. He was also a trader with the Germans and we ate better yet. (Archie died of a heart attack in 1971.) While in the hospital, I also met a local man from Columbus, Springhorn. He became a very well known chiropractic doctor. He recently died.

One morning, thousands of the U.S.A. and British airplanes started coming over our camp. When they got over the camp, they would split up and go different directions. We did not know at the time, but our camp was a check point for them. We put a large red cross on the roof, but they had known we were there all the time. Some of the Germans came in and told us that when the Russians arrived, they wanted to be our prisoners. One old man gave us his gun and we brought him back to the U.S. Army with us. He was one of the better Germans and had treated us well in the camp. Soon after the appearance of the planes, the Germans were gone. Russian troops came into a small, small town near the camp and a young girl in her early twenties came to the fence and asked if we could get her mother into a hospital. When asked what was wrong with her mother, she informed us the Russians had raped her. We asked if she had been harmed and she said, “No, they only wanted experienced women.” We could not help her.

A Russian tank with a woman driver came up to the gate. She waved us back, then proceeded to tear down the fence and gate post with the tank. We thought we were free!!!! No, we were moved inside another fence and told we would have to register so the Russians could collect money for each one liberated. The next day we were moved to Adolf Hitler Lager, where Hitler kept his number one Air Force. Here we had better food, lodging, and water to drink.

Russian women guarded us, and when I tried to get a German typewriter, she put a gun on me and said “NO!”.

The next day we stood in line all day long and registered. That was April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1945. On April 29<sup>th</sup>, 1945, we were still there. An American Captain came into camp and tried to get us out. The Russians refused to let us go. On the night of May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945, a Colonel sent a black man into camp. He told us there would be trucks behind the hedgerow in the morning. If we could get onto the trucks, they would take us back to the U.S. Army. After planning, one man was to run. The rest of us would take the Russian guard and not let them shoot the man running. When the man started to run, we got the guard. He was killed with a German bayonet. (I brought the bayonet home with me.) If one or one dozen men got on a truck, it pulled out. My buddy – Archie O’Conner – got on first, and as the truck was rolling, he grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the truck. I still wonder how many got out before the Russians discovered we were going. There were 5,400 American soldiers in that camp. As we were going down the Autobahn (super highway) an American P38 airplane flew very close to our truck and we thought we were attacked by the enemy. He wagged his wings and flew off, knowing we were “Ex POWs”. The trucks took us to Camp Lucky Strike, France. There we were deloused, given showers, new clothes, and food. We were ordered to eat five small meals a day, then drink an eggnog each night before we went to bed. I went from below 90 pounds to 148 pounds in no time at all. When I returned home, I was a strapping 175 pounds. I looked swollen all over, and it did not last long. Soon I was back to normal weight. Home at last!!

**The following is a list of some of the POWs I came to know well:**

**Archie R. O'Conner  
St. Thomas, ND  
(Died 1971)**

**Tom Thompson  
Linton, IN**

**Tony Walpert  
Philadelphia, PA**

**Albert Maudice  
Philadelphia, PA**

**Harold (Ace) Egnlehart  
Reading, PA**

**John Pyrg  
Connecticut**

**D. N. Sturgis  
Indianapolis, IN**

**Charles Holtzman  
Long Island, NY**

**Jim Colliers  
Campbellsburg, IN**

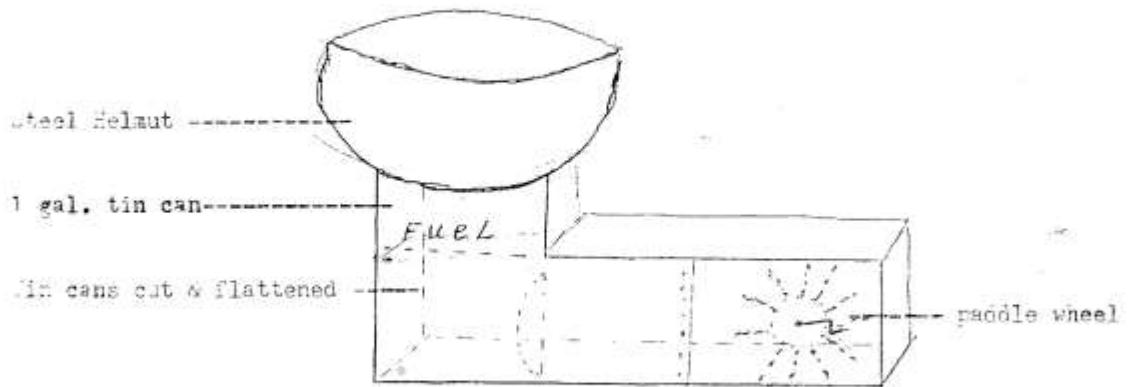
**Robert Woods  
Bloomington, IN**

**John Eldon  
Detroit, MI**

**William Hurley Miller  
Columbus, Indiana  
February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1985**

USED IN P.O.W. Camp To HEAT WATER IF WE HAD T.

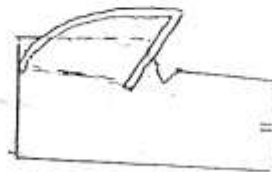
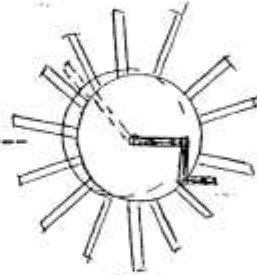
P.O.W. Blower for cooking ---



Tin cans cut & bent, then secured with a nail hit by a rock.



paddle wheel made of tin & wood



G.I. can opener used to cut cans.