



# BARBED WIRE DAYS

## BY NUMBER 1650

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On the morning of February 23rd, 1944 I was known as Staff Sergeant Robert A. Breneman, S/N 17071400, first flight engineer and top turret gunner on "Round Trip Rosie," a B-24 heavy bomber flying out of Manduria Italy in formation with other bombers of the 450th bomb group on a mission to Styer Austria. By that evening, and for one year, two months and seven days, I was number 1650. Nothing more!

I do not know what the German assigned number represented and can only speculate that I may have been the 1,650th USAAF non commissioned officer to fall into their hands. Actually, I did fall----by parachute to the mountains near Grunau Austria as our bomber was downed by German FW-190 fighters. That account is chronicled in "Round Trip Rosie--A Short History" that I wrote in late 2001. This account describes some of my experiences while a prisoner of the German military.

I suspect that the fastest way to lose all of one's freedom is to become a prisoner of an enemy. For well fed and respected USA military personnel it was a jolt to become just a number with little nourishment for survival and no rights whatsoever. It was a journey with no knowledge of where it was going or when it would end. My journey began with my capture on the mountain above Grunau and the transport that evening by three members of the Gestapo to the Wells Air Base where the German fighters that attacked us were based.

The Germans had collected a number of us airmen that day and I was one of 20 or so who slept on the floor of one of their hangars that night. The next morning we were herded into a box car, the door shut and locked from the outside and left wondering, what next? The train rumbled on through the day and finally stopped in a marshaling yard that turned out to be at Frankfurt on the Elbe. The marshaling yard had been bombed extensively and some of its citizens emerged from the rubble to throw stones at us as we marched to a nearby building containing an interrogation facility.

Interrogation lasted no more than 15 or 20 minutes but there was an interminable wait to be called out of a 6 X 6 foot "standing room only" cell where we were getting very warm and tired. Perhaps it was a way of softening us up. All USA personnel had been instructed to give only "your name, rank and serial number" during any interrogation and that is what I did. *"What bomb group were you with and where is it located?"* "My name is Robert A. Breneman, Staff Sergeant, Serial Number 17071400." *"What was your target?"* "My name is Robert A. Breneman-----." And so it went. Actually, I think the interrogator was aware that, as non-coms, we had little or no useful information to divulge. The officers (who were sent to camps reserved for them) may have experienced a more thorough grilling.

I stated earlier that, as prisoners, "we had no rights whatsoever." However, we did have what was considered to be a "bill of rights" from the "International Convention Relating to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, signed at Geneva July 27, 1929 and ratified by a majority of the world powers including the United States and Germany. It set forth the rules and standards for treatment of prisoners of war. However, we were to discover that the rules of a given prison camp as declared by *Der Kommandant* would govern.

The American Red Cross and YMCA operated beyond those standards and following the interrogation I was given what was called an "initial capture kit" of about 50 items provided by the Red Cross. It was a collapsible suitcase containing an Army overcoat, underwear (including the long woolen type), socks, toilet articles and other essentials. This may have been the only advantage of being captured early in the campaign since many who came later when the infrastructure of Germany was nearly crippled arrived in camp with whatever they were wearing when they bailed out. For the most part, this was a heated flying suit and heated felt slippers that would not serve them well in the future.

With the second day of captivity nearing an end; we were again stuffed into a box car bound for an unknown destination. The European box car is much smaller than its American counterpart and still bore the markings familiar to our fathers who fought in World War One; "40 Hommes-----8 Chevaux" (40 men or 8 horses). One was suggested that our fathers slept on the same straw in 1918. In my case there were upwards of 60 of us jammed into its space and no straw. The toilet facility was a bucket placed in the center. There was not room for everyone to lie down so we took turns while the others slept sitting against the walls. About twice each day the door of our car would be unlocked and some food passed in. The first occasion brought thin slices of a very dense dark bread and some ersatz coffee while the second offering was boiled potatoes; one each. We were beginning to feel intense hunger pangs.

There were three or four cars of American P.O.W's; a cargo that had the lowest priority resulting in many hours of our three day journey spent sidetracked while more important freight rolled by. So, where were we going? We knew that our journey was taking us North and East and when off-loaded we found ourselves at a prison camp near the town of Heydekrug in East Prussia at the Lithuanian border and not far from the Baltic sea. It was "Stalag Luft 6" or officially "Kriegsgefangenenlager der Luftwaffe Nr. 6."

After being processed (finger printed and photographed) in an outer building we were marched into the main compound and saw the place that would be our home for the duration. Or so we thought! We would learn that its layout was typical of all German prison camps. At Heydekrug there were rows of barracks 3 deep facing a combination activities and parade ground with a few other buildings housing a kitchen, showers, latrine (an enlarged out-house) nearby and one reserved for activities. I had been assigned to a barracks facing the parade ground, the number of which I do not recall, but they were all the same inside. In fact, if you remember seeing the movie "Hogans Heroes" or its TV sequel, the interior of our barracks was very much like that.

They were about 20 feet wide and perhaps 80 to 100 feet long. I believe ours had 80 men sleeping in double tiered bunks set perpendicular to the outer walls. We soon discovered they were not designed to rest the weary bones of humans! Each bunk had 6 wooden slats about 5 inches wide upon which rested a mattress made of "Gunny Sack" material partially filled with wood shavings that sagged into the open spaces between the slats. We endured that two inch lumpy platform in preference to sleeping on the floor where, during the night, we could be stepped on by others walking to the rear of the barracks to use our nocturnal latrine. A large bucket! The area nearest the door had a rather large European type brick fire box for heating and a table with several chairs.

Two barbed wire fences spaced about 20 feet apart and perhaps 10 feet tall enclosed the perimeter of the compound. A series of guard towers of the type depicted by the sketch on the first page were equally spaced around the perimeter. Each tower contained a mounted machine gun, search light and a guard armed with a rifle. Armed guards with police dogs patrolled outside the perimeter day and night. A low wood railing 50 feet inside the inner fence marked the "no trespassing" zone. The guards had orders to shoot any prisoner who dared go beyond the rail. Adjacent to ours was a similar compound housing British POW's who we could converse with across a narrow service road between the two.

We found the camp rules to be short and succinct:

- Salute all German Officers.
- All German personnel regardless of rank are your superior.
- No trading with or bribing of German personnel.
- Group meetings only with permission and the presence of a German interpreter.
- You are allowed to write two letters and four postcards each month.
- Go beyond the wood rail or if found outside at night----you will be shot.

There were other regulations, one of which required a count of the prisoners twice daily. We lined up in columns of five to be counted in the morning and again before evening lock-up. If the count didn't match the record there would be a search for the missing person(s). Most often a discrepancy resulted from someone getting "sack time."

The required standard mail form was a thin single sheet about half the size of an 8 1/2 X 11 which didn't allow for lengthy messages but I know my parents, upon receipt of my first letter, were greatly relieved to learn that I had survived without incurring so much as a scratch. Outgoing and incoming mail turned out to be a "hit or miss thing". I know that my parents received only a few of those I wrote and only a couple of theirs found their way to me.

It was the end of February and at our northern latitude the sun set about 3:00 PM and didn't rise until about 8:00 AM. So, initially, our days were short but lengthened steadily as spring and summer arrived when darkness came as late as 11:00 PM and daylight early as 3:00 AM. This had a profound effect on our activities during the winter months since we were locked in the barracks with the windows shuttered from the outside long before dark and for a considerable time after sunrise.

## STALAG LUFT 4

It would be a week or more before we learned that the "running of the gauntlet" was ordered by *der kommandant* of the camp. Vengeance, we were told, for losing some of his family to Allied bombs not long before. In the meantime, we settled into our barracks in a compound larger than Stalag Luft 6 but with the same arrangement of barbed wire, guard towers and "no trespassing zone". The barracks, however, were about twice as wide and over 100 feet long. Also, the interior layout was different with rooms on both sides of a central hall leading to a one-hole latrine and wash room at the rear. Each room was furnished with 8 triple deck bunks accommodating 24 prisoners and---yes, each bunk had 6 wood slats but, this time, an elongated paper sack partially filled with wood shavings. They were as uncomfortable as those at camp 6 but at least the wood shavings didn't sift down to the bunk below. The forward part of the barrack near the door had a table, a couple of benches and a "pot-bellied" stove.

Our camp was located near the village of Kiefheide which I estimated to be about 70 miles from where we disembarked at Stettin. Many prisoners had come from other camps that were in the path of our advancing armies and some of them were put in one of three adjacent compounds (Lagers) labeled A, B, and C. We were in Lager D. As before, the British and Canadian airmen were next door to us where we could converse from time to time. In a few months, as more airmen arrived, the camp population increased to about 10,000.

We again set about establishing an elected mini government with a fellow by the name of Francis Pauls from Lansdale, PA becoming the camp leader (he and others elected to that position were called the "American Man of Confidence"). He was also the leader of our compound, Lager D. It was like starting all over again. The kitchen menu was the same and there were no Red Cross food parcels or YMCA equipment received until late fall. Therefore, our pangs of hunger increased and idle time was spent walking the perimeter of the compound. Well, not exactly!

Prisoners of war not only desired but were obligated to escape if possible. So, we began digging two tunnels. One was to reach beyond the outside fence and the other was to connect to the British compound so that men could crawl through the tunnel to stand in formation in either place at the twice daily count in the event that one or more of us had made it out beyond the wire. There was a problem! The soil in that part of Germany was sandy and needed support to avoid cave-in. This necessitated a call for bed slats for which I and most others contributed one. If sleeping on 6 bed slats was meant for the damned, 5 became the desolation of the soul but we had no choice but to endure.

We heard that the tunnel connecting to the British compound had been completed but the one to the outside world was discovered early by the Germans and filled in. Thus, the connecting tunnel would only fulfill its intended purpose if someone were to escape by another route. To my knowledge, no one ever did. Also, none of our bed slats were recovered.



Activities and our spirits picked up in the fall when the YMCA sports equipment, books and other materials began to arrive. We built an outdoor stage where those with talent could perform and there were regularly scheduled classes instructed by men who had received specialized training. I attended a class in architecture and found it interesting. One of the most popular stage shows was a burlesque where some of the more shapely guys dressed as females and danced to recorded music. The receipt of some Red Cross food parcels helped diminish the ever present twinges of hunger and, of course, the almighty cigarette maintained its status as the medium of exchange.

The mood at the camp became more gloomy as the winter months arrived but our hopes of liberation rose with our daily briefing of news that the Allies in the West and Russians in the East were now making rapid advances. Christmas was celebrated with a church service and the singing of carols augmented by some with "Klim-Can-Booze". I had received a couple of letters while others had seen none. Getting a parcel from home was largely unheard of but to my surprise a box arrived from my parents in January containing 6 cartons of cigarettes. I had requested them in one of my letters mailed months ago. I WAS RICH! But not for long!

By late January the Russians were again within striking distance of our camp. Perhaps this time, we thought, the Germans would leave and we would be liberated by the Russians. But for some reason, the Germans considered us to be of value and we were given orders on the 2nd of February to prepare to abandon camp the following morning.

This time, Slim and I made backpacks from shirts by sewing up the bottom and also sewing the end of the sleeves to the bottom. A few stitches up the front kept the buttons from popping open. We proceeded to stuff them with what food and clothing we had and gave them a try. They worked great! I would wear my light jacket where I had placed many packs of cigarettes inside the lining. We already were wearing our long underwear and when the time came we would put on our overcoats and tie two blankets around our necks in horse collar fashion.

With no advanced warning the German guards entered our barracks and searched everyone. Unhappily, they found the cigarette packages in my jacket and confiscated all but a pack or two. I was back to being poor!

## A LONG WALK TO FREEDOM

The call to leave came before dawn on the morning of February 3rd and Slim and I fell in line outside in the cold night. As before, we had no information of where we were going or how we would get there. It did not occur to us that at least 160 "40 & 8"s" would be needed to transport 10,000 prisoners. If it had, we would have concluded that a far fewer number would be available and that many of us were in for a hike. It was dark and we couldn't tell if any of the other compounds were being evacuated at this time.

We marched out of Stalag Luft 4, Lager D, in smaller groups of two or three hundred men with guards spaced roughly 30 yards apart; all 2000 of us forming a column nearly a mile long.

Some speculated that we were heading back to the Baltic to board another ship. Others had the vain hope that a marshaling yard with "40 & 8's" would appear in the distance. Neither of these occurred and we continued on through the rural landscape stopping occasionally to eat or rest and to receive fresh replacement guards arriving by truck. More than 16 hours later and well after dark we were led into an open field and told to bed down for the night. Slim and I placed two blankets on the ground and used the other two for cover. Having walked an estimated 35 miles and being exhausted, we promptly fell asleep. It would have been nice if we had turned our shoes over or brought them under the blankets to prevent them from filling with the snow that fell during the night.

So, in the morning, with wet shoes and socks, we fell in line to continue the march. To where, we hadn't a clue! Our heading was generally west away from the advancing Russians whom we hoped would catch up to us. As yet, the Germans had not provided any food and we were living off whatever was in our backpacks which we knew would soon be depleted. But that night we were led into a field near a farm house where they had prepared boiled potatoes. We received one each and bedded down for the night.

OUR MARCH WOULD CONTINUE FOR NEARLY 3 MONTHS AND TODAY, 57 YEARS LATER, MOST OF THE PARTICULARS OF THE DAYS AND WEEKS HAVE BEEN ERASED FROM MEMORY. ONLY GENERALITIES AND THE HIGHLIGHTS OR "LOWLIGHTS" REMAIN.

At some point during the summer at Stalag Luft 4, a group of Russian prisoners had been marched into an adjacent compound. They were ragged, dirty, hungry and some without shoes. The American and British POW's collected food, clothing and even a pair or two of shoes that were delivered to their side of the fence and we assume they appreciated it. One day during our march we arrived to spend the night at some buildings where Russian soldiers had been imprisoned for many months. We were in the same rooms with them and we were the ragged and weary but they offered nothing and only heard them utter some unfriendly grunts. I questioned if I really wanted to be liberated by the Russians.

With time, the various groups became dispersed, mostly the result of being sent to various fields or barns to spend the night but we all were experiencing hunger, dysentery and losing weight. We found that the cows, sheep or horses provided a great deal of warmth when sleeping in barns. Also, there was always a bed of straw upon which to rest. Unfortunately, with the straw came little white lice that found a comfortable home in our long underwear. Actually, they were not much of a bother, but still memorable.

By now the German Luftwaffe had been decimated and the Allies had mastery of the skies and we would occasionally see our P-51 and British Spitfire fighters zoom overhead. We did not presume that they would recognize us as prisoners instead of German military so we always ran for cover, if there was any. On one such occasion, we were located on a hillside overlooking a road where there were German vehicles. A Spitfire appeared, waved his wings in recognition and proceeded to destroy the vehicles in the distance. It was quite a show!

Our daily ration consisted of the boiled potato at night and ersatz coffee plus any thing we could grovel from the dirt on the way. I once picked a small shriveled carrot off the road and immediately consumed it. At least I think it was a carrot. I never relished eating charcoal but there was the thought it would curb our dysentery so we proceeded to burn twigs and consume the charred remains. Not my favorite dish but it seemed to help. Of course, the bathroom was anywhere by the side of the road.

There were a few times when a wagon loaded with that dark dense bread appeared and we would cut a loaf into very thin slices to divide among 20 men. We usually were allowed to build fires if camped in a field. Sometimes it was near a barnyard which came in handy once when a chicken wondered within reach that I grabbed by the neck. It didn't have a chance to squawk and became a tasty meal for several of us.

It might have been a morning in the latter part of March when I and several others emerged from a barn too weak to continue. We simply sat down next to the road awaiting whatever fate was in store. The group formed up and I said goodbye to Slim who I would not see again while in Europe. I believe there were four of us with a single guard and we just sat there the better part of the morning until a horse drawn wagon arrived into which we were loaded. It had picked up others from groups nearby and bumped along for several hours until we came to a railroad siding where there was a train of open gondola cars. We were ordered into one and I lay down at one of the ends on the cold steel floor which had a slope to the center where the unloading doors were located. Sometime later, I felt the jar of an engine being attached and we pulled out for another unknown destination.

Darkness came and I laid there becoming cold and miserable and needing to reposition from time to time as I slowly slid to the center. I wasn't at all sure I would survive the night but at daylight the train stopped, I know not where, at what appeared to be a field hospital. There were many other American POW's there and a few British, most if not all, from Stalag Luft 4. With a few days rest and, more importantly, a decent amount of food, I was pronounced well and fit by a doctor as were others including a fellow by the name of Harry Dever with whom I would spend the rest of my days as a prisoner.

I can't recall if we had another train ride or were marched out of this camp. Either way, we were back walking West in a group numbering perhaps 80 or so and again sleeping in fields and barns and receiving our daily potato and ersatz coffee. One field was located on a hillside where we could see the runways of a Luftwaffe airfield. To everyone's surprise and astonishment, an aircraft with no propellers, nor the familiar sound of a piston engine, banked and landed. Some thought it was a sail plane but it didn't look like one and besides, it made a whining noise. We wouldn't know until our return to the States that it was an ME-262 jet fighter and that the course of the air war would have swung in their favor had the Luftwaffe had them earlier in large numbers.

On another day, at about noon, we were herded into the second floor of a brick building located in a sizeable village. We were puzzled because we had never stopped that early in the day. Then we got word that Hitler had ordered all prisoners shot.

There was a scramble to retrieve anything from our backpacks that could be used as a weapon. There would be no sense in just sitting there taking it. It was a very nervous afternoon and night with no sleep but in the morning we were moved outside, formed our column and continued down the road. The German Generals had refused to obey Hitler's order.

April brought warmer weather so I and others cut off our overcoats at the knees which was left ragged and unhemmed. The white lice had multiplied but still were not of any significant discomfort. We didn't know where we were or what was happening in the war so we just walked on. However, some of the citizens of a relatively large village had lined up along the street to watch us pass and a man near us kept repeating in English "it won't be long now", "it won't be long now". And it wasn't!

The younger guards had been sent to the various fronts weeks earlier and their older replacements were not inclined to walk far each day. So for us, it became a "walk in the park", wondering around a few miles now and then but often staying in one place for several days-----probably until we ran out of potatoes in that area. But we were still starving!

Each day of walking brought us a little closer to the Elbe river and at the end of April we got word that the British were on the other side and ready to cross. There were perhaps 20 of us in a barn inside a white fence next to a dirt road at a farm on the western edge of a small village.. During the afternoon and early evening we heard the sounds of battle in the distance. **OUR TIME HAD COME!**

I slept well in the straw that night and was the first to awake and leave the barn shortly after dawn. There was a single older guard with a rifle standing at the gate. He and I conversed for awhile as best we could. He, of course, was uneasy not knowing what the day would bring. Nor did I, until both of us saw an armored column racing towards us from the west. The guard began to shake uncontrollably and I motioned to him to give me his rifle whereupon I opened the gate and walked to the center of the road.

I would make other dumb decisions in my life but this would be the dumbest because I failed to recognize that with my ragged clothing and beard that had grown for 3 months, I no longer looked like an American aviator. I stood there with a rifle waving my arms and looking down the barrel of a 30 caliber machine gun mounted on the front of the lead half-track. I could have been shot, but instead they stopped and I told them that we were American prisoners of war and that there were a couple of "Brits" in the barn. The others, hearing the commotion, came running out to greet our liberators. **WE WERE FREE AND I WAS NO LONGER NUMBER 1650!**

The British gave us printed posters to tack-up warning the Germans to stay in their homes and told us to secure the village. There wasn't much to secure for it was a tiny place. A couple of them had gone into the farm house and I followed shortly and found them sitting at a table with the old farm couple who were shaking. I don't recall their words but they were giving them a hard time which the couple obviously understood.



I sat down and listened for awhile but then intervened to say, in effect, that this old couple were not the ones who bombed London or fought at the beaches in Normandy. They were civilians and should be left alone. I sensed that they studied my gaunt eyes for a moment and then rose and left. This was simply the code of conduct for the Americans and British. The Russians? (I would later read that they slaughtered thousands who were so unfortunate to be in their path).

The British gave us some of their rations and said they thought an American Engineering unit had located in a town to the southwest. The two "Brit" ex-prisoners hopped aboard the lead half-track and the column roared off to the East to engage the enemy. That is, if there was an enemy left to engage!

I am not sure of the date but think it was April 30th. If so, it was the day that Hitler, with the Russians advancing a few blocks from his bunker in Berlin, took his own life by a gunshot through the roof of his mouth and who with others that had committed suicide were carried up to the courtyard and cremated in a pool of flaming gasoline. The German military units had collapsed and those that could were heading West to surrender to the Americans as choice number one, the British as choice number two and the Russians----never.

It felt great to be free and four of us walked through the village, which we found was named Zarrington, looking for a means of transportation. There was a small factory at the east end which we entered and saw an electric cart used to move heavy machinery. There was charge in the batteries so we climbed aboard and proceeded West but it wasn't long before it stalled climbing a small hill. It had died and we were back to walking.

We speculated on how far we had walked since leaving Stalag Luft 4 and guessed that, in a straight line, we were perhaps 350 miles down the road. But we never travelled in a straight line so we would have walked considerably further than that. That afternoon we stopped at a farm house and knocked. The frightened couple inside, seeing we were not armed (I had left the rifle with the British) eventually opened the door a crack. We offered them soap (small wrapped cakes like those found in hotels that came in Red Cross Parcels) in exchange for food. Soap was very scarce in Germany and they responded by giving us some bread.

In late afternoon we came upon, and entered, an abandoned SS camp and were greeted by a group of women. They were Polish slaves of the SS who had left two days earlier leaving some of their food and other supplies behind. It was difficult to comprehend how delighted they were to learn that we were Americans and after some talk they proceeded to prepare the first decent meal that any of us had had in over a year. We slept well on German Army cots that night and left in the morning to track down that American Engineering group or any other GI's in the area.

We had walked South on a dirt road for several hours when we noticed a cloud of dust in the distance and, as it got closer, recognized the color and insignia of a German command car leading an armored column.

It looked to me like I was to become number 1650 again but the car stopped, an officer stepped out and asked, where can we surrender to the Americans? We were startled but I said, "right here"! I've wondered how he recognized us as being American personnel and can only guess that since we looked neither British or Russian and certainly not German, we must be American. He withdrew his side arm (a German Luger) and handed it to me. I motioned for the keys to his command car whereupon we looked inside, opened and inspected the contents of the trunk, circled the next vehicle in line attempting to look severe and officious, returned to the command car, told the officer we would go and return with our commanding officer who would formally accept their surrender. Then drove off, but had to wait until out of sight before bursting into laughter.

We had wheels, but where was the US army? The Brit's had said southwest of Zarrington. We had gone West, then South but since we couldn't turn around and go further South with the German column sitting there we opted to go West at the first chance. We bumped along a dirt road for perhaps a half hour when the car coughed, sputtered and came to a stop, out of gas. Having just gotten accustomed to riding we were again walking.

There wasn't much of anything along that rural road but in about two hours we saw the signs of civilization ahead and to our delight as we neared the village, the tents, trucks and personnel of the US Army. It was the Engineering group and we were the first ex-prisoners to stumble into their midst.

We attracted a crowd of GI's who wanted to hear our stories and it was gratifying to see them dig into their duffle bags to give us things that we hadn't had in months. One of their officers appointed a search team that left in trucks to find other ex-prisoners who might be wondering around out there. Whether or not they went to that German column and formally accepted their surrender was not revealed to me, nor did I care. However, they returned with a half dozen other ex-Stalag Luft 4 guys and we were asked to come to a large 3 story home at 6:00 PM. They were using the place as their command headquarters and, upon arrival, we were led to the third floor where a long banquet table had been set with table cloths, fine china and silverware with the center pieces being a long line of dishes filled with delicious food that they had spent the afternoon preparing. We hadn't seen anything like it since before leaving our homes to join the service and, of course, devoured most if not all of it. They provided us with rooms in which to sleep and later that evening I laid down on a mattress with a pillow for the first time in many, many months.

We spent several days there during which time the GI's combed the countryside bringing in more of us. I had discarded my dirty blankets, overcoat and backpack but was unwilling, as yet, to part with my long underwear. We borrowed a staff car one day and just tooled around the area, sometimes entering villages where the Germans, having spotted our army vehicle, would scurry back inside their homes.

It came time to leave and we were one of three trucks full of ex-prisoners that were transported to a distant airfield where several DC 3 transports and a host of other ex-prisoners awaited us.

We left the runway just after dark headed for Nancy, France and after crossing the French border observed fireworks being sent skyward from town after town. It was May 8th and the German high command had signed the surrender papers late the night before. IT WAS "VE" DAY! THE WAR IN EUROPE WAS OVER!

They moved us from the airfield at Nancy to the railroad station where we were astonished to find a long line of tables on the platform holding an enormous quantity of food. Enough to feed an army, I thought. And I guess that is what it was meant to do because there were hundreds of us arriving by the hour from all over Germany. After filling our stomachs we boarded, for the last time, another "40 & 8." But this time, there were only 12 in the car which had a bed of straw at one end with blankets and pillows. Moreover, we could now leave the door open and watch the scenery or jump off at various stops where there were more tables of food or to use the bathroom.

The train headed south and pulled into a camp that had been specifically setup to receive former prisoners. I don't recall its name or location but I was assigned a bunk and was scheduled for delousing and showering where I discarded all of my old clothing including, at last, the long underwear, lice and all. It was great to be totally clean and after dressing in my new issue of clothing I set about to familiarize myself with the surroundings. I had been issued a cablegram form that would be sent at no charge which I addressed to my parents telling them I had been liberated, was well and safely under the protective wing of the American armed forces.

Then I noticed a long line of men with their mess cups being filled from a large vat containing egg nog. There were many kinds of food that we craved, among them were eggs, milk, butter and fruit (potatoes were not on anyone's list). I was quick to join the line and after my cup was filled, I did as all others did; returned to the end of the line and drank the contents before getting a refill. I would do this over and over again each day. The long endured scarcity of food had a profound effect. I doubt that anyone retired for the night without first stashing some food under the pillow or on the floor next to their bunk. I remember devouring a large can of peaches one night and spreading butter a quarter of an inch thick on bread another night. The caloric intake had become immense.

I recall but one other event of significance during my stay; sighting Lou Samsa, the pilot of our B-24 bomber and the only other crew member to survive, in the crowd. We had a long talk, recalling the flaming descent of "Round Trip Rosie" to the mountains of Austria and recounting our days as POW's. Thank God it was over!

I had weighed-in at 95 pounds and left 3 weeks later at 130 pounds on a flight to a port at Le Harve France where I boarded the Liberty ship SS Normacmoon. While still on deck, one of the officers asked for volunteers. Two that would handle the public address system; one for handicrafts and three to publish a daily newspaper. I volunteered to work on the newspaper and much to my surprise and delight the three of us were given a stateroom close to the radio room. One of us would go to the radio room periodically and pickup the news. Since I was the only one who could type, I edited and typed master pages while another ran them off on a mimeograph that the third man distributed throughout the ship.

It was an easy and satisfying task which kept everyone abreast with what was happening in the Pacific. In the afternoon of the fifth day we glided into the harbor of New York City, past the Statue of Liberty and docked within view of the towering buildings of Manhattan. I called my mother and father from Grand Central Station who were overjoyed to learn that I was back safely in the good old USA. I then boarded a train to my home town, Des Moines, Iowa and two nights later stepped off and into the arms of my loving parents.

### EPILOG

*I was on a 60 day furlough and had the use of my dear brothers' car who was serving on one of the Aleutian Islands. It would be several weeks before I had the courage to pull out of the driveway without first stuffing some food into the glove compartment. Near the end of my stay, the Japanese surrendered and I joined a wild celebration of the end of World War Two in downtown Des Moines. I left the next day for a week of R & R at the Cadillac hotel on Miami Beach and was then transferred to Cochran Field in Macon, GA where I was discharged from military service on October 3, 1945.*

*I entered college at Iowa State University in January of 1946 and on November 26, 1947 married a beautiful blond named Norine who stands beside me at this moment, beautiful as ever, as I type these final two words-----THE END.*



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