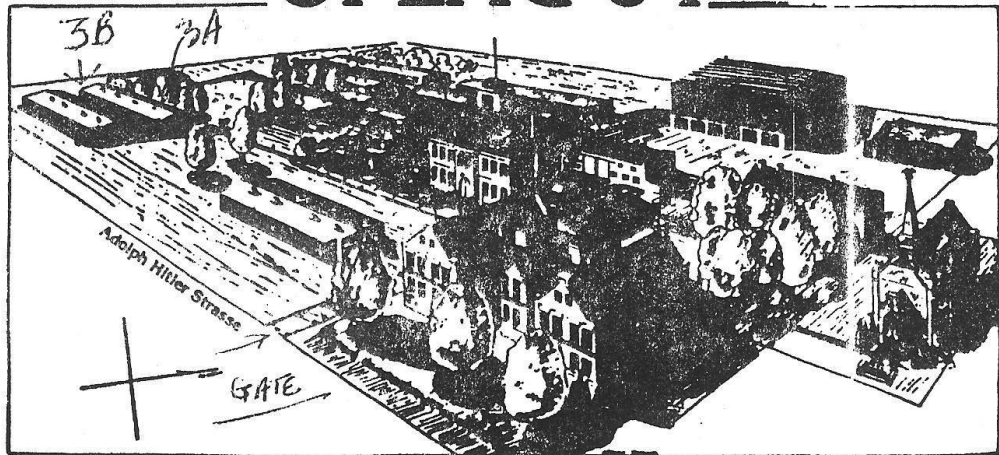


Curtis
Livingston

OFLAG 64



Drawing does not show the three, high, barbed wire fences surrounding the 900 feet by 1200 feet area of the P.O.W. Camp; nor are the eleven guard towers shown.
BY DANIEL BICKERS

September 13, 1943 fell on a Monday. I know that now but at that time, I was not concerned with the day of the week or month. In combat, days tend to fuse one into another and you have one primary concern: staying alive.

Our reinforced battalion of approximately 1,100 officers and men was ordered into a defensive position near the Italian town of Salerno in anticipation of an attack by a German armored division of some 13,000 men. It was not a comforting feeling to be outnumbered by enemy force by more than 10 to 1.

I was the S-2, or intelligence officer, of my battalion. Earlier that day, through an interpreter, I had interrogated an Italian officer who had surrendered to our unit. He informed me that the Germans (with whom he had previously served) planned to attack our position with two armored brigades, each with about 3,500 troops. More importantly, they were equipped with tanks and armored personnel carriers. I related that and other information to my battalion commander. He chose to disbelieve it and did not order our troops to dig foxholes. He did order one of our four companies to an outpost position about one mile ahead of our lines. At about noon, the Germans stampeded about six or seven hundred horses through our position in an effort to learn our exact defenses. Minutes later, the outpost company commander reported his position was being overrun and that he was withdrawing. The battalion commander ordered me to go up to the outpost company and direct the commander to withdraw to the right flank of the battalion. By now, we had lost both radio and telephone contact with the company. I started out by hitching a ride on an artillery observer's jeep. He had to turn off about half way to the outpost company so I jumped off and continued on foot. Suddenly, the jeep seemed to explode. It had received a direct hit from a German tank. Simultaneously, I came under a hailstorm of German artillery fire. I took cover in a small ditch and was unable to move for over two hours while artillery shells were bursting steadily all around me. Later, when I raised up from my 18 inch deep ditch, a German half track opened up on me with machine guns. I was not hit but my back pack had four bullet holes in it. While trying to keep an eye on the half track, I heard a voice say, "Hans op!" I looked over my shoulder and into the business end of a German rifle. I had just become a prisoner of war or as the Germans would say, a "kriegsgefangener."

In a motorcycle sidecar with another German guard on a following motorcycle, I was taken back to German headquarters and, under guard, permitted to sleep. (It was dark before we reached the headquarters.) The following morning, a German Army Captain had me brought into his tent where he asked me to have a seat. He was quite pleasant. He asked my name, noted my rank as 1st Lieutenant, and asked me my serial number. He then asked me my age. I told him, "I won't give you that information but I can tell you that today is my birthday." He smiled, reached into a drawer of his field desk and handed me a small tin of chocolate and said, "Happy birthday, Lieutenant. You may go."

The following day, I was joined by another US Army lieutenant by the name of Spence. He was from another regiment in my division and had been captured the same day as I. About 2:00 PM, an American P-51 attack plane flew over our area and departed. I immediately asked the German guard, in sign language, for a shovel. He laughed but got one for me. Lt Spence and I promptly dug slit trenches. We were sure the pilot of that P-51 had seen the German tents and vehicles and equally sure he would return with help. We were not disappointed. We had no sooner finished digging our trenches than five P-51's came over the nearest hill, making strafing runs on the headquarters with .50 caliber machine-guns. Two of them dropped bombs. One strafing plane actually straddled our slit trenches. A number of German personnel were killed, including most of the kitchen staff. We were moved, along with a number of other US prisoners of war, to rear areas. Travel was by truck at night. Since the US Army Air Corps controlled the air, the Germans did not dare travel by day. Even at night, one guard on each truck served as lookout and at the slightest sound of an aircraft, would shout, "Fleiger!" (airplane). The driver would cut off his lights and stop the truck. We prisoners would be required to take cover in ditches. After a number of such stops, Lt Spence and I decided to try an escape. The next time the truck stopped and we were ordered off, the two of us rolled down an embankment out of sight of the road. When the truck was ready to leave, the guards called out for us but since they did not dare use lights, they could not locate us. The truck eventually pulled away. After waiting a couple of minutes, we stood up and whispered our congratulations to each other on our escape. A concussion grenade landed between us. I was knocked into a pile of rocks and suffered a chipped and dislocated elbow. Spence fared a little better. The guard had waited quietly in the roadway while the truck pulled around the corner. We had been outsmarted and from then on, were kept under watchful eyes. We eventually reached the northern Italian town of Benevento (good wind), where I met a number of fellow officers from my battalion. It was there I learned that only one officer and twenty-six men had escaped. The rest were either killed or captured. In his book, Crusade in Europe, General Eisenhower wrote of this loss of the battalion. It was estimated that over 1,500 men were killed in an area of approximately 1 square mile, almost equal numbers of German and American.

One of those captured was my battalion surgeon and he repaired, as best he could, my very swollen and painful elbow. Since he had no medication or pain-killers of any kind, that was not a pleasant experience.

After about a week, we prisoners were moved via freight train through the Italian/Austrian Alps to a prisoner of war (POW) camp in Austria known as Mooseburg. There, for the first time, we were allowed to write a post card to our families. The cards were turned over to the Austrian Red Cross which assured us they would be forwarded. It had been almost two months since my capture. Unknown to me, my family was initially notified that I was missing in action. In those days, word came via a War Department telegram. My postcard was later broadcast as propaganda over Berlin radio, was picked up by ham operators in the eastern US and relayed to my wife. The card simply said, "Am well but POW. Happy birthday." Following a short stay in Mooseburg, we were on the move again via freight train. The boxcars in which we rode were known in Europe as the French Forty or Eight, meaning they were supposed to hold 40 men or eight horses. We were packed 60 to a car. Our route took us to Berlin where some of us were placed in solitary confinement for interrogation. I was one of those so "honored." I was to spend the next 16 days in a 4 foot by 10 foot cell, interrogated daily, stripped of all possible diversionary items such as watch, ring, billfold, shoe laces, cigarettes, etc. A 200 watt bulb burned overhead 24 hours a day. There were no windows and only a solid door with a peep hole opening from the outside. Furniture consisted of a small table and a mattress of wood shavings. Food was beet top soup (unwashed tops of beets thrown into a vat and boiled) and an occasional slice of dry, hard German bread -- which, by the way, was 20% sawdust. I now realize it was far better than the Japanese or, later, the Koreans and Vietnamese gave our men who were their captives. The German captain who interrogated me was an American. He had no German or British accent. He said he had a home on Lake Hopatcong in New Jersey, had been on the New York police force, and had worked in Pennsylvania in the steel mills. He had also, of course, been a German bund member and when war broke out, he volunteered to serve in the German Army.

He drew his Luger pistol several times, saying, "I have a good notion to blow your damned head off." I felt sure he was bluffing so it didn't help him. On one occasion, he said, "Don't tell me you don't remember. You still have the imprint of the T-patch on your shoulder (Texas 36th Division). I know you were in the 143d Infantry Regiment, the 2d Battalion, the headquarters of that battalion, and I know you were either the S-2 or the Transportation Officer. I want to know which." My good friend, Lt Ivan Carlisle, was across the hall from me in another cell and, since he was the Transportation Officer, I was certainly not going to say that was my job. I also knew Ivan wouldn't talk and since I was not about to admit I was the intelligence officer (that would have really put me in the pressure cooker), I would not tell the interrogator anything. As an aside, during an earlier questioning by a turncoat British corporal (or a German dressed in a British uniform, which was more likely), he had left me 4 cigarettes and lit one of them for me. I held on to the others but had no match to light them with. That was a very telling way for the Germans to work on me for I was a heavy smoker at the time. A Russian prisoner, under guard, delivered my beet top soup each day and I made a sign of lighting a cigarette with a match. He got the message and the following day there were three matches under my plate when he left. Finally, on the 17th day, we were all released from our cells at the same time. We broke out in uncontrolled (spell that nervous) laughter.

Later that day, we were again on the move, this time through Berlin on streetcars (under guard, of course) to a railway station where we boarded another freight car. This time, our destination was a town in northern Poland known as Sczubin, renamed Altburgund by the German Army. There, our camp was known as Offizier Lager (Officer Camp) 64. (By the latter stages of WWII, it had become temporary home to over 1,500 US Army ground force officers.) For me, that "temporary" condition lasted almost two years. For the most part, the German allowed us to run the camp inside the wire. They counted us twice daily at a formation they called "Appell." Frequently, they would search the camp from top to bottom while we were required to remain in formation. Since the location of the camp was equidistant from the North Pole as Hudson Bay in upper Canada, winters were very cold. Temperatures of 40°-50° below zero were not uncommon. In those days, wind-chill factors were not figured, but they would have been far colder. We were in barracks-type buildings, one story, which were divided into cubicles. Each cubicle was approximately 14 feet by 10 feet and contained 4 double-decker bunks and a small table in the center. Eight men, so confined, must either adapt to one another, personality-wise, or become enemies. Only one fight occurred in all of Oflag 64 during my stay of almost 2 years. We received parcels of food from the American Red Cross on an irregular basis, but for the most part our diet consisted of a slice of bread and a small potato ration daily. We busied ourselves with various sports activities using equipment received from the YMCA, with reading, cards, chess, etc. As officers, under terms of the Geneva Convention, we were not allowed to work. American enlisted men prefer working on German farms, under guard, since the food was far better than in camp. In my case, I played a variety of sports and read a lot. My primary diversion, though, was the drawing -- to scale -- of an 8 by 10 foot map. Another officer and I drew it, posted it with major German and American units (after D-Day in June 1944), and used it during our news briefings. To explain: We had clandestine radios in camp (which the Germans never found) and thus we received the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) daily news reports. We also received German news from a broadcaster known as "Axis Sally" (and frequently other unprintable names) delivered via a loudspeaker system. With string, we kept track of the battle lines reported by the two sources and removed the string representing BBC after the "reading of the news" by our barracks representative. He, in turn, received the news from our radio operator whose location was kept secret from the Germans and from most of our POWs.

Perhaps our major diversion was the building of a tunnel which we hoped to use to escape. Captured engineer officers drew up the plans. To start, we needed a point of origin near the perimeter fence but away from the German guard compound. That meant the barracks in which I lived, or Barracks 3-B. A central washroom between Barracks 3-A and 3-B had a brick firebox covered with a large iron kettle. It was there for prisoners to boil their clothing. We removed the kettle, put in a false fire box covered with ashes, and dug down gradually expanding to a small room about 8 feet square directly under the cement floor of the washroom. From this room, we began to dig toward the fence, some 80 yards away. Sound simple, right? What do you do with the dirt? How do you keep the walls from collapsing?

All prisoners were asked to bring their empty Red Cross parcel boxes to a central point, where they were used to box up the dirt. We then stored it in the attic of 3-B, using bed boards across the rafters. The entrance to the attic was outside the barracks and toward the guard headquarters, so we could work only at night between dark and lights out (10 PM). After 10, guard dogs patrolled the inside of the camp. If you run out of Red Cross boxes, you must wait until you get more. We told the Germans we wanted to grow some flowers in the Red Cross boxes. Some prisoners actually got flower and vegetable seeds from home and grew a rather large garden. It also served as a means of disposing of dirt from the tunnel but we had to be careful because the dirt was of different colors. We shored up the walls of the underground room and of the tunnel by using prisoner bed boards. Normally, each bed had 10 or 11 boards under the mattress. Unless a man was unusually heavy, he could expect to keep no more than 4. I had 4 when I left camp.

When we reached the first perimeter fence, we encountered soil that was even sandier than usual and we were limited in our supply of bed boards, so we had to hold up for over two months. About the time we were ready to resume digging, the Germans began setting off explosive charges in the ground around the camp, hoping to collapse any tunnel. When the dynamiting stopped and digging resumed, the Germans issued an order that any prisoner caught in a "restricted zone" would be shot without warning. Asked where such zones were located, the Germans refused to say. That meant if you got beyond the wire and were found, you could be shot on sight. It gave us reason to pause. Then General Eisenhower issued orders that all prisoners were to remain in camp. The end of the war appeared near. Our Senior American Officer was Colonel Thomas Drake. He had been captured in a tank battle in North Africa. He was respected by all the prisoners because of his firm dealing with the Germans. In 1944, he issued orders that all prisoners who could walk were to walk at least one mile a day around the inside perimeter of the camp. This was gradually increased to five miles a day. It was his way of getting us ready to walk out of the camp. We had a group of Russian officers in our compound, about 20 in number, serving as a camp cleaning crew. We also had about 30 US Army enlisted men who served as cooks and as orderlies in the camp medical rooms. Generally, Russian prisoners were treated brutally by the Germans (and vice versa). Our Colonel Drake would not permit such treatment and threatened to report the Germans to the International Red Cross in Geneva, Switzerland. (The IRC regularly sent representatives to visit our camp.) The Germans, French, English, Italians, and the US, among others, had signed the Geneva convention following World War I. It governed the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war. Japan, Korea, China, Vietnam and Russia, among others, did not sign and thus these nations were not bound by the normal rules of handling prisoners.

In December 1944, the Russian Army began its march across Poland toward Germany. Our German guards said we must move if the Russians came close. By the end of January 1945, it became obvious that we must evacuate our camp. Some prisoners remained in camp with the German OK because they were physically unable to make any sustained march in sub-zero weather. The American doctors wanted me to stay in camp because I had chilblains. That is a condition in which previously frozen feet swell up, itch unbearably, and turn purple. I refused to stay, preferring to take my chances outside the camp. That began the most miserable three weeks of my life. We walked from our camp to Stettin, Germany, a distance of about 250 miles (as we walked it) in snow, sub-zero cold, sleeping in barns and haystacks with wet and frequently frozen clothing and without food except for what we could carry in our pack out of prison camp. On the first night, over 200 of our members escaped, later making their way back to the Russian lines. (All made it safely.) After that, security tightened, with guards firing into the hay or probing the hay with their bayonets. On the third night, hearing gunfire from three sides, our guards left us. We were sure we were about to be "liberated" by the Russians. Many prisoners ate some of their stored food anticipating they would be able to eat well in the near future. At 4 AM, our guards returned, supplemented by a German SS company, the so-called "elite" of the German Army. We were on the road, marching out, in a matter of minutes and walked all day without a break. After 18 days of walking, my shoes wore out and the cardboard in the soles grew soggy so I borrowed a pair from a friend who had an extra pair. They were size 13, two sizes too large. By being frozen, they bent sharply across my toes, cutting them and filling my shoes with blood. I grew so weak I could barely walk and eventually sat down on a bank by the side of the road. As usual, a German guard started yelling and threatening to shoot me. I was so low in spirits and felt so lousy that I told him to go ahead.

After seeing the blood and my bleeding feet, he put me on a wagon which was following the prisoners and I rode there until we reached Stettin later that day. There, the group of prisoners split. Those who could walk reasonably well were sent on into Germany under guard. They later ended up at a camp near Hammelburg, south of Frankfurt-am-Main, and were liberated by the American Army. I was placed in the second group. We were placed in boxcars, again, this time 70 to a car with the center one third wired off for the German guards. We were so cramped that only half of us could sit while the remainder stood. In that manner, we made a slow and very tiring trip to Berlin. We were without food and water for the five days and nights it took to reach Templehof Station in Berlin. That station, we knew, was the target of almost daily bombing raids by British and American aircraft. We were parked in the center of the rail yards and left overnight. The following day, we were moved through Berlin to the south. We were amazed at the change in Berlin. Hardly a building was left standing. It was a city of heaped rubble.

We were moved to a prisoner camp about 20 miles south of Berlin called Leuckenwalde. It held some 35,000 prisoners representing, we were told, about 45 different nationalities. Many were Russians but their numbers were diminishing daily because the Germans were systematically starving them to death.

We Americans, after being unloaded from the train, were herded into a delousing chamber and required to take a steaming hot shower. After weeks of bitter cold, days without food and water, and in my case suffering from loss of blood, the steamy heat came as a shock. I passed out. When I regained consciousness, I was in a bunk in a barracks and a Norwegian doctor informed me that I had double pneumonia. The Americans had no food to share; in fact, there was very little available in the camp. The Norwegians, in the next compound, sent over a Norwegian Red Cross parcel for the American prisoners who were ill. I have no doubt but what their charity saved my life. I recall a number of events while in Leuckenwalde. First, someone brought Max Schmeling over to my bed. He had fought Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship just before the war but was later a German paratrooper. I refused to shake hands with him. Then came the shock of President Roosevelt's death. Finally, after I had recovered enough to get out of the barracks occasionally, I witnessed a sight that I will never forget. Starting at 10 AM in April 1945, a solid wave of bombers that took two hours to fly by passed over our camp. There were literally thousands of them. They all dropped their bombs on Berlin. The ground shook, 20 miles away, from the force of the bombs. The war had to end soon. Two days later, the Russians arrived.

My first sight of a Russian was of a drunken lieutenant commanding a tank. He ordered it to straddle the fence around our camp and proceeded to knock down the fence. The German guards had departed, wearing civilian clothes. The Russian tank was followed by 3 or 4 Studebaker trucks, filled with equal numbers of Russian men and women, all drunk, and all headed for Berlin. After them came the Mongolians with horses and wagons. I could tell you a few stories about them. Suffice to say, they were not far removed from animals. Our camp was surrounded by Russian guards who ordered us to remain in the camp. We were allowed to visit a shower which was located about 500 yards from our camp but we soon found that to be a mistake. The Russian guards stole anything of value our POWs had, including watches, rings, etc.

While we were in Leuckenwalde, one incident of interest occurred. The Senior American Officer, a Lt Col Oakes (COL Drake had been repatriated) and his staff (with me as security officer -- I had by that time recovered) were told by the Russians that we were to occupy a plush facility which had been controlled by the German Luftwaffe (Air Force) before and during WWII. It was, in fact, a German senior officer rest camp. Prior to our arrival the buildings had been taken over by a group of French laborers. They were ordered by the Russians to leave and promptly destroyed the place. Mirrors, commodes, sinks, doors were smashed, windows were broken out, mattresses slashed, and the floors used for bath rooms. We could not stay in the buildings but camped out. That night, one of the Americans wandered into the area occupied by the French and was badly beaten. The Russians had had enough. The next morning they called a meeting of the senior French official and his staff, along with Lt Col Oakes and his staff. The Russian major spoke quietly and was interpreted by a Russian girl. She said, "Gentlemen, the commandant bids you good morning. Last night, an American was brutally beaten by the French. The commandant wishes to inform you that if, during the remainder of your stay here, so much as one hair of an American's head is misplaced by the French, you sir (looking at the senior Frenchman) will pay with your life. The commandant bids you good morning." That was it but there was no doubt he would have cheerfully killed the Frenchman.

We were returned to Leuckenwalde where we were required to remain in camp, under guard, for over a month after our initial "liberation." The US Army, during that entire time, was on the west bank of the Elbe River, less than 35 miles away. At one time, they sent in 120 two and a half ton trucks to take the Americans out but were told by the Russians that if they removed one man, all trucks would be confiscated and the drivers interned. The trucks left empty. It was a blatant insult to the Americans. Finally, we were loaded on Russian and captured German trucks and taken to the Elbe. There, at the town of Dessau, were two foot bridges across the river. We were permitted to cross one while White Russians (those who were anti-communist and who had fought with the Germans against the Russians) were marched, one for one, across the river at bayonet point. As they headed over the river bank into Russian territory, you knew they were doomed to swift execution. It is a little-known part of American history of which I am not proud. It was for that, and other reasons that I said after returning to the US, "We should have returned through Alaska," meaning through Russia, then Alaska.

As I crossed into friendly surroundings, the previous two years were reflected in a skinny (6 foot 3 inch, 130 pound) frame, some health problems, and a lot of experience. But I was alive.