

A Postal Soldier's Story

We were located in Luxembourg in late 1944 close to the German border. Our forward observer party, consisting of Lt. Warren Springer, Sgt. Willard Webber, Cpl. Billy Queen, Sgt. Peter Gucci and myself, arrived at Lanneret on Dec. 15th to replace the forward observer party of Lt. MacAfee. We were using an upstairs room of one of the houses in town for an observation post. It gave us an unobstructed view toward Mosheim, Germany, but we could not see the town because of a rise in the ground. Even though we were not too well oriented in the town and it was hard to determine our exact location. Other soldiers in our party were able to locate the house we were in.



We were awakened some time before daylight by a very heavy artillery barrage. The shells seemed to be falling everywhere although none struck the house. We stayed some time after the barrage lifted. We reported to the battery but I cannot recall what instructions we received. There was a tank destroyer company in town but they had gone. After some time, Lt. Springer decided that we should try to get back to the battery, so we proceeded to load our gear in the jeep. I cannot recall the time we left but I would guess it was between 9 and 10 a.m. We had traveled only a short distance when we came upon the Intelligence and Reconnaissance platoon from the 34th Infantry. The I & R platoon was under the command of Lt. L. Bouck. After some discussion, Lt. Springer thought that we could be of some assistance, so we stayed. There was some doubt that we could get back to our battery. We had parked our jeep some distance from the position. We had a battery pack for the radio and our weapons but I do not think we had a great amount of ammunition. Our location was very well positioned in a small woods on a slight rise. The foxholes were deep and had excellent overhead cover with a good field of fire. There were 18 men in the R platoon and four of us from C Battery. The Germans attacked shortly after we arrived and Lt. Springer, Wibben and I went into one hole with one or two others. It was a very hectic time and I cannot recall exactly what happened. I do believe that we brought some artillery fire to bear, although my recollections are not clear. At the onset, the Germans could not penetrate our position. Just before dark all our ammunition was expended and both the phone and the radio were dead. That was when we heard a German voice ordering us out of the foxhole. We all understood that one grenade would kill all of us so we came out and were taken prisoner. I do believe we were very fortunate that the German soldiers were regular army. If they had been SS troops, I doubt that we would have survived.

After we had been searched, Wibben and I had to help carry a wounded German back to Lanzerath. We were kept there that night, then began our journey to a POW camp. We later learned that Billy Queen, who had gone to another foxhole, had been wounded and died. This was confirmed in January (after the Germans had been driven back) by Cleon Janos, a member of another C Battery forward observer party, who found the body of Billy Queen where he had died in that skirmish. Cpl. Queen was the only one of the twenty-two men that died in that battle. I have not been back to Lanzerath since then, but someday I may.

On December 17, 1944, we began our journey into Germany as prisoners of war. We spent the night in Lanzerath and the town was shelled by our own artillery. As we marched out of town we saw several German soldiers that had been killed by the artillery fire.

As we marched up the road we saw German infantry and armor going toward our lines. It would have been comforting to know that within a few weeks the Germans would be streaming back to their own country. We had no insight into this possibility at this time so we had very little to feel good about.

Some of the German soldiers yelled at us, but very few of us understood German. We never had to march with our hands on our heads, although I have seen films, on both sides, where prisoners had to walk that way. We marched through several small towns. The people for the most part, just stared at us. The only time they would show any emotion was if they saw anything that looked like an air force uniform.

I do not recall much about food and water except that there wasn't much of either one. The guards were reasonably tolerant to anyone having personal needs. In fact, we were not mistreated by any of the guards. They were older men and many of them were not German. They were given the choice—join the German army or be shot.

There must have been at least 50 of us marching together. The first night we were all locked in a large storage building. I do not remember getting much food or water at that time either. The next morning we resumed our march and as near as I can recall—more than fifty years later—we were taken to Bonn. There we became part of a larger group and were all put into box cars. They were commonly referred to as 40 and 8 cars (40 men or 8 horses). They put about 60 of us in each car and locked the door. Needless to say, there was not much room. We spent 4 or 5 days in the cars. Since it was very cold and no one had any extra clothes, we tried to keep

warm by huddling.

Traveling by train in Germany was very dangerous. The Allies had air superiority and would shoot up any trains that moved during daylight hours. Therefore, we moved mostly by night. We spent a lot of time on sidings; troop trains and supply trains took precedence.

As near as I can recall we arrived at Limburg the day before Christmas. The prison camp commander refused to take us so we stayed locked up in the cars in the rail yard. That night Allied air forces bombed the yard, but fortunately, our train was not hit. The next day we were moving again. We must have been given some food and water, but I cannot recall it. We traveled to Nuremberg where we were unloaded and marched to the camp outside of town and there we began our life in a prisoner of war camp Each day we could hear and feel through the ground what we thought was bombing attacks by our Allied Air Forces on some large towns in the vicinity. It really did raise our hopes. Our hopes were finally realized on April 28th when a tank force supported by our own 99th Division came into our camp. Our waiting was over and we were really happy to see some G.I.s from our own C Battery, 371st Field Artillery. I still don't know how they found us in such a large number of people. A few days later we were flown into Camp Lucky Strike in France. I think one of the main reasons was to put some weight on us and also time to scrub the prison grime off of us. Both were very much appreciated. The chow lines were very long. After eating you could get back in line and by the time you got to the head of the line you would be hungry again. You can be sure that no one complained about the food. It was like being in heaven—clean clothes, candy, cookies, cokes and the smokers were really in heaven

We stayed at Camp Lucky Strike for a week or more; everyone had gained some weight and orders were cut to send us home. They put us on board a Navy troop transport. I do not recall how long it took us to get home; it took days going the other way. They had given us some back pay so everyone was free to buy the goodies available on the ship.

As we came into port we saw the Statue of Liberty and there was a lot of yelling; it was a wonder that the ship did not capsize because everyone was on the same side of the ship...It was great to be home!!!.....Peter Gacki

Post Script: Pete Gacki, retiree of Branch 2555, recently passed away and this article was reprinted in memoriam. Article courtesy of Branch 2555 "*Spartan News*" May-June 2008