

FOR THE WAR CRIMES OFFICE

CIVIL AFFAIRS DIVISION, WDSS

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In the matter of the mistreatment of

American prisoners of war at Stalag

Luft #4 from November 1944 to May 1945.

Perpetuation of Testimony of Dr. Leslie Caplan (Formerly Major, MC, ASN 0-41343)

Taken at:

Minnesota Military District, The Armory, 500 So. 6th St. Minneapolis, 15, Minn.

Date: 31 December 1947

In the Presence of:

Lt. Col. William C. Hoffmann, AGD

Executive Officer, Minnesota Military

District, The Armory, 500 So. 6th St.

Minneapolis, 15, Minn.

Questions:

Q. State your name, permanent home address, and occupation.

A. Leslie Caplan, Dr., 1728 Second Ave. So., Minneapolis, Minnesota; Resident Fellow in Psychiatry, University of Minnesota & Veterans Hospital, Minneapolis, Minn.

Q. State the date and place of your birth and of what country you are a citizen.

A. 8 March 1908, Steubenville, Ohio; citizen of the United States of America.

Q. State briefly your medical education and experience.

A. Ohio State University, B.A., 1933; MD 1936; University of Michigan Post Graduate work in Public Health; University of Minnesota Graduate School; one year general internship, Providence Hospital, Detroit, Michigan; 4 years general practice of medicine in Detroit, Michigan 1937-1941; 4 years Flight Surgeon, U.S. Army 1941-1945.

Q. What is your marital status?

A. I am married.

Q. On what date did you return from overseas?

A. 29 June 1945.

Q. Were you a prisoner of war?

A. Yes.

Q. At what places were you held and state the approximate dates?

A. Dernisch, Jugo-Slavia 13 October 1944 to 20 October 1944; Zagreb, Jugo-Slavia 27 October 1944 to 1 November 1944; Dulag Luft, Frankfurt, Germany, 15 November 1944 to 22 November 1944; Stalag Luft #4 28 November 1944 to 6 February 1945; on forced march under jurisdiction of Stalag Luft #4 February 1945 to 30 March 1945; Fallingbostel Stalag II B March 30 1945 to April 6 1945; on forced march from 6 April 1945 to 2 May 1945.

Q. What unit were you with when captured?

A. 15th Air Force, 449 Bomb Group, 719th Squadron. I was Flight Surgeon for the 719th Squadron

Q. State what you know concerning the mistreatment of American prisoners of war at Stalag Luft #4.

A. The camp was opened about April 1944 and was an Air Force Camp. It was located at Gross Tychow about two miles from the Kiefheide railroad station. In the summer of 1944 the Russian offensive threatened Stalag Luft #6, 50 approximately 1000 Americans were placed on a ship for evacuation to Stalag Luft #4. Upon arrival at the railroad station, certain groups were forced to run the two miles to Stalag Luft #4 at the points of bayonets. Those who dropped behind were either bayoneted or were bitten on the legs by police dogs.

Q. Were these wounds serious enough to cause any deaths?

A. All were flesh wounds and no deaths were caused by the bayoneting.

Q. Did you see these men at the time of the bayoneting?

A. No. This happened prior to my arrival at Luft #4.

Q. Did you see any of the men who were bitten by dogs?

A. Yes, I personally saw the healed wounds on the legs of a fellow named Smith or Jones (I am not certain as to the name) who had been severely bitten. There were approximately fifty bites on each leg. It looked as though his legs had been hit with small buck shot. This man remained an invalid confined to his bed all the time I was at Luft #4.

Q. Do you know how many men were injured as a result of the bayonet runs?

A. I was told that about twenty men had been hospitalized as a result. Many other bayoneted men were not hospitalized due to limited medical facilities.

Q. Who told you of these incidents?

A. Captain Wilbur E. McKee, 1462 So. Seventh St., Louisville, Ky., who was Chief Camp Doctor. He should have some authentic records. Captain Henry E. Wyses, 346 E. Havenswood Ave., Youngstown, Ohio, also knew of the incidents. There were also two enlisted men who were elected by the soldiers as Camp leaders and known officially as "American Man of Confidence" who could give an account of the camp and of the bayoneting. The chief "American Man of Confidence" was camp leader and should have complete records of the incident. His name is Frank Paules, 101 Regent St., Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

Francis A. Troy, Box 233, Edgerton, Wyoming, the other enlisted man, and "American Man of Confidence" should also verify the incidents. Both of these enlisted men were also on the forced march when Stalag Luft #4 was evacuated.

Q. Do you know if the Commandant was responsible for the bayoneting and dog bites?

A. I did not know the Commandant and I do not know who was responsible. Captain Pickhardt, the officer in charge of the guards, is said to have incited the guards by telling them that American Airmen were gangsters who received a bonus for bombing German children and women. Most of the guards were older men and fairly reasonable, but other guards were pretty rough. "Big Stoop" was the most hated of the guards.

Q. For what reason was "Big Stoop" disliked?

A. He beat up on many of our men. He would cuff the men on the ears with an open hand sideway movement. This would cause pressure on the eardrums which sometimes punctured them.

Q. Could you give any specific incidents of such mistreatment by "Big Stoop"?

A. Yes. I treated some of the men whose eardrums had been ruptured by the cuffings administered by "Big Stoop".

Q. Can you describe "Big Stoop"?

A. He was about six feet, six inches tall, weight about 180 or 190 pounds, and was approximately fifty years old. His most outstanding characteristic was his large hands, which seemed out of proportion to those of a normal person.

Q. When you arrived at Stalag #4, were you subjected to the bayonet runs?

A. No. We were marched from the station to Luft #4, but not on the run. Some of the men were tired and we complained to "Big Stoop". He snarled at us, but personally went forward and slowed the column down.

Q. Did you have any duties assigned to you while a prisoner?

A. I was known as an Allied Medical Officer at Stalag #4 Camp Hospital and in charge of Section C while on the march.

Q. State what you know concerning the forced march from Stalag Luft #4?

A. In February 1945 the Russian Offensive threatened to engulf State Luft #4. On 6 February 1945 about 6,000 prisoners were ordered to leave the camp on foot after only a few hours notice. We left in three separate sections: A, C, and D. I marched with Section C which had approximately 2500 men. It was a march of great hardship. For 53 days we marched long distance in bitter weather and on starvation rations. We lived in filth and slept in open fields or barns. Clothing, medical facilities and sanitary facilities were utterly inadequate. Hundreds of men suffered from malnutrition, exposure, trench foot, exhaustion, dysentery, tuberculosis, and other diseases. No doubt many men are still suffering today as a result of that ordeal.

Q. Who was in charge of this march?

A. The commandant of Stalag Luft #4 was in charge of the three sections. Hauptman (Captain) Weinert was in charge of Section C that I marched with. All the elements of Stalag Luft #4 occupied a good bit of territory and there was frequent overlapping of the various sections.

Q. How much distance was covered in this march?

A. While under the jurisdiction of Stalag Luft #4, we covered an estimated 555 kilometers (330 miles). I kept a record, which I still have of distances covered, rations issued, sick men abandoned, and other pertinent data. This record is far from complete especially about records of the sick, but the record of rations and distances covered is complete.

Q. How much food was issued to the men on this march?

A. According to my records, during the 53 days of the march, the Germans issued us rations which I have since figured out contained a total of 770 calories per day. The German ration was mostly in potatoes and contained very little protein, far from enough to maintain strength and health. However, in addition we were issued Red Cross food which for the same 53 day period averaged 566 calories per day. This means that our caloric intake per day on the march amounted to 1336 calories. This is far less than the minimum required to maintain body weight, even without the physical strenuous activity we compelled to undergo in the long marches.

The area we marched through was rural and there were no food shortages there. We all felt that the German officers in our column could have obtained more supplies for us. They contended that the food we saw was needed elsewhere. They further contended that the reason we received so little Red Cross supplies was that the Allied Air Force (of which we were "Gangster members) had disrupted the German transportation that carried Red Cross supplies. This argument was disproved later when we continued our march under the jurisdiction of another prison camp; namely Stalag #IIB. This was during the last month of the war when German transportation was at its worst. Even so, we received a good ration of potatoes almost daily and received frequent issues of Red Cross, far more than we were given under the jurisdiction of Stalag Luft #4.

Q. What sort of shelter was provided during the 53 day march?

A. Mostly we slept in barns. We were usually herded into these barns so closely that it was impossible for all men to find room to lie down. It was not unusual for many men to stand all night or to be compelled to sleep outside because there was no room inside. Usually there was some straw for some of us to lie on but many had to lie in barn filth or in dampness. Very frequently there were large parts of the barn (usually drier and with more straw) that were denied to us. There seemed to be no good reason why we should have to sleep in barnyard filth or stand in a crowded barn while other sections of the barn were not used. The Germans sometimes gave no reason for this but at other times, it was made clear to us that if we slept in the clean straw its value to the animals would be less because we would make it dirty. At other times barns were denied to us because the Germans stated having PWs in the barn might cause a fire that would endanger the livestock. It was very obvious that the welfare of German cattle was placed above our welfare. On 14 February 1945 Section C of Stalag Luft #4 had marched approximately 35 kilometers. There were many stragglers and sick men who could barely keep up. That night the entire column slept in a cleared area in the woods near Schweinemunde. It had rained a good bit of the day and the ground was soggy, but it froze before morning. We slept on what was littered by the feces of dysenteric prisoners who had stayed there previously. There were many barns in the vicinity, but no effort was made to accommodate us there. There were hundreds of sick men in the column that night. I slept with one that was suffering from pneumonia.

Q. What were the conditions on this march as regards drinking water?

A. Very poor. Our sources of water were unsanitary surface water and well water often of questionable sanitary quality. At times so little water was issued to us that men drank whatever they could. While there was snow on the ground, it was common for the men to eat snow whether it was dirty or not. At other times some men drank from ditches that others had used as latrines. I personally protested this condition many times. The German doctor from Stalag Luft #4 (Capt.

Sommers or Sonners) agreed that the lack of sanitary water was the principal factor responsible for the dysentery that plagued our men. It would have been a simple matter to issue large amounts of boiled water which would have been safe regardless of its source. At times we were issued adequate amounts of boiled water but at other times, not enough safe water was available. We often appealed to be allowed to collect firewood and boil water ourselves in the many boilers that were standard equipment on almost every German farm. This appeal was granted irregularly. When it was granted the men lined up in the cold for hours to await the tedious distribution. Another factor that forced an unnecessary hardship on us was the fact that when we first left Stalag Luft #4, the men were not permitted to take along a drinking utensil. The first few issues of boiled water were therefore not widely distributed for there were no containers for the men to collect the water in. As time went on, each man collected a tin can from the Red Cross food supplies and this filthy container was the sole means of collecting water or the soup that was sometimes issued to us.

Q. What medical facilities were available on the march from Stalag Luft #4?

A. They were pitiful. From the very start large numbers of men began to fall behind. Blisters became infected and many men collapsed from hunger, fear, malnutrition, exhaustion, or disease. We organized groups of men to aid the hundreds of stragglers. It was common for men to drag themselves along in spite of intense suffering. Many men marched along with large abscesses on their feet or frostbite of extremities. Many others marched with temperatures as high as 105 degrees Fahrenheit. I personally slept with men suffering from Erysipelas, Diphtheria, Pneumonia, Malaria, Dysentery and other diseases. The most common disease was dysentery for this was an inevitable consequence of the filth we lived in and the unsanitary water we drank. This was so common and so severe, that all ordinary rules of decency were meaningless. Hundreds of men on this march suffered so severely from dysentery that they lost control of their bowel movements because of severe cramps and soiled themselves. Wherever our column went, there was a trail of bloody movements and discarded underwear (which was sorely needed for warmth). At times the Germans gave us a few small farm wagons to carry our sick. The most these wagons ever accommodated was 35 men but we had hundreds of men on the verge of collapse. It was our practice to load the wagon. As a man would collapse he would be put on the wagon and some sick man on the wagon would be taken off the wagon to make way for his exhausted comrade. When our column would near a permanent PW camp we were never allowed to leave all of our sick. I do not know what happened to most of the sick men that were left at various places along the march.

Q. What medical supplies were issued to you by the Germans on the march from Stalag Luft #4?

A. Very few. When we left the camp we carried with us a small amount of medical supplies furnished us by the Red Cross. At times the Germans gave us pittance of drugs. They claimed they had none to spare. At various times, I asked for rations of salt. Salt is essential for the maintenance of body strength and of body fluids and minerals. This was particularly needed by our men because hundreds of them had lost tremendous amounts of body fluids and minerals as the result of dysentery. The only ration of salt that I have a record of or can recall was one small bag of salt weighing less than a pound. This was for about 2500 men. I feel there is no excuse for this inadequate ration of salt.

Q. To your knowledge, did any sick man die as a result of neglect by the Germans on the march from Stalag Luft #4?

A. Yes. The following named men died as a result of neglect. All of these men have been declared dead by the Casualty Branch of the Adjutant General's Office:

NAME

George W. Briggs S/Sgt.

John C. Clark S/Sgt.

Edward B. Coleman S/Sgt.

George F. Grover S/Sgt.

William Lloyd S/Sgt.

Harold H. Mack T/Sgt.

Robert M. Trapnell S/Sgt.

It is likely that there were other deaths that I do not know about.

Q. Did all these deaths occur while the men were directly under the control of Stalag Luft #4?

A. No. As I mentioned before, our sick men were left at various places and I never saw them again. Some of these men died after we were out of the jurisdiction of Stalag Luft 4.

Q. What were the circumstances which led to the deaths of these men?

A. At 0200 on 9 April 1945 at a barn in Wohlen, Germany, Sgt. George W. Briggs was suddenly overcome by violent shaking of the entire body and soon after he went into a coma. This patient was sent to a German hospital. We were then under the jurisdiction of POW Camp Stalag II B and they voluntarily sent this patient to a hospital. This is in marked contrast to the treatment received when we were under the jurisdiction of Stalag Luft 4 when every hospitalization was either refused or granted after a long series of waiting for guards, waiting for permission to see Capt. Weinert, and waiting his decision. In spite of the prompt hospitalization, this patient dies on 11 April 1945. No doubt this death was largely caused by being weakened on the first part of the march while under the jurisdiction of Stalag Luft 4. On 9 March 1945 while on the march in Germany, Capt. Sommers who was the German doctor for Stalag Luft 4, personally notified me that John C. Clark had died the previous night of pneumonia. He had not been hospitalized and had received very little medical care. I never saw this patient, but he was seen in a barn in the terminal stages of his illness by Capt. Pollack of the Royal Medical Corps who told me about it later on. On 13 April 1945 while on the march in Germany, Edward B. Coleman collapsed from severe abdominal pain and weakness. I made a diagnosis of an acute abdominal emergency superimposed on a previously weakened condition which was the result of malnutrition and dysentery. He was hospitalized but according to the records of the Adjutant General, he died 15 April 1945. He had had both legs amputated because of gangrene secondary to frostbite. He told me that S/Sgt Vincent Soddaro ASN 32804649 of Brooklyn, New York had also had both legs amputated because of gangrene and frostbite. Sgt. Edwards and Sgt. Soddaro had been in the same German hospital.

Q. What other mistreatment did you suffer on the march from Stalag Luft 4?

A. There were beatings by the guards at times but it was a minor problem. At 1500 hours on 28 March 1945 a large number of our men were loaded on freight cars at Ebbsdorf, Gem We were forced in at the rate of 60 men or more to a car. This was so crowded that there was not enough room for all men to sit at the same time. We remained in these jammed boxcars until 0030 hours March 30, 1945 when our train left Ebbsdorf. During this 33 hour period few men were allowed out of the cars for the cars were sealed shut most of the time. The suffering this caused was unnecessary for there was a pump with a good supply of water in the railroad yards a short distance from the train. At one time I was allowed to fetch some water for a few of our men who were suffering from dysentery. Many men had dysentery at the time and the hardship of being confined to the freight cars was aggravated by the filth and stench resulting from men who had to urinate and defecate inside the cars. We did not get off these freight cars until we reached Fallingbostal around noon of 30 March 1945 and then we marched to Stalag 11B. The freight cars we were transported in had no marking on them to indicate that they were occupied by helpless prisoners of war. There was constant aerial activity in the area at the time and there was a good chance of being strafed.

Q. Was the suffering that resulted from the evacuation march from Stalag Luft 4 avoidable?

A. Certainly a large part of the suffering was avoidable. As I mentioned before, we marched through rural Germany and there was no lack of food there. There were always many large barns available that could have been used by us. There was always firewood available that could have been used to boil water and thus give us a supply of safe drinking water. There were many horses and wagons available that could have been used to transport our sick mer There were many men in our column who were exhausted and who could have been left for a rest at prison camps that we passed on the march.

On 30 March 1945 we left the jurisdiction of Stalag Luft 4 when we arrived at Stalag Luft On 6 April 1945 we again went on a forced march under the jurisdiction of Stalag 11B. Our first march had been in a general westerly direction for the Germans were then running from the Russians. The second march was in a general easterly direction for the Germans were running from the American and British forces. Because of this, during the march under the jurisdiction of Stalag 11B we doubled back and covered a good bit of the same territory we just come over a month before. We doubled back for over 200 kilometers and it took 26 days before British forces liberated us. During those 26 days we were accorded much better treatment. We received a ration of potatoes daily besides other food including horse meat. We always barns to sleep in although the weather was much milder than when we had previously cover this same territory. During these 26 days we received about 1235 calories daily from the Germans and an additional 1500 calories daily from the Red Cross for a total caloric intake. I believe that if the officers of Stalag Luft 4 had made an effort they too could have secured us as much rations and shelter.

Q. To what officers from Stalag Luft 4 did you complain?

A. I only saw the commandant of Stalag Luft 4 once on the entire march and I was not allowed to talk to him then. Mostly I complained to Capt. Weinert who was in charge of "C" column that I was with most of the time.

Q. Can you describe Capt. Weinert?

A. He was a little taller than average and well built. He was in his forties but looked much younger until he took his cap off and exposed his bald head. He was an Air Corps officer and was said to have been a prisoner of the Allies in North Africa and later repatriated for a physical disability. I never saw any certain evidence of such a disability. He rarely marched but rode in his own wagon. Some of the men said he had an arm injury but I never saw any definite evidence of this. Maybe this was because I only saw him on rather formal military occasions when he would stand or sit in a rigid manner almost as if he were at attention. I never saw him for long periods of time. He spoke excellent English but it was a favorite trick of his to act as if he did not understand English. Usually he spoke to me through an interpreter, but several times we spoke in English.

Q. Are there any other incidents that should be reported.

A. There is one other incident I would like to report. On 16 February 1945 we were on the road west of the Oder River in the general area of Schweinemunde. I was then marching with a party of several hundred of our stragglers who were tagging along behind our main column. We met a small group of other prisoners on the road. I was allowed to talk to these men briefly and obtained the following information: these men were from PW camp Stalag 2B, which had originally been at Hammerstein. They were all sick and had left their column to be taken to a hospital. On arrival at the hospital they were denied admission and continued the march with little or no rations. These men appeared to be on the verge of exhaustion. Two had obvious fevers with severe cough, which was probably pneumonia or tuberculosis. About 20 of these men were Americans. One had on a foreign uniform and I thought he was an Italian. There was a tall British sergeant with them. One of the men carried a small wooden chest with the name of "Joe McDaniels" or "Joe McWilliams" on it. He told me that he had been acting as Chaplain at Stalag 2B. Another man was a tall, slender fellow from Schenectady, New York. (After I was liberated I met an ex-prisoner from Stalag 2B who thought this fellow was J. Luckhurst of 864 Stanley, Schenectady, New York.) This fellow said he was suffering from recurrent malaria. These men were so weak they could scarcely stand. The German sergeant in charge of our small section at the time recognized their plight and got a Wehrmacht truck to take them to our next stop. We received no rations that night, but did get a small issue of hot water. The next day these men were placed on wagons and stayed with us. They again received no rations and again were sheltered in crowded barns. On 18 February 1945, I personally protested to Capt. Weinert about these men, although he had known about them previously. I pointed out that these men were exhausted and might soon die. I requested rations, rest, and hospitalization for them. Capt. Weinert said they were not his responsibility, inasmuch as they were not originally from Stalag Luft 4. I objected to this and stated that these men were now in our column and that he was responsible for their lives and health. He then agreed to leave these men behind. The next day, Capt. Weinert told me these men had been transferred to another command. I never saw the men again, but I heard a rumor that one of them had died.

Q. Do you have anything further to add?

A. No.

(signed)

Leslie Caplan, M.D.

State of Minnesota

County of Hennepin

I, Dr. Leslie Caplan, of lawful age, being duly sworn on oath, state that I have read the foregoing transcription of my interrogation and all answers contained therein are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

(signed)

Leslie Caplan, M.D.

Subscribed and sworn to before me, this 5 day of January 1948.

(signed)

William C. Hoffmann

Lt. Colonel, AGD

Summary Court

CERTIFICATE

I, William C. Hoffman, Lt. Col. Certify that Dr. Leslie Caplan personally appeared before me on December 31, 1947 and testified concerning war crimes; and that the foregoing is an accurate transcription of the answers given by him to the several questions set forth.