

# Prisoner of War

*This is the story of two friends who endured months of hardship and terror and survived to tell this tale. One of these men was John Wranesh, who wrote this story, and the other was Drew L. Sheffield. Both were gunners on the Fred J. Lockwood crew in the 748th Squadron.*

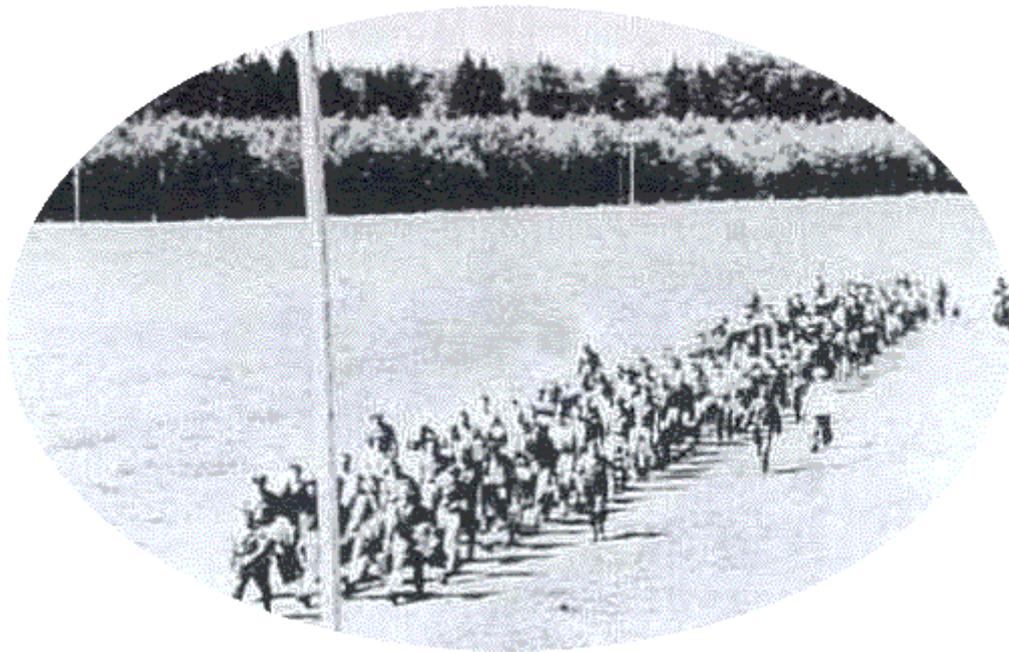
*It was on a mission to Magdeburg on July 28th, 1944, only their 4th mission, when they encountered enemy fire and went down and became.....Prisoners of War.*

*This is also the story of these two courageous young men who found companionship, encouragement and strength through each other. And it was these characteristics that enabled them to survive an ordeal that ranks with the great atrocities of World War Two.*

*The following description was written by John Wranesh a few years ago and is reproduced here with his permission.*

## The 86 Day, 600 Mile POW Forced March

*Feb 6th to May 2nd, 1945*



I will never forget Drew, it was always Shef when I addressed him and I guess it will always be that way.

When we were assigned to our crew at the Second Air Force Training Station, Lincoln Army Air Force Base, Lincoln Nebraska it seems that Shef and I immediately struck a friendship and bond: he was from the rural area of northern Florida and I was a New York "hillbilly" from the foothills of the Adirondack mountains. I always had a great deal of respect for him from day one; he was a few years older, had more military time and above all his demeanor reflecting on his excellent upbringing- it was always "yes, sir and no, sir" and it always seemed to come so naturally.

Following our crew assignment, we departed by rail to the Sioux City Army Air Base, Sioux City, Iowa for operational training. This was in the spring of '44. We were well trained by the

training personnel, especially by those who had pulled their missions in Europe and returned to state side training assignments. Parachute training was touched on lightly as was becoming a prisoner of war. As with any army training, we were not without accidents such as runaway guns in air-to-air target training, formation flying going through clouds, aircraft malfunctions etc.

We were fortunate in our crew by having two engineer gunners on our crew, Shef and Carlton Killgo.

The mess hall at the base was running 24 hours a day to accommodate crews flying both daytime and nighttime training missions. Many of the permanent base personnel worked at the stockyards or grain mills on their off shifts which was reflected in lack of attention at the mess hall. Typically as "GI's" we always had a gripe!

Following our training in Sioux City we were transported by rail to Herington Army Air Base, Herington, Kansas; a seemingly `nowhere" place in the middle of a triangle between Salina, Topeka, and Wichita. This was a staging area where we picked up our gear for overseas assignment. We had a motivating speech by a "flat hatted" Colonel who had seen combat and tried to tell us what this whole venture was about. I remember his asking "what do you think of the food here?" and one GI piped up "it's great" and the Colonel flipped him a silver dollar and responded "Thanks"-- it was good for a laugh.

I might add, there was a B-29 at the flight line and we all were remarking how huge it was. We had our picture taken by it, but I am not able to locate it.

This was summertime and after short stay at Herington we were transported by rail to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey to await transport by ship to Europe. We were pretty well quarantined but had the run of the base. I shall always remember our trip to the commissary for a watermelon; I had maybe a quarter of it and and Shef being a "Florida boy" consumed the rest-how he loved watermelon.

We were alerted to move on out and it was rather eerie going up the gangplank on the SS Brazil with all our belongings. The SS Brazil was a one time luxury sister ship of the SS Uruguay, SS Paraguay and maybe there were others. The ship was converted for troop

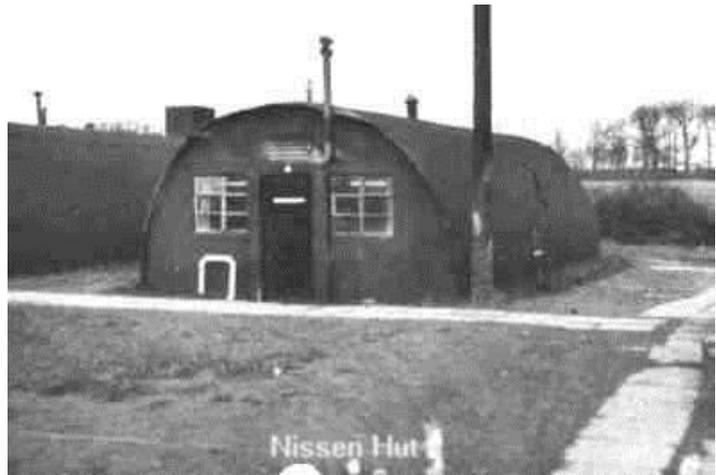


transport duty; the huge swimming pool was converted to a mess hall and we had to eat standing utilizing an endless shelf-like table. The ship carried army air force, a railroad battalion, infantry, WACS, artillery, and others. Needless to say things were cozy. There were tiers of hammocks and a rather smelly environment with people becoming sea sick. Shef and I usually watched the endless poker games going on in

various corners and hallways during the night and slept in the daytime when the sleeping quarters cleared out a bit. Since we were in a convoy with the slowest ship determining the speed, it took two weeks to get to Southampton. We had drills and submarine alerts, but nevertheless felt somewhat secure with the swiftly moving Canadian corvette ships darting about protecting us. It was quite a relief to get to dry land.

We were quartered at Stone, England for a bit until they worked out transportation to The Wash which was a training base where there was further orientation and gunnery training "to sharpen our skills." We were then transported to Station #130, Glatton, England (near Peterborough.) and the 457th Bomb Group. (B-17's)

Our quarters were "Nisson Huts" which were corrugated sheet metal panels curved to provide a semi-circular hut. Nothing fancy, but better than a tent by far. We were indoctrinated as to the local procedures and security and we were ready for operations.



*(Editor's Note: John Wranesh and Drew L. Sheffield were members of the Fred J. Lockwald crew which consisted of: Lockwald, Pilot - Joseph Jirik, Copilot - James B. Rawls, Navigator - Seymour F. Salganick, Bombardier - Carlton J. Killgo, Engineer/TT - Harry L. Jacobson, Radio Operator - John Wranesh, Left Waist Gunner - Drew L. Sheffield, Ball Turret Gunner - Everett A. Mahannah, Tail Gunner.)*

**Crew Mission No. 1** (Group Mission # 123 - September 17th, 1944)

This was the first mission the crew was assigned to - Nijmegen, Holland in support of allied ground troops. I was held back to perform guard duty on the line as was customary for flight crews to perform security due to the openness of the base as a whole. The aircraft was hit by flak and the crew had to salvo the ball turret, throw out the ammunition and guns and "all else" to make their way (as I recall) to Florenz, Belgium and a minimum landing area. There were no casualties and the crew was ferried back to Glatton after a couple of days. This was quite an introduction to combat for the crew and "anxious moments" on the part of many!

**Crew Mission No. 2** (Group Mission # 126 - September 26th, 1944)

This was a mission to Osnabruck, Germany

**Crew Mission No. 3** (Group Mission # 127 - September 27th, 1944)

This was a mission to Cologne, Germany

**Crew Mission No. 4** (Group Mission # 128 - September 28th, 1944)

This was a mission to Magdeburg, Germany. Our last mission.

The group put up 36 aircraft to bomb the Krupp Works Machine Shops. We were flying at 26,500 feet and approaching the IP (initial point for making the bomb run) when we were attacked by approximately 50 German fighter planes. We were hit in the Number 2 and Number 3 engines and we were on fire - there was no way to keep the aircraft flying. We continued to lose altitude and the pilot gave the order to bail out: this may have been approximately 16,000 feet.

*Note: Lt Joseph Jirik, copilot and Sgt Harry L. Jacobson were both killed in the fighter attack.*

It seemed "forever" coming down in the chute, but in the last few hundred feet the ground seemed to be coming up at me and then there was the abrupt STOP!

I had landed in a kohlrabi (turnip) patch and was immediately captured by the overseer of the German farm. I was an intruder entering his territory from the sky above, didn't speak the language, and just how far could I run in flying boots dragging a parachute? He motioned for me to come forward which I did and then and there became a "Kriegie". This is the short term for the German word kriegsgefangener meaning war prisoner. Americans are always finding nicknames and shortened versions of words.

Five of our crew landed in what we estimated to be a seven-mile radius. The navigator and top turret gunner bailed out immediately as we were hit and were not assembled with us. The five of us; pilot, bombardier, tail gunner, ball gunner (Shef) and myself were assembled by the local police and trucked to Brunswick, Germany. It was after dark and we were herded into an air raid shelter. The British were doing their nightly bombing performance - it was quite an experience, being bombed and in an air raid shelter with Germans who would have executed us right away had we not had police and German guard protection.

Following the air raid, Brunswick was pretty much in flames and the guards were very upset to say the least; however we were taken by a small truck to a German Air Cadet Center to spend the rest of the night. In the morning we were placed on a train under guard and transported to the interrogation center at Oberusel where we were placed in solitary confinement for several days.

Following interrogation we were transported to the nearby Dulag Luft #1 at Wetzlar where we were provided minimal personal care items and some different clothes like shoes provided by the International Red Cross Service and limited personal care items.

The next movement was by train to Stalag Luft #4 in Pomerania, north and east of Stettin near Poland. The daylight bombing and strafing by allied aircraft tore up the rail systems and caused us to be exposed to great harm at various intervals. It took several days to make the journey.

Upon arrival at the camp we were assigned to a billet with several nationalities of crew members who had flown with the Royal Air Force such as British, Canadian, New Zealand, Australian, Rhodesian, Czech, Polish, French, Indian (India) and South African. There were 25 of us in a room of three-tiered bunks with some of us sleeping on the floor and benches. Very crowded and with 25 different personalities there had to be some semblance of order installed and the primary objective was to have respect for each other.

It was customary for the POWs to establish a "combine" so Shef and I having been together through this ordeal thus far formed our "combine". Within our room we had certain duties and there were rotational duties such as hauling soup in the pails from the cook house to the billet, cleaning the room, cleaning the corridor, performing operational duties such as maintaining a lookout and advising where the German guards were. We referred to them as "goons" and whenever there was one close by we would say or holler "goon up" depending upon the urgency of the notification.

Ron Dolby, an Australian airman, was our room leader, developing duty schedules and otherwise trying to keep us informed with limited information and striving for some semblance of order with 25 guys within very limited confines.

The main diet was potatoes, dehydrated cabbage once hydrated, thin soups with slivers of some form of meat, ersatz coffee, and dark bread. The bread was something else - very heavy with a "saw dust filler" and many times there were hard pieces that would grind on your teeth. The cutting of the bread was done ceremoniously with everyone watching. Scotty Lowe was the cutter, he had a knack for sharpening knives on stones, bricks, or other hard substances and he could cut to meet the 1/8" thick tolerance per slice. There could be no waste and he always had an audience.

The American Red Cross provided parcels for POW's, but there was always the problem of "transport" claimed by the Germans with railways bombed out, troop priorities, roadways bombed out and other wartime conditions. When we received parcels it was for a fractional part ranging from 1/8 to a very rare full parcel. The cigarettes and "D" chocolate bars along with soap became the main mediums of exchange among the POW's (as well as the German guards who would provide some needed items e.g. batteries for the secret radio etc.)

Time was generally spent in conversation, playing cards, playing chess, reading books from the limited library and walking circuits during the daylight hours. Walking circuits meant walking around the outer perimeter of the billets and within the warning wire (a one-foot high barrier several feet from the high barbed wire fencing between lagers). If one went beyond the warning wire he could be immediately shot and this did happen.

The window shutters were closed as darkness approached and the billet would be secure for the evening and the dogs would be released within the lager to "maintain security." The shutters would be opened up when daylight came. The Germans required us to attend two roll calls and head counts every day (and sometimes more if there was a suspect condition on their part). We would often try to mess up their count by side - stepping or stooping and they would count and recount. This happened even in the colder weather, but we got some satisfaction out of a bit of "deviltry" keeping the Germans from doing something else.

We had an "Ush Ush" system working within the camp - we were tuned to BBC (British Broadcasting Company) and received "genuine news" quite frequently. The billet leader had a hand written copy of the news which he read to each room (after the shutters were closed) and then burned the copy following the final room reading. This was a godsend when we were more informed than the Germans who might periodically give us an older copy of a German propaganda newspaper. We were unsure and discouraged when the Battle of the Bulge occurred during December 1944. This was a very positive turn of events for the Germans, but short lived thank goodness.

In January of 1945, the Russians were geared up for their offensive from the East. As January rolled on toward the end of the month we could hear the big guns. The Germans had to do things in a hurry. They decided to evacuate the camp.

Approximately 1500 POWs had already left by train to the officers camp at Barth, Germany (Stalag #I). On February 6, 1945, one of the coldest days on record the remainder of approximately 9000 POWs evacuated the camp on a forced march. The Red Cross stores were distributed to the POWs with each taking a parcel and more if they could carry it. Shef and I had been walking circuits all winter long and probably were in as good a shape as one might expect under the conditions.

In anticipation of the evacuation we were instructed by the camp leader as to what and how we should approach the situation which resulted in the construction of a back pack out of a

shirt and rolling blankets around the pack. Fortunately we had our heavy GI overcoats with the high collar to partially cover our heads. We loaded our packs with what little we owned and were "ready" for the road.

The first days march was a test of what was to come!

We covered in the neighborhood of thirty kilometers and were pretty well exhausted when we reached a farm barn to spend the night. There was no warm meal. The Russians were moving to the west at a rapid rate. The secondary roads were filled with German refugees who would have no part of Russian dominance. There were wagons pulled by horses and loaded with whatever valuable possessions the people might have had.

The cold weather resulted in frost bite and the walking caused blisters, a combination which caused some of the POW's to remove their shoes. Once they did that they could not get their shoes back on so they had to go to the sick wagon. Shef and I did not remove our shoes even though our feet felt so badly.

During the first few days of marching we relied heavily on the Red Cross food parcels; however, water was a big problem. The water at the barnyards was of poor quality and we were hit with dysentery. This will drain a person's energy big time! We had to relieve ourselves, squatting by the roadside and yet had to maintain our position in the marching column or maybe a threat by the guards to "rouse" with a rifle pointing at you. The small supply of toilet paper did not last very long and then it was tearing the lining out of the overcoat for clean up and ultimately the cleanup was of the animal variety-squat and hurry back in line.

We were fortunate to have a Flight Surgeon Doctor among us (Dr. Caplan) who had limited medical supplies, but gave us advice and encouragement along the way, even to the extent of providing charcoal whenever he could to curb the dysentery. Disease such as pneumonia, cholera, exhaustion, and infection caused the death of many POWs.

*(Note: To read more about conditions during this march.....view the testimony of Dr Caplan before the War Crimes Office in 1945)*

At one point a few weeks into the march Shef and I both were pretty well drained. During a furlough prior to going overseas my brother Joe and I traded wrist watches and somehow I was able to keep it from the Germans. We decided that we should trade the watch for food - we did for two loaves of bread, some fat and a bit of margarine. This probably saved us from being buried in Germany. Guess we really didn't know how close to the end we might have been.

The Luftwaffe guards were strict and did not allow us to build fires during the days we did not march. It seemed we were never able to warm up and it was one cold animal barn after another. Sometimes we did not have a barn to go to as was the case in the area of Swinemunde. It was cold and raining and we "slept" on pine boughs. How we ever got through that episode, only by the grace of God.

Our destination was Fallinbostle (although we did not know this until we arrived there). This was a camp that held an estimated 110,000 POWs of various nationalities such as British, French, Russian, Yugoslav, and others. We were put up in huge circus type tents with only a small bit of straw for a floor. These were indeed very grim days with very little food. Thankfully, the allies were moving to the East and we were at this camp for only a week or so

and we were placed in the custody of the regular German Wermacht which at that time was made up of elderly personnel.

This time we were marching to the East. Life was a little better with the Wermacht. The old guards could not move swiftly when loaded down with their gear and they seemed more understanding of the position the country was approaching - the end was coming. We were allowed to build fires on this march. Shef and I found an old grease bucket about the size of a cake carrier, boiled it out and put a bail on it and that became our cooking and washing utensil.

Shef was small in build and he could squeeze through the smallest crack. On one occasion he squeezed through a small opening and "gathered" a couple of goose eggs. We went into a potato hill and also found some pig weeds which were just poking through at this time of year. We put everything into the pot and had a major banquet!

What I have not yet mentioned is the fact that one was no cleaner than the dirtiest person in this whole outfit. We had not had a chance to bathe and we were the dirtiest, grimmest, unshaven, long haired, and lousiest group you would ever encounter. You might say we had a sub animal existence. During the warm days when we did not march we would be picking lice and snapping their eggs out of our clothes. With our grease bucket Shef and I boiled some of our clothes at times and managed to get a little relief.

During the later part of April, 1945, we were hearing the big guns again and we knew this whole thing had to end soon. On May 2, 1945 we were in this barnyard and a Canadian scout car drove up and we knew the war was over for us. The German guards made their way cross country and we were instructed to "head West."

Not a shot was fired.

We were now under Allied control, went to Brussels and then to Camp Lucky Strike, France where we were given a brief physical exam and awaited shipment home. This is the last I saw Shef.

As I recall he chose to ship out of France and I thought I could get home faster by going to England and getting a ride home. I did go back to the air base at Glatton and ended up getting a ride on a freighter.

Just being together with Shef during this time resulted in our knowing a lot about each other, we listened to each other, reasoned with each other, shared whatever we might have had during lean and grim times, and helped each other as needed; certainly we could never forget those days.

It is with a note of sadness that we could not have seen each other or corresponded sometime over the years; but we each had to try to organize our lives after a very traumatic experience. I doubt that one could ever have a greater friendship than Shef and myself, having been crew members, experienced combat together and sharing the grim experience of being Prisoners of War - all in about a year.

***John Wranesh***