

# Being a POW

by William Paschal, Medic, 397-G

*William Paschal, a medic with Company G, 397th, was a POW.*

When we were finally packed into the 40-and-8 small boxcar, the reality of the harshness of prison life began to sink in. The boxcar was originally designed to hold forty humans. Twice that number of GIs was packed in like sardines. There was not room for all to sit at the same time. We took turns standing then sitting on the floor. The train did not move for the first afternoon and the hours passed very slowly. No way to relieve ourselves, no food, just stand there and wait for the next events to unfold. The train moved at night.

The next day we were let out to relieve ourselves alongside the tracks in daylight. A small cup of soup was given out. We were locked back into the cars to stand or sit for the rest of the daylight hours. This went on for several more days of endless, tedious enduring of time.

We finally arrived at the small town of Bad Orb, Germany, about thirty miles northeast of Frankfurt am Main, Germany. It had taken the Germans one full week to move us less than 300 miles from our point of capture. We were marched about three miles up a mountainside to Stalag IXB.

Things looked pretty grim as our band of prisoners arrived at the gates of the prisoner of war camp. One of the German-speaking guys asked the guard at the gate, "What kind of camp is this?"

The guard replied in a brusque manner. The GI prisoner would not tell us at first what the guard said. Later we learned that his reply was "You will be dead of disease or starvation within six months."

We could tell from the looks of the prisoners already in the camp what was in our future. At the camp office, we were lined up and again searched. My medic bags were emptied on a table at this point. This effectively ended my career as a medic.

Every morning we were called out for "*Appel*" (roll call). We stood in long lines while guards counted each line. A correct count by the guards left us free to return to the barracks. Many times the count did not match the required numbers and we were counted again and again.

Our morning soup was a greenish mixture that looked like grass and turnip tops. Immediately all of the GIs who did not already have diarrhea came down with that malady.

The shutters were opened and the door was unbarred during the day so we could go outside the barracks. This building was built of stone part way up the wall with the upper wall and roof of one layer of boards. When it snowed outside, it often snowed a little bit inside as well.

We were allowed enough firewood each day to burn in the masonry stove for two hours. We slept on the floor on mats filled with wood shavings. No furniture was in the room. Three hundred men slept in rows on the floor. The building had one toilet hole and one water faucet.

Going to relieve yourself at night was a major undertaking. You had to call out to the guy who slept beside you to be guided back to your own spot on the floor.

Not all prisoners had been stripped of their gear. Our group had no toothbrushes, razors, pocket knives, cups, canteens, or mess kits. Toilet paper was not issued at first but later we got some used office paper. I borrowed a knife and fashioned a crude spoon from a piece of lumber torn from the barracks.

Lice became our constant companions and many men spent the hours outside the barracks with their trousers down in the frigid weather while smashing lice that were hiding in the seams of their garments.

In February the man of confidence (prison leader or spokesperson) Jack Kastens, was ordered to name all of the Jews in the American prisoner of war contingent. He refused and did not move when the guard captain issued that order. The German seized a rifle from a private, swung it like a bat at Kastens's face and knocked Kastens senseless to the ground.

Later the guards came into the huts and identified those they knew or thought were Jewish themselves. These men were taken to another separate building. A roster of 350 men for a forced labor camp was needed. There were not enough Jewish men so a large number of healthy (?) GIs were added to the list. Their destination was the infamous labor camp at Berga am Elster.

Gerald Daub of the 100th Division was wounded in November. As he recuperated at a hospital, he was told he would be placed in a replacement depot and assigned to another unit maybe even to some other job than a rifleman. Daub knew that his buddies could not win the war without him so he refused. He returned to our Division in mid-December 1944 and in time was captured at Rimling and was one of those sent to Berga am Elster. Jack Kastens was labeled as “undesirable” and sent there also.

The next man of confidence was Eddie Pfannenstiel of Hays, Kansas. Eddie had joined the Army in 1940 to serve his twelve months and get out. He was looking forward to mid December 1941 to his release date. December 7 changed his plans.

Pfannenstiel asked for one cigarette from each GI prisoner. He then made a deal with a guard to use these to purchase rye or barley to be added to our morning soup. The soup—some cold boiled potatoes and one-sixth of a loaf of sawdust bread—was our only food.

Shortly after that I was called out in a roster of ninety forced laborers to be sent to the south of Leipzig to a soft coal mining area. Enroute to that camp, our boxcars of prisoners were blown off the tracks in Frankfurt by the bombs from an American fighter bomber who spotted the German tanks and 88mm guns on the same train as our cars. Our boxcar was tilted at an angle and the prisoners inside began to push and tug at the door to get out before it tipped over. We could hear German shouts from outside. Our German speakers said that if we opened the door to come out, the guards would shoot. We were marched from that spot across part of Frankfurt to another set of boxcars. While being marched along, German civilians along the street threw stones and spat at us. Some of the things shouted at us sounded like “*Verdammt Americans.*”

We arrived at the small village of Trebnitz and were placed into a barbed wire enclosure that looked like a schoolyard and schoolhouse along the side of a paved road. The building was much better than those at Bad Orb. It was of normal construction, had regular outhouses, a furnace fed by coal briquettes, and bunks. The food seemed to be a little more in quantity. As usual we were lined up each morning in nine lines of ten men to stand *Appel*, or counting. The second morning we were there, the men were to be marched off to work at the strip mines. I was standing at the head of one line when word was passed up to me, “Medic, we have one man too sick to come out for roll call. The guards have gone in to drag him out. . . .” I left the line and ran to the doorway of our quarters. There my way was barred by a guard with a lowered rifle. I could see a GI lying on the floor with blood on his face. Another GI helped him up to lay him on a bunk. The guard captain (a sergeant) was placing his pistol back into his holster. The German shouted something in German and left the room. This was later translated as “You lazy pig! If you will not work here, you will not eat here.” I was forced back outside to join the *Appel*. I learned that when the sick man could not report outside for *Appel* the guard and the sergeant had stomped in and commanded him to get up. He was assisted by another prisoner but could not move or answer the Germans. The guard captain had drawn his pistol and hit the GI twice back and forth across the face with it. The men marched off to work.

Harold Brick of Minnesota was our new man of confidence. He had another GI to assist him. Another GI and I were responsible for emptying the nighttime honey barrels and keeping the premises neat. A guard stayed behind each day to keep an eye on us. I was told that an ambulance would be available to transport the sick man to a prisoner of war hospital. The ambulance arrived and I was appointed as the driver.

It was a wooden dog wagon with some hay in the box. These wagons have wheels about two feet in diameter and shafts in front. A large dog pulls this and the owners make the rounds of the village to deliver milk, eggs, and cream to customers. We placed the GI in the box and I picked up the shafts. The other GI (I think this was Ray Klund) pushed and I started out at a trot accompanied by the guard. This was a four-mile journey and finally we arrived at a large barn-type building. We were ushered in through the gate and placed the “ambulance” inside the front door. An English orderly came to us and asked the patient his name. The GI was comatose and did not respond. I gave the particulars—the GI was William Schroeder of Company F, 100th Division. The orderly took the wagon and snatched a small notebook from my hand in which I had written the patient’s name. In a few minutes the orderly came out with the wagon, handed my notebook to me and carefully placed it on my hand while putting one finger to his lips

in a shhshing motion. We returned to our Camp IVF at Trepnitz. We received word the next morning that William Schroeder was dead. I discovered later that the notebook contained two pages of war news written presumably by the English. Apparently they had managed to construct a crystal radio and traded for some earphones.

Soon it became noticeable that all of we prisoners had greater numbers of lice. The warmer environment seemed to make them very lively. With my pencil and notebook I drew a small outline of a segmented body, six legs, and small head. I presented this one morning to the guard sergeant at *Appel* and scratched myself vigorously under my armpits and crotch area. He nodded and in a day or two we were loaded onto trucks and taken to a delousing shower where we scrubbed ourselves with a soap, got dusted, and our clothes were sent through a heated oven to kill the lice. In the meantime, I learned that our living quarters had been tightly closed and some type of fumigant had been lit to kill the lice that remained in our blankets. This did the trick.

We did receive a Red Cross parcel which was shared among several men. The tins had been opened so we had to eat the contents of canned meat right away. This supposedly kept us from hoarding food for future escapes.

Quite a number of the prisoners came from families where German was spoken. Many of these men did not let the Germans know that they understood their language. After the end of the first week of March they overheard some guards talking about the crossing of the Rhine by the Americans and that some of the engineers responsible for blowing the bridge had been shot.

The men came back from the worksite one day and reported that two Germans in long leather coats had come to the site and taken an American soldier away. This man was Tom Zeleske and it seemed that the Gestapo had presumed him to be Jewish. We never heard of his fate.

Air activity increased as the fighters now had bases further to the east and we were within their range. One day I saw a P-47 dive on a small train, hit the engine with .50-caliber bullets, causing an explosion and a perfect smoke ring to rise into the air.

By now the designated food grippers were longing for the good old K rations of the US Army. The evening talks did not involve women, but food. Recipes for rich food, meat dishes, pies, cakes, almost anything edible were the main topics of interest. Our group rapidly lost weight. We knew that our hope for survival was for the war to end soon.

On April 12 we were rousted out early and ordered to bring our belongings. We started on a forced march. Evidently the Germans were not going to defend this open countryside but they were hoping to get us to Leipzig where a defense would be made.

At first we marched north and east. Some thunder was heard to the east and the Germans feared this might be Russian artillery, so we changed course and began to head north and west.

In the evening we were marched into the enclosure of several farm buildings. Six or seven houses were in a circular enclave joined by a wall of stone. This was a defensive method from earlier times to protect individual families from bandits. We were locked into the barns for the night.

I was certain that I heard cannon fire and heavy-machine-gun fire to the west. In the morning we could look over the walls and see American tanks approaching from the west. The guards gave up their weapons and in a short time jeeps carrying motorized infantry stormed through the gates and our prayers were answered. This was April 13, 1945, the day after President Roosevelt died.

The armored division did not have transportation for us and told us to make our way on foot to the west. We started out in small groups and stayed the first night in a commandeered house in Graetz, Germany. We ate meals that we demanded from the civilians. We finally got to their division headquarters and had a real tasty Army meal. The white bread tasted like cake to us. The headquarters moved us by truck to the east into Leipzig. One week after liberation we were further east into Germany than when we were when liberated. I was discharged from service in December 1945. Seven months after liberation, despite my "non-working status" as a prisoner of war, my weight at discharge was 112 pounds.