*“I think the scariest moment of my life, I said, We don’t stand a chance here. Am I gonna get us all killed or what? And these men were my responsibility. I didn’t want to die either. But I felt for my men. So I put my bayonet on top of the rifle, I got my handkerchief out, and I stood up, I was praying and I just stood up.”*

**– Charles Eberle**

# Chapter 8: Charles Eberle

**Aaron Elson:** Today is August 6, 1999. How old are you now?

**Charles Eberle:** Eighty. February 15 I was 80.

**Aaron Elson:** So you**’**re a little older than Jim (Koerner)

**Charles Eberle:** I**’**m two years older than Jim. We used to box together years ago. I was a state champion boxer.

**Aaron Elson** Before the war?

**Charles Eberle:** Oh yeah, way back in 1941. I had my medal that I won for the state championship. What the hell did I do with it? I had it up on here. I**’**m so disorganized. Where did I put that thing? It’s got the date, and Charlie Eberle, 160 pounds, the 1941 champion. AAU. That was the big thing years ago.

**Aaron Elson:** That wasn’t the Golden Gloves, was it?

**Charles Eberle:** No, Golden Gloves I broke my hand, and I didn’t finish that year. Then shortly after I won the championship Uncle Sam called me. I was in the first draft in 1943.

**Aaron Elson** What made you want to be a boxer?

**Charles Eberle:** I was always very active. I used to wrestle in high school. And I was always a tough kid. I used to have long, curly hair and that used to get me in a lot of fights when I was nine, ten years old. My mother never cut my hair till I was in high school I think. I don**’**t know how I came to go down to the gym, I know, yes, Alec Molfo, he was a boxer in his day and he used to train guys over at the firehouse. Joe Banzio was a state champion also, and one of the Mooney brothers also was a state champion. I used to go up there and I used to watch them and that’s what got me interested. Then I started to go down to Elizabeth and Frank Orlando, he was a well known boxing manager and also a terrific fine person, and his brother was a trainer, Tony Orlando. And that’s what got me started. I had about 27 bouts, I never kept track.

**Aaron Elson:** Did you ever get knocked out?

**Charles Eberle:** No, but I lost on a TKO one time and I ended up in the hospital. I had pneumonia. I didn’t know it. I was gasping in the last round. Then the referee stopped the fight. And I collapsed later and they rushed me to the hospital. I had pneumonia. I had no brains at that time. I liked it. I met Jim there. Jim used to go to the gym also down there, and we were a lot alike.

There**’**s a lot of wise guys go down to the gym, a lot of pros, and some of these pros, they’ll get ahold of the amateurs and they really maul them. Jim and I were both pretty good boxers, and the manager would say, let’s say this guy was mauling one of the young kids just trying to come in. “All right Charlie, come in the next round, you’re next.” And we could handle them. We could hit too, just like they could. And Jim would do the same thing. We never took advantage of the young kids coming up. We were young, too. We were only 19 at the time, but you had kids 17, 18 just coming up.

Jim was always a fine person, and I didn’t meet him again until just a few months ago. We went to a wedding down in Bricktown, and we met there, and started talking, and all of a sudden he’s a prisoner of war also, and I said Holy Christ, we**’**ve got to get together. He said come over tomorrow morning. So I went up to his house at ten o’clock the next morning, and I didn’t have any 100 percent disability before then. I only got it before that for a short time before that, a partial. And he told me, “I get 100 percent disability” which makes a big difference in what you earn.

I was drafted in the first draft in Roselle Park in 1941. I went to Fort Dix, and from Fort Dix to Camp Croft in South Carolina. That’s where I started to fight. I had some more bouts down there too, but then one time my father said one of our acquaintances is an officer now, he went to OCS, why can**’**t you do that? I said okay, I’ll see what I can do. So right away I put in an application for it. You had to go to NCO school; you had to be a corporal or better, and I was a private. So that made me a corporal and sent me to OCS. And I graduated in August.

**Aaron Elson:** Where did you go to OCS?

**Charles Eberle:** At Fort Benning, Georgia, infantry. I got orders from there to report to Camp Kilmer. I was here only three or four days, and I got orders, overseas, right away. And I went and joined the 34th Division, which is the Red Bull Iowa Division, and we were in training for the landings in Africa. It was terrific training, too. And from England we went to Africa, and hit the beaches in Africa. We landed in Algiers. I wasn’t in the first contingent, but I had some buddies get killed in that. And if I get emotional at times – you think of things, it’s been 50 years.

**Aaron Elson:** You don’t hear much about those landings.

**Charles Eberle:** It just grinds me. People don’t consider at all the people that left that didn**’**t come back, and I think of that all the time.

**Aaron Elson:** Who were some of the first friends that you lost?

**Charles Eberle:** It**’**s hard to come by names now. Hamilton, what was his first name now, he was a redhead. He was killed in the first or second day, killed by the French.

**Aaron Elson:** The French?

**Charles Eberle:** Oh, yes. The French were fighting us in the beginning. Then DeGaulle took over, and they started to fight for us against the Germans. But they were the ones that made our landing difficult in Algiers.

**Aaron Elson:** I didn**’**t know that at all.

**Charles Eberle:** You could look that up, it’s true. Not for long, though. And then we worked our way back through Algiers to Tunisia.

**Aaron Elson:** What kind of an officer were you? Did you have a rifle company?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes. I had a platoon. A platoon is about 37 men. I’ll start from when we really got into action. We breezed through Algiers with not too much opposition. We had some patrol fights there. I can tell you a humorous thing maybe about it. We go through a certain area at night. Patrols were always at night. On a desert there’s no activity. Our thing’s always artillery and tanks, ours to them and theirs to us, and that’s all we were. We even had these yellow things to put down on a flag so the Americans would know not to bomb that area. But then the Germans got smart and hey, that’s where they are, so we didn’t use them after a while, because then the Germans would come and bomb us and strafe us. So the patrol work was always at night. You’d find out where the lines are and things like that. And we went out one night. You’d send out scouts and they’d determine about where they were. They could hear the Italians talking the Italian language. One guy was of Italian descent and he understood everything they were saying. And I said, Okay, this is what we’re going to do. We’re gonna just fire over the head, make a lot of noise, and sure enough, because we heard this is what they do.

They didn’t want to fight the Americans, not that they were yellow, they just didn’t want to fight us. So they all surrendered. There must have been 15 or 20 guys. We had further work to do that night, so we just took the bolts out of their rifles, and we gave them a compass bearing to go. I said, “You**’**ll come across a cactus area, and make a lot of noise, talk and sing and shout, so that they’ll know you’re there. And that’s what they did. They made a lot of noise and they were captured, and they said, “We should feel sorry for you. You**’**ve got to fight the Germans. We go now to America.” That was quite something.

From there we had the Kasserine Pass. That was in February in 1943. They knocked out a lot of us. We had over 100 tanks, a hundred and some tanks knocked out in this one I’ll say eight-hour period. Our tanks had I think 75s then, but they had 88s. And before we could even get in range, they knocked out every one of our tanks. I’ll never forget that.

**Aaron Elson:** That must have been a carnage. Were a lot of the crews killed?

**Charles Eberle:** Oh, yeah. I’ll tell you, one time, we were on patrol, and this was in the daytime, too, because we wanted to find out the extent of their penetration, and they sent me out with a patrol. We had no radios at that time but I did have a radio man with me from artillery. Sure enough, we located three tanks and our artillery knocked out one of them. But then the other guys got out of their tanks and they start opening up on us. I had my B.A.R. man – that’s an automatic rifle – Pierce, a Texan. He did pretty good. He knocked one machine gun out of theirs, but then he got hit, too.

I was maybe 20 yards from him. I got over to him, and I was able to drag him to where we could make a stretcher for him. That’s a funny story, too. When you had a situation, you get two field jackets and you get two rifles, and you make a stretcher. My field jacket came off and I had an O-3 rifle, and that was one.

Well, only about five years ago we had a reunion of the guys in my company out in Des Moines, Iowa, and we’re talking about this particular event, and these two guys are arguing, whose other jacket and whose other rifle it was that made the stretcher that we could drag Pierce back on. And the wife of one guy says, “I don’t understand this. I send you down for a bottle of gin, you mulled around, you said ‘What was it you want again?’ And you**’**re trying to remember something that happened fifty years ago.” Everybody laughed. But anyway, to get some continuity, we were pushed back from the Kasserine Pass, and then we started a series of assaults.

**Aaron Elson:** Did Pierce survive?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes. And he lived, because I spoke to him after the war on the phone. He got better. He went back and he was in combat in Italy, too, and he lived all through that. Can you imagine that? He’s a Texan. I forget his first name. Pierce. And a big guy, too. A big guy, but anybody could handle him practically. He couldn’t be gruff to anybody. But he was a good soldier, I’ll tell you. That’s one, too, you had guys that were real, you know they always had a word for it, real foulups let’s say in camp or on maneuvers. But in combat these guys come through for you. And they get back out and they start drinking and get drunk all over again and then you’ve got to break him again. I had one guy, Sodnick his name was, he was terrific. But every time he’d get back he’d get drunk again and he’d get pulled in by the MPs, and you’ve got to break him. He never got up to sergeant again.

Anyway, we had a series of counterattacks and in this one my platoon is the point for my company, which is the point for the battalion, and the battalion the point for the regiment. In fact the battalion commander was court martialed, or he was reduced a grade anyway, back to major from colonel. He was 600 yards behind us, and what good are you there? You’re in open territory. And because of him, my company, most of the company, we got captured.

The night before we had to take this hill, which wasn**’**t much at all. The Germans had evacuated it. In front of us, maybe 200 yards, was a real high ridge, maybe 200 feet high. I had guys up there to patrol to see what was what. And they’re coming back down, “The Germans are coming!” Christ, I saw them before they even got me that message. The Germans are coming through the pass – not the Kasserine Pass but Kef el Ahmar – and they**’**ve got tanks and weapons carriers.

We don**’**t even have bazookas. We had no antitank weapon, no radio, and I remember – I hope I can get through it – Bob Fry was my, in barracks he was my orderly, because when you’re training, you’re soaking wet, he takes care of everything for you. He makes your bed and all; you’re too busy doing things and arranging things. But in combat he’s your runner. When I saw how the situation was turning out, we had lost the machine gun section already, and some other guys were either wounded or killed, I told Bob Fry, Bob, go back and tell Hinton, who was our C.O., what the situation is. He didn**’**t get ten, fifteen feet and he got a mortar right between the legs. When I got to him, he was already out of it. And they**’**ve got the mortars coming down. We’re in the desert. There’s cactus, and you’ve got some rocks there, but you’ve really got no protection. If a mortar went off twenty feet in front of you it would get you because it spread out.

I think the scariest moment of my life, I said, We don’t stand a chance here. Am I gonna get us all killed or what? And these men were my responsibility. I didn’t want to die either. But I felt for my men. So I put my bayonet on top of the rifle, I got my handkerchief out, and I stood up. I was praying and I just stood up.

**Aaron Elson:** You stood up?

**Charles Eberle:** I had to. What are you gonna do? And the Germans came in right away. They didn’t start shooting. I have to give them credit. They were very good. They rounded us all up quickly. They were very efficient. What**’**s the name of the guy now, general, Rommel. Oh, they were efficient. And we only had one B.A.R. man, Pierce, no other automatic weapon. The rest of them had O-3 rifles, ping, and they had machine pistols, brrrrp, brrrrp, brrrrp. Christ almighty, you didn**’**t stand a chance with them.

**Aaron Elson:** I thought Pierce was already wounded and evacuated?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes. This was on another day. Anyway, the company, too, was taken. They went right around us with their machines and tanks. They got us all except one patrol which was off on this other high hill but off to the right so they couldn**’**t do anything. They didn**’**t get captured. But you couldn**’**t blame them for not doing anything. Especially when you look at the weapons the Germans had and the weapons we had. It wasn**’**t until a little later that Patton came in and took over and he saw that we got the right weapons and were better equipped

Oh, I started to tell you the story about the tanks. I never finished that story. We went out on this patrol, and we knocked the one tank out, and the guys started firing at us. We got Pierce in safe keeping, and they had withdrawn, and the burned-out tank now was there. So we looked for their weapons. They**’**ve got machine pistols, they**’**ve got cameras, and what else did they have, they had nice field glasses, and I didn**’**t even have a pair of glasses. So we**’**re running up there, we all ran up, and I grabbed this handle, and holy shit, there**’**s shit all over my hands. The guys were blown to bits in there; there was shit all over the place.

I could never change my kids’ diapers because of that. That’s what it reminded me of. Because there was shit all over inside, shit and body parts because they were blown to bits. Because all the ammunition in there blew up, too. That**’**s a thing you never forget. Just like with Bob Fry, when I got back home I could never call his people because if I didn’t tell him to do what he did he would have been alive, and that still affects me today. I can**’**t get over it. I never could call his people when I got back to tell them what had happened. I just let it stay like it was. I think it’s a mistake now, I think I should have. I**’**m sure they would have understood but you don**’**t think that way at the time. It’s embedded in your mind that I had done that to him, and I thought of that all the time I was a prisoner of war.

**Aaron Elson:** Did they give you any training, when making you an officer, for having to deal with a situation like that?

**Charles Eberle:** Oh, no. These guys were in combat who were training us. You learn that after you get in combat, what to do. Don’t let anybody tell you they’re not scared. Everybody’s scared. You know, you are. And then you just have to get that out of your mind and do what you have to do. Guys that do brave things don**’**t do it because they’re so brave, they just do it because they get this out of their mind and then they do it because they know it has to be done, really. You’ve got guys, too, that took off. We had a sergeant, I’m not gonna mention his name, he was one of the best sergeants we had in training. We got in combat, and he took off. He couldn’t handle it. And you thought that he’d be one of the greatest guys in combat.

**Aaron Elson:** When you saw that happen, were you judgmental?

**Charles Eberle:** I wanted to shoot him.

**Aaron Elson:** Really?

**Charles Eberle:** Yeah. I wanted to shoot him. But he was out of his mind, I guess.

**Aaron Elson:** Had you seen that happen to anybody else, or was that the first time?

**Charles Eberle:** I**’**ve seen guys cry. I**’**ve seen a lot of guys cry.

**Aaron Elson:** How close did you come to shooting him? Did it just run through your mind?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes, it ran through my mind.

**Aaron Elson:** But you couldn**’**t have actually done that.

**Charles Eberle:** I don’t know. Just like the first time you shoot somebody, you hesitate and you hesitate, but the guy**’**s shooting at you, so you**’**ve got to make sure you shoot him. The first German I wanted to shoot, he was up on this here ridge, not the same one I was just talking about, and by the time I made up my mind I was going to shoot him, he got behind the rocks and he started firing at us.

**Aaron Elson:** That’s something I**’**ve never had to deal with. Many people haven’t had to deal with.

**Charles Eberle:** I’ll tell you, all you have to do is be in a tight situation and you forget all about it, you start shooting. As an officer you don’t shoot much anyway, because you**’**re busy going around, and I was always right there with my men. I wasn’t behind. I was right there with them all the time. That was my job, and that’s what I had to do. I know I killed some Germans, but that wasn**’**t my main thing. My main thing was to organize my group. And I had a good group, too.

**Aaron Elson:** I know in Europe they would hide their insignia. Did you cover that up because the snipers would shoot at it?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes. I had my insignia on the back of my helmet, nothing on the collar. We did the same thing. We would look for their officers and pick them off. And you didn’t do none of this here stuff when you’re out there. You holler commands. You didn**’**t do any waving of the arm because they’d know you’re either a sergeant or an officer and they’re gonna shoot you first if they could. I was lucky. I never got wounded. Very lucky.

**Aaron Elson:** When you got captured, what happened?

**Charles Eberle:** We couldn’t fight, so I decided to surrender my guys. They separated the enlisted men from the officers, and a little experience about that, too. We had two flyboys come in that were shot down, and we were already told by the Germans that we were gonna fly over from Tunisia to Palermo. The flyboys come in, and before we told them about this, they’re saying how they love to get these JU-88s, that**’**s Juncker 88s, they’re like our C-47s, they**’**re cargo planes and they do about 125 miles an hour. They said how they would knock them down.

I said, Hey, that’s the way we’re going over. Uh oh, they changed their tune. But you know what they did? They flew us over, but they said okay, you guys, you**’**re going with the enlisted men, the two flyboys. They went by boat with the enlisted men. But us, we didn**’**t know whether we were gonna shit in our pants or what. That was a scary moment. Of course later there were no Germans in the area at the time when we landed at Palermo.

**Aaron Elson:** How were you treated?

**Charles Eberle:** By the Germans? The first camp we went to was run by the Italians, and they weren**’**t that bad either but they had no food for you. In fact, we**’**d seen them bring in a donkey that they killed, or got killed, whatever it was, and that was our meal. It was a British camp too, incidentally. All British officers. And they were great, the British were, to us. When we came in, there were four or five of us, and we came into this little room that had bunk beds. I think there were six bunk beds in the room we were assigned to, and there were four British guys there, and two of us bunked with them. And here out on the table they had marmalade, D-bars, choc-o-lade, and all the goodies.

The Italians, some days we didn**’**t get anything at all. No food. We would bribe guys, we still had American money, to get stuff for us, donuts and things like that, and so we were really hungry. Here we ate all this food up, and it wasn’t then that we realized but it was a little later that we realized what assholes we were, taking their food, and we realized later on you didn’t get any more parcels. But we realized how good they were, the British were, to us. The camp was run by the British officers. We had an American colonel, he was in the camp also, Colonel Guler.

The next night, some guys got hold of pliers. I don**’**t know how they got them, maybe they bribed somebody, and they cut through the fence, so I go through, too, and I wish I could remember the guy’s name. I can**’**t now. it was a guy from Iowa, and he shouldn’t even have tried to escape because he was physically beat.

When we all escaped you’ve got to break up, but he and I stayed together till we got to the Abruzzi mountains, a real high ridge. It takes you hours to get up there, and you get up there, you know you were safe because it’s all shale and you could see if any Germans were coming. But then the next night we worked our way across the Abruzzi mountains to a little town, and this guy and I were hungry. The D-bar that we had was the worst thing in the world because it was so hot, and our saliva got so thick, and I had a hole in my canteen from climbing there and no water left in it, and these Italian people, they were just great to us. They fed us, and we were able to dig a place. They had a big straw pile with like a little roof over it, and we had a hole underneath it. If someone would get wind that the Germans were coming, “Montanya, Montanya!” so we’d go to the mountains. Other times we didn’t have time to do that and we’d have to get down in the hole. But they never squealed on us. And they could have been shot. They would have been shot. They did a lot of great things for us, the Italian people.

I was out 27 days altogether, and we worked our way down to Campobasso, and, geez, I wish I could remember his name. We had enlisted men also. And we divided, enlisted men went with the other officer, and the other guys went with me. They got through, and we were recaptured.

The reason we were recaptured, two Italian kids, they were 20 maybe, or late teenages, and they guided us across these mountains. This one morning, we hear this noise, and it’s the Germans shouting, and they**’**re firing their weapons. Of course we had no weapons. I went and I dove into some shrubs and I hit a rock smack in the mouth. It knocked my tooth off, and I’m dazed, and I hear this laughter out there. It was the Germans, and they**’**re talking. I didn**’**t understand any German then but I learned later on. And I found out the reason they’re laughing, my ass is sticking out from underneath the bush. And I’m still because I’m dazed. The guy still thinks I**’**m trying to hide. And they’re laughing like hell.

One of the German sergeants, actually I had a civilian coat on. I had my Army uniform but you couldn’t tell I was a soldier, and he wanted to shoot us. Me in particular, because I was an officer and I had my ID card. And the German officer, he spoke impeccable English. I couldn’t understand what he was saying but I could see what he was saying to the sergeant, like “Get over there and mind your own goddamn business.”

Later on I slept in the same room with him that night. He took over the mayor’s huge home in Campobasso, and it was a room as big as these two rooms put together, the bedroom was. He said, if you have to go, there’s a latrine right out there, but make sure that you make some noise because the guard is outside. Don**’**t try to escape. Don**’**t try anything with him either. He went to Johns Hopkins University for his masters degree, and he even knew somebody in Roselle Park, John Neustadter, and that**’**s somebody I had known. I wish I had gotten his name and address. I got called back the Army in 1950 for two more years, and I was sent over to Germany. I would have loved to have seen him. What a fine man he was.

**Aaron Elson:** He saved you from the sergeant?

**Charles Eberle:** Yeah, the sergeant would have killed me. Because I had a civilian coat on, and I had it buttoned so they wouldn**’**t see my uniform.

**Aaron Elson:** What do you think at a time like that?

**Charles Eberle:** You think only of survival. In fact, that**’**s one night when I cried. Because here I thought, we**’**re through. I**’**m gonna be home. Because I knew that they wouldn**’**t send me back into combat. I**’**d be going home, and that**’**s all I thought about. That night I just cried terribly, because I was so broken. And I didn**’**t know what I was in for. Being incarcerated is an entirely different kind of life.

**Aaron Elson:** When you dove into the shrubs you broke a tooth, you banged your face. Did you get any dental or medical treatment?

**Charles Eberle:** By the Germans? No. None at all. I wasn**’**t that severe. They washed off my forehead with their first aid thing, but that’s all. I didn’t get a bandaid on it. I had some kind of hole there I remember. Oh, then I went back to Sulmona where I escaped from. Colonel Guler also escaped and he was recaptured. The colonel was the oldest POW. He was captured at Tobruk. He was a liaison officer with the British a year or two years before, and he was a lieutenant colonel then, and a hell of a nice guy.

**Aaron Elson:** He was American or British?

**Charles Eberle:** He was American. From New Jersey, too. Max Guler was his name. Colonel Max Guler.

**Aaron Elson:** You said that the guy that you escaped with and spent those 27 days with never should have gone out in the first place because he was in bad shape. Did he survive?

**Charles Eberle:** I would have made it a lot sooner because I was burdened by him. I had to help him. Let me tell you what happened to him, too. He got home, and went to Phenix City. Now, by this time now I’m in Oflag 64, and his cousin, the 34th Division was a National Guard outfit, everybody**’**s related to everybody, and his cousin, I can**’**t remember names at all anymore, came over to me this one day and showed me a clipping.

He got shot to death in Phenix City. He started to fool around with some guy’s wife there, and the guy went out and got a gun and came back and shot him. How ironic can you get. But he was like a real wise guy too. He didn**’**t do me a favor by coming along with me, because I had to sacrifice myself to help him. He was selfish in a sense. He was all for himself, that’s the way he was. I got to know him after a while. But when his cousin came and showed me his clipping, you know, when you come into camp like that, you**’**re interviewed, and then it’s put on the bulletin board, who you are, where you’re from and all, and then anybody who knew you in there, they come over to you.

**Aaron Elson:** Was this in the POW camp?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes, this is in Oflag 64 in Poland.

**Aaron Elson:** I didn**’**t know they did that.

**Charles Eberle:** Oh yeah. The Americans did that. If you knew somebody, you wanted to make it known to the other guys who you are, and they would put your name down, where you were captured, where you’re from, and it would just be for Americans. In fact, the guy who became my dearest friend all my life, he only died about ten years ago, his name is Phil Wade. He came in this one day, and we had played football against each other down in Elizabeth. In those days you had amateur leagues, and he remembered me. And so we had a great time. Then we find out our mothers belonged to St. Joseph’s Sodality and his mother had to buy my mother the Christmas gift. It’s a secret and it’s not revealed until the gift is given. And we thought gee, what a thing. Then later on when we came back to the States after the war, he and I went to Fort Benning. But before we went to Fort Benning we both came back and both married Italian girls,

**Aaron Elson:** How did he get captured?

**Charles Eberle:** He wasn**’**t in my outfit. He was captured after me, but he went right to Oflag 64, now this is Poland. I was captured in Italy for quite a while too. And when he was captured they didn**’**t do that anymore. They sent him directly to Oflag 64, an all American camp. I was in a British camp. Yeah, I know where he was captured now. He was captured in Italy. He was with the 36th Division. I think he got a Purple Heart and he got a citation also, like the Bronze Star. But anyway, we both came back and we both got married. He married Angela. I have a note up there now, call Angela. She must be away. We**’**re still the dearest of friends. She**’**s like my dear sister. Nothing ever between us. My wife was beautiful and Angela was beautiful. We had two beautiful gals. And here they hit it off, and both intelligent gals too. She was a nurse, Angela was. I’m sorry, a dietitian.

So Phil and I went down to Benning. We spent a lot of time off together, doing things. And when we got out of the Army, all these years, they were our dearest friends. He was well to do himself, and her father, too. Her father was a Gallo, and they were big people up in Netcong. And Phil was from a very prominent family in Elizabeth, the Wade family.

**Aaron Elson:** Where did you first run into Major Waters?

**Charles Eberle:** Major Waters? Colonel Waters. You want to know about Colonel Waters? The finest person ever you’d want to meet. What a man he was. He wasn’t the commandant of the camp. He was a lieutenant colonel at the time, but he would set up formations and things like that. He was in charge of escape plans also. I had an escape plan, too, but it was never pulled off.

**Aaron Elson:** Was it your idea, that you would present to him?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes, but it had to be approved because you would endanger other people. My escape plan was to be in a laundry bag with laundry and have the American guys in the back release me and let me out, and nobody would know about it. But it never came to pass. We moved out. It’s Colonel Waters you**’**re talking about, not Colonel Guler, right? I wanted to start telling you about Colonel Guler too, because he was the old salt type of soldier. When they recaptured us, the corporal would make us walk in the street, and people would spit at you, the Germans, not everybody. And this one time the German sergeant, he was okay, and he liked his food. So we got to this one town, I think it was Hanover, and he went to the officers mess there, the NCO mess, he was like a master sergeant.

When the sergeant in charge of the mess saw us, “You can’t bring these people in here.” And the sergeant says, “This is where I want to eat. I don’t want to go eat where they do, and I can’t let them out of my sight. So this is where I’m gonna eat.” They got in a big argument. They were speaking German, I couldn**’**t understand much of what they were saying, but the one guy, the interpreter for us, said, “He’s sticking up for you people. He wants you to eat here too.” So finally he outranks the other guy, so we eat in that mess.

That’s how silly regulations get. He should know that the sergeant could not let us go by ourselves. He had to eat with us. And then the sergeant, he’s a big shot in the German army, bigger than in the American army, nosirree, he’s gonna eat in this nice mess hall. We ate good food, too.

I remember on the train going back, too, we had a German woman with a little girl on there, and we had been given a Red Cross parcel to share. So we’re in this compartment and we’re eating cheese and all the stuff that’s in there, and when I see this little girl, she’s looking, and so I break off part of my D-bar, and the woman starts to cry. She was so happy that we did that, you know, we were the enemy. And she was just so happy that we had compassion. We gave her some cheese to eat, too. And we had Spam; we shared that with her on our ride.

Let**’**s see now, I made notes here last night, and some today. Did I tell you about the guy who went to Johns Hopkins University? Guler, okay. Oflag 64. All German sergeants. People spit on us. Oh, I didn’t finish, in the camp, in Oflag 64 in Poland, the Germans had a name for it, Aotburgund, what the Polish called Szubin, but the camp was well organized. You had schools going on. That’s what I did. I studied German all the time. When I got through, I could speak real good German. When I escaped my second time I was the one, let me talk about the camp first.

In the camp if you had an escape plan, you had to be approved by Colonel Waters, let’s say, and his committee. And there were tunnels that were made. All the tunnels eventually were exposed, so nobody got out through tunnels at all. But we had two guys that got out, and they were recaptured. Some other guys got out too, and one or two guys made it through. They didn’t tell you when the guys, right when they escaped, maybe a month later they’d tell you. They didn**’**t want any loose talk, because some guys might be doing business with Germans, like I did. This one German guard, he was an old German guard, and I would give him D-bars, or kase, that**’**s cheese in German, and things from my Red Cross parcel for sugar, and he would bring me fresh stuff, which he wasn**’**t allowed to do but he took a chance, and we had a nice relationship. I was still learning German then so I wanted to talk to him as much as possible.

**Aaron Elson:** Did you have anything to do with making radios?

**Charles Eberle:** We had a radio in the camp. It says in this one book that I made the radio. I didn**’**t make the radio. A guy from Jersey made it, though. He was an engineer. And I**’**ve seen him, recently I saw him. I**’**m trying to think of his name, gosh. He**’**s in the book there. I could read through the book to find out what his name was. But I had the radio for a short time. And then I gave it to somebody else to hold.

**Aaron Elson:** What would happen if you were caught with the radio?

**Charles Eberle:** I don**’**t know. See, when you**’**re in that situation you**’**ve got two minds. You think, what is the best thing for me to do? The best thing to do is you**’**ve got the radio. Every night we had sessions whereby we would get BBC news. We would get the latest news all the time. When the landings in Italy took place, that news they gave out just a few days later. They didn**’**t hold that news off. They told us, Please don’t look excited, don**’**t change any of your routine with Germans. Just act like nothing has happened. They didn’t want you to act elated. Be smart, don’t say ha ha, I won’t be here long, anything like that. Because that’s why they**’**d start looking. And they often did search. They suspected we had the radio, but they never did find it. We had it with us in the final escape, they had that radio.

**Aaron Elson:** Where would you hide it?

**Charles Eberle:** Up in the beams, in different places. Only one or two guys knew where it was hidden. I know this. I**’**ve got two stories to tell, remind me. Landkart, just say Landkart. Separate the two. Oh, a shoeshine kit from home, you squeeze the handle a certain way, and out came the pieces for the radio. It was things like that. That’s what they would use to make the radio. All the stuff came not from Red Cross parcels but from individuals.

Oh, and Landkart. As time got on and the Russians were getting close to the camp, we could foresee either breaking out or being freed, and Colonel Waters wanted maps of the area. He knew that I was dealing with this German. He had to be sure that I wasn**’**t doing anything I shouldn’t do. Charlie, what we need is, we want maps of this area. Road maps are good enough. They don’t have to be military maps, but road maps of this area. So we know where we’re going when we get out of here. And then I want a big map of the whole area.

So this one day I said, The SAO – he knows what I mean, the senior American officer, Colonel Waters – wants me to get hold of some maps for him, because you know, eventually, the Russians are gonna come through here and we want to know where we’re at.

“Ach! Nein! Das Landkarten shtrict verboten.” Strictly forbidden, do you understand some German? “Kan nicht!” He would like to but can**’**t. And I said, “Listen, Colonel Waters will turn me over to your Oberst, and you know what’s going to happen? He’s going to find out that we’ve been trading back and forth. It would mean the brig for me, but for you, you might even have to go to Russia.

“Ach, Nein!” Anyway, I scared the shit out of him. “I**’**ll see what I can do.”

So a week or so later, he met me one day, he brought me Landkarten. Oh, and then, after that, Colonel Waters wanted me to get him some pistols. Well, that was out of the question. The guy said I’d be shot. Pistolen, kan nicht das.

As a result of my POW life, I studied German. Carl Hansen was the guy. He was a professor of German at Penn State University. Twice a day, in the morning and then the afternoon, you sat on the side of the hill and you studied German. And he was a stickler. He wanted you to talk German like the Germans talked it. For instance, in America we say My brother, my bruder. In Deutsche, mein bruder. So that when I got to where I escaped the second time, I now had what, eight months of German, six or eight months of German that I was learning, and I spoke German like a German spoke it.

When I escaped, there was this one German woman, she was a young woman, there were about seven of us at the time, I was the only one speaking German. She told me later that she did not believe that I was an American, because I spoke German like the Germans spoke it. After a while she realized that I was truly an American. But I got a big charge out of that. If I could get by her that way, I could get by Germans too.

**Aaron Elson:** How did you pull off the second escape?

**Charles Eberle:** The first night they marched us to this one area where they had a bunch of cattle barns. I’m talking with some of the other guys, and we’re gonna try to get away. The Germans, they’re very nervous now. This is the best time for us to try. We have marched from 4 o’clock that morning until dark, and we’re all very tired, as were the Germans.

Oh, and now they had to use some of the young Germans, Deutsche Jugend, and they had to be frightened too. So other guys, they hung out and they hid in the loft. But what I did, I didn**’**t know but what they’d punch through the loft there with rifles with bayonets up there. That didn’t appeal to me. They didn’t do that. But I got a piece of beam, and when a cow goes into the thing there, the cow can only only go down so far, and I built the rest up with hay. I’m down underneath that hay, so when the Germans come by, the cow’s chewing on that hay, and before you know it I hear the other guys say “They’re gone! They**’**re gone!” And then I get up from where I was, and we made our way back toward Poland, toward Warsaw.

**Aaron Elson:** This is when you were being marched from Oflag 64 to Hamelstein?

**Charles Eberle:** Hamelburg. Yes. Eventually they ended up in Hamelburg. That**’**s when this book The Raid was written, I think you read that in there. The whole group went to Hamelburg.

**Aaron Elson:** But you escaped?

**Charles Eberle:** I escaped the first night, yes. In fact, we went to a big farm house there, where other Americans that had escaped had gathered. We were maybe 30 of us now. And I’m going out this one night, I think it was early, it was dark, though, and I hear “Halt!” I said, “Ich bin Amerikane,” and I see they’re not Germans either. I said, “Ich bin Amerikanski.” Make sure they weren**’**t going to shoot me first. I knew what they wanted. They took me inside and they had some guys who could interpret then inside there and talk with the Russians, and we had to stay there supposedly. But some of us didn’t. We just took off, because they didn**’**t have any soldiers there.

**Aaron Elson:** These were Russians?

**Charles Eberle:** Yes. I was going out to the barn to get some milk, that’s when they said “Halt!” They were Russians, not Germans. And they were big, too, big tall guys. Not all Russians were like that.

**Aaron Elson:** And you didn’t want to surrender yourselves to the Russians?

**Charles Eberle:** Well, let me tell you, later on, no, we came back. I ran into one Russian major who spoke very good German too. He was a real fine guy. We had to walk most of the way, or we could get on pony carts where the Poles were going, because the Poles were going back too. This one Russian major, he gave us a ride in one of our own jeeps. They had all our equipment. So he took us to this farm house. He took us inside, and he had a pig in the back. He was telling the people, in his language, I could see what for, and he said in German, “This is for you, not for them.” But when he left we divided it up. The Poles were just wonderful too. And we shared it with them anyway.

He picked us up the next morning, and he dropped us off in Warsaw. Not anywhere in particular, just Warsaw. That’s when we got into the square there in Warsaw, and my friend and Bob Plummer, his name I remember, we spoke to each other on the phone not so long ago, that**’**s more than five years ago, I got a letter from him too. Did you read that letter?

**Aaron Elson:** No.

**Charles Eberle:** I’ll let you read that. Where the hell was I?

**Aaron Elson:** You were in the square in Warsaw.

**Charles Eberle:** Okay, the square in Warsaw. And we’re Americans. In fact I had an American flag on me. And the people came, and they wanted to take you to their place. I don’t know who it was, they took us to their house now. I can**’**t remember whether it was the son, no, the son was killed. There was an uprising. Before the Russians came through, the Poles had an uprising against the Germans, and their son was killed in that. Then the Russians crossed the Vistula. They could have crossed a lot sooner and saved the Poles, but they never did. And this family, Stefanski was the name, Stanislav Stefanski, they took me in with Bob Plummer, and they took care of us.

We shed a sweater or some part of our garments for bologna, or cheese, or what, and we’d bring it back and share it with the Polish family. And one day we never came back. The Russians grabbed us and they threw us in a DP camp with Jewish refugees, Yugoslavs, Italians, and it was a hellhole. You couldn**’**t go outside at night, there was shit all over the place, everybody had dysentery, no straw, no blankets. Here we’re Americans, it didn’t mean nothing to them at all.

They kept us there only a few days, but in this time, and I guess probably moreso when they put us in a boxcar. They put us in boxcars and the door was open partway, and this is January, February, and you know in Poland it’s now subfreezing most of the time. No straw, no blankets, nothing else for us. And you had to leave the door ajar there because everybody had the shits. And it was cold. God damn it was cold. You try to keep your fingers, your feet on somebody else’s chest to try to stay warm. That’s when my feet got badly frostbitten.

When they put us in this boxcar, it was a seven or a nine day trip, and we got to Odessa. They put us on a British boat, and there, ohh, they had tablecloths. We ate like kings. The British were wonderful to us. And they gave us two hundred dollars, no, that was in America I got two hundred dollars, because I lost it in one night gambling. I watched some guy playing cards, and I watched him bluff, so then, I was not a good gambler, so I had three eights or whatever it was, and we**’**re playing five or seven card stud or whatever it was, and it looks like he might have I think two pairs, and he**’**s outbidding me and outbidding me. I went through damn near the whole two hundred dollars and I saw him finally, and he had a full house. Son of a bitch. I never gambled much after that at all. I learned my lesson about gambling. Where was I before I got to that?

**Aaron Elson:** You were on a British ship.

**Charles Eberle:** Yeah. And they treated us royally. They took us to Port Said, Egypt. We came under American control there. They sent us right over to Naples.

This is the letter from Bob Plummer.

**Aaron Elson:** [reading] “December 4, 1993. Dear Charlie, Boy, it was great to hear from you after all these years. I have often thought of you in the past. As a POW you stood head and shoulders above the rest. You were a leader and we all respected you and your judgment. You wouldn**’**t be defeated and so you were the one we followed. It was you who led us out of the snow. What experiences we had. We did a heap of living in those days. And some of us grew up almost overnight. The only other POW I kept in touch with was Johnny Waters. He made four stars when he retired from the Army, and with only one leg. He was West Point class of 1931, by the way.”

**Charlles Eberle:** He got wounded I know in Hamelburg. I didn’t know he lost his leg, though. Because that’s when the American forces came in, Patton’s forces. That**’**s when Patton got in trouble a little bit with the media, because they thought he committed the rescue because Waters was his son in law, but he came in to rescue 600 officers, that’s a big difference. And Colonel Waters was not that kind of guy. He wouldn’t have allowed that to happen. He was a wonderful man.

**Aaron Elson:** [reading] “Did you know that our group was the last group to leave by sea from Odessa? No other ship was allowed by the Russkies to pick up POWs. The Russians took others and off to the cold country with them. We had some luck there I believe. They say that there are or were 30,000 Yanks left in Russia and 40,000 Brits. Also a few French, amount unknown. Yipe. It could have been our fate too. Like I said, I was contacted by John P. Smith, sounds like a name on a cheap hotel register, a first lieutenant, and we were in barracks 9B. LTC Martz was our boss in there as I remember. Old Smith turned out to be a pacifist, although he retired as a major in the USAR. War makes for strange bedfellows as they say. I was in the Marines at boot camp when my orders from the US Army came through, calling me up in 1950.

“The DI took and looked at the orders, then tore them up in front of me and said Fuck what the Army wants you to do. You belong to me now. I could have gotten out, but something inside said stay with the Corps and see what develops. I did and had a ball. I wouldn**’**t have missed it for anything. Then civvy street. What a bore. But I did manage things and later did quite well if I do say so.

“I was a vice president/general manager of a company and did a fair job, but got jammed up with my secretary and as you well know it ain’t smart to dip your pen in the company inkwell. So I had to continue to march in another direction. Sounds like a soap opera, doesn’t it?

“Well old chap, keep in touch and I will see you at the next get together, god willing. Give my best to Emma and keep the faith.”

Now who**’**s Bob Plummer?

**Charles Eberle:** That’s the guy that I escaped with in Poland. He was a happy go lucky guy, a real foulup probably in the Army. He joined the Marines when he got back.

**Aaron Elson:** How did you get called up again if you had frostbite?

**Charles Eberle:** Ohhhh, shit. Well, here**’**s what happened. When we got to Naples, we all said we’re going be fighting these sonofabitches next, the Russians, because they had no regard for you at all. Let me tell you a story about church, going to church, the Russians, when I was in Poland, when I was in Warsaw. I get so disgusted with myself, what the hell’s happening? I used to be such a sharp guy. I was in sales all my life.

**Aaron Elson:** I asked you how you got called up?

**Charles Eberle:** Okay. When we got to Naples we all said we**’**re going to be fighting these sonofabitches next. Let**’**s join the inactive reserve. We all did as enlisted men, so we all joined the inactive reserve and figured, well, they won**’**t call you up unless there’s an all out war, and that’s the only war you could foresee at the time. Along comes the Korean War. Every one of us got called back in. Every one of us. And one guy got captured in Korea. Captain Kitchens was his name. And this I got through a friend of mine.

**Aaron Elson:** Did you wind up in Korea?

**Charles Eberle:** No, I was very lucky. I was, wait, let me tell you about how I got to go to Germany instead of Korea. When I came back from overseas, I made regimental athletic officer, and that changed my MOS. But the other one I had was 1542, that**’**s infantry. Any infantry is 1542. Help me out again.

**Aaron Elson:** You were the regimental athletic officer. And this helped you go to Germany instead of Korea.

**Charles Eberle:** Okay, yeah. Now when I got recalled, an officer reports to the post. I was called to Fort Dix. I reported to the VOQ (visiting officers quarters) there and showed them my orders and I got assigned a room there. The next morning I’m going to go to the headquarters. So it’s a rainy morning. I had my car with me. So I’m driving up and I see this captain walking by there. I stop and ask him if he wants a lift. Yeah. What’s the Army all about now, I**’**ve been out of it four years. He’s telling me about the changes and all, a nice conversation. Then I drop him off there, and I start my processing. An officer gets processed. And then you have to go in for your assignment. You have to see the adjutant’s office.

Well, he was not the adjutant, he was the assistant adjutant, and he was in charge this day. So I said, Hey, what have you got that’s good? And they ask you, What’s your MOS? I forget what the regimental athletic officer is, I says, that was my latest MOS. Incidentally, I said I’m not particularly crazy about going into combat again. I said if I get a nice job here, at Benning, I’d like that.

“Yeah, we can do that for you.”

Oh, fine.

He says, “If you stay here, every three months they clean you out, and over to Korea you go.”

I said, That doesn**’**t sound so good either.

He says, “I**’**ve got just exactly what you want. They’re forming the 4th Division, that’s already scheduled for Germany, and the officer cadre for it. And they’re scheduled to go to Germany, he mentioned several months ahead, and if you accept that now, that would probably be the best thing.

So I said, Let me call my wife. I called my wife and I told her. I said it’s the best thing for us. And I could probably get you down there too.

And then I was sent down to Fort Dix. I came home on leave, and a few days, zoom, they shipped me right out. I**’**m trying to get it from the beginning. Then I came home. I told my wife, and I was sent to Camp Kilmer, and from Camp Kilmer I got notice right away, and I was sent over to Germany. And I was in the occupation force there.

My tour of duty in Germany the second time, I was in Frankfurt part of the time and then I was made a referee and I was an umpire in the maneuvers there. I traveled all through Germany, visited my father’s folks. This time I spoke terrific German. And I met his family over there. In fact I’ve still got letters. I correspond with them. I had a nice tour of duty, it was uneventful actually. And then eventually I got out. I had two boys now. This is 1950 I’m talking about now.

**Aaron Elson:** You said to ask you about going to church in Warsaw.

**Charles Eberle:** Oh yeah. I knew this Pole, Stanislav Stefanski, for a period of time, and this one morning, they were just great, as were all the Polish people there, and we’re coming back from Mass this one morning. This American jeep whizzes by, and it pulls up a couple blocks ahead of us, and one guy got out. When I saw it, he was pulling this girl down out of the house, and apparently her husband or brother or kin to the girl, a Pole, had his arm around the girl and the iron railing so the German cannot budge that gal loose. And the guy in the jeep hops out of the jeep, Bing! Bing! Two shots. Shoots the Pole I assume dead. And grabs the girl, throws her in the jeep, off they go.

Now I wanted to say something about the, Jim, I can**’**t remember his last name, there were three guys that were All American in football, and one was about 6-6, about 240 pounds, I can**’**t think of their names now, dammit.

We had great athletes in there. So we had this athletic event, and then we asked permission to give out prizes. We wanted it done in the presence of everyone. Could we have a formation? There were 600 I guess. And yes, they allowed us to have a formation there.

There were probably a half dozen German officers and a dozen German guards there, too. So after the events are all over, we ate, in the early part of the afternoon, and we had a formation and they gave out the different prizes. Klim tin, you know what klim is; Spam, and this is real treasure for those guys. And then, I forget his name now too, dammit, Carl Hansen was there too, our captain. He called the Americans to attention, and points to the band. We had a little 12 or 14 piece band, and as they start up, it’s the Star Spangled Banner. We do a half left, and then Hand Salute. Present Arms. And everybody saw exactly what we were looking at. Someone out of a mattress cover made an American flag. And here they are playing the Star Spangled Banner and we’re standing there till it’s through, and then we salute the flag, and Dismissed!

The Germans, they don**’**t know what to do, what to say. But fortunately they were regular army so they just walked away like nothing happened at all. But we pulled a fast one over on them. You could do that with the Germans, but the Gestapo you wouldn**’**t have even tried that. So when I see, I break up when I see people doing the burning the flag thing. When I see anybody do that, I get so irate. Because I know what the flag means to me. But not a lot of people do. Really. Anytime you walk by my house just look where the flag is, as long as it’s not raining out. If it’s a little drizzle I’ll leave it out anyway, you’re not supposed to have it out when it’s raining.

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