



James Leroy Cockrell, Jr

**A Narration of World War II Experiences
by One Soldier**

2003

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Baptized as an infant into the Presbyterian Church. Attended public schools through high school. Graduated June, 1935.

Early Military Training

The story really begins in September 1935 when I enrolled in the Cavalry School at Camp Chase, Oklahoma. One of the courses that first semester was the "Cavalry Reserve Officers' Training Corps". I found that if you enrolled in the Cavalry you would tryout for the polo team. This seemed sort of ironic for a teenager, so I joined. When I was inducted into the Corps, we went through a short orientation and were sent to a barracks, which was kept in stables run by the US Cavalry. (I never acquired the skills to be a member of the polo team.)

It was at the university that I met my future wife, Peg. (Actually Margaret Cochran) She developed into a steady date, and her presence that year was a

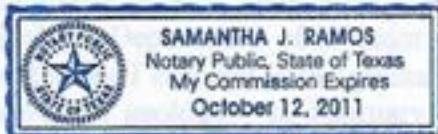
State of Texas
County of Fort Bend

Before me, Samantha J. Ramos, on this day personally appeared
James Leroy Cockrell, Jr., known to me to be the person whose name
is subscribed to this memoir and acknowledged to me that he executed the same.

Given under my hand and seal of office this 9 day of December ²⁰⁰⁸ (year).

(Personalized Seal)

Samantha Ramos
(Notary Public's Signature)



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Biographical Data

Born April 22, 1918 in Tulsa, Oklahoma of James and Lelene Cockrell.
Baptized as an infant into the Presbyterian Church. Attended public schools through high school. Graduated June, 1935.

Early Military Training

The story really begins in September 1935 when I enrolled in the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. One of the electives that first semester was the ROTC (Reserve Officers' Training Corps). I found that if you enrolled in the Cavalry you could tryout for the polo team. This seemed sort of exotic for a teenager, so I joined. After we were inducted into the Corps, we went through a short orientation and were issued a horse, which was kept in stables run by the US Cavalry. (I never acquired the skills to be a member of the polo team.)

It was at this university that I met my future wife, Peg. (Actually Margaret Coon). The relationship quickly developed into a steady date, and has continued that way until now.

In June 1939 I completed my four-year program, majoring in chemistry. Although I did not graduate that year, due to health, I did complete the training offered by the Reserve Officers' Training Corps, was sworn into the U.S. Army as a Reserve Officer with the rank of Second Lieutenant. This consisted of periodic updating of the activities of various branches of the U.S. Army with emphasis on the activities of the Cavalry. As war came closer, we were led to believe that, being Cavalry officers, we would be given the mission of guarding the Mexican Border.

Because of my stomach problems, I was counseled to find a career in some outdoor occupation. I enrolled in the University of Oklahoma with a major in Geology. I graduated in June 1940 with a Bachelor of Science (Geol.) degree. I worked in the Geology Department of a major petroleum company for the summer of 1940, and in September I enrolled in the graduate school of the University of Tulsa, seeking a masters' degree in geology. In February of 1941, after I had almost completed my academic requirements for the degree, but before submitting a master's thesis, I was called into active service as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army and assigned to the First Cavalry Division stationed at Ft. Knox, Kentucky

Pre-War Military Service

Arriving in Ft. Knox in February, I reported to the 1st Cavalry Division headquarters where I was issued a helmet and a US Army 45 caliber pistol, complete with holster and campaign web belt. I was given a list of clothing I was expected to purchase. Finally I was assigned to the second battalion, Lt. Colonel James Alger commanding. Col. Alger was a graduate of West Point, and he turned out to be a good commander. He assigned me to Company B, Captain Percivil (Perry) Winkler commanding. Capt. Winkler was a graduate of, I believe, Virginia Military Academy. He immediately assigned me to the 2nd platoon as its commander. He introduced me to the company sergeant, Master Sgt. Hammer. Sgt. Hammer took me to the barracks that housed the 2nd platoon and introduced me to my platoon sergeant, whose name I have forgotten. I met the 25 men in my platoon, and went to the Officers' barracks where I was assigned quarters.

Not long after I arrived at Ft. Knox, along with a host of other officers, we were informed that we would not be issued horses, but rather medium tanks, the M4A1 with a side mounted 75-mm cannon. This cannon was an adaptation of the 75mm artillery piece used by the Field Artillery. Since this was mounted on the side of the tank itself, not in the turret, it had to be lined up by shifting the position of the tank. The side to side movement was quite limited. Most of our early field training consisted of maneuvering the tank so it was roughly lined up with the target. All in all, it was quite unsatisfactory. We were officially designated as the First Armored Division, General Ward commanding. However, we gave up the designation of the First Cavalry reluctantly, and all officers wore the yellow shield with a diagonal black stripe, which was the official shoulder patch of the First Cavalry

Also, this was before the jeep was introduced to the Armored Force. Instead, a corps of motorcycle riders did all traffic control and advanced reconnaissance. This was a very risky duty. We normally traveled under blackout conditions on back roads, which were dusty. The duties of the motorcycle corps required them to go back and forth from the front of the tank column to the rear. The first casualties our division suffered were to that group of bike riders.

Frequently, officers were required to leave their commands to report to the company, battalion or division headquarters during duty hours. And, of course, after duty hours, the officers had to have transportation to their choice of recreation activities, all done on motorcycles. This also resulted in too many accidents, sometimes to senior officers. But that did not last long. The Jeep was introduced and immediately the motorcycle was retired.

Also, the Sherman tank replaced the M4A1. This was a large step forward since a

true 75 mm antitank gun was mounted in the turret, and could traverse 360 degrees. It was controlled entirely by the tank commander. The tank driver could concentrate his whole attention on moving the tank from place to place without the distraction of having to worry about aiming the cannon. Just below and to the rear of the tank commander was the loader. Ammunition for the gun was mounted on the wall of the turret, greatly limiting the amount of ammunition we could carry for the cannon. The crew consisted of five men, two in the turret and three in the body of the tank. Also, the design of the motor and the track was greatly improved, doubling the speed of the tank.

My long-time steady date, Margaret Coon and I were married the following April, 1941, and in due time our first daughter was on the way. I was not to see the arrival because we were ordered to go to North Ireland to protect the west flank of the British Isles from the threat of invasion by the Germans.

England

The 250 tanks of the division along with some miscellaneous division equipment were driven from Ft. Knox, Kentucky to the Brooklyn navy yard. There it was loaded onto the *Sea Train Texas*. I, along with 50 tank drivers and a Major from the division, whose name I have forgotten, were loaded along with the tanks, and we joined a large convoy just off the coast of New York. The Major retired to his assigned stateroom with a case of whisky and wasn't seen again until we arrived at Belfast.

We set anchor awaiting the last of the convoy. I retired to the visiting officers' dining salon (I could not call it anything less, it was large and plush). There I was served a 5-course steak dinner, which I ate alone. I asked where everyone else was, and was told that the officers' quarters, including the dining hall was built to accommodate 100 officers. The 1,000 men would be fed in the soldiers mess. After dinner, I went outside by the rail to watch the last of the convoy join. As I was enjoying myself, the sergeant in charge of the men came up and introduced himself. I have forgotten his name. I remarked how good the dinner was, and he replied "Ugh". It turned out that the men were served boiled codfish. Furthermore, the meals were on vertical, refrigerated elevators, and the men would have to work their way through 1,000 rations of codfish before they came to the next offering. I went to the purser and asked if the men could eat with me from now to the end of the trip. He said that if I did not mind, he certainly did not. So, we ate in high style for the rest of the 45-day trip across the Atlantic. I may well have prevented a mutiny. I know I could not have waded through my share of boiled codfish.

The voyage across the Atlantic was largely uneventful. The convoy went at the speed of the slowest vessel, which was 5 knots per hour. The weather was calm and clear the whole trip. The time was spent in idleness, largely sitting in deck chairs reading.

Fortunately, there was a good library on board. I do remember one occasion when I was idly standing at the rail with one of the officers of the ship and a periscope appeared about a hundred yards or so from us, going the same way. After a while I asked the officer how he knew the submarine was not German. His calm reply was that it had not fired at us. That was the end of that conversation.

In 21 days we arrived at North Ireland. The *Sea Train Texas* left the convoy and proceeded to the port of Belfast, North Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom. There the tanks were unloaded and we met the rest of the division. They had come over on a faster troop transport. I shook hands with the Major and rejoined my regular platoon.

It was a fiasco. The tank crews simply could not get used to driving on the "wrong" side of the street. We would get organized on the left, but at the next turn we would end up on the right side. One fortunate thing was that the wartime traffic was extremely light, even in a large city such as Belfast. Those few drivers were intimidated by the tanks coming at them on the wrong side of the street and retreated onto the sidewalks until the column passed. Everything came to a standstill until we were out of sight.

We had been assigned a camp on the estate of one of the North Irish noblemen, Lord Fitzpatrick which was on the outskirts of a village called "Ballywillwill, in the extreme southeast of North Ireland. The platoon leader of the third platoon and I became very well acquainted with Lord Fitzpatrick. I have forgotten that lieutenant's name, but everyone called him "Lummy". Lummy and I were together all during the prison experience and escaped together at the end of the war. Since we had very little to do our weekends were almost always free. On Saturday and Sunday mornings we would meet Lord Fitzpatrick and his Majordomo at the golf shop of his club on the coast. It was a true "links". The greens were cut extremely short, never watered and hard as concrete. Getting a ball to come to rest on the surface of a green was a victory. But the work had just started. Putting was a real adventure which Lummy and I never solved. So, Lord Fitzpatrick and his partner would invariably win. Our usual bet was one pound, which was quite steep for us. However, after golf (which would last all day) we would adjourn to his manor house, eat dinner and play bridge for the evening. There Lummy and I would get well. In fact, Lord Fitzpatrick kept us in booze and cigarettes as long as we were stationed there. I learned later that our good friend and golf-bridge companion died very shortly after we left. He had seemed in good health to us.

Our stay in Northern Ireland was long and tedious. Our training was at best rudimentary. No one in the First Armored Division had any experience or training in warfare, much less with tanks. And our equipment was untested. Our activity consisted largely of maintenance. Once a week we went to the local creek and washed the tanks. Otherwise, we went out in the fields and practiced maneuvering using hand signals for

communication. From the time I joined the division in Fort Knox, until I was captured in North Africa, I was never issued a map. We spent a considerable amount of time in classrooms with maps planning maneuvers, but when we went out in the field, we had no maps and were only vaguely aware of where we had been, where we were or where we were going. There was no radio communication between the tanks of a platoon. We could only speak to the company commander, and that communication was noisy and weak. When the tanks were running, you could not hear. Our normal communication was by hand and arm signals given by the Platoon Leader standing in the open turret. This was limited to periods of good visibility when there was no active gunfire directed toward the command tank.

As has been mentioned, the tank cannon was a 75-mm anti-tank gun mounted in the turret in such a way that the tank commander had 360 degree traverse and elevation adjustment from the horizontal to about 25 degrees. Sighting of the piece was by eye, estimating the distance, and adjusting the elevation by reference to a book. In practice, the range was estimated and an explosive round was fired and the point of impact observed. Then the elevation and transverse position were adjusted by experience and another round fired and readjusted. When the explosive round was on the target, an armor-piercing round was fired. This was quite time consuming and used up a good part of a limited supply of ammunition before even a stationary target on a firing range under ideal conditions could be successfully hit.

Even considering these difficulties, our experience in practicing this skill was limited by the fact that we were never completely supplied with ammunition, and replenishment was problematic. I believe that my time on the firing line was limited to not more than five days in the entire time we were equipped with the Sherman tank until the time of our first and only battle.

The Germans on the other hand were equipped with the Panzer tank, which carried an 88-mm anti-tank gun and a crew with two or more years practical wartime experience. In fact, the Germans were able to knock out our tanks from a distance our 75 mm cannons could not reach.

Furthermore, our view of the enemy's movement was limited to line-of-sight. If he could move behind even a low ridge of hills or in a shallow depression in the terrain, we would be completely unaware of it. Our scouts operating in front and on our flanks could not communicate reliably by radio and would have to send an individual on foot or in a jeep to tell us of such movements. By that time, the enemy would have changed course. In North Africa we never had air cover or reports of enemy activity. In any case, it would have been futile since communication from an airplane to a front-line platoon or company commander would have been impossible.

Imagine what we thought while watching the modern tanks operating in the recent desert war in Iraq. They were equipped with global positioning systems that showed them on computer-generated maps where each tank in the area was and where it was going. Their guns were aimed with laser beams, the guns trained by computer automatically. If the terrain was unsuitable for maneuvering, or the visibility was bad, or the enemy had an overwhelming local superiority, overhead attack aircraft could be called in by the ground commander to reduce that superiority.

The future of warfare without soldiers could easily be imagined. But all this was to be in the far distant future. Our job now was to contain and defeat one of the most experienced and capable generals of the German Army—General Erwin Rommel.

North Africa

The medium tanks of the 1st Armored Division did not take part in the initial assault on North Africa in November 1942. In fact, in that battle with the French, the only tanks used were light tanks manned by reconnaissance troops. We arrived after the hostilities had ceased, and landed at regular unloading piers, the tanks and equipment landed by cranes. We landed at the port of Oran.

In February of 1943, the British had driven the Germans along the south of the Mediterranean into Tunisia. They had advanced along the shore line and held the Ports of Tunis and Bizerti. (A jazz song popular among the troops was named "Dirty Gerti from Bizerti.") We marched from Oran into Tunisia at Tebessa. We went through the Kasserine Pass to Sbeitla. General Fredendall, commander of the II Corps, set up his headquarters at Tebessa. He was not well liked by the Officers, and was particularly rude to the commander of the 1st Armored Division, General Orlando Ward. He sent the 1st Armored Division on East to defend the Eastern Dorsal mountains. Our battalion, under the command of Col. James Alger, was stationed on the plains just west of the town of Sidi Bou Zid. That morning, February 13, General Eisenhower made an inspection of our positions, and during that time, climbed on the back of my tank to get a clearer view of the battlefield. He remarked to me that our position was indefensible, and got off the tank and headed back to Tebessa to tell General Fredendall that his troops were poorly positioned when the Germans attacked with Panzers and Stukas. In his haste, General Eisenhower left a small bag of his on the back of my tank. The Germans quickly came through Faid pass and took Sidi-Bou-Zid. We pulled back into the plains. Col. Alger led us back into the mountains in a counter attack. The Germans set a trap, and wiped out our battalion, destroying our tanks and killing or capturing most the battalion.

During this engagement, my tank turret was hit by an 88 mm shell. I was in the turret and fragments of metal hit the right side of my head and ear. I never found who

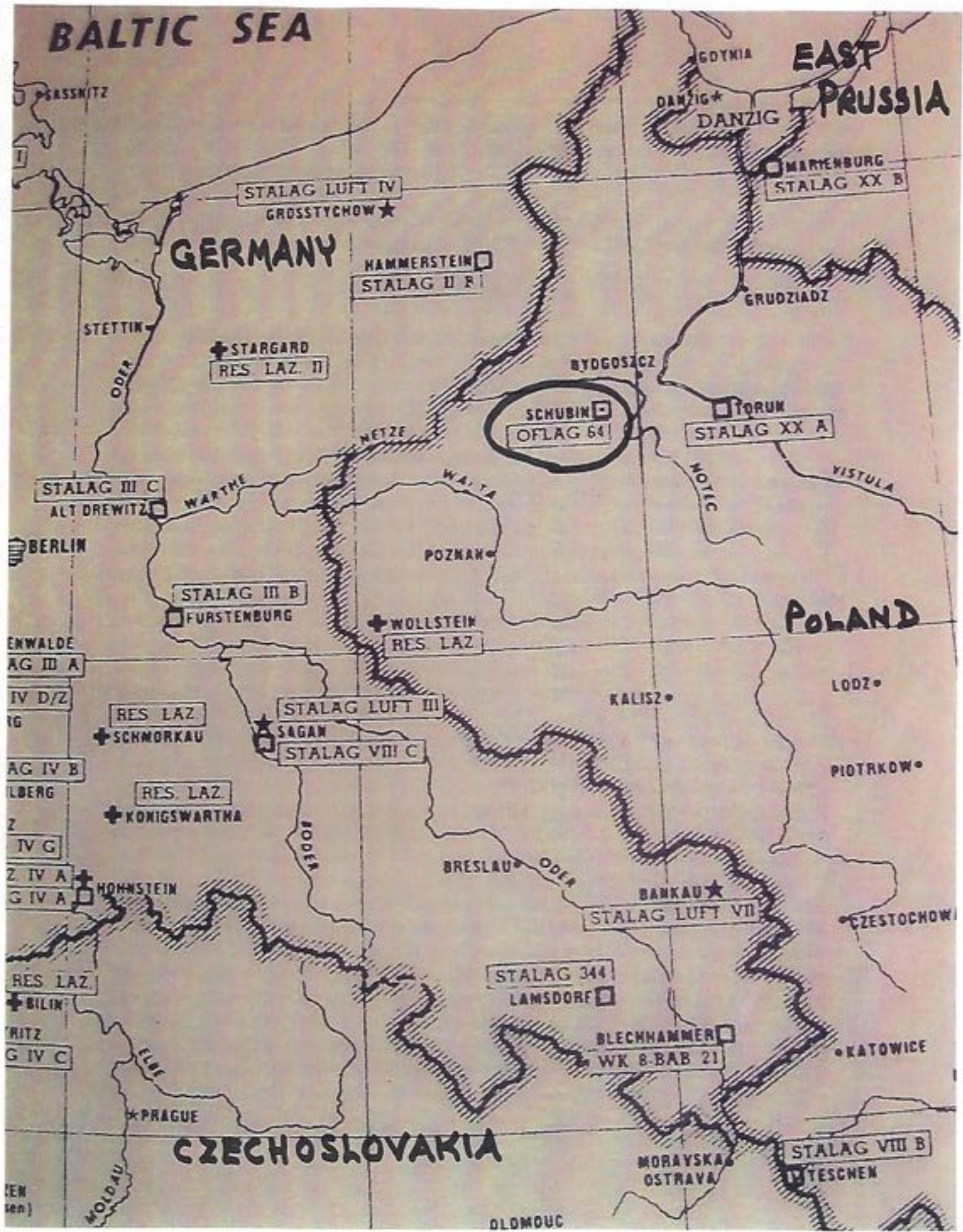
reported the wound since we were captured almost immediately. Anyway, I received the Purple Heart for that wound. The tank was hit several more times and destroyed. The crew and I got out and hid in a small dry stream called a wadi. Within minutes, a Panzer tank came down the hill with its tread in the wadi where we were hidden. We were captured. The German tank commander found General Eisenhower's bag with his name tag on it and reported that he had captured an American General. He ordered us brought to Faid where he was. Of course, there was no General Eisenhower, just me. He talked to me for a few minutes through an interpreter, and then said in good English, "Lieutenant, for you the war is over." That was not quite true.

We were taken by truck to Tunis. There we were loaded in JU52's, tri-motor flying box cars and flown to Naples, Italy. We were put into a tent camp run by the Italians. Up to that time we had been treated fairly well. In fact, there was somewhat of a friendly treatment while we were in the hands of the front line Germans. But when we got to Italy we felt the first taste of what it was going to be. We had almost no food, no clothing, no heat, no sanitary facilities. The Italian guards treated us roughly, frequently using the butts of their rifles on us when we did not understand the orders they gave us in Italian.

We remained in that camp about a month or six weeks while the rest of the prisoners from the North African campaign were transported to Italy. Then we were loaded and locked into boxcars and carried by train through Italy, France, Germany and into Poland. During that trip, the officers were separated from the men. I do not know where the men were taken, but the officers were put in Oflag 64 in Schubin, Poland. The Germans had renamed the town Altbergund. By the time we reached the end of that long journey, the American prisoners were starved and generally in poor shape. We were introduced into the camp that was commanded by Oberst Schneider. He remained in command of us the entire time we were in the camp. We got to know him very well.

The senior American Officer in the camp was Col. Thomas Drake. He was a graduate of West Point and a veteran of World War I. It was largely because of his commanding presence and strong sense of organization and military discipline that Oflag 64 became a reasonable place to live in captivity. That is not to say it was a pleasant experience, far from it. But it became a reasonable place to spend the time as a prisoner and to do something useful for yourself and for others.

The very first thing he did was to establish his rank and insist on being respected for that rank. Oberst Sneider, surrounded by his staff, started berating Col. Drake and his small group of officers. He spoke in a loud and insulting tone of voice. Col. Drake got up and with his officers left the room. Oberst Sneider sent for him to come back, apologized and began speaking in a normal tone of voice and with very obvious respect



for Col. Drake's rank. From that time until the camp was evacuated, Oberst Sneider was a proper soldier. He adhered to the regulations. The same could not be said for the officers on his staff, particularly the Nazi party member who could apparently countermand Oberst Sneider on occasion.

Rather than try to recount life in the prison camp from day to day or month to month or even year to year, I am going to briefly describe a few broad categories.

Religion

The most significant thing that happened to me was my conversion to the Catholic Church. I had previously been attracted to the church by reading some of the papers written by a Jesuit geologist, Teilhard de Chardin. What he taught me was that you could follow the insights into the natural order gained by a study of science without denying the foundations of the church. What the scientist learns if he is conscientious is that the scientific understanding of the laws of nature is not complete in most respects but is developing as the scientist learns more about the subject. The layman's understanding of creation and the history of the world was largely taught him by one who also did not understand the subject. One was for the serious and rigorous scientist and the other was for the layman who did not speak the language. Father Chardin, PhD, was a paleontologist and he taught at the university level. He taught evolution, the history of the earth and of the universe. He was a great advocate of Darwin and his theory of evolution. Holding that view put Chardin in opposition with the officials of his order and later with officials of the Vatican. In fact, that dispute eventually led to his being exiled to China, assigned to a mission there. The upshot of that was that Chardin discovered the Peking Man, and rose to a position of great influence in scientific circles.

In Oflag 64, I met Father Brach. I won't go into what all we talked about, but he was a member of the laity as far as science was concerned and I was a member of the laity as far as the church was concerned. But in a fairly short time we learned that we would never agree on doctrine or Catholic practice and confined our conversation to matters we could discuss like current events and our survival. We got along fine. I was baptized by Father Brach into the Church, and since I had taken some years of Latin in College, I quickly learned the duties of an acolyte and learned the Latin of the Mass. There were not very many Catholics in the camp, and before I became proficient, Father Brach often had to say the daily mass by himself. So I became a fixture. I would go to his quarters in a separate building, He would say Mass and I would assist him. Afterward we would have a cup of coffee together. This would often extend well into the morning or until someone would come to visit. I grew to value this association and it lasted after we returned to civilian life. Father Brach eventually lost his mind and was tended by a group of nuns in San Antonio, Texas. Until his death, Father Brach would call me about once a month. Toward the end, one of the sisters told me that I was the only one he talked to and with whom he seemed to make some consistent conversation.

Eventually Peg was baptized into the Church. In time our four children were brought up as Catholics and educated through high school in parochial schools. This also led to our being introduced to Father McNamee, our pastor in Tulsa. He had a great influence on our entire family. But that is another story.

All-in-all, my position in the Church can be stated in the words of another scientist who said, "A scientist can be religious, but not a theologian. But, back to the prison.

Living Conditions

Oflag 64 was about 10 acres in extent. We understood that it had been for a long time a Polish boy's school. There were the original masonry buildings consisting of two buildings which were used by us as headquarters and housing for the senior officers. The third building was a chapel which we used for Sunday services for the various faiths represented in the camp.

The perimeter was enclosed by two fences made of barbed wire and separated by about ten feet as I remember. The rest of the space was filled with recently constructed wooden barracks. This is where the rest of us lived.

The main things we all remembered were the long winters of body-numbing cold which was never ending. Each barracks was furnished with one ceramic stove for warming the entire uninsulated building. We were furnished a limited number of pressed peat blocks which we burned for warmth. Everyone in the building spent most of the time in winter as close to the stove as possible. I think the fact that we all huddled together gave us more warmth than the furnace did.

And the second was the perpetual hunger. When we first arrived, there were about 150 of us. We were issued one 10-pound Red Cross parcel of concentrated food each week. Everything about the parcel was used. Each had a tin can of powdered milk. When the can was emptied, it was converted into what we called a "Smoky Joe". It was a prized possession, and was the primary cook stove for the other things in the parcel. We burned the cardboard box, paper and small slivers of wood when they could be found.

But in fairly short order, the number of prisoners grew, first to about 250 and finally, when we were marched to Germany, to about 1,500. As the numbers grew, the number of food parcels shrank. Finally, we would sporadically get one every month or so. The Germans fed us twice a day. It mostly consisted of vegetables, and that mostly potatoes. Every now and then we would get a small helping of a gray colored meat, invariably boiled and tasteless. Everyone lost weight. There were no scales in the school, but the average prisoner lost 50 or more pounds from an average pre-prisoner

weight of perhaps 150 to 175 pounds. After the march into Germany toward the end of the war in Europe, and after I had been fed for a week by the American platoon I attached myself to, I was picked up by a medical team. At that time, I weighed 85 pounds. It did not take long for me to fill out. By the time I got back to the states and Peg got a chance to feed me, I weighed about 150 pounds, my normal weight.

The sanitary conditions were very rudimentary. We slept on straw-stuffed mattresses on wooden slats. These slats were badly needed by the escape committee which was digging a tunnel. They were used to shore up the dirt to keep the tunnel from collapsing. To make it fair, each prisoner was "taxed" one bed slat from time to time. Toward the end, we were down to three or four slats, and spent much of the time sleeping on the floor, and made our beds to hide the fact that the number of slats was diminishing. Our contact with the Germans was largely the Apell, or count. For this, we lined up in four ranks and were counted by two or three Germans. They would end up behind the fourth rank and compare counts. This usually took quite a bit of time, and almost always resulted in repeating the count. Often the German camp commander and/or the camp representative of the Nazi party would address the assembled Americans. This was so insignificant that I cannot remember a single thing they said.

Under conditions like this, normally you would expect morale to go down to the extent that living would sink into degradation. But that did not happen. Credit for the maintaining of morale must be given to the senior officers in the camp. In the beginning, our senior officer was Colonel Thomas Drake, a veteran of World War I. His second-in-command was Lt. Col. John Waters, the son-in-law of General Patton. They and the other senior officers set the standard of discipline for the camp. All sorts of activities were organized, a school, a library, an orchestra, a theater, a jazz band, a chorus, an escape committee, a green house, crafts, an athletic program and the like. Everyone was encouraged to engage in some activity. There was something going on or being planned all the time. It was a God-send. It was what kept us sane and in some kind of physical and mental condition to withstand the rigors of the life we were forced to endure.

The equipment for all these activities was supplied by the YMCA and the Salvation Army through the good offices of the Swedes. The only outside, civilian person we saw in the two years we were in that camp was a representative of the Swedish YMCA, Mr. Henry Soederberg who managed to have an amazing assortment of things shipped in. We called him "The Welcome Swede".

MUSIC

Bob Rankin was the guru of the camp music. He was a real professional, and insisted on first class performances. The first group he organized was a typical jazz band. The instruments, of course, were furnished by the Swedes. They included all the

instruments needed for a full concert orchestra. But at first, Bob organized the dance band in support of the Theater Group which had been formed. Among the instruments furnished to us was a bass violin, or the Bass. Although there was an accomplished player for almost every instrument, there was none for the Bass. Bob canvassed everyone in the camp first to see if there was a Bass player, and failing that was there anyone who could read music fluently.

My mother had insisted that I take piano lessons, which I did for many years during my elementary school years. I never learned to play because I did not have an ear for music. My brother Ross was the one who had an ear. He played the trombone expertly, and made my life miserable because I was such a failure as a pianist. But one thing I did learn, I could really read music.

So, I discussed the problem with Bob. We worked out a method that worked very well. He had one of the trained violinists tune the Bass before every rehearsal and performance. I had worked out mathematically where the fingers went for every note on the range of the Bass. So, since I knew what note the music called for and I knew where my fingers needed to go to produce that note, I could do a fairly satisfactory job of playing the Bass. And, of course, as I gained experience I got somewhat better. At least, I was the best the camp had to offer for that job. We supported the Theater Group in the several musicals they put on, and we did informal concerts for the general camp as often as Bob could put a new program together. Eventually, as the camp grew, Bob found a player for every instrument we had, and put together a fairly good symphony orchestra. From time to time we would put on a real concert. Of course, they were well received but never as popular as the jazz concerts and the support of the Theater Group's musical revues.

SPORTS

As could be expected, sports played a big part in an all-male population. But it was severely restricted because of the lack of food and general run-down condition of the men. At the same time, it was understood that an attempt to escape was expected whenever we could manage it, either as individuals or in groups. So, as much physical exertion as could be managed was arranged. Sports was a good way to do that without giving away the fact that you were building strength and stamina. Again, the Swedish YMCA came through with the equipment.

The most regular exercise available to everyone was walking. And we did a lot of it. Not only did it keep us somewhat fit, it provided a means to hide the enormous amount of dirt dug up in our attempt to tunnel under the fence. This will be discussed in the next section. For the most part we would walk in groups. The groups would organize informally and talk, talk, talk. You would think this would die down as time passed

without outside contact. But there was a constant stream of information, some fact and some rumor. But either way it was grist for the mill.

Organized sports consisted mostly of softball. And that was severely limited by the atrocious weather in north-central Poland. The winter was impossible, and long. It started in mid-October and continued well into May. Spring was cold and wet as was Fall. Spring lasted from mid-May well into June. Fall started early in September and lasted until mid October when it started freezing after dark. Winter consisted of freezing rain, snow, overcast skies and wind. In fact, it was five months or more of misery. Sports, except for walking was impossible.

ESCAPE

Every camp I have heard of had an escape committee. That committee was necessary, otherwise there would be all sorts of ill conceived, aborted attempts and the German guards would constantly be at work ferreting out our plans. Rather, a committee would be formed and an individual or group which thought they had a reasonable escape plan, would submit it to the committee. The committee would consider the plan and, if they thought it had merit, would recommend it to the Camp Commander who would approve or disapprove it. Of course, if an individual saw an opportunity to escape he was free to do so, not having time to go through the approval process. There were very few of these opportunities until very near the end of the war. Later, I will describe my escape under these chaotic conditions.

In the meantime, the prime escape attempt was the tunnel. Those who planned the escape, chose the place of entry and exit and dug the tunnel. They were given every possible assistance by the whole camp. The effort was monumental because of the difficulties encountered. The ground through which the tunnel was dug consisted of mainly a black clay. The weather was often wet and always cold. The primary dangers were discovery and cave-in. As a result, the entrance was secret, even from those not directly involved in the digging and direct support of the effort.

The Germans were always suspicious of tunneling because it was the number one escape attempt in every camp. They constantly pulled surprise inspections to try to find evidence of digging activity. For that reason, the dirty clothes worn by the diggers had to be hidden and the dirt dug had to be hidden inside the camp. Also, the wet clay which formed the ceiling and walls of the tunnel had to be shored up to prevent collapse. To do all this, the diggers would take off their dirty clothes in the tunnel, wash off the mud from their bodies, change into dry, relatively clean clothes and return to their normal activities. Certain prisoners were required to furnish two socks. The toes would be cut out and tied with string. The socks would be filled with dirt in the tunnel and passed out to waiting prisoners. They would fasten them inside their trouser legs and go for an exercise walk around the inside perimeter of the compound. As they walked, they would

slowly release the dirt in their socks and the following prisoners would tramp the dirt into the path to hide it. Over the long period it took to dig the tunnel, the exercise path slowly grew in height. But it was never noticed by the German guards. Finally, as described above, the tunnel was shored up by slats from the bunks of prisoners.

This was slow work, and took many months. Before it was completed, the senior officers got word that escape attempts such as this were being punished by the Germans by execution, not always the prisoners who had attempted the escape, but often random prisoners taken from the population. As a result, the senior officers ordered a halt to this activity. It was just before the final evacuation of the camp, and we would not have had time to complete the tunnel in any case.

THE RADIO

The news came to us first through the Germans. Of course, it presented the war in the best light they could put on it. But, we fairly quickly were able to build a replica of the very first type of radio, the crystal set. A few of men who could write in shorthand would listen to an armed forces broadcast coming out of France. They would go from barrack to barrack and read the news every day. Of course, one of us would stand guard.

EVACUATION

On January 21, 1945, we were assembled with everything we could carry and began evacuating the camp just ahead of the advancing Russian army. It was bitter cold and we were ill clothed by that time. We put on everything we could find, but it was not enough. The sick and infirm were left at the camp with Col. Drury, the chief American medical officer. The rest of the some 1,500 prisoners began a 350 mile march east through Poland and into central Germany.

At first, the Germans attempted to provide a sort of minimal food consisting of soup made of what vegetables they could commandeer from the population, but this was sporadic. For the most part, we foraged for ourselves. Fortunately, the Poles and Germans fed their hogs cooked potatoes in the fields. When they fled, they often left large vats of cooked, frozen potatoes in those fields. We would pry them out of the vats and carry them in our pockets to thaw. When they were soft, we would eat them, skins, dirt and all. That was mainly what we lived on.

We walked across snow-covered, frozen roads—mostly back roads. We slept in barns and farm out-houses wherever night found us. Almost every night, some of the prisoners would be left because they were unable to walk further, or had hidden somewhere and were not found. As a result, our numbers gradually reduced. Lummy and I were separated from the main group in the confusion somewhere near Hammelburg.

Col. Goode and the some 450 remaining prisoners were loaded on a train on March 6 and arrived at Camp 13B where there were about 10,000 prisoners housed.

In the meantime, Lummy and I and about a dozen prisoners under about the same number of German guards continued our march. The morning of March 15, I was not able to stand. My feet were cut by the ice and swollen by the cold and I could not stand. Lummy and one of the other prisoners found a large piece of cardboard and a piece of rope, put me on the cardboard and dragged me like on a sled for the balance of the day. That night we came to a prison camp at a small town named Blumenwalde.

We were fed and clothed and somewhat warm. Anyway, I recovered in a few days and could walk slowly. The situation was chaotic. The American advanced forces were reported to be a hundred miles or so east of us. The German guards were beginning to show signs of giving up. Lummy and I got out of the camp looking for food. We came on a German Volkswagon by the side of the road. Lummy was somewhat of a mechanic, and wired around the ignition lock. He found that a 20 millimeter shell was lodged in the transmission. We got a couple of German boys to push us, and the darned car started. We headed east. We could only drive about 20 miles per hour because the transmission was locked in second gear. Eventually we came to a river. The bridge was destroyed, but someone had put up a pontoon bridge beside it. It had gotten dark, and we could not see the other side of the river. But we started across. Evidently, the river had risen because there was about 50 feet of water between the end of the bridge and the far shore. While we were figuring out what to do, an American light tank appeared. We shouted and waved, but the tank commander, a sergeant, shouted that he did not speak German.

I was tired, hungry and fed up with problems. Here was an American enlisted man and I was back in power after two and a half years. I identified myself as an American officer, and if he wanted to keep his stripes he would figure out how to get us over the water and back to his superior officer. He was somewhat reluctant, and after I got a good look at myself in a mirror, I could understand why. Anyway, he had one of the soldiers in his tank wade out to see how deep the water was. It was shallow, so Lummy and I waded across. The sergeant asked what to do with the car. We broke out laughing and climbed on the back of the tank. He took us back to the camp where his unit was bivouacked and we were home.

I am going to end this narrative here. I was so disoriented by reason of not having to make any decision or having to concern myself with survival that I do not have any memory of my trip home. I know from talking to others later that we were taken to England where we boarded ships for the USA. We landed finally in Newport News. But I do not have any personal memory of that trip. I was reunited with Peg and met Anne and that is all I remember. Shortly afterward I was promoted to Captain and retired from the military, moved my family to Tulsa and Joined my father in the Midwest Printing Company (later changed to Ross-Martin Company) and stayed there as Plant Manager and Director of Research for some 20 years.

