

Written narrative by Jack Rathbone, transcribed by his daughter Julie Rathbone Gionfriddo

It seems to me that in all the tales and reports of the various POW camps permanent and temporary, I have never seen mention of the POW hospital at Wollstein (Lazert) staffed by British medical personnel.

In reading General George Waters taped interviews I noted in particular his descriptions of the wonderful treatment and help given to the Americans by the people at the British camps. His comments concerned British Oflag our group spent months at Oflag IX AZ, in Rotenberg, German. Here also the British contingent took our people into their confidence and gave them the skinny on what they could get away with, how to get and use radio parts, how to organize the internal workings and contacts with the guards etc.

At Wollstein the British ran the officers hospital for the allied prisoners at the POW camps. The same spirit of sharing information, secrets etc. prevailed there.

The camp (Lazerette) at Wollstein was a prison camp with wires, guards etc. but was a little looser perhaps. At this camp were several personnel who I will always remember. The commanding officer was Dr. Cameron, a Britisher with a Scottish background. Dr. Lesmnovich was the dentist. Two noncoms (Sargents) who were outstanding: Sargent Owen Thomas and Sargent Cook. Thomas, I kept in contact with as long as he lived. Sargent Cook, usually referred to as "Cookie" was a unique person. He was the son of a wealthy English grain importer. He had spent a year each in France and Germany learning the language to learn the local dialects and idioms. After a time in the POW system after his previous studies (in preparation for becoming one himself), Cookie could switch from regional dialects and idioms, double meanings, off-color jokes, , probably more fluently than most of the natives.

While in Oflag 64 I developed a skin infection or outbreak, on my hands that our medical staff could not do anything with. This resulted in several visits to German doctors in Posen, with no improvement (despite several Wassermans they could not diagnose the problem). Finally I was sent to Wellenstein for a memorable visit. The British gave me a warm welcome, and made me sing (if you could call it that) the Star Spangled Banner. I got to know the staff. I can't say enough about how well I was treated. The hands didn't respond, however, but cleared up gradually on their own schedule. (NOTE from Jack's daughter..I remember when I was a teenager in the 1960s my Dad's hands still "broke out" occasionally).

Two small episodes involving the Englishmen, particularly Cookie are worth recalling. Dr. Bergeson (sp?) from Oflag 64 also had an interlude at Wollstein. Bergie was part of the 168<sup>th</sup> division and was from Des Moines. Someone came up with an introductory book to the Swedish language. I don't remember where it came from. Bergie might have gotten it. A French officer captive in the camp knew some Swedish and he began to teach Bergie Swedish. One day Cookie appeared while they were

struggling to make Bergie a Swede. He picked up the book, thumbed through it and asked to borrow it for a day. He returned it a day or so later and came in jabbering in Swedish to Bergie who just threw his hands up. Before the war changed his plans, and everybody else's, Cookie had been slated to go to Spain to digest Spanish.

I lost contact with Sergeant Cook after the war but corresponded with Owen Thomas as long as he lived. He confided to me that Cookie was not a Sergeant but was actually an officer in the intelligence branch of the Army. Until the Germans broke through and picked him up (with many others) he had been used as an agent disguised as an enlisted man (a Sergeant). He had followed a routine of dropping in at various night spots in the French back country, where he hid his language fluency and might hear various references to schemes and secret plans.