

LIVING HELL: THE TRUE STORY OF MAYS W.
ANDERSON AND HIS LIFE AS A
GERMAN P.O.W..

by Norley Hall

SECTION ONE-THE GERMANS

On Nov. 20, 1944, a 23 year old tank Commander from the small, rural town of Springville, Utah found himself in a precarious situation.

His tank unit was one of the advance points for the huge Allied thrust through German occupied Europe in the desperate World War II battles before Germany would be forced to finally concede defeat.

The Commander, Lieutenant Mays W. Anderson, was in deep trouble. The driving rains of the preceding days had made quagmires through which the tanks had to keep moving or bog down. Although his Colonel understood this, the decision to move anyway was made by a General far removed from a working knowledge of tank limitations. So the move across the auto bahn into the mud was made and the tanks had to keep rolling forward directly into enemy territory even though their infantry regiment had dropped back in the face of the fierce German counter attack.

Now Anderson found himself bogged down, bracketed by mortar fire and completely surrounded by Germans with machine guns. "We couldn't even put our heads out or they would be blown off," he recalls. "My own tank was hit and knocked out. A piece of one shell went into my face." A cover fire from neighboring tanks was requested and the order to abandon the tank was given. 4 of the 5 man crew made it out before an artillery shell slammed into the tank. The 5th man was knocked unconscious but also escaped later.

Mays and his companion, Private Burton were able to make their way to a concrete covered fox hole. "mortar and Artillery shells were coming in like rain. Jerry (Jerry and Hienie were commonly used slang names for German soldiers. Lieutenant Anderson probably used them instead of much stronger language for fear of German censorship and retaliation while writing his log in a German prison) and American were both landing on us for we were in no mans land. A Jerry observer had us zeroed. The bracket was about 90 yards. A Hienie mortar lit directly on top of our fox hole. It cracked concrete and it looked as though we were to be buried alive." Somehow Anderson survived the barrage. When it subsided slightly, he and his companion made a 60 yard dash to a house, dove over a "dud" shell and hid in the basement as the artillery fire followed them into the house. After another mad dash to determine the fate of the rest of his platoon, Mays returned to find that the cavalry had arrived. "Lieutenant Knippa (and his tank platoon) had been ordered to replace my torn up platoon." At this point Anderson could very well be home free. However, he and a companion elected to return to the front to determine the fate of the rest of his platoon of tanks. He states the next events in his journal (written while in a German Prison in Poland).

"This fighting had been on the edge of Eschweiler, Germany, early in the evening." After the newly arrived tank platoon had laid down a barrage allowing Mays and Burton to escape back to the main body of his battalion, he was asked by his Colonel if he could pinpoint for

Knippa the exact location of his mired and battered tanks. In spite of a severely bleeding head wound, Mays volunteered to

return to the area to do this. He was promised that if after finding the tank locations "you will be sent back for medical attention." Anderson asked Sergeant Harold Zickafoose to accompany him and they immediately set off on the several mile journey in the dark. "While walking into town we met American G.I's in a house. We talked to them and asked the whereabouts of "Jerry". They said they had not seen Jerry for several hours. We continued on our way. After walking about 50-75 yards I noticed a column coming down the road from "Jerryland." Thinking it was a -patrol, we walked until we were opposite each other. I crossed into the middle of the road. The column came to meet me. They were Jerries!!"

"Before I recognized them, they recognized me. They knocked the gun (carbine) out of my hand and put a burp gun (automatic pistol) in my stomach and said Marche'. I threw my hands on top of my helmet and began my life as a prisoner of war."

For Anderson, "life as a prisoner of war" rapidly became a life of living hell. The horrors, beatings and atrocities of war were borne home in such vivid detail that he got to the point where, "I was in total numbness. After you have seen so much detestation, I mean by shelling, by killing by starvation and being a P.O.W. and going through all the things I had, it was almost a fact that you were numb. I wasn't scared then, because a person can only get so scared.

After that you just aren't scared any more. Death? You really aren't that much afraid of it."

Brushes with death started rapidly after the capture. "During these few brief moments of excitement (immediately following their

capture) one Deutsche Soldot shot. I think I seen (sic) Zickafoose (Anderson's companion) fall. I'll find out when I get home if he was killed there. (Sergeant Zickafoose survived that shooting but was later killed on April 25, 1945). Sergeant John Dennison was hit. The bullet ricochet inside his steel helmet and lodged in his neck."

After the excitement of the capture and shooting had died down, Anderson and his companions were prodded along with guns in their backs to the German command post. They then progressed through several interrogations and search points until they came to a P.O.W. collecting point about 50 kilometers from the front. During this time they were shelled, "we were under fire by American artillery.

We were in hell." They were scarcely fed. "Ate (one) slice of black bread, butter, jam." They were searched, threatened and interrogated.

The following days melted into a series of moves from one collecting point to another, interrogations, threats, near starvation and freezing. Anderson cites two incidents from this time. "Nov 22, 1944 about 0300 (3:a.m.) we were searched, interrogated and threw (sic) into a damn cold barn. The Hienies gave us no breakfast. For dinner we had our first bowl of beet top soup. (contents: 1 pint water, 3 beet top leaves). For supper they gave us 1/4 loaf German bread. They told us to save it for we were to march next day to Bonn, Germany, to another prison camp."

"We marched 43 kilometers(Kms) with no rest, no water and that small hunk (of) black bread. It rained all day. We were cold, soaking wet and extremely tired. the Germans would not give us any rest. About 1 Km from Bonn the Frenchman (a French civilian taken prisoner) was taken away and probably shot. We reached (the) stalag (German Prison) at Bonn. I was so tired. We stood outside while stupid Jerries very inefficiently again searched us. it was still raining. I didn't dare sit down. I'm sure I couldn't have got onto my feet again (Prisoners who couldn't keep up on the march were shot.)

As a reward for the walk the prisoners were put into "Another very cold barn. They gave us 1/2 loaf of black bread and 1 can of horse meat for every 7 men. This was to last for supper and 2 more days on a train." The next morning they were roused and forced to march another 5 km to Bonn. "I had a hard time walking that far. Blisters on my feet. Stiff all over my body. My clothes only partly dry from body heat."

Here Anderson was taken away and thrown into a solitary room with "no light. about 10' long, 5' wide, 7' high with one small window."

This "Waldorf" was a 700 year old castle It was well equipped with "dungeons and everything medieval for torturing prisoners. Head and hand-locks, body stretchers, torture chambers etc."

"The tone of interrogation was different here. Anderson was kept 10 days totally without food. "The first day they offered me food and liquor and told me they just need to know where my outfit was so they could notify the authorities." When Anderson refused to give information he was severely beaten and thrown back into solitary.

This became the daily routine until the "Spricht Officer" (German SS interrogator) finally gave up on him as 'a bad job.' Although he had been subjected to a severe delousing routine, Anderson notes that at this time "I was really lousy." On being put back with other prisoners, Anderson tells of borrowing a razor and 1 blade from a fellow prisoner. "This blade had shaved over 100 men and I had 3 weeks growth of beard. I shaved in cold water and no soap or mirror. I cut my face to ribbons. I had scratched the louse bites and made large sores. At the time I write these words, (2 months later) those sores have not healed due to lack of sufficient nutrition and healing vitamins."

Anderson tells of waiting for the next prisoner movement. "We had lice in our clothes, few blankets and cold weather. We were given about 7 lbs. of wood for 150 men each week to heat a barn, so we were never overheated." They were so hungry now that when they could, they would effect an exchange of "1 pack of American cigs. (cigarettes) for a loaf of Jerry black bread. By now this bread had the taste of cake to us. By now too, we started to burn our beds to keep warm."

At the next stop in his odyssey, Anderson went to near-by Limberg where he was to entrain for Schubin, Poland and Oflag 64. This was meant to be his permanent prison. "At Limberg the Germans took 1490 Belgian Francs and 60 German marks (from me). Amounting to about \$45. We boarded a box car. 23 men in 1/3 of a French box car. There was not room for us all to sit down at once so we moved in shifts.

Half would sit down at a time. We sat at Limberg in the freight yards for 2 days under this strain . We never moved 1 inch. Our rations here was (sic) 1/4 loaf bread a day. Once every days a 1" square of cheese. Even in my terrific hunger I could not eat this cheese. It smelled like human waste.

The prisoner train moved 50 km and sat another 2 days. The prisoners were locked in the box cars with their guards "behind chicken wire." At Frankfort the train was bombed by American bombers. "Bombs exploded 200 yards from our car. Great columns of smoke went spreading into the sky. Our freight car shook as if it would jump off the tracks. The bombs hit their targets, Thank God. They hit a factory, oil dump and oil and gas RR cars." During the raid the German guards locked the prisoners in the cars and hid in an air raid shelter. Of this Anderson says, "Hitler's supermen didn't have the guts to sweat out this bombing with us." The journey was to last 10 days. Because of constant bombings disrupting train service and the fact that the prison train was last on the Ge very frequent and very long. During the entire trip the temperature hovered near-10 degrees. The men -remained crowded in 1/3 of the box car in so cramped a condition that only 1/2 of them could sit down at one time. Lying down was out of the question. The wounded and sick were attended by Anderson's companion, Dr. DiFrancesco of Washington, D.C. There were no medicines and on one occasion the Dr. begged the guard for some hot water from the locomotive so he could at least clean the festering wounds. The request was denied and the Dr. was forbidden to even look at one enlisted man who had blood poison.

On the seemingly interminable journey, Anderson states that "We left Limberg with enough rations for 5 days. Where the journey took 10 days we were never given anything more." For the entire journey He had 1/4 of a small loaf of black bread for 5 days, a small chunk of "stolen" turnip on the 6th day "Which I ate dirt and all." On the 7th day 1/5 of a loaf of bread and nothing on the 8th and 9th day. On their arrival at Oflag 64 on the 10th day they each received 1/3 of a red cross parcel. "By the time we had run out of food, the lice were working on us very well. We were so lousy we were in pain itching and scratching. Our bodies were dirty and we never washed the entire 10 days." Anderson also tells of mens nerves giving away under the intense strain. ""we-hated each other. We were very grouchy and contemptible. To ease the strain of nerves and not to allow ourselves to think of home we played games. Kids games such as guessing who you assume you are."

After the journey, oflag 64 at Altburgund, Poland (re-named Schubin, Szubin or Sczubin after the Russians captured it) looked "Good". It was strange being outside again with so much air to breathe, and, Lord, room to spread your legs."

Their greeting at the camp was a familiar search and interrogation, combined with a warning, "Do not try to escape. Guards will shoot without warning." The prisoners were each given 1/3 of a red cross parcel to eat. Of this Anderson says, "Our stomachs had shrunk. After eating what we had I got sick. I vomited up what I had eaten."

Life in Oflag 64 was a vast improvement over previous treatment Anderson had received. Delousing, regular 2 minute showers, periodic red cross parcels and a library to occupy time helped immensely.

News of impending Russian occupation filtered in. The fall of near by Warsaw (50 miles away) brought much speculation. "About January 20, 1945 we were ordered to move out. Russians were coming fast and with no opposition. So 1500 Officers (1471 officers and enlisted men by official intelligence report) started a March of Death from Alburgund to a point unknown near Berlin"(Brandenberg).

According to Anderson the countryside was utter chaos. "Refugees crowded the roads. The Germans were poorly organized and in a hurry to get away before the Russians could catch them. Train travel was entirely disrupted with nothing moving on schedule and very little moving at all." In the confusion the temptation to escape was eminent. When such an attempt was made, the Germans would turn dogs loose to hunt the escapee down. When they were found they were shot on the spot.

"The 1st day we marched 23 kms, all in a very weakened condition due to lack of food and inactivity. We received no food from Germans. We moved into a barn and slept that night." With the weather as low as -50 degrees, warmth was an extreme problem. Anderson solved it the first night by finding 2 agreeable cows in the barn and sleeping between them. "The next morning Doc. (Dr. DiFrancesco) approached me and said 'do you want to go on like this or shall we try to escape?' I answered that 'we might as well be dead as go on like we were.' We burrowed real deep in the hay stack and waited."

The Germans were in such a hurry to get away that they didn't wait for a body count, "or they would have found us missing and looked in the barn with blood hounds. Had they found us they probably would have shot us." As it was the guards prodded the hay stack with bayonets but fortunately didn't reach the 2 escapees. It was some time before the duo found out just how fortunate they had really been. Due to the potential threat of the Russians overtaking the death march, the German guards were very negligent and very obviously in a rush at this early stage of the march. An account by a soldier who completed the march tells how in following days the Germans made a regular practice of shooting at random into haystacks and prodding them with pitchforks before leaving them for the morning marches.

"After the Jerries had gone we crawled out and found about 25 others had also hid in the hay. Colonel Barron with 107 men had been left behind (wounded and ill). The Germans gave them a certificate stating they were sick and temporarily abandoned so they would not be killed by other German troops.

Colonel Barron ordered us to leave in daylight, to leave immediately because we were endangering the lives of men left behind. We were hunted men. If we were to be caught there it might mean death to the entire group."

While most of the 25 men left as soon as possible, Anderson and DiFrancesco, with two other ex-prisoners re-hid in the barn for that

night. The following day they went into town. There they found a family willing to take them in and share what little food had successfully been hidden from the Germans with the nearly starved prisoners. To all of them, escapees and the Polish family alike it was a celebration of freedom.

In spite of the extreme cold, poor clothing and food and a great deal of trepidation about their future, the feeling of relief was terrific. "We were happy, for now no one was guarding us. No damned Germans to shout and scream at us and to probe us with guns. We ate with this family strawberry preserves and real whipped cream, coffee and fruit cake. We talked until late. (One of the escapees was able to speak fluent Polish). We then retired to a REAL bed with REAL mattresses!"

Anderson vividly recalls the the oncoming Russian army. "I went outside that night and as far as I could see in the distance a front of vehicles was coming in the dark with their lights on." (The oddness of this struck Anderson as absolutely no one ventured anywhere on a war front at night with lights on). "I could tell by (the) sound of motors and (the) clanking of tracks they were tanks."

The Russian advance left the ex-prisoners with a very difficult dilemma. At that point they were not positive the oncoming army was even Russian. It could very well have been a German counter-offensive. If the advancing forces WERE Russian, how could safe contact be made with them?

The nondescript rags they were wearing were salvaged from anywhere possible and there was nothing to prove they were American and not the hated Germans. The problem was to make a positive identification of themselves before they were shot down on the spot. (Anderson was wearing a salvaged Belgium overcoat and a "captured" German cap).

One of their problems was solved by the Polish population of the town the next morning. As soon as it was light they could hear the excited voices of the townspeople shouting for sheer joy, "They are Russians! They are Russians!" DiFrancesco and Anderson decided that their best course of action would be to leave the home of their Polish benefactors and go alone to meet the oncoming army. "We thought this would be best in case the Russians shot first and asked questions later. We didn't want to bring any harm to the people in the home." The two walked down the road for about 15 minutes. "We heard a tank coming toward us." The tank was about the biggest thing Anderson could imagine. (60 tons) "One tank pulled past us, another along side of us and the third blocked the road in front of us. All three of them had their guns on us. Doc could speak four languages and was talking as fast as he could but was getting nowhere. Finally a Russian behind me asked, 'I are you American'? I whirled around and said, 'Where did you learn to speak English'? I never did answer his question."

SECTION TWO-THE RUSSIANS

The two former prisoners at first thought they were home free when the Russians took them on the back of their tank and went to the town of Elin. On the way they "feasted" with the Russians on "liberated" (from the Polish) honey, meat, butter, and bread. The feeling that all was well was soon dispersed though.

"As we rode along on this tank, along the sides of the road in

fields and almost anywhere you would care to look, you could see dead Germans. (Anderson later found out that many of these were Polish refugees. At the time however, he expresses his thoughts at seeing "Germans" on the receiving end of the war). Soldiers, men, women and children were all killed. There were some taken from their homes. All clothes except their underwear was gone. I presume, and in many instances know that the Poles, after the Russians had come in, killed these German Civilians for atrocities committed by them in the last 5 years of occupation." "These civilians were shot, bayoneted and in numerous instances tortured before being given the opportunity to die. From the savagery these Germans have committed, my estimation is that they have received the death due such a beast of civilization." Anderson notes now that on the way into town the city square was "filled with bodies, all recently bayoneted and without any clothing except underwear." His enquiry's resulted in his learning that they were civilians classed as collaborators. "His statement later was that, "They were people judged not to be good for the (communist) cause." Of the killings and immense amount of death around him at the time, Anderson stated in his journal, "Now, we all say we are civilized. But I will bear witness NONE of us are. These peaceful Polish people committed crimes against civilization that is entirely unbelievable to anyone in the world except the few of us who have seen them. Fighting soldiers kill, but even they, if it were told to them, would say it was a gross exaggeration. But I swear, none of what I write here is exaggerated in the slightest degree." We are all animals. Now I know that. Animals with clothes on and more intelligent. But we use our God given intelligence in some way to kill. We shall never go killing or (waging) wars. We enjoy it too much! Anderson was soon to note other acts of savagery by his Russian hosts. "On the truck ride from Elin to Schubin we could feel the truck bumping. The bumps were dead bodies. In their hurry to capture Germans, the Russians would drive their tanks into the helpless refugees on the road and leave bodies, goods and dead horses. They would then drive over them instead of even pulling them off the road." The two were brought to the Russian headquarters and offered a toast". "I drank. It was vodka mixed with benzene (gasoline). It burned all the lining out of my mouth. Had we not accepted his hospitality, we were still not sure they trusted us or would not have shot us. They were a bunch of wild men with guns. The tank Commander offered Anderson a chance to "Continue to Berlin" with him. Anderson politely declined the offer. After the tanks left, much of the Russian hospitality seemed to leave with them. "I was interrogated by an officer who would not believe we weren't Germans. When we insisted we were American, I received another severe beating." The interrogation continued until finally one of them (the Russian interrogators) went in the other room and found some English writing. When I could read it they finally decided we weren't Germans. Then they just turned us out. We had no where to go and still worried about being shot as Germans." From Jan 16, 1945 until March 18, the same year, the two ex-prisoners became refugees in the eyes of the Russians. "We were entirely on our own. We could go anywhere, but where could we go?"

They made their way to the refugee town of Rambertan by way of a totally destroyed Warsaw. "Dear reader, there just was nothing but ruins. The Germans had systematically set about destroying Warsaw. What was not destroyed by dynamite was burned completely. It was so thoroughly destroyed that we had to go 12 kms further to find shelter and any building standing." Rambertan was another hard experience. Countless refugees from Czechoslovakia, France, Rumania and other European countries were crowded together in pitiful conditions. "Food was worse than German food. We ate Kosha (a tapioca type starchy food) and bread worse than the German bread. There were 5,000 refugees of all nations."

While we will spare the reader the descriptions of the toilet facilities, or lack of them, let us just say they were very much proof of Anderson's contention that we are it all animals". Men, women and children were packed in together. "You slept shoulder to shoulder with strange people, men or women. You went to the toilet (open air slit trenches) with them. There was every type of disease you could imagine."

The soldiers would possibly have left the refugee camp if Anderson had not been stricken with, "what Doc. told me was a clot on my brain." Possibly from the beatings or shell or bomb concussions. "If I even moved my eyeballs I blacked out." The only thing the Dr. could do for him was total immobility. "For 10 days I lay on my back without moving. The Dr would bring Kosha and feed me." After 10 days the clot seemed to dissolve. Entertainment during this period was provided by the Russians. "Every Saturday afternoon they staged hangings of collaborators'.

We were invited to view these. We only went once." Anderson was also invited to participate in a gang rape of a Polish girl." When we declined, they raped her then used a broom stick on her, the savage bastards."

In March, Anderson and his companion were grouped with 350 American officers and 800 enlisted men and carried by truck to the Black Sea port of Odessa. There they were "Traded" for a group of Russians by the British. These Russians had been captured by the Germans on their eastern front and forced to put on the German uniform and fight for them or be shot. "The Russians had been holding us because they wanted them. (the captured Russian prisoners). It took the British 3 days to get the Russians off their ship. They knew what was waiting for them. They would either be shot or go to Siberia."

SECTION THREE-IN RETROSPECT

SPRINGVILLE: In May, 1985, Mays W. Anderson, formerly Lieutenant Anderson, returned for the first time in 40 years to the scene of his incarceration as a prisoner of war in Schubin, Poland. Anderson had every right to extreme bitterness over the treatment he had encountered at the hands of his German captors and also at the hands of his Russian liberators.

Anderson had been subjected to as much abuse as the human body can expect to endure. He had suffered both mentally and physically and had carried a life time horror of the events that had happened to him in Germany and Poland during world war 2. His return was not

rompted by curiosity, or a desire to renew old acquaintances.
e made the trip only to try to put to rest "old ghosts."
I wanted to go back and see that camp (oflag 64, the German
O.W. prison in Schubin, Poland) At 23, it's a dream. 40 years
go is like a dream. I couldn't believe that those things had
appened in life and as 40 years went by I wondered if the things
was thinking about were so. Some things had been so

diculous, so unbelievable that you wonder if they are really so.
t was good for me to go to Schubin and recognize things. I told
he people there that now maybe we can put this thing to rest.
Anderson harbored no grudge now for the rough treatment he
received at the hands of the Russians. He felt nothing but pity for
he Poles. While he only voiced his opinion of the Germans in
denouncing President Reagan's visit to Bittburg cemetery where
there are SS troops interred, he left the feeling that they were not
quite included in his feelings of clemency. Anderson's war was
not a gentleman's adventure. It was a gloves off, no holds barred
battle for survival. It was the culmination of 5 1/2 years of worse
than slavery occupation by a hated people. It was people forced
to grovel in abject poverty and misery and submission to every
degradation possible for a ruthless savage to heap on another
human being. It was exposure to death and pain until they lost
their meaning and an induced numbness took over.

"I felt real bad when you saw people under those conditions, (the
Polish people in wartime) I felt real bad for the Russians too. I
felt a real comradeship for the Russians for what they had done
to get the Germans out of that territory. The Germans were the
ones we were all fighting. What the Russians were doing just
seemed to be a necessary part of war.-On the Western front there
were a lot of things took place. They think that every thing is
done in order by the book, but it just wasn't done that way. I was
sorry for the Poles and sorry for the Russians. The Poles really
got kicked in the butt and so did the Russians.

"Now I go back 40 years later and they seem to be retrogressing.
They should be building themselves. After 40 years they should
have come a long ways because they are a very intelligent
people. They can't feed themselves. They have the most
beautiful land in the world and they can't feed themselves. They
have the attitude, 'why should I work any harder because I'm not
going to get any where any way.' I feel bad that the political
system has held them back."

Seemingly the ghosts were laid to rest. Anderson feared a
recurrence of "wild dreams" after the Poland visit but stated, "It
asn't been that bad." Anderson states now that "I wish every
merican could spend 2 weeks in Poland, then they would come
back and get off their dead butts. They would be more willing to
pay their taxes and put time in to help civic governments work.
We haven't got a perfect system, but we have got by far the
best." Mays W. Anderson died in Springville, Utah in 1995.
The above is a copy of a magazine article dictated to Norley Hall
from Mays W. Anderson.