

TRAUMA OF CAPTURE

From the moment of capture, the American POW in German hands faced an uncertain fate. Aside from the daily deprivation of a prisoner, he shared the menace of Allied attacks on the enemy, ran real risk in attempted rescue and found danger lurking even in the final moments before liberation.

Interview by Alexander S. Cochran, Jr.

During World War II, almost 100,000 American servicemen were captured by the Germans and incarcerated in prisoner-of-war camps for the remainder of that war. Given the large number of Americans who later returned home as liberated POWs, plus the apparent popularity of the television series *Hogan's Heroes*, it is a wonder that more historical interest has not been shown in the experience of Americans who underwent the trauma of wartime captivity in the enemy camp.

A problem for the military historian has been the lack of historical documentation, however. The Red Cross, German and American records on POWs in Germany are sketchy at best. Then, too, the subject is one of enormous emotional impact, as it often leads to comparison with the German treatment of civilians, particularly in the German concentration camps. As one result, many who embarked upon studies of American POWs were soon sidetracked by those well-known horrors of Nazi Germany.

Since the recent experiences of American POWs in North Vietnam and the American-hostage episode in Iran, there has been new interest in the POW phenomenon, in general—recent advances in oral history have begun to fill the gaps in the POW picture of World War II, in particular.

One account of personal experience at the hands of the Germans four decades ago is that of Brooks Kleber, who in late June 1944 was a young first lieutenant in the U.S. Army on a nighttime reconnaissance patrol behind enemy lines in Normandy. By daybreak, he had completed his mission, but he and his patrol failed to find a "return gap" and were captured. Thus, for Kleber, today a military historian himself, began a 10-month saga as a POW, during which he spent 23 days in a boxcar, underwent strafing and bombing by Allied planes, was incarcerated in a POW camp in Poland, then was marched 300 miles in 43 days to Berlin, and finally was liberated near Munich.

As a young but trained historian, he made mental note of his own emotions, as well as other details of the traumatic experience, its climactic point a little-known POW rescue attempt ordered by General George Patton, without the knowledge and approval of his own commanders.

Cochran: As an infantry platoon leader, you led your four-man reconnaissance patrol behind German lines one night nearly three weeks after D-Day, only to be captured early the next morning.

Kleber: Yes, it was a disastrous end to a fairly productive night. My patrol had found a gap in the enemy's lines and had discovered the crossroads which was our mission. We came back and missed the gap. Someone fired at us, and then we tripped a flare. It was getting light, and I decided to find a place where we could hide during the daylight. But the Germans saw us first and fired on us. Two of my men were hit, and my carbine was smashed by a German round. Up until that point, I was doing things automatically, just like training. I wasn't thinking about being captured. There wasn't any fear, just almost excitement.

Cochran: Then you surrendered. What were your emotions then?

Kleber: I started to tremble, but then I became concerned the Germans would think this was from cowardice. It was just a natural reaction, I guess. We had to carry our two wounded, although they both were dying. We stopped once, and an American mortar round went off. A piece of shrapnel flew right in front of my face. Then the Germans put us in a barn by ourselves. At that point, a tremendous sense of depression overwhelmed me.

Cochran: You finally realized you were a prisoner of war?

Kleber: I think so. Up until then, I thought that I had some options. I had told off a German officer when he took a small Bible from one of my dead and then when he took the boots off of my dead soldiers. But when they



On night patrol behind German lines, Lieutenant Kleber and his men couldn't find a return "gap" at daybreak and then encountered the also-patrolling enemy.

us in that barn, something hit me—it lasted for a couple of days. I shouldn't be proud of it because it represented a breakdown on my part, a severe reaction.

Cochran: Today's soldiers are given special training supposedly to prepare them for this type of reaction, along with Code of Conduct briefings. Do you remember any of this in your training?

Kleber: If I had any, it did not make an indelible impression. I don't recall thinking that I am going to do "this, that, and this" because of my training. Maybe we had something similar to the hour on the Customs of the Service, but I don't remember.

Cochran: Soldiers are told that the greatest danger after being captured probably comes at the hands of their captors, the front-line troops. How long did you stay with them? How did they treat you?

Kleber: After the war, I was chastened to learn that the unit that captured me was one of the poorer of the German Army units. Perhaps that was why they were so easy on me. I remember one soldier telling me in halting English, "For you, the war is over." They kept me for a few days and asked me simple questions such as what was my unit. I was interrogated at battalion and division level, but none of it was very professional. They treated me as well as I could have expected.

Cochran: Somewhere along the line, you would have been transferred to the German POW system. At this point, officers and enlisted men would be separated, as would those in the air and ground forces.

Kleber: First we were sent to a *Dulag*, short for *Durchgangslager*, a transient camp, which is where the first formal interrogation took place, before being assigned to a permanent prisoner of war camp. Later on, I was amazed to find out that there, the air force prisoners were subjected to very intense questioning, confronted with their wives' names and their class at flight school. The Germans would overwhelm them with details, particularly their military past, which was

very disarming and, I am sure, helpful to the Germans in information-getting.

Cochran: What happened after your capturing unit turned you over to the German POW system? Any difference in your treatment?

Kleber: I was placed in a boxcar with about 36 other officers. Our prison guards were all overage troops. On July 4, 1944, I began a long, 23-day train ride from Rennes to Chalons, an old French cavalry post on the Marne River. The actual journey followed a "U" because of the war activities and the low priority accorded the POW trains.

Cochran: That's a long time to be in a boxcar for what should have been a trip of less than 100 miles!

Kleber: We spent 10 days just sitting in a rail yard at Tours. Just prior to getting there, we were strafed by British night bombers. They hit only the engine, which was unusual as they normally attacked the whole train.

Cochran: That must have been a helpless feeling.

Kleber: A very helpless feeling. We got a new engine in a few days, but we remained in the rail yard because the train had such a low priority for right of way. One day, we heard our own B-17s coming overhead. The German guards just locked the doors of our boxcar and headed for the bomb shelter. We watched helplessly from the two little slits in the side of our boxcar and could see the bombs coming down. This was fascinating, until they came closer. Then we tried to crawl under the floor.

Cochran: So you got strafed by the British and bombed by the Americans. That must have made you think about escape. Did anyone try to escape?

Kleber: About two or three nights out, we were able to get a plank up from the floor of our boxcar. As we were always moving very slowly, we were able to get six prisoners out on the bed of the car. When we stopped, they dropped off in the middle of the night. I don't know if any of them made it, as I knew none of them. But the next morning, after a headcount, the Germans discovered their disappearance. This led to one of my greatest memories of my prison-of-war experience. The senior American on the train was Colonel Paul Goode, "Pop" Goode.

Cochran: How did he become a prisoner of war?

Kleber: He was a marvelous individual. He had been a regimental commander with the 29th Infantry Division during the invasion of Normandy. Shortly afterwards, the combat situation became extremely fluid with many small units cut off in the Normandy area. He had been ordered to send a patrol out to find one of these units, what he considered to be a suicide mission. He protested and was threatened with relief. So he determined to lead the patrol himself. And, sure enough, he was captured.

Cochran: What did the Germans do to "Pop" Goode when they discovered the six missing prisoners?

Kleber: They took him out next to the train and dug a shallow grave. Next, they formed a firing squad, and "Pop" gave his West Point ring to one of his fellow officers. The Germans went to the last moment, but then placed everyone back on the train. It was very dramatic.

Cochran: Did this prevent further escape attempts?

Kleber: They actually prevented this by moving the guard cars so that there was one at each end of the prisoner boxcar. Thus, there were machine guns at both ends.

Cochran: How did you feel about escape? Did it ever enter your mind?

Kleber: I was supposed to be the next one out of the car via the torn-up plank, but the machine guns gave me other thoughts. Actually, the opportunity never again came up. When we finally got to our permanent camp, *Oflag 64*, the American "shadow staff" there had decided that since the

was almost over, there would be no more attempted escapes.
Cochran: Before you got to the *Oflag* (short for *Oflag*, or permanent officers' camp, as opposed to *Stalag*, *Stamm-lager*, a permanent camp for enlisted men), you went through formal interrogation at the *Dulag*. Why were you singled out and what was that like?

Kleber: I really don't know why they picked me. I supposed that it was by random. I was placed in a solitary-confinement cell for five days. It turned out to be one of the two places during my captivity which had modern plumbing. It was a rather overwhelming experience.

Cochran: Why?

Kleber: You sat and didn't know what to do with yourself. I grabbed some German toilet paper, which was newspaper torn up, and translated it, as I had studied German in college. I was only questioned three times in the five days.

Cochran: What was the actual interrogation like?

Kleber: I had a sergeant, always the same one. He sat you down in front of a table on which there was chocolate, cigarettes and canned meat. I refused them all because it was obviously to make you feel at ease and more pliable. He would ask questions about things like training. When he got mad, he expressed his ire through criticism, especially of our Depression-era dust bowls like Oklahoma. "Germany would never permit anything like dust bowls," he would say. That was really stupid because all that did was to raise my ire.

Cochran: Did you ever fear for your life during this solitary or interrogation?

Kleber: No. I never felt intimidated at all. It may now seem strange, but I had no fear at that point.

Cochran: After the formal interrogations were over, what happened to you? LAHN

Kleber: I was again shifted to another *Dulag*, this one in Limburg on the Moser River, a three-day train trip. We stayed there for about a week. There, an American medical captain from the 28th Infantry Division elected to stay and administer to the succeeding waves of American prisoners. Later on, I learned that British night bombers hit a marshalling yard close by, and several bombs had fallen into the transient camp. Fifty-six prisoners had been killed, including this captain. People like that should be honored now. There are others like him, such as Father Stanley Brach, who stayed with American wounded who were being captured in North Africa and was imprisoned for the entire war. I got to know him very well at *Oflag 64*.

Cochran: I sense that you really didn't think that you were going to be a prisoner of war for long? Perhaps that had something to do with your lack of fear?

Kleber: Correct. Once we heard that the Normandy beachhead had been secured, we thought the war was going to be over before the winter. I never expected the Germans to defend their home soil as they did. Neither did I expect something like the Bulge. And my thoughts were shared by the other prisoners. As a consequence, our morale in the camp was pretty high, all things considered.

Cochran: In late September 1944, after three months of boxcars and interrogation, you finally arrived at your permanent camp, *Oflag 64*, located in Poland. The main reason the Germans had their permanent camps so far to the east was to be as distant from the battlefields as possible, thereby preventing escape. But this also placed them directly in the path of the Russian advance, which was moving faster than that of the Allies in France.

Kleber: When I got there, there were about 500 prisoners. The camp had originally been constructed for British prisoners, but, after the North African campaign, the Germans used it for American officers.

Cochran: The American prisoners captured in North



First moments after capture — as seen by a German wartime photographer, his film itself later captured.

Africa had been there for more than a year. I suspect that they were very different from those captured at Normandy such as yourself?

Kleber: Right after I got there, the Red Cross parcels for prisoners of war stopped, and I never got any mail from home. Now, these guys had been there for more than a year, receiving all kinds of stuff from home, as well as the weekly Red Cross parcels. There was a lot of stuff that you could save from them. When it became obvious in December that the Russian advance was going to force the evacuation of the camp, you might have expected some sharing of these surpluses. But there was none. Later on, when we left the camp, these guys made improvised sleds full of things they had saved. And they would discard it rather than give it to us. I remember the older guys using margarine for lamps, while I would have loved to use it with my bread. So they just threw it away.

Cochran: Earlier we mentioned a "shadow staff" in permanent camps. Did *Oflag 64* have one?

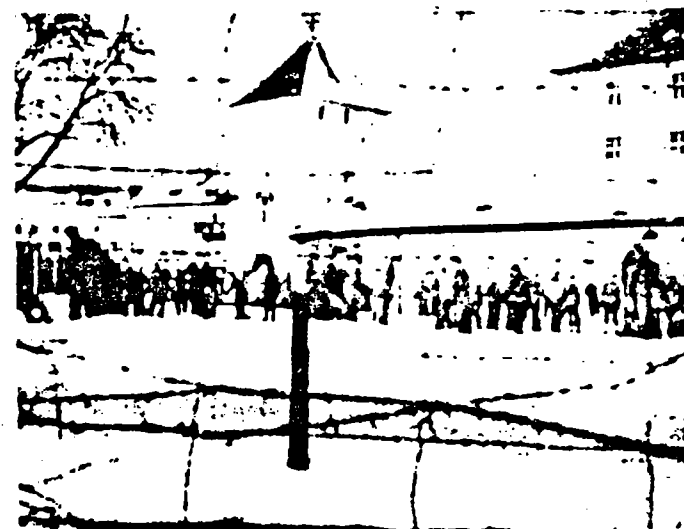
Kleber: Yes. It was just like any other Army staff, with a commander, a chief of staff, an S-1, S-2, S-3, and S-4. They imposed and supervised the internal order and direction of the camp. They were very important in the overall functioning of the camp. Remember, after we were captured, the only Germans we saw were those guard companies. We took care of ourselves.

Cochran: How did you live?

Kleber: We lived in dormitories. We were not overcrowded. We had cubicles made out of beds and lockers. Our mattresses were stuffed with straw, which was tolerable.

Cochran: This almost sounds pleasant.

Kleber: I don't want to leave you with that impression. Boredom was our deadly enemy. Keeping busy was so important, especially when the weather turned cold. It wasn't that much warmer inside, but it was harder to keep everyone busy because we were inside. Every morning, we had roll call. Then you would go back to bed if you wanted! No exercise. Now this never got as serious as what I have read about in Korean War POW camps, where American prisoners literally gave up. But there was danger in this listlessness.



TOP: Life in POW camp tended to be dictated—here, a body of British POWs on morning parade. MIDDLE: Just about every face in this Oflag is downcast. ABOVE: Prisoners in Stalag 1A set off on work detail, armed with scythes rather than any real weapons of war.

Cochran: What did you do to prevent this?

Kleber: We had an incredible amount of activities that we set up and supervised ourselves. We had a 5,000-book library. We had "Schubin Prep," which took its name from the closest town, in which high school and college-level courses were taught by the prisoners. We had a jazz band, a classical orchestra. There was a baseball league and a touch-football league. It was touch football with tackling, which was really backwards. We all had lost so much weight that we would have rather been tackled than blocked.

Cochran: Did this help you to keep busy?

Kleber: Oh yes, until winter set in. Things began to taper off then, and morale took a nose dive, especially when it appeared that the war would not be over before the next year.

Cochran: How were your relations with the German guards? Were they brutal?

Kleber: No, but it was not like you see in *Hogan's Heroes*. I get disgusted with that show, because it makes the Germans look like oafs and the camp like a holiday. The most accurate portrayal of what prison camp was like was the movie *Stalag 17*, except that you cannot depict utter boredom. Utter boredom would mean a boring movie! I only saw one act of brutality by a guard, and the recipient deserved what he got, as he was an ass.

Cochran: Earlier you mentioned that the American leadership at *Oflag 64* had ordered no more escape attempts.

Kleber: Yes, there had been escapes, but with the war "so close" to being over, the leadership felt this would just waste lives. As I remember, we agreed with this approach.

Cochran: I guess we now forget that most people felt the war would be over in late 1944—until the Battle of the Bulge and the fierce defense by the Germans of German home soil. Meanwhile, food must have played a central part in your camp life.

Kleber: You worried about food. You worried about getting through each day. That meant that you did not have time to worry about sex. You didn't tell dirty jokes. You didn't think lascivious thoughts. You thought only sweet thoughts—family, home, loved ones.

Cochran: What was the diet like?

Kleber: Oh, it was not much fun. We tried to keep our minds off of it by making lists of restaurants from home and then developing menus and for our favorite meals. As I was from the Philadelphia, I was responsible for the Bookbinder Restaurant. But the diet was poor. I went from 165 pounds to 129. The Red Cross parcels always had canned meat and fish, and these were removed by the American staff for use in the kitchens. Each prisoner got a third of a can at the evening meal. The meat that the Germans gave us was used in the noon soup. Breakfast was ersatz coffee that some prisoners preferred to shave with. We got a sixth of a loaf of bread daily, plus a weekly ration of margarine and ersatz jam. Sometimes we got a potato, a turnip, or a carrot with dinner.

Cochran: Do you still think of prison camp when you eat those vegetables today?

Kleber: No, but I have never forgotten the bread. It was wonderful. It never spoiled. It was black. It was sour. I remember pockets of sawdust in it, as they used this to hold it together. I had a callus on my finger from cutting the bread so thin to make it last longer. The bread kept your teeth white. To this day, whenever I see black bread in a restaurant, I remember prison camp.

Cochran: Let's talk a little more about the camp itself.

Kleber: When I first arrived there, it was after three months with only one pair of underpants, one pair of socks and one razor. I remember approaching the gate. There track meet going on, and all the prisoners stopped and to greet us. The place looked so well decorated,

prisoners looked so well scrubbed and groomed! All I could remember was what I had felt when I had first gone to Dickinson College as a freshman. It was the same feeling.

Cochran: We read about German spies in prison camps. Did you have any problem with this?

Kleber: The prisoners had their own system to deal with this. First of all, you normally knew someone in the camp. But if someone came in that knew no one, he was very subtly interrogated to make sure that he was not a German plant. You tried to find out where he was from and get into those areas that he would not have been briefed on in his cover story.

Cochran: How about news of the war? How did you know what was going on? You must have been hearing something to be so discouraged in the winter.

Kleber: We never learned any true news from the Germans unless it was bad news. The Bulge—we got an accurate treatment of this, you may be sure. The rest of war news came from our secret camp radio and the BBC. This was in turn distributed by word of mouth in pyramidal fashion. The code word was, "The bird is going to sing," and we would gather in small groups to learn the latest from the war front.

Cochran: What about the camp newspaper? Didn't that have any war news?

Kleber: It was more about camp events, plus any news from home that came from mail. Nothing about the war.

Cochran: The combination of news from the BBC, plus reports on the Bulge, must have had a disastrous impact upon camp morale.

Kleber: Morale got lower and lower. The Red Cross parcels stopped. Weather got colder. The guards told us that the Russians were getting closer. Sometimes we thought we heard fighting. There was a definite feeling of uncertainty. We sort of sensed the camp was going to be closed down soon.

Cochran: And then one day in January you were told to prepare for a 10-kilometer march to the railroad station and another train ride to a new camp.

Kleber: Yes, but this time there was no train. For the next 43 days, we marched more than 300 miles, away from the Russian advance and Poland, back to Germany. We crossed the Odra Estuary and ended up just north of Berlin. We marched during the day and slept at night in large barns, ones that would hold more than 1,000 prisoners. On our third night out, the word came down that the advancing Russian troops were so bad that all German troops had to be evacuated. So our little, overage German guard company, with all the German officers, just left. All that was left was an Austrian captain. For a while, our "shadow staff" plus the captain took over, until a Latvian SS company showed up for a short period of time. Five days later, we marched into a town where our old guard company was waiting for us. We hooted at them, and all that they could do was to look back with sheepish looks!

Cochran: By March 1945, you arrived in Berlin. Then?

Kleber: They put us in several boxcars—I was very tired and wary of boxcars by this time—and took us to *Stalag XIIIC*, Hammelburg. The main inhabitants of this camp were prisoners from the Battle of the Bulge, two regiments of the 106th Infantry Division. Camp leadership was poor, particularly compared to what we knew at *Oflag 64* and on the 43-day march. The attitude to the Germans seemed to be "What can we do for you today." Well, "Pop" Goode took over, and soon it was just the opposite.

Cochran: He's the man almost shot following the escapes from the boxcar.

Kleber: Yes, he was one of the most valiant men I have ever met. He led the march from *Oflag 64* to Berlin with a *baggiage* which became a symbol and which I later discovered



German guards search POWs about to leave on work detail.

contained the camp's secret radio. He was a brave man. But things were so bad at Hammelburg that it would have taken far more than him to straighten it all out.

Cochran: Can you expand a little on that?

Kleber: The camp was lousy. We got very little food—meat twice a week in the evening soup. The rest of the time, we got soups made from dried salted cabbage or sugar beet soup. I was urinating about five or six times a night because of this liquid diet. One prisoner had been shot going to the latrine at night.

Cochran: There is controversy over a prisoner "snatch" raid conducted by a small armored force from General Patton's Third Army in March 1945, as one of the prisoners at Hammelburg was Lt. Col. John Waters, who also happened to be Patton's son-in-law. Can you pick up the story here?

Kleber: Well, Patton's Army had already crossed the Rhine River and was poised at the Main River, some 60 miles from Hammelburg. He then ordered a small armored task force to conduct a liberation raid on the POW camp. The mission was to by-pass all enemy resistance, liberate the prisoners and bring them back on tanks and half-tracks.

Cochran: The whole notion seems highly illogical, because Patton was about to attack north, and here he was ordering a raid to his east. As I remember, his superior, General Omar Bradley, later said he did not know of the raid until two days after it was launched, and, had he been consulted, he would have forbidden it.

Kleber: Yes. This task force, which consisted of only 307 men, 10 Sherman tanks, 6 light tanks, a 105-mm. assault gun, 27 half-tracks loaded with ammunition, 7 jeeps and a Weasel, was commanded by a staff officer, Abe Baum, hence the designation "Task Force Baum."

Cochran: This sounds impossible. There were more than 1,500 American prisoners, plus 3,500 Serbs, at Hammelburg.



General George S. Patton sent an armored task force to Hammelburg deep in Germany on a rescue mission that proved abortive despite a few hours of freedom for American POWs there.

Kleber: The small task force left on March 24, 1945, and, two days later, approached Hammelburg. En route it had caused considerable confusion among the German staff as to its purpose, while also liberating 700 Russian prisoners of war. But it also had suffered major equipment and personnel losses and was at less than half strength by the time it reached us.

Cochran: When were you first aware of Task Force Baum?

Kleber: There were rumors that something was going to happen. It was electrifying. The camp was located on a high hill outside of the town surrounded by haystacks. We were all agitated that day.

Cochran: Did anyone in the camp know of the raid? Why were you so worked up?

Kleber: No one knew. But you know in the army, and even more in a prison camp, with the absence of precise information, rumor fills the vacuum. Perhaps the Serbs learned of it from their radio. But all of a sudden, one of the haystacks burst into flames and an American tank ran up the hill and broke through the wire.

Cochran: What happened then?

Kleber: A disorderly reaction of joy and uncoordinated enthusiasm. The word went out to get back to our barracks because there was a fire fight going on between the task force and our guards. "Pop" Goode decided to send someone to talk with the task force and see about stopping the firing. So Colonel Waters and one of the German officers tried to approach the tanks under a white flag. En route, one of the German guards shot Waters, seriously wounding him. His life was only saved by a Serbian doctor.

Cochran: At this point, the armored task force consolidated on the hill outside the camp and prepared to return to the American lines with as many prisoners as they could carry, some 60 miles to the west.

Kleber: We were told to get our things together and move

out to the tanks. Soon everyone realized that there were too many prisoners and too few vehicles. So we were then told either to head west on foot toward American lines or to move back into the compound. Both alternatives were distasteful to me.

Cochran: What did you do?

Kleber: I found myself a place in one of the half-tracks loaded with ammunition. We messed around for two or more hours trying to find our way off that hill. It was a nightmare. I remember being about seven or eight vehicles from the lead. We were stopped by a German soldier who went screaming away. I imagined he would soon return with a bazooka.

Cochran: What time of day was it then?

Kleber: The task force had arrived in the afternoon, it was evening when we grouped on the hill, and it was dark before we moved out. Our driver told us that when we hit the main road, we would have it made. We got to the road and then went through a village. Then we hit a road block. The two lead tanks were knocked out. So we turned around and went back to the hill, a half-mile from the camp.

Cochran: What did you feel like then?

Kleber: It was like a dream, a vivid nightmare. It was unreal. You were sitting there, but not in control of your fate. When I was captured, I still had some control. But now I was sitting there on all this ammunition, and nothing was happening. No one knew what was going on. The indecision just made it surrealistic. We quickly held a council of war, and I remember "Pop" Goode saying that the situation was such that unless you wanted to break up into small groups and go west to the American lines, it was time to move back to the camp. I agreed with this, and I went back willingly.

Cochran: What was that walk back like?

Kleber: We walked back in the very ruts that the tanks sent to rescue us had made. I saw a German guard who told us, "Get some sleep, fellows—you've had a tough night."

Cochran: What was it like back in the camp?

Kleber: I was so exhausted, so emotionally drained, that I just went to sleep. It wasn't awful. My spirits had been lifted. I lived through this period when I had no control.

Cochran: How did the rest of the prisoners feel?

Kleber: Certainly there was a great let-down. The rest of my prisoner-of-war experience, even liberation, was anticlimactic. I don't remember any conversations about the failure of the prisoner snatch. The whole thing was so unexpected, improbable. There are still great debates about Patton's motivation.

Cochran: Well, what do you think? You've certainly had the time and interest to study more now.

Kleber: There is no doubt in my mind that General Patton knew his son-in-law was at Hammelburg and his decision to attempt the prisoner snatch was motivated by that knowledge.

Cochran: Is that wrong?

Kleber: The task force should have been larger. This was only part of a battalion. Eventually the task force commander, Captain Baum, though wounded three times, made it back to American lines.

Cochran: Let's go back to your own situation, your own feelings at the time.

Kleber: There is a point where you feel that your life is changing—that you are no longer in charge of your own world—that you are at the mercy of other people—that your major concern is just to stay alive. This means what are you going to eat. I scrounged outer leaves of cabbage from the mess hall. You worry about how you consume your Red Cross parcel—were you a squirrel who prorated everything until the next parcel arrived, or were you impulsive and ate when you were hungry? So when this thing was over, we had

not died, we survived. The war was going to end. What I really mean is, the exultation of being liberated was muted by this surrealistic nightmare of that night at Hammelburg—the utter physical exhaustion and then the relief of just lying down and going to sleep.

Cochran: How many prisoners actually made it on foot from Hammelburg to American lines?

Kleber: I've never been able to figure that out, primarily because of the poor accounting of American prisoners of war by both the Germans and the Americans. I've talked to some that did make it. Hell, there are still 16 listed as missing in action from the task force.

Cochran: What happened to you after Hammelburg?

Kleber: We were shifted from Hammelburg the next day to Nuremberg, where we just missed the Allied bombing raid that had killed a bunch of prisoners. Then we walked to Moosberg, just north of Munich. It was spring, and the German guards were aware that the war was almost over.

Cochran: How did that compare to your earlier march from *Oflag 64* to Hammelburg?

Kleber: It was almost like a picnic. We would take wood from woodpiles, potatoes from farms—and when the farmers came out to complain, the guards would say, "You can't talk like that—they are American prisoners."

Cochran: I sense that the German order was breaking down, and that the prisoners' "shadow staff" was the only thing holding things together.

Kleber: Without a doubt. Our built-in order, the morale, was lifted because there were indications that this would not last much longer. The weather turned warmer in the spring. The Germans treated us better. Hence our morale was better.

Cochran: Did you ever fear at this point being killed or executed?

Kleber: No, but there were pervasive rumors that Hitler was moving us to his mountain fortress in Bavaria to be used as pawns. We were moving south in that direction. During our march south, we were buzzed by American planes. The word went out not to act like scared rabbits when they came by, as they might think we were Germans. We were told to stand in the road. The next day, I was at the head of the column when American planes appeared overhead. They circled around and around, then they peeled off for the attack. We had no Red Cross things. We looked just alike a bunch of stragglers. As the plane got over us, he waggled his wings and flew off. That was a dramatic moment for me.

Cochran: What happened at Moosburg?

Kleber: There were more than 100,000 prisoners there, all kinds. I saw air force types. I saw an old high-school classmate who had been shot down the year before.

Cochran: Is this where you were liberated?

Kleber: Yes. And again, word came through that it was about to happen. We had two groups of guards, one SS and one *Luftwaffe* company, and they fought in the camp among themselves about the degree of resistance that should be offered. One of the guys from my old *Oflag* cubicle was killed during this. All of a sudden I began to wonder if I would make it.

Cochran: Liberation was anticlimactic?

Kleber: The emotional orgasm was at Hammelburg. We were shifted from Moosburg to Inglestadt on the Danube. I remember going into a German depot there and "liberating" some bayonets and a horse whip. I still have them at home. I saw a Texan "liberate" a big saddle. We then went to Rheims, where the Americans had set up a 24-hour kitchen for prisoners. The entree was canned bone turkey. I ate from a mess tray standing in line for seconds and then thirds. I can still remember the tremendous stomach ache that overcame me a few hours later.

Cochran: From there, you were shifted to Camp Lucky Strike in France, which was set up for redeployment of American troops to the Pacific.

Kleber: That was worse than the final days in prison camp because they were utterly unprepared for us. As a Scotsman said, "The food was bad and in such small quantities."

Cochran: Did you have any problems emotionally adjusting to the fact that you were no longer a prisoner?

Kleber: That was really like the meal that you are going to order once you get home. When you got into a more normal ritual and your stomach fills up, you don't think of it. Lucky Strike was so bad, so poorly run. They simply had no plans for processing huge numbers of liberated prisoners. So they just told us to stay put and they'd get us on a ship going home. If your name came up and you weren't there, your name went to the bottom. My buddy went to Paris for the weekend, but I just stayed there. My only feeling was to get home.

Cochran: What was it like going home later, from the redeployment center in France's Camp Lucky Strike?

Kleber: Well, I continued to think that I wasn't going to make it. A friend of mine at Lucky Strike was sending his wife a wire when he was killed by a stray bullet fired by a guard at someone attempting to molest a Red Cross girl. When we went home, we went in the first unescorted convoy. I was sure that there was a U-boat lurking out there which had not gotten the word or whose captain wanted to sink one more ship for the *Führer*. From Fort Dix, I went by taxi to my uncle's home in Trenton. It stopped on the opposite side of the street. The crossing of that street was my last psychological obstacle. I had made it home.

Cochran: How did this POW experience affect your life?

Kleber: I am an utterly compassionate person. I worry about people of the world who are not getting enough to eat because I did not get enough to eat, and I saw people who got even less. Whenever I see a dog tied outside a house, I wonder about the animal's lifestyle. I have compassion for people and animals.

Cochran: Do you have any bitterness toward the Germans who imprisoned you?

Kleber: None whatsoever. Later on in my life, I often served as an escort for senior German Army generals who visited Fort Monroe, Va. I would always tell them, "I was a guest of your government during World War II." There would be an awkward silence and then laughter.

Cochran: It would appear that your attitude differs from Vietnam prisoners of war or the Iranian hostages.

Kleber: With relation to the Vietnam prisoners, having been a prisoner under "agreeable conditions," I cannot fathom what it would be like to be in solitary for five years. Trying to imagine how terrible that was, along with the guards' brutality, is impossible. I suspect that those prisoners' worlds adjusted as did mine and that of others during World War II; but our worlds here, because we've never known it, will never understand. As a prisoner, you become psychologically adapted to that world. The hostages were not necessarily heroes but rather victims.

Cochran: In retrospect, what was the meaning of all of this for you?

Kleber: I'm still not really sure. I guess in trying to explain those months of captivity, I lose the sheer emotion involved. The experience of liberation was almost as traumatic as that of capture—and, of course, I underwent Hammelburg. When captured, a psychological spring is wound up—and when freed, it is released. While I would not go as far as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who said of Gulag Archipelago, "Bless you, prison, for having been my life," I still think that prison camp turned out to be a teacher of human values. □